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Eastern Partnership - an ambitious project for 21st century European foreign policy

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When Russia cuts gas supplies to Ukraine in January, EU households suffered. The EU found its quality of life directly affected not just as a result of its own energy supplies, but by the political and commercial landscape in its eastern neighbourhood.

There could be no more telling example to demonstrate that the EU's interests – of all its Member States alike - are tightly bound up with developments in the countries on its eastern border.

Next week, Member States will discuss for the first time the Commission's proposals for an ambitious, new "Eastern Partnership" with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It will offer more concrete support than ever before to encourage reforms that are essential to build peace, prosperity and security, in our mutual interest.

This Eastern Partnership will operate at a number of different levels, and across the policy spectrum. On energy alone, it offers: first, tailor-made bilateral support to boost each country's own energy security, in full recognition that the needs of countries dependent on Russian gas like Armenia and Moldova, transit countries like Ukraine and Georgia, and suppliers such as Azerbaijan – will differ. Second, it proposes multilateral cooperation to improve early warning and crisis preparedness. Third, it suggests flagship initiatives to help diversify the EU's sources of energy supply and transit and promote green energy.

The gas crisis revealed of course the degree to which some Member States depend on Russian gas supplies through a single transit country. That is a specific issue that we must address. But it also revealed how important it is that we have partners whose governance provides for respect of contracts, transparency in the management of key sectors – in sum respect for the rule of law.

That is why the Eastern Partnership sets out proposals for the most ambitious programme of institution building yet, reinforcing the European Neighbourhood Policy, going further than we have ever gone before with countries in transition short of offering a specific promise of membership. In offering intensive expert support to governments in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, we are not only investing in the economic and political stability of these countries, but also in our own well-being.

On our eastern flank there are still a number of unresolved conflicts. The Russia/Georgia conflict of August last year left an open wound in the Caucasus, with Georgia's two separatist entities outside the control of the Tbilisi government. We should seek to do all we can to create a climate for settlement there, as well as in Transnistria and in Nagorno Karabakh – and to avoid new flash points. One factor which can help in this is mitigating the economic and social disparities which fuel conflict. The Eastern Partnership will seek to iron out these differences between

regions, where they exist, rather as we have tried to do within the EU. Again, this costs money, but is a price worth paying.

Building relationships with any partner has to be a two way street. This is no exception. The Eastern Partners want freer trade and easier travel. The EU wants to encourage reform. We can only make real progress on Free Trade Agreements with economies that are genuinely ready to open up to competition. And we can only offer visa facilitation to countries which have secure travel documents, properly run borders and arrangements for readmission of returnees. But if we want to protect our security, we need to be willing to move on these key desires of our neighbours. We are asking a lot, and we have to be willing to give in return.

There will always be those who - once the latest crisis fades from memory - would prefer a more modest approach to countries whose development is in some cases very different from our own, and whose European choice is fragile. This is short-sighted. We should be ambitious now to prevent crises in the future. This means opening our markets to goods from new competitors. It means allowing - in controlled mobility partnerships - greater access for workers from these countries when they bring skills we lack in our job markets. And it means devoting EU taxpayers' money to the initiative.

All that the Commission is proposing to Member States next week is in the interests of our citizens. This is not philanthropy. It is 21st century European foreign policy. Drawing on the EU's unique range of instruments, we are seeking to achieve a new, innovative style of partnership with countries which are still emerging from a communist past. If we remain ambitious both in what we offer and what we seek, I am convinced that the Eastern Partnership will bring stability and prosperity dividends to European citizens for generations to come. With the help and energetic support of the Czech Presidency for this ambitious proposal, as well as that of my Polish and Swedish colleagues, I will make every effort to carry along all other EU Member States next week.