

EurActive interview - Štefan Füle: EU needs to consult with Russia over Ukraine's association



Štefan Füle

The signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement is taking place in two stages, because of the need for the EU to continue consultations with Russia, Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Commissioner Štefan Füle told EurActiv Czech Republic in an exclusive interview.

Štefan Füle is a career diplomat. He has previously served as Czech ambassador to NATO and Lithuania. He spoke to EurActiv Czech Republic's Adela Denkova.

Why has the European Union signed only the political part of the Association Agreement with the interim Ukrainian government? When is the rest of the agreement going to be signed?

It is a clear expression of commitment to Ukraine that we are ready to fulfil and sign the entire agreement, in the right time and conditions. It is a clear signal of association between Ukraine and the EU, in a situation where an illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia is taking place. We divided the signature into two parts. Now we are planning to sign the remaining part. The Ukrainian side agrees with us that the signature should occur immediately after the presidential elections, which will be held on the 25th of May.

What will happen if the winner of the elections does not want to sign the agreement?

This of course depends on the Ukrainian side. The agreement was negotiated by the two sides, and it depends on both of them whether they will continue in their mutual commitment and ratify the agreement. The ball is on the Ukrainian side, and it depends only on them whether they fulfil the potential.

Do you think that only signing one part of the agreement could lead to complications in Ukraine? Do you think it would be wiser to wait for the new Ukrainian government, and a sufficiently strong mandate?

No, it will not cause any complications. We wanted to address the request of new Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, who wanted to sign the entire Association Agreement as soon as possible. By the way, I refuse any doubts about the legitimacy of his government. The establishment of his cabinet was agreed by approximately 85% of MPs. That means there was a constitutional majority in the Ukrainian Parliament created by previous parliamentary elections. The vote was attended also by some members of the Party of Regions.

During the debates about Ukraine in the Czech Republic, including among politicians, some people have said that the Parliament, which voted for the government, was under the control of militants from Maidan. Or that the EU should be careful about which government it supports, because the current cabinet also includes right-wing radicals. Is it normal, in a country which officially supports the Ukrainian government, and which labels the fate of Ukraine as crucial for itself?

You are absolutely right that the issue is crucial for the Czech Republic. The access to objective information on which it is possible to create a political approach is also essential. The Russian propaganda about a coup conducted by nationalists and extremists is not true at all. Maidan took place for a long time without any effort of Ukrainian leaders to meet its requirements. Moreover, excessive force against the protesters was used at least three times. That of course led to certain radicalisation. Yes, Ukraine has historical experience with nationalist groups, like many other European countries. But it is important that even after the radicalisation of Maidan, the radical group was forming only a small part of these forces. It is utter nonsense that this small part of the movement would in any way control the Ukrainian Parliament, or the vote of MPs. That would mean that we are on the field of propaganda, which can often be heard from Russian media.

Returning to the Association Agreement, what were other reasons for dividing the signature into two parts?

The Association Agreement is really a complex document which contains a number of commitments. The new government should have the opportunity to reflect on all of them. It is also important that we have more time to continue our consultations with the Russian side.

What are the consultations dealing with?

They generally relate to the relationship between the DCFTA [the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, which is an integral part of the Association Agreement] and the [Russia-led] Customs Union. They deal with the impact of Association Agreements on our neighbours to the neighbours of our neighbours.

You can come across an opinion that this is a diplomatic triumph for Russia. For a long time, the EU refused Russian intervention in the bilateral negotiations between the EU and Ukraine...

Let me correct that. We have always invited the Russian side to the debates about the impact of the Association Agreement with Ukraine. We had information about the various objections, mainly from the economic sector, and we wanted to refute these speculations through the dialogue with Russia. Last year, in February, the Russian government had a joint session with the European Commission in Moscow. For the first time, we explained our view of the relationship between Association Agreement and the Customs Union, at the highest level. We also offered further discussions on these matters. We want to ensure that our partners from the Eastern Partnership always have an opportunity to continue utilising their relationship with Russia. We also offered deeper cooperation, in terms of harmonising the regulatory framework between the EU, and the emerging project of Eurasian Union. But we did not hear any positive response until the last EU-Russia summit.

What Russia came with – or what the Ukrainian president after the consultations with Russian president came with – were tripartite consultations between the EU, Ukraine and Russia. We refused such consultation. The agreement was negotiated between the EU and Ukraine. It depends on these two sides to find an agreement on its aspects bilaterally.

Maybe the EU should have been better prepared for what happened shortly before the Vilnius summit, and especially after it. The EU was very surprised by the Russian approach. Does it indicate a lack of preparation?

If you mean that we were surprised by military interference in the Crimea, and the organising of a referendum in a situation of high military presence and illegal annexations, then the EU was perhaps not the only one who was surprised. The whole world was surprised. Everything which the international law stands for was completely trampled.

Isn't it a little bit naive to believe that Russia will respect international law under all circumstances, even on such an important issue in Russian foreign policy as the Ukraine?

I work on the presumption that Ukraine is a sovereign state which decides individually about its course, according to the Helsinki principles of the OSCE. The negotiations between the EU and Ukraine started in response to Ukraine's request to create the foundations for closer relationship. We have never thought that Ukraine should choose between Moscow and Brussels. There is nothing like that in the agreement, and nothing like that is even behind the agreement. However Russia refused to sit with us at the negotiating table, and began to adopt unilateral economic measures against Ukraine instead. We learned about some of the allegedly negative effects of these measures from the Ukrainian side, when President Yanukovich announced that he was not ready to sign the agreement.

The European Union had no hint of forthcoming Russian steps, which escalated before the scheduled signature of the agreement?

We obviously had some information. We expressed ourselves quite clearly on that in August and September. But we did not have information on all of these measures, and we had no information about the impact on the Ukrainian economy especially in the east. The reason was that President Yanukovich and his people protected this information, not only against us but even against the Ukrainians.

I do not mean only the trade measures, but also the intervention in Crimea, because this is something you cannot plan in two days. It has to be somehow coordinated. The European Union had no idea about that?

That is something you would have to talk about with a security expert. But I would like to point out that if you already have thousands of soldiers in Crimea, you do not need too much planning.

But there has also been coordination on the political level.

There were signals which we heard and did not want to interpret for several reasons in the way they were materialised at the end. It was President Putin who said a few years ago that the USSR's disintegration was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century. It was President Putin who said at the plenary of the NATO-Russia summit in Bucharest in 2008 that Ukraine was an "artificial" state. And it was President Putin who came up with the idea of Eurasian union just after we offered the possibility to negotiate Association Agreements with our Eastern partners. I would like to stress that it is not a problem to have two integration projects at the European continent, if all of the states voluntarily agree to join them. The problem would arise at the moment should the two projects behave like rivals. That would risk a trade and political barrier within Europe.

So Europe now already has an idea about what President Putin wants to achieve and what he is ready to do for it. Does it mean that the EU will be prepared for a similar scenario that could unfold in Moldova and Georgia, which are going to sign the agreements in June?

If you are asking whether we know that Russia as a partner is ready to break the rules of game – and hereby I refer mainly to the Helsinki principles which constitute the foundation of European security – then yes, we already know it. That is also the reason why the heads of states and governments of the EU adopted targeted sanctions in two steps, and why they emphasise that the EU is ready to move further with the sanctions if Russia continues with this policy. The next level could include selected economic sanctions that could have a much more significant impact on Russia.

So you are not afraid that what happened in Ukraine will happen in Moldova and Georgia?

Am I not afraid of Russia invading Moldova or Georgia if we sign the agreements. Is that what you want to ask?

Well, we did not expect it would invade Ukraine either.

We cannot respect such behaviour; we simply have to refuse it in principle. I believe Russia understands this.