

**Opening statement of Mr Štefan FÜLE
Commissioner-Designate for Enlargement and European
Neighbourhood Policy**

Distinguished Members of the Parliament, ladies and gentlemen,

As I was walking here this afternoon, I could not help thinking how far, both my country and I have got in only two decades. From a life behind the iron curtain, geographically in the centre of Europe, to standing in front of the representatives of its 500 million citizens and far closer to the true heart of Europe. Who would have imagined that 20 years ago?

I am honoured by today's opportunity to engage in a discussion with you on two of the Union's most ambitious policies, which are also very close to my heart: enlargement and neighbourhood.

To me, **enlargement** is **more** than a policy portfolio. It has transformed my country and my own life. It has transformed Europe as a whole. It has restored hope and dignity to millions of people. This is why **I am a strong believer in further reunification.**

Last enlargements showed clearly that **this is a policy that brought huge benefits for citizens across the Union**: increased trade and investments, with all their impact on economic growth and job creation; more mobility for citizens reduced unemployment and higher living standards. But most importantly, enlargement reunified a divided continent and helped consolidate democracy, stability and security in Europe.

The iron curtain that separated Europe during the cold war came down in 1989 but its shadow only vanished through enlargement!

I want to work closely with you, the European Parliament, not only because the Treaties ask us to do so, but because the European Parliament has been traditionally the champion of enlargement - and only by working together we can achieve the same benefits from future enlargements.

With each and every new accession **we have to make sure that Europe becomes not only larger, but also stronger**. EU enlargements have strengthened the fabric of Europe. This has been the experience so far. I see it as my duty to make it so for the accessions to come.

The rules are clear: there are not and there should be no short-cuts to membership; the same conditions for everyone. The pace of reforms determines progress towards membership. Being an EU member is a demanding task, for which one must be properly prepared. I believe strongly it is our duty to assist these countries to pursue their reform agenda. And I will make maximum use of all instruments and resources at my disposal to do so. It is important as my job will be to make sure that accession is proposed only to countries that can make full benefit from it and can bring their positive contribution to Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All of our neighbours are important for the EU and all are important for me! I am committed to devoting equal attention to our neighbours in the East and in the South.

Our neighbours are diverse and so are individual EU member states' relations with them. I believe strongly that our neighbourhood policy provides us with a coherent approach that ensures that the whole of the EU is committed to deeper relations with all our neighbours, while at the same time allowing us to develop tailor-made relations with each country. I will cooperate closely with High Representative Ashton in coordinating our political and policy responses towards our neighbours.

Our cooperation with our partners can only go as far as they are ready to take it. I intend to engage in the closest dialogue possible with our neighbours and to listen to their needs in a spirit of partnership. I will do this bilaterally as well as at the regional level, through both the Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership and I will encourage the active involvement of the parliamentary dimension in this dialogue. I will promote a policy of progressive engagement with those countries that are not, as yet, full participants in our neighbourhood policy.

If we want our partners to engage more deeply, we must offer the right incentives. Democratic and market-oriented reforms in our neighbourhood should be complemented by increased market access and mobility. I will work together with the Trade Commissioner towards deep and comprehensive trade agreements where possible, and with the Home Affairs Commissioner on easing the visa regime of those partners who address successfully the issues of security and illegal migration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Europe I believe in is built on shared values: a clear commitment to democracy, diversity and the rule of law; an economy that should provide opportunities and prosperity for all, and a general respect of the fundamental rights of its citizens. These are conditions for lasting peace and stability; stability at our borders is Europe's stability.

These are the basic values that all current Members of the Union share and respect every day. I will work with all partner countries willing and able to fully implement these values and to actively promote them.

The Lisbon Treaty has given the Union the tools we need for a more efficient, democratic and coherent Europe. The EU's credibility as a global actor depends on our capacity to shape our own borders and our immediate neighbourhood. This is a major challenge for us all, that I believe we can meet if we work all and well together.

Thank you.