When you think of the European Union, what comes to mind? A place where people have a good standard of living? A place where after many wars, there is durable peace? A place where laws are enforced fairly, elections are free, and every citizen’s rights are respected?

This has not happened by luck or coincidence. Choices and compromises – sometimes difficult ones – have been made by the people of Europe to bring this about.

We believe that the prosperity and stability we have achieved for ourselves is something we can, and want to share with our neighbours. There are very concrete ways, by working together, that we can help countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia offer the same benefits to their people. We believe that we are better off if our neighbours are better off. There must be no new gulf between those living on different sides of the EU external border.

That is why we have extended the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to the South Caucasus and are currently consulting with these three governments on establishing concrete Action Plans. Together we will agree on the steps we can take together to promote democratic freedoms and economic reforms which will bring the partners’ economies closer to Europe’s giant single market – with all that can mean for jobs, businesses and living conditions of their citizens.

The ENP makes a very substantial offer. In the economic field, it means deepening trade relations, enhanced financial and technical assistance, gradual participation in a number of EU policies and programmes (something previously reserved for our own Member States and candidate countries) and, the most novel and far-reaching feature of the ENP, a “stake” in the EU’s internal market. To help you participate in this market, we will provide you with assistance to bring your rules and standards in line with ours, in order to reduce obstacles to trade.

The ENP also means support in strengthening democracy and the rule of law, strengthening respect for human rights, and building up the free media. With our considerable experience of successfully helping countries in transition, we can help to create the conditions in which corruption and fraud can be rooted out, and to develop effective administrations that are capable of running fair and efficient government.

Beginning consultations with the countries of the Southern Caucasus under the ENP puts your countries in company with our neighbours from shores of the Mediterranean to Ukraine and Moldova. Every Action Plan is tailor-made for
the partner country, focusing on a limited number of key priorities agreed between ourselves and the country itself.

We are seeking to deepen our relations where it makes sense for both sides. A good example in this region will be energy cooperation. We need to consult together on how we can work more effectively to our mutual benefit, on supply and transit questions as well as on the efficient and sustainable use of energy. We also have to discuss how we can ensure the climate is right for our investors to support the development of your energy sectors.

I am often asked what the ENP offers to countries who would like to join the EU. The ENP does not prejudge either way any future possibility about membership. Working with the EU under the ENP is not a preparation for accession talks, neither is it an alternative to an accession perspective. The prospects it offers are a goal in themselves.

How far this work together under the Neighbourhood Policy can take us depends a great deal on each country in the South Caucasus.

One thing is clear: the full potential of what we offer will only be achieved once the frozen conflicts in the region are resolved. The EU, which has built its own prosperity and stability on regional co-operation and the peaceful settlement of conflicts, believes strongly that this is a vital precondition for progress in other areas as well.

Hard choices have to be made when those who have suffered in conflict are asked to negotiate for peace. In Europe once bitter enemies now sit around the table together as partners, to the benefit of all concerned. We hope that those who carry the responsibility of seeking peace in the Southern Caucasus will find the vision and the courage to do the same.

With other partners under the Neighbourhood Policy we already support those who are seeking conflict resolution. Our Action Plans with Moldova and also Ukraine are helping us to work jointly on the Transnistria problem. In the Middle East, our Action Plans with Israel and Palestine are among other things serving to build trilateral co-operation, helping to build confidence between all parties.

I hope to see the time – and not too far in the future – when we will see the unfreezing of the conflicts that have caused so much human suffering and misery in the South Caucasus. We will then be in a position to offer more, and work much more closely with those who choose the path of peace.