

Commissioner Füle on the visit to Belarus, 9 July 2010

- This is my first visit to Belarus since taking office earlier this year. It gave me the opportunity to make a "tour d'horizons" of the Belarus political scene, and also to talk not only with state officials but also with the opposition and the civil society; and now with you, the media.
- I used this opportunity to listen to my interlocutors, to their expectations from the EU, but also to pass some key messages. Let me share with you the main ones:

1. My first message was that I believe we can do more through our policy of gradual engagement. Belarus is the only country in the Eastern Partnership which does not participate in our bilateral cooperation. I believe this can change, if we continue to support Belarus in its path to reform.

2. My second message was that any further development of our relations needs to be based on the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

Let me take two examples: elections and the death penalty.

- In all countries, elections are a democratic stamp on a country's international ID. Belarus needs this stamp to prove that is ready to engage on the basis of the same democratic values as the EU.
- Belarus remains the only European country still applying death penalty on its own citizens. We urge the authorities to enact a moratorium, pending the abolition of the death penalty. This would serve Belarus' talks with the Council of Europe.

3. My third message was that we are ready to help Belarus in tangible and practical ways:

- The EU has a lot to bring to Belarus and its people. It can help improve the everyday living standards of the people. It can support Belarus in its reforms to modernise its administration and make its economy more competitive in order to reach out to new markets. It can also make travelling easier and cheaper for Belarusian citizens.
- If an agreement can be reached with Belarus on visa facilitation and readmission, more Belarusians will be able to travel to the EU countries. Students, business people, journalists and those with families living in the EU would be able get visa free of charge.
- In summary, we came with a practical and substantive offer for Belarus and its people.
- By taking on a reform agenda both in the economic and political fields and moving closer to international standards, there is a real chance for Belarus to move closer to its European neighbours and to gain from the substantial benefits this entails.
- I hope Belarus will seize this opportunity.