

Social democrats pay condolences to Poles

Warsaw, 19 April 2010 – What was designed as participation in a meeting called to discuss ways to strengthen cross-border cooperation in the Baltic region turned into a visit for payment of condolences. A Warsaw trip by an SPD delegation from Schleswig-Holstein on 13 and 14. April passed all under the shadow of the air crash near Smolensk a couple of days before which killed the Polish president and a number of prominent public figures of Poland. Led by Schleswig-Holstein SPD and caucus chairman Ralf Stegner the SPD delegation of former Schleswig-Holstein premier and SPD party whip Björn Engholm, Bundestag deputy Franz Thönnies, European parliament deputy Ulrike Rodust, Schleswig-Holstein diet deputies Birte Pauls and Wolfgang Baasch, and Schleswig-Holstein SPD executive manager Christian Kröning visited the Polish capital, where they were taken care of by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation office in Poland.

Political talks were thus of secondary importance. The Poles were overwhelmed. Talking politics was out of the question. The SPD delegation found a city in distress, with people



wearing black, national flags with black ribbons and vigil lights dominating the streets. In the Piłsudski Square where pope John Paul II used to read mass during his pilgrimages and which these days turned into a central venue of mourning, visiting delegation members lit candles to commemorate the dead.

Ralf Stegner presented a condolence letter to the governing body of the social democratic sister party SLD from Sigmar Gabriels along with a sympathy message from FES executive director Roland Schmidt. The get-together was a bitter experience to the German visitors because the original schedule of the Schleswig-Holstein delegation in Warsaw provided for meetings both with Jerzy Szmajdziński, the SLD presidential candidate, and with Jolanta Szymanek-Deresz, the SLD deputy chair who was to head the candidate's election campaign. Both were killed in the Smoleńsk crash. Knut Dethlefsen, who heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Warsaw office, emphasised it was important to go ahead with the long-announced visit from Germany, the disaster notwithstanding: „When friends are hit by misfortune you don't keep away but stand close by them.“

The delegation also paid a visit to the to express their sympathy. Krzysztof Dośła, the chairman of the Gdańsk regional Solidarity union board, turned out to have been a personal acquaintance of the deceased head of state, the Schleswig-Holstein people were told.

„To many of us he wasn't President Kaczyński but our mate Leszek“, said Krzysztof Dośła. In a following conversation on political issues both parties found similarities in the Baltic countries, ranging from the role and condition of the shipping industry to deficiencies of neoliberal governments to minimum wage debates. The Solidarity union and the SPD, Ralf Stegner summed up, „are bound many shared beliefs and many a goal pursued “.



An emotionally charged meeting, and one that lingered long in memory, was an encounter with the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Polish parliament, Andrzej Halicki. Visibly moved, Halicki talked of the sudden death of 18 of his colleagues from the benches in the Sejm. He also told the delegation how deeply he was moved by the many sympathy messages he was receiving him from abroad.

„If I can say I learnt a lesson from the tragic event of 10 April, it is that the time we are given here on Earth and in politics is short“, Halicki said. Life is too short for us to lose ourselves in cheap quibbles and always wait for the other side to make a first step. He said that was what had moved him to sort out with his Russian colleague a joint meeting of the foreign relations committees of the Sejm and the Russian Duma to be arranged in the following week. „If this dreadful tragedy brings with it a flicker of hope, then perhaps that the shared sorrow is sending fresh impulses to the rapprochement and reconciliation between Russia and Poland,“ said Halicki.



Bundestag deputy Franz Thönnies, himself member of the German parliament's foreign relations committee, welcomed the idea of holding a joint Russian-Polish meeting of their foreign affairs bodies and put forward the idea of a trilateral parliamentary meeting, which can try to establish new communication structures in the arduous triangular relationship between Russia, Poland and Germany.

Following the talks with their Polish colleagues the delegation resumed their trip to go to Vilnius where they took part in a conference the Friedrich Ebert Foundation staged to discuss with other European social democrats new possibilities for cooperation between countries in the Baltic region. Participants will remember above all the mourning Poland, but also the good German-Polish relations as well. Knut Dethlefsen summed up the visit: „To social democrats Solidarity is a central social value. The honest compassion of the SPD delegation was received as a token of solidarity.“