

Belarus: Further steps in Dialogue on Modernisation

Speech of Commissioner Š. Füle at the seminar "Privatisation and private entrepreneurship in Belarus – scope for international assistance" in Warsaw on 16th April 2012

Dear Minister,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is appropriate that we should gather here today in Poland, the birthplace of **Solidarity**. Like my own country, Poland knows a lot about the transition to democracy. Poland has also made a major contribution in shaping the European Union's policy towards its eastern neighbours.
- Nobody can be happy about the way in which the relationship between the European Union and Belarus has developed after the 19 December 2010 Presidential elections. The respect for human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles has deteriorated seriously and so have our bilateral relations.
- These developments are unfortunate. However, the European Union's policies are principled and we have reacted to the increasingly repressive policies in Belarus. **We will continue with our tough approach**, including restrictive measures, until all political prisoners are **released and rehabilitated** and steps taken towards human rights and democracy. Talking about steps, let me join the Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski and say that the release of two political prisoners Mr Sannikaw and Mr Bandarenka was a step in the right direction. What is important now is that the rest of the political prisoners is released.
- A silent and almost invisible **fear has gripped the country** and has deprived the people of a vision of a better future. That is why it is so

important to set out a positive **vision, a vision that can be achieved for the future of the country**. This is what the European Dialogue on Modernisation is all about.

- Against the background of the strained relations with the authorities, the European Union is increasing its efforts to reach out to the Belarus' population, civil society and democratic opposition.
- The **Eastern Partnership** is a concrete example of these efforts. I am thinking in particular of the important role played by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and its Belarusian national platform.
- At the launch of the European Dialogue on Modernisation in Brussels on 29 March, there was a broad representation from civil society and the opposition, as well as from the European Union institutions and some other international organisations. We had a first discussion on a number of key themes including the upcoming parliamentary elections, visa issues, Belarusian accession to the Bologna process and economic reform.
- In our discussion, I sensed a great interest by both sides to discuss real, substantial issues which are key to the development of Belarus.
- As you will be aware, some participants were prevented by the authorities from coming to Brussels. However I made it clear that this will not prevent the views of these people from being taken into account.
- Staying on the subject of the free movement of people, I have been working closely with my colleague, the Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström, to find ways to make it much **easier for ordinary Belarusian citizens to travel to Europe**.

- As a result of our efforts, the member states' foreign affairs ministers have recently decided to fully exploit all the possibilities offered by the Schengen Visa Code. This sends **a strong message of support and solidarity from the European Union to the people of Belarus**. And indeed, it will be followed-up.
- The European Dialogue is an innovative exercise. I hope that our joint and committed work will help to clarify our understanding on the vision of what a modern and democratic Belarus could look like and about what is needed to take us there.
- The Dialogue will assist the European Union to update and extend the draft Joint Interim Plan into what could become a draft “European Modernisation Plan for Belarus”, for discussion with the Government, if and when the situation so allows.
- At the same time, it would allow civil society and the democratic opposition to feed information about the prospects of substantive cooperation and incentives into the domestic political debate.
- It is important that the European Dialogue is real and interactive. We seek a bottom-up approach, focussing on four thematic working groups which will mainly meet locally in Belarus.
- Supporting thematic seminars on topical issues for the modernisation of Belarus is a key component of the Dialogue. This seminar – on the key issue of privatisation and entrepreneurship – is the first of what I hope will be a set of events organised by interested European Union member states within the framework of the Dialogue.
- As for the substance of the seminar, we believe that reforms such as **restructuring of state owned enterprises - including through privatisation** should be at the centre of efforts to move towards a

more liberal and competitive economy. The European Union is ready to support such reforms - once the situation allows.

- One word on the involvement of the authorities: Obviously, we are not interested in a theoretical exercise. In the end, any reforms would have to be assimilated and implemented by the authorities. Therefore, representatives from the authorities may be invited at experts' level on an ad-hoc basis to our Dialogue.
- I look forward to our constructive discussions about how to support Belarus' future transformation towards democracy and into a country which is strongly anchored in a common space of European values.

Thank you.