

# Commitments made at the hearing of

## **OLIVÉR VÁRHELYI**

### Commissioner-designate Neighbourhood and Enlargement



Commissioner-designate Olivér Várhelyi appeared before the European Parliament on 14 November 2019 to answer questions from MEPs in the Committee on Foreign Affairs (the Committee on International Trade was invited). This document highlights a number of commitments which he made during the hearing. They refer to his portfolio, as described in the [mission letter](#) sent to him by Ursula von der Leyen, President-elect of the European Commission, including:

- Western Balkans and Turkey;
- Eastern Neighbourhood;
- Southern Neighbourhood.

Please note that the quotes included in this document only make reference to the oral commitments made during the hearing. The [verbatim report](#) of the public hearing is available on the [Commissioners-designate hearings website](#). The Commissioner-designate was also sent some written questions in advance of the hearing to which he provided [written answers](#). Following the hearing an additional questionnaire was sent, and the [additional written answers](#) were received on 18 November 2019.



“As a Commissioner, from the day I am elected, I would be acting in a completely independent way. I would take no instructions from any government, any institution [...] I would act in a collegial way and I would be pursuing the EU line and only the EU line.”

“I will pursue the European Union position when it comes to the rule of law – be it the Western Balkans, be it the Eastern Partnership, be it the Southern Neighbourhood.”

## Enlargement policy

“The methodology would need to be enhanced in a way that creates more dynamism, the possibility for more dynamism for those candidate countries who can and who wish to move faster. On the other hand, for those which are going slower, we will have to slow down also the enlargement process.”

“In the enlargement process we have the ‘fundamentals first’ principle, which means if there is no progress or back-tracking on the fundamental rights, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, negotiations can be halted, chapters cannot be closed or even financial assistance can be suspended. I will not be afraid to make use of any of these tools at my hand if it is going to be necessary because the conditions are not met.”

## Western Balkans

“I intend to increase the pace of structural and institutional reforms, with a strong focus on the fundamentals of the rule of law, economic development, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform.”

“I will engage with all institutions, businesses and civil society to accomplish this.”

“The European perspective is unchanged and I will fight and work for that all the way.”

“I’m willing and able, capable, to work with those Member States who had concerns, and I will engage right away with those Member States to address them.”

“When it comes to the rule of law in the Western Balkans, we have very clear criteria that they have to meet and I do not intend to change or propose any change to those criteria. On the contrary, [...] I think that we need to intensify work with our Western Balkan neighbours to achieve more.”

“[...] my priority will be to have a common assessment of the Member States and the Commission when it comes to facts on the ground. I want to include the Member States in our field missions at expert level to come and cover the whole region together, look at the facts, look at the developments and let’s assess them together so

that we can avoid another failure. That way, we will have a clear list of achievables on both sides – both sides meaning the Western Balkan countries and us, and then there will be no surprises.”

“We might come to a critical point that we have one or two or three of the candidate countries who accomplish to meet all the conditions. I have no *a priori* on this. [...] It is possible to abandon any group approach, but it might happen that we will have a group. So let’s not rule that out.”

“Five years from now, my vision would be to have a much more developed Western Balkans, having peace between Kosovo and Serbia, Kosovo having full visa liberalisation and free travel and accession negotiations very much advanced with North Macedonia and Albania, maybe close to an end, and a Serbia that is ready to join.”

## Turkey

“I will also work as a team with Josep Borrell on our future relations with Turkey, a key partner for the EU in a wide range of fields. There is clear scope to get more out of our relations to better serve our mutual interests. As Turkey continues to play a vital role in hosting and addressing the needs of almost four million refugees, we should continue assisting Turkey in this and in managing increased irregular migration.”

“Accession negotiations have effectively come to a standstill. The next Commission should therefore start a reflection, in consultation with this House and together with the Council, on how to develop a strategic partnership, based on common interests and rooted in existing frameworks.”

“When it comes to the accession process of Turkey into the European Union, we see that it is already at a standstill. However, stopping or finishing accession negotiations without accession is a major political and strategic decision to be made by this House and to be made by the Council. This is not something that the Commissioner will decide upon. So when we have a full discussion about our future relationship with Turkey of course this is going to be a strategic question that we need to look at.”

“[...] when we come to the financing – the IPA financing. [...] I know that this is an issue in this House and this House has a very firm position on cancelling fully IPA support to Turkey. I would have a more cautious approach. It has already been cut from EUR 600 million to EUR 250 million, and we are in the process of cutting it further down to around EUR 130 million, but this is the very core of our financing and this finances civil society. If we cut those funds, we will disappear from the Turkish society, so we need to continue. We need to continue to engage.”

## Neighbourhood policy

“There is a major development gap between the EU and its neighbours. My objective will be to reduce it by unleashing the untapped potential of the region.”

“We have developed a very comprehensive set of cooperation, but also of conditions, when it comes to the respect of human rights, freedom of the press, and independence of the judiciary. I intend to continue in that footpath, and I will ensure in all our relations, that these conditions are observed.”

“My portfolio will cover the external relations of the migration dossier and there I will continue to defend the EU line, which is that we have to help our partner countries [...] to protect their borders and to withstand external pressure from illegal migration, but also to help them to cater for those migrants who are on their territories.”

“Should there be a proposal from a group of Member States [to introduce an EU human rights sanctions regime], of course I’m willing to look into it and work with them to see what benefits such a system may bring.”

## Eastern Neighbourhood

### Future of Eastern Partnership

“I want to see the Eastern Partnership strengthened in light of the ongoing consultations on its future. I will work on proposals for the Eastern Partnership’s long-term policy objectives, to be presented by the Commission in good time ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels in June 2020.”

“My idea about reinvigorating or reinforcing the Eastern Partnership would be to try to help them to create a market economy that will improve their chances of withstanding outside pressure but also to create a climate for investment, which will be for the prosperity of their nations.”

### Differentiation and deepened sectoral cooperation

“Some countries in the east, Georgia, Ukraine, and more recently Moldova, [...] are showing determination, sometimes in very difficult contexts, to tackle reforms, others less so. Hence, intelligent differentiation across the portfolio remains key to exporting stability.”

“There is still work to be done to deliver on all the benefits of the DCFTAs, but should they like to engage with us more, be it economic development, be it basic infrastructure, such as transport or energy, or be it the Green Deal or digital, we should be able to engage in a more meaningful way with them on those areas.”

“[...] we should be ready to engage and integrate them into as many policy areas as they feel able to do. [...] It could also be on security.”

### Ukraine

“Ukraine [...] is of key geopolitical importance for the EU. We will continue to support its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, efforts to bring the conflict in Donbas to an end and to support reforms, whether on the rule of law or the economy. We should make full use of all our tools, including the Commission’s Support Group for Ukraine.”

“[...] we will have to stand by them and we will have to defend them, including any possible prolongation of the sanctions in relation to Russia, for as long as we do not see any progress in the Minsk process. [...] I will help Josep Borrell with all the tools in my portfolio to make that happen, and meanwhile back up all the actions to help Ukraine regain its sovereignty.”

“So far, we have not offered this possibility [of full integration into the EU] for Ukraine. But what we can do [...] is to help them to create a solid market economy that attracts foreign direct investment, that creates growth and jobs locally and that strengthens that country. To me, that is going to be a priority.”

“I will engage with the High Representative, especially in Ukraine, where it also seems that [disinformation] is a phenomenon that is affecting the public the most. I will deploy all financial means as well so that Ukraine can fight that phenomenon.”

### Other eastern neighbours

“Azerbaijan can be a key partner in the energy sector but we have to keep the rule of law and democracy on the agenda.”

“With Armenia we need to focus on economic development, and with Belarus, help the country’s modernisation while keeping the development of core democratic values on the agenda.”

“I will continue to engage with Belarus to ensure [nuclear safety]. [...] We need to make sure that our experts can also look at the site and can go there and make sure that nuclear safety is going to be ensured according to our standards.”

“I will work with Moldova and for Moldova, so that the reforms are not halted or not backtracked. We have to make sure that even if there is internal crisis, reforms continue. If they don’t, we will have to suspend financial assistance, like it has been done in the past. It is clear that financial assistance is clearly and unconditionally linked to progress in reforms.”

## Southern Neighbourhood

“We will renew our partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood based on the ‘more for more’ principle while focusing on the economic development of our partners.”

“In partnership with our southern neighbours, I will focus on promoting good governance, protecting the environment and climate, as well as developing a more effective approach to migration issues. I will give utmost importance to economic growth and the success of employment policies, especially for young people.”

“Some partners have progress and reforms hindered directly by conflict like Syria in Libya or its fallout in Lebanon. [...] Morocco and Tunisia are showing determination, sometimes in very difficult contexts, to tackle reforms, others less so. Hence, intelligent differentiation [...] remains key to exporting stability.”

“I intend to quickly formulate new proposals on the partnership priorities in order to intensify our relations with these countries which are engaged in demanding reforms.”

“Morocco is willing to engage with us, not only in areas that are of interest to [...] it, but also that are of interest to us, and therefore we can continue and develop this partnership further with them. [...] This could be a model for the entire Southern Neighbourhood.”

“I will see to it that we provide all assistance, not only financial but also expertise [...] once there is a government in place in Tunisia [...] to help them put in place an administration that works for the people [...]”

“There are encouraging developments [in Algeria] by the elections coming up in December. [...] We will, of course, encourage them to go ahead on a democratic path but it is for the Algerian people to decide on that.”

“Relations with Libya and Syria are more complex. The first of my goals will be to work to restore and protect peace and stability, in coordination with the United Nations.”

“In Libya [...] we need to intensify our efforts to improve the humanitarian conditions for migrants [...]”

“We will have to support voluntary returns to Syria, if the basic principles of voluntary, safe and dignified return are respected, in close coordination with the UNHCR.”

“We must support Lebanon and Jordan, two countries that host a very large number of refugees.”

“We will continue to support economic and political reforms [in Egypt]. At the same time, we will continue our close dialogue on human rights.”

“I continue to defend the EU line, which is that only a two-state solution can bring long-lasting peace in the Middle East and we will have to engage with Israel and with Palestine to achieve that. [...] I have the tools at my disposal to encourage this process.”

## Financing instruments

“My principle in relation to [the financing instruments under the next MFF] is that we want to have financial instruments that are available, that are pragmatic, that are effective, and which are flexible.”

“The governance [of the financing instruments] needs to be looked at, and I will make sure that the views of the European Parliament will be taken into account.”

“[...] it is clear that IPA will be used solely for the purpose of the preparations for accession – capacity building, rule of law and all the other areas that are key to be developed in these accession countries.”

“We will have another financial tool in the making, which is the NDICI, where we have allocated funds for migration. So there will be no interference [...] between IPA and migration actions.”

## Relations with the European Parliament

“I am determined to work closely with the European Parliament. [...] I see an important complementarity between our roles. I will count on fully using parliamentary diplomacy and relations with governments in the interest of the European Union. I will provide all the support you need to work efficiently.”

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