Situation in Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2011 on the situation in Belarus

The European Parliament,

– having regard to its previous resolutions on the situation in Belarus, in particular that of 17 December 2009 on Belarus,

– having regard to Council decision 2010/639/CFSP of 25 October 2010 concerning restrictive measures against certain officials of Belarus, extending both the restrictive measures and suspension until 31 October 2011,

– having regard to the Conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council of 25 October 2010,

– having regard to the Statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions on the presidential election in Belarus by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) as of 20 December 2010,

– having regard to Rule 110 of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the Prague Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit reaffirms the commitments, inter alia of Belarus, to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,

B. whereas the Council, on 25 October 2010, ‘called on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the (presidential) elections are conducted in line with international norms and standards for democratic elections and Belarus’s commitments in the OSCE and the UN’,

C. whereas Belarus has committed itself to consider the recommendations made by the OSCE and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) regarding improvements to its electoral law in order to bring it into line with international standards for democratic elections and to consult about the proposed amendments with the OSCE; whereas the National Assembly of Belarus passed a reform of the Electoral Code without prior consultation of the OSCE,

D. whereas the Council ‘reaffirmed its readiness to deepen its relations with Belarus depending on developments in Belarus towards democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as its readiness to assist the country in attaining these objectives. Subject to progress in Belarus in these areas, it stood ready to take steps towards upgrading contractual relations with Belarus’,

E. whereas the Council, after evaluating developments in Belarus, has decided to extend the restrictive measures against certain Belarusian officials but to suspend the application of the restrictions on travelling to the EU, both until 31 October 2011,
F. whereas according to the OSCE PA and OSCE/ODIHR ‘Statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions on the presidential election in Belarus’ some improvements took place in the run-up to the elections but they were overshadowed by the serious irregularities on the voting day and the violence that erupted on the night of 19 December,

G. whereas over 700 persons were detained for their participation in the demonstration on 19 December in Minsk, most of whom have been released after serving short administrative sentences while 24 opposition activists and journalists, including 6 presidential candidates, have been charged for ‘organising mass disorder’ accompanied by violent attacks and armed resistance that could carry prison sentences of up to 15 years; whereas a further 14 persons may soon be charged,

H. whereas the police crackdown on the demonstration of 19 December 2010 and further measures taken by the law enforcement agencies against democratic opposition, free media and civil society activists were condemned by the President of the European Parliament, the EU High Representative and the UN General Secretary,

I. whereas the lawyers representing protesters, the political opposition or their families are faced with the threat of losing their licence/being debarred,

1. Considers, in line with the findings of the Preliminary Conclusions of the OSCE PA and OSCE/ODIHR, that the Presidential elections of 19 December 2010 failed to meet international standards of free, fair and transparent elections; considers this vote as yet another missed opportunity for a democratic transition in Belarus and calls, in the light of numerous and serious irregularities reported by OSCE/ODIHR, that new elections be held on the free and democratic conditions according to the OSCE standards;

2. Condemns the use of brutal force by the police and KGB services against the protesters on Election Day, in particular expresses its indignation over a brutal attack on Mr Niakliayeu, both examples of the severe violation of basic democratic principles, such as freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, as well as of human rights, and expresses its concern at the attempts of the Belarusian authorities to take into state custody Danil Sannikov, three-year-old son of the Presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, and Irina Khalip, an investigative journalist, who have both been jailed since the 19 December election; is particularly concerned about the health of Mikalay Statkevich, who has been on hunger strike for the last 31 days;

3. Strongly condemns the arrest and detention of peaceful protesters and most of the presidential candidates (e.g. Uladzimir Niakliayeu, Andrei Sannikov, Mikalay Statkevich and Aleksey Michalevich); the leaders of the democratic opposition (e.g. Pavel Sevyarynets and Anatoly Lebedko), as well as great number of civil society activists, journalists, teachers and students facing sentences up to 15 year prison; calls for an independent and impartial international investigation into the events under the auspices of the OSCE; calls for politically motivated charges to be immediately dropped;

4. Condemns the repressions and urges the Belarusian authorities to stop immediately all forms of harassment, intimidation or threats against civil society activists including raids, searches and confiscation of materials in private apartments, outlets of independent media and offices of civil society organisations as well as expulsions from universities and workplaces;
5. Demands an immediate and unconditional release of all those detained during Election Day and in its aftermath including the prisoners of conscience recognised by Amnesty International; calls on the Belarusian authorities to provide unhindered access for the detainees to relatives, legal assistance and medical care;

6. Regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities to terminate the mission of the OSCE Office in Belarus and calls on the Belarusian authorities to withdraw this decision;

7. Condemns the blockage of a number of major Internet websites, including networking channels and opposition websites, on Election Day in Belarus; underlines that current media legislation in Belarus does not comply with the international standards and therefore calls on the Belarusian authorities to revise and amend it;

8. Calls on the Council, the Commission and the EU High Representative to review EU policy towards Belarus including consideration of targeted economic sanctions and the freezing of all the macrofinancial aid provided via IMF loans as well as lending operations by the EIB and EBRD programmes; underlines that the orientation of the ENP and national assistance for Belarus should be redirected in order to ensure appropriate support for civil society; reiterates the importance of the effective use of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights;

9. Calls on the Commission to support, with all financial and political means, the efforts of Belarusian civil society, independent media (including TV Belsat, European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racja and others) and non-governmental organisations in Belarus to promote democracy and oppose the regime; sees the necessity to step up and facilitate the relations of Belarusian NGOs with the international NGO community; at the same time calls on the Commission to halt ongoing cooperation and to withdraw its assistance provided to the state-owned media in Belarus; at the same time, the Commission should finance the reprinting and distribution of poetry books by Uladzimir Niakliayeu which were recently confiscated and thrown into fire by the Belarusian authorities;

10. Calls on the European Commission to develop a mechanism of registration of NGOs that are denied registration in Belarus for political reasons, in order to enable them to benefit from the EU programmes;

11. Urges the Commission to continue and increase financial aid to the European Humanities University (EHU) based in Vilnius, Lithuania, to increase the number of scholarships for Belarusian students, repressed for their civic activities and expelled from universities and to contribute to the ‘Solidarity with Belarus’ donors’ conference in Warsaw (2/02/2011) and the following conference in Vilnius (3-4/02/2011);

12. Calls on the Council, the Commission and the EU High Representative to immediately re-apply the visa ban on the Belarusian leading authorities expanding it to the state officials, members of judiciary and security officers who can be considered responsible for the vote-rigging and post-election brutal repressions and arrests of the members of the opposition and to freeze their assets; points out the sanctions should remain in force minimum until all political prisoners and detainees are released and exempted from charges; welcomes the good example of the Polish Government which imposed its own travel restrictions to the representatives of the Minsk regime and at the same time simplified access to the European Union for the Belarusian citizens;
13. Calls on the Council to consider the possibility of suspending Belarusian participation in the Eastern Partnership activities no later than at the Eastern Partnership summit in Budapest if it there is not an acceptable explanation and considerable improvement of the situation in Belarus; this suspension not apply to NGOs and civil society;

14. Calls on the Commission and the Council to intensify work on the negotiations directives for the readmission agreement and for visa facilitation, which include affordable visa fees order to enhance people-to-people contacts;

15. Expects EU Member Countries not to weaken the EU action with bilateral initiatives with the Belarusian regime that undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the European foreign policy;

16. Expresses its opinion that sport events, like the World Ice Hockey Championships in 2014, should not be held in Belarus while there are political prisoners in that country;

17. Regrets the move on the part of the Russian Federation in recognising the elections and description of the repression as an ‘internal affair’; recommends that the European Commission engage in dialogue, consultations and political coordination with the non-EU neighbours of Belarus, who traditionally have special relations with that country and are also partners of the EU, namely Russia and Ukraine, in order to maximise the efficiency of EU policy towards Belarus and to cooperate in properly balancing the reaction against the democratic deficit and human rights violations in Belarus with the need to avoid the latter’s international isolation;

18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, EU HR, EU Member States, the President, Government and Parliament of Belarus and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and the OSCE.