



TEXTS ADOPTED

Provisional edition

P8_TA-PROV(2018)0174

Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 19 April 2018 on Belarus (2018/2661(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions and recommendations on Belarus,
- having regard to the parliamentary elections of 11 September 2016, the presidential elections of 11 October 2015 and the local elections of 18 February 2018 held in Belarus,
- having regard to the statement of 20 February 2018 by the spokesperson of the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs (VP/HR) on the local elections in Belarus,
- having regard to the statement of 25 March 2018 by the spokesperson of the VP/HR on developments in the run up to and during Freedom Day in Belarus,
- having regard to the Council conclusions on Belarus, in particular those of 15 February 2016 lifting sanctions against 170 individuals and three Belarusian companies and setting out the framework for policy dialogue and the conditions for EU-Belarus relations to develop on a more positive agenda, notably as regards democratic reforms,
- having regard to the conclusions of the Eastern Partnership Summit of 24 November 2017, and the endorsement of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, which is designed to bring results for citizens,
- having regard to the visit of Commissioner Hahn to Belarus in January 2018 and the ongoing negotiations on the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities,
- having regard to the decision of the Foreign Affairs Council to prolong for one year until February 2019 the remaining restrictive measures against Belarus, including an arms embargo, the ban on the export of goods for internal repression and an asset freeze and travel ban against four individuals listed in connection with the unresolved disappearance of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist in 1999 and 2000,
- having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to all human rights conventions to which Belarus is a party,

- having regard to the statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus of 28 March 2018,
 - having regard to Rules 135(5) and 123(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas following the presidential elections in 2015 and the parliamentary elections in 2016, Belarus held local elections on 18 February 2018; whereas the longstanding recommendations by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission in the field of electoral legislation and processes remain unaddressed in Belarus; whereas, according to foreign diplomatic and Belarusian observers, the local elections that were held in February 2018 only reconfirmed such shortcomings;
 - B. whereas the EU lifted most of its restrictive measures against Belarusian officials and legal entities in February 2016 as a gesture of goodwill designed to encourage Belarus to improve its records on human rights, democracy and the rule of law;
 - C. whereas the EU has repeatedly stated that respect for fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and human rights constitutes a clear precondition for the improvement and further advancement of relations between the European Union and Belarus; whereas, however, the situation in the country continues to remain of concern, as only very limited, tentative steps for improvements can be observed in this respect;
 - D. whereas the long-awaited constitutional and legislative reforms that would allow for the development of a true democracy are lagging behind;
 - E. whereas no electoral reform has been attempted and, as demonstrated during the local elections of February 2018, a significant number of severe shortcomings and procedural irregularities remain, including a restrictive legal framework for political rights throughout all stages of election campaigns and problems with observing, voting and counting votes; whereas since 1994 no free and fair elections have been conducted in Belarus;
 - F. whereas international observers were not invited to observe the local elections, while the Belarusian observers, for their part, collected tangible evidence of mass nationwide efforts to inflate turnout totals and of carousel voting, with the latter being used for the first time in several years;
 - G. whereas intimidatory activities continue, including numerous cases of the detainment of independent and opposition activists, politicians and journalists; whereas, once again, prominent members of the opposition, and pro-democracy and human rights defenders, were prevented from participating in or were arrested in the run-up to, and during, an unauthorised demonstration in Minsk on 25 March 2018 to mark the 100th anniversary of Belarus' proclamation of independence, although most were subsequently released without charge;
 - H. whereas two political prisoners, Mikhail Zhamchuzhny and Dzmitry Paliyenka, remain in detention;
 - I. whereas the European Parliament has been supporting Belarusian civil society for years, by awarding the Sakharov Prize to the Belarusian Association of Journalists in 2004 and to Alaksandr Milinkievich in 2006, among other initiatives;

- J. whereas the events of Freedom Day 2018 demonstrate once again that the Belarusian Government has no intention of abandoning its old policies of repressing, on a mass scale, citizens attempting to exercise rights provided for by the constitution and by international treaties;
- K. whereas on 24 January 2018 the Ministry of Information arbitrarily blocked access to the leading independent news website Charter97.org on the territory of Belarus; whereas criminal proceedings against independent bloggers have been opened; whereas the draft amendments to the Law on the Media would, if adopted, pose a new and significant threat to freedom of expression in the country;
- L. whereas on 25 October 2016 Belarus adopted its first National Human Rights Action Plan, approved by a resolution of the Belarusian Council of Ministers, which defines the principle lines of action for implementing the country's human rights commitments;
- M. whereas Belarus is the only country in Europe that still carries out capital punishment; whereas the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus has noted that death sentences in Belarus can be considered highly disputable owing to the lack of an independent judiciary and of fair trials;
- N. whereas the EU and Belarus are currently negotiating tailor-made Partnership Priorities, whose main areas of interest include economic development and modernisation, strengthening institutions and good governance, connectivity and people-to-people contacts; whereas the Belarusian Government has repeatedly stated that it is seeking the normalisation of relations with the EU, the lifting of the remaining sanctions, and visa liberalisation; whereas, however, progress in this regard is necessarily subject to Belarus showing political will and commitment towards democratic values, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms;
1. Supports the EU's critical engagement with Belarus, as long as it is conditioned on the undertaking of concrete steps towards democratisation and on the Belarusian authorities' complete respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights;
 2. Notes with disappointment the lack of implementation, despite earlier appeals, of the recommendations made by the OSCE ODIHR and the Venice Commission following the presidential elections in 2015 and the parliamentary elections in 2016, which were supposed to be implemented before the 2018 local elections; calls on the Belarusian authorities to resume without delay work on comprehensive electoral reforms, as part of the broader democratisation process and in cooperation with international partners;
 3. Deplores the harassment of journalists and independent media in Belarus in the follow-up to the local elections, including the illegal removal from a polling station and brutal treatment of Belsat TV journalist Andrus Kozel, and the blocking of the news portal Charter97, among other actions;
 4. Urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately and unconditionally lift the blockage imposed on the leading independent news website Charter97.org, to abandon the amendments to the Law on the Media, which, if adopted, would threaten freedom of expression, and to end the persecution of independent bloggers for practicing free expression;

5. Notes that the number of democratic opposition representatives at precinct-level voting stations was disproportionately low in relation to the number of applications submitted;
6. Expresses disappointment at the repeated refusal to register democratic opposition parties; calls for the lifting of restrictions and the easing of registration procedures for political parties in Belarus; stresses that all political parties must be allowed to conduct unrestricted political activities, especially during election campaigns; calls for the repeal of Article 193/1 of the Criminal Code of Belarus, which criminalises participation in the activities of non-registered organisations;
7. Regrets the Belarusian authorities' disproportionate reaction to opposition activists' efforts to organise an unauthorised rally on the Freedom Day celebrations of 25 March 2018, which led to dozens of arrests, including of opposition leaders and former presidential candidates Mikalai Statkevich and Uladzimir Niakliaev; reiterates that freedom of assembly and association is a fundamental human right; stresses that any serious backtracking in terms of democracy and respect for fundamental freedoms, including more detentions of political prisoners, should in each case bring about a clear reaction from the EU in its relations with Belarus;
8. Strongly calls for the release of Mikhail Zhamchuzhny and Dzmitry Paliyenka, two civil society activists currently detained for political reasons, and for all former political prisoners to be rehabilitated and their civil and political rights restored;
9. Reiterates its call on the Belarusian authorities to ensure, in all circumstances, respect for democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international and regional human rights instruments ratified by Belarus;
10. Points out that respect for fundamental freedoms is a key element of a healthy democracy; urges the Belarusian authorities to engage in a constructive and open dialogue with the democratic opposition and with civil society organisations, with a view to guaranteeing citizens' freedoms and rights, in particular the right to association, peaceful assembly and expression, as well as to securing a framework for free and independent media;
11. Strongly reiterates its call on Belarus to join a global moratorium on the death penalty as a first step towards its permanent abolition; recalls that the death penalty constitutes inhumane and degrading treatment, has no proven deterrent effect and makes judicial errors irreversible; notes with regret that Belarusian courts have handed out new death penalties in 2018;
12. Calls on the EEAS and the Commission to continue support for civil society organisations in Belarus and abroad; stresses, in this context, the need to support all independent sources of information for Belarusian society, including media broadcasting in the Belarusian language, and from abroad;
13. Takes note of the EU-Belarus sector dialogues at technical level and the broadening of cooperation in areas such as economic reform, resource efficiency, the green economy and environmental protection; calls on the EEAS and the Commission to prioritise the safety of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, and to ensure that progress in EU-Belarus relations is conditional on increased openness and cooperation, and on full

compliance with international nuclear and environmental safety standards, on the part of Belarus;

14. Regrets that the current human rights dialogue is not yielding concrete results and urges the EU Special Representative for Human Rights to find ways and means to promote the full and effective protection of human rights in Belarus; calls for the release of all political prisoners;
15. Takes note of the ongoing negotiations on EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities and looks forward to their swift conclusion, which will broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation for the benefit of citizens on both sides and allow Belarus access to a wider scope of financial assistance and cooperation, conditional on it taking clear and tangible steps towards democratisation and openness, including, as a priority, comprehensive election reform; welcomes, in this context, the Commission's plan to increase the allocation of financial assistance for the period 2018-2020; insists on clearer reform commitments by the Belarusian Government and recommends the setting up of a roadmap for closer EU-Belarus relations in the form of benchmarks and a timeline for the implementation of such commitments;
16. Urges continued EU support to civil society organisations and human rights defenders, and calls on the Commission to work closely with, and follow the recommendations of, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum; urges the Belarusian Government to ensure civic participation in policy-making processes at local and national level, drawing inspiration from the guidelines adopted by the Council of Europe on 27 November 2017; notes the growing interaction between Belarus and this organisation;
17. Calls, in this regard, on the EEAS and the Commission to find ways to inform and consult with Belarus civil society organisations about the ongoing EU-Belarus dialogue and negotiations;
18. Notes with satisfaction the start of the implementation of the EU-Belarus Mobility Partnership, and is looking forward to finalising the EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements, as a clear contribution to people-to-people and business contacts;
19. Welcomes the decision by the Minsk authorities allowing, since February 2018, short visa-free stays in Belarus for foreign citizens of 80 countries;
20. Welcomes the progress made in promoting EU-Belarus youth exchanges and people-to-people contacts, including through the EU's MOST mobility scheme, Erasmus+, Horizon 2020 and the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument (TAIEX), and through Belarus' accession to the Bologna Process; calls for the implementation of the Bologna Process in accordance with the roadmap agreed jointly by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Belarus, a measure that will benefit young Belarusians and further improve exchanges, and people-to-people contacts, with the EU;
21. Calls for the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus; calls on the Belarusian Government to cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur; calls on the EU and its Member States to promote and support the extension of the UN Special Rapporteur's mandate, and invites the EU Special

Representative for Human Rights to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur in order to improve the situation in the country;

22. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the European External Action Service, the Council, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Council of Europe, and the governments and parliaments of the Member States, as well as to the Belarusian authorities.