



Plenary sitting

B8-0451/2018

2.10.2018

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION

with request for inclusion in the agenda for a debate on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law

pursuant to Rule 135 of the Rules of Procedure

on deterioration of media freedom in Belarus, notably the case of Charter 97 (2018/2861(RSP))

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on behalf of the ECR Group

B8-0451/2018

European Parliament resolution on deterioration of media freedom in Belarus, notably the case of Charter 97 (2018/2861(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on Belarus, especially of 19 April 2018,
 - having regard to the visit of Commissioner Hahn to Belarus in January and June 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 statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus of 28 March 2018,
 - having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to all human rights conventions to which Belarus is a party,
 - having regard to Rules 135(5) and 123(4) of its Rules of Procedure
- A. 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;
- B. 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 intimidatory activities continue, including numerous cases of the detainment of independent and opposition activists, politicians and journalists;
- C. whereas Reporters without Borders conclude that more than 100 journalists were arrested in 2017, usually while covering opposition protests as well as the harassment of freelance journalists working for independent media outlets based abroad, who cannot get accreditation, has reached unprecedented levels;
- D. 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 the website was named after Charter 97 - a 1997 declaration calling for democracy in Belarus that was signed by journalists, opposition politicians, and rights activists; whereas the founder of the Charter 97 declaration, Aleh Byabenin, was found hanged in his house near Minsk in September 2010; whereas Belarus-born journalist Pavel Sheremet, who was a spokesman for the organization behind Charter 97, was killed in a car bombing in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, in July 2016;

- E. whereas Natalya Radina, editor-in-chief of the website Charter97 after being arrested in December of 2010 by the Belarusian KGB had to flee to Warsaw, Poland, where she continues to operate the news site in Belarusian, Russian and English language versions thanks to financial support from Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; whereas according to Radina, the site's reader number have grown sevenfold since they moved to Poland; whereas Radina believes that "because we work freely without state censorship or self-censorship" the site "had 4 million unique visitors - that is, half of the adult population of Belarus", as she stated in the European Parliament on June 5;
- F. whereas on April 16, 2018 the website Charter97 was also prohibited by Russian authorities on the territory of the Russian Federation; whereas according to Radina, in the months following the blockings, the number of visitors from within Belarus to the website decreased by 70 per cent; whereas Radina received death threats and was warned that she is being followed and that she only "has few days left"; whereas Radina stated that blocking the Charter97.org service in Belarus means that "the information space" in the country is now "completely subject to Russian influence";
- G. whereas in early August 2018 Belarusian authorities carried out raids in the newsrooms of two independent Belarussian outlets Tut.by and BelaPAN. The raids resulted in the detention of nine journalists from both outlets, including Tut.by's editor-in-chief, over allegations they illegally accessed and used online information provided by the state-owned news agency BelTA; whereas there are other internet news portals such as Belarus Partisan which access in Belarusian internet is being denied;
- H. whereas on August 7, the Investigative Committee of Belarus opened a criminal case under Part 2, Art. 349 of the Criminal Code punishable with two-year jail sentence (illegal access to computer information committed out of other personal interest, which caused substantial harm) against journalists and editors of a number of Internet resources;
- I. whereas the latest amendments to the Law on Mass Media, adopted in June 2018, extend government control to online media outlets. Whereas the changes, which will enter into force on 1 December 2018 will establish further bureaucratic hurdles for websites that want to register as official online media outlets; whereas websites which according to the new legislation choose not to register, or do not meet the new criteria, cannot file requests for accreditation with government institutions. Whereas both registered and unregistered online media outlets will also be obliged to register, the names of people who submit comments while the owners of registered online media outlets will be also legally responsible for the content of the comments;
- J. whereas in 2018, Belarus has slipped down to place 155 in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, which evaluates the level of press freedom in 180 countries each year; Since the start of this year, Belarussian independent journalists have received a large number of fines, at least 48 as of May 17, according to RSF; whereas absolute majority of fines have been imposed on individuals working for the television station Belsat TV, which is financed by national Polish Television and is broadcasting from Warsaw, Poland news from independent sources in Belarus to Belarus and in Belarusian;
1. Reiterates its call on the Belarussian authorities to immediately and unconditionally lift the blockade imposed on the internet access to the news website Charter97.org on the territory of Belarus. Calls also on Russia to lift the blockade imposed on the

Charter9 website.

2. Considers the arrests of journalists in August 2018 as an expression of disproportional measure on the side of Belarusian authorities and calls for all charges against them to be dropped.
3. Strongly condemns the repeated harassment of journalists and independent media in Belarus.
4. Strongly regrets the amendments adopted to the media law, which is a tool of tightening control over the internet.
5. Reiterates its strong concern about the further worsening climate for independent and opposition websites and media outlets and journalists in Belarus.
6. Reiterates its calls on the Belarusian authorities to strengthen respect for democratic principles, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms including respect for truthful and unbiased journalism.
7. Praises Polish and Lithuanian governments support for independent media in Belarus, especially for Charter97 website and Belsat TV. Calls on other Member States to follow their example and support their efforts to promote freedom of speech and human rights in Belarus. Calls on European Endowment for Democracy and other Western foundations to help finance independent media in Belarus, especially the Charter97 website and Belsat TV.
8. Calls on the EEAS and on 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, especially Charter97 and Belsat TV.
9. Calls for independent investigation of unsolved deaths of Belarusian human rights activists and journalists including Aleh Byabenin and Pavel Sheremet.
10. Regrets conviction on August 24 of Henadz Fiadynich and Ihar Komlik, activists of the independent trade union REP to 4 years of restricted freedom.
11. 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;
12. Welcomes the decision by the Minsk authorities extending, since July 24, 2018, visa-free stays in Belarus for foreign citizens of 80 countries;
13. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States and the President and the Government of Belarus and President and the Government of Russian Federation.