

## **EU and Belarus: Engagement for Reforms**

**Belarus and the European Union share much more than just a common border.** Their cultural and economic ties go back many centuries. We have a huge opportunity to see these ties go forward, and extended. This will be for our mutual benefit. As the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy, I am personally convinced of this and committed to prove it.

**EU cares for its neighborhood, and for the people living just beyond its borders.** It is with this in mind that we designed in 2004 a special policy towards our neighbours, to make sure that after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the accession of Central and Eastern European countries, no new dividing lines will cut Europe from its closest neighbours.

We have established the European Neighbourhood Policy as a process that delivers more for more. **The higher our partners' reform ambition, the stronger our response.** For this part of our neighbourhood, we have developed a regional framework called the Eastern Partnership. Through it, we offer our Eastern neighbours a combination of tools to reform and strengthen their administrations, boosting economic growth with a view to bringing their living standards closer to those in the EU.

This is a comprehensive package aimed at providing **the right regional dynamics to help our partners create jobs and growth** while continuing to modernise their economies and their administration. Partners like Ukraine or Moldova have immediately realised the potential for closer relations — and are making significant use of the policy.

**It is time to take the gradual re-engagement with Belarus, started in 2008, to another level.** For this to happen we need to see more respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, more democracy, and stronger rule of law. These values are too fundamental for us, for our citizens and for the daily life of Belarusians to deprive them of a forum of dialogue and engagement.

The Eastern Partnership might well be the policy framework that allows for such engagement to take place. We want to extend the invitation to Belarus to join fully this partnership for reforms, also at the bilateral level. The benefits could be enormous: **Belarus could associate itself politically with the EU, and integrate economically with the world's biggest and most prosperous internal market. While the Belarusian citizens could enjoy easier travel to the EU.** We wish to see more Belarusians visiting the EU, studying and doing business here. The conclusion of visa facilitation and readmission agreements between the EU and Belarus will bring you the same benefits already enjoyed by neighbours who already accepted our offer: a reduced visa fee for all citizens, fee waivers for a sizable proportion of all visa applicants and a much broader use of multiple-entry visas for certain categories such as journalists, business people, and those with family members living in the EU.

Today, **the EU is reaching out to Belarus with a substantial and practical offer** to deepen mutual relations. On the eve of an important moment in your country's political life, I hope Belarus will seize this opportunity to bring you closer to your European neighbours.

**Štefan Füle,**

Commissioner for EU Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy