



TEXTS ADOPTED

P8_TA(2017)0126

Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 6 April 2017 on the situation in Belarus (2017/2647(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions and recommendations on Belarus, including on the European Neighbourhood Policy,
- having regard to the statements by the Chair of its Delegation for relations with Belarus of 27 March 2017, the European External Action Service (EEAS) spokesperson of 17 March 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus of 14 and 28 March 2017, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of 24 March 2017, the Director of the OSCE/ODIHR of 17 and 26 March 2017, the OSCE PA Human Rights Committee of 27 March 2017, and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT) of 29 March 2017 on recent arrests of peaceful protesters and unlawful detentions in Belarus,
- having regard to the Council conclusions on Belarus, in particular those of 15 February 2016 lifting the restrictive measures against 170 individuals and three Belarusian companies,
- having regard to Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/350 of 27 February 2017¹ prolonging the restrictive measures against Belarus until 28 February 2018, which include an arms embargo and an asset freeze and a travel ban against four people listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist in 1999 and 2000,
- having regard to the parliamentary elections held on 11 September 2016 and to the presidential election held on 11 October 2015; having regard to the numerous declarations by the Belarusian authorities that some of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations following the 2015 presidential election would be implemented ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections and having regard to the OSCE/ODIHR final report of 28 January 2016 on the presidential election in Belarus of 11 October 2015,
- having regard to the report by FIDH and the Human Rights Centre ‘Viasna’ on Forced

¹ OJ L 50, 28.2.2017, p. 81.

Labour and Pervasive Violations of Workers' Rights in Belarus,

- having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
 - having regard to Rules 135(5) and 123(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas the Government of Belarus introduced Presidential Decree No 3 ‘On the Prevention of Social Dependency’, the so-called ‘social parasite tax’, which was signed by President Alexander Lukashenko in 2015 and began to be implemented as of February 2017 – this decree sanctions unemployment by imposing a special duty to finance government expenditures, ranging from a fee of approximately EUR 240, which is about two thirds of the average monthly wage in Belarus, to forced labour for citizens who have been working for fewer than 183 days a year; whereas the decree was received with widespread criticism from citizens, activists and journalists;
- B. whereas since 17 February and over the course of March 2017, despite the pressure from the state media and security forces, including the presence of armed officers to disperse demonstrations, mass peaceful protests of thousands of citizens have been taking place in dozens of cities across Belarus as a reaction against the adoption of Presidential Decree No 3, and against the construction of a business centre near Kurapaty, a memorial site for the victims of Stalin;
- C. whereas the authorities have responded violently to these demonstrations, in particular on 25 and 26 March 2017; whereas peaceful demonstrators tried to march along Minsk’s main avenue on the Freedom Day of 25 March, but were blocked by a cordon of riot police; whereas the security forces have attacked the protesters, beating women, minors and the elderly; whereas hundreds of protesters have been arrested, including domestic and foreign journalists reporting on the events; whereas at least 700 people have been detained in Minsk, some of whom were unintentional spectators;
- D. whereas a large group of human rights defenders have been detained while observing peaceful demonstrations; whereas according to the Human Rights Centre ‘Viasna’, as of the end of the day on 27 March 2017, a total of 177 people had been handed court rulings on administrative charges over their participation in the 25 March protests, of which 74 resulted in administrative detention and 93 in fines; whereas more than 100 opposition members were arrested as a preventive measure before the protests;
- E. whereas 27 people, including Zmitser Dashkevich, a former political prisoner and a leader of the ‘Young Front’ movement, have been arrested under allegations of plotting a riot by groups trained in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania; whereas they face an offence punishable by imprisonment for up to three years; whereas the Committee for State Security (KGB) is refusing to disclose the number of people arrested in connection with the so-called ‘mass riot case’;
- F. whereas Mikalay Statkevich, a prominent opposition figure and former presidential candidate, who was expected to lead the demonstration in Minsk, was arrested and kept in a KGB detention centre for three days, with no information as to his whereabouts; whereas Sergei Kulinich and Sergei Kuntsevich were also arrested; whereas Uladzimir Nyaklyayev, a well-known Belarusian poet and presidential candidate in 2010, was also

illegally detained prior to the rally of 25 March 2017 and, as a consequence, had to be hospitalised due to weakened health conditions; whereas Pavel Seviarynets, Vitali Rymashevski, Anatol Liabedzka and Yuri Hubarevich, along with a number of civic activists, were arrested over the course of March 2017; whereas on 23 March Ales Lahvinets, deputy chairman of the Movement for Freedom, was arrested in Minsk; whereas around 60 human rights observers were preventatively detained;

- G. whereas on 25 March 2017 the police raided the office of the Human Rights Centre 'Viasna' in the Belarusian capital, preventatively arresting at least 57 persons involved in the monitoring of ongoing peaceful protests; whereas prior to this, other human rights defenders, such as Oleg Volchek, a head of the Human Rights Centre 'Legal Assistance to the Population', and Anatoli Poplavni, a member of the Gomel branch of the Human Rights Centre 'Viasna', were detained and sentenced to short terms of imprisonment; whereas Leonid Sudalenka, a member of 'Viasna', was also detained and convicted for having submitted over 200 citizens' complaints against the provisions of the above-mentioned Presidential Decree No 3;
- H. whereas according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) 120 incidents of violations of journalists' rights have been registered; whereas the internet was shut down across the country and journalists have been sanctioned for covering the events or sentenced to prison on charges of hooliganism or for disobeying police orders; whereas some of them are still awaiting trial; whereas over 20 cases of harassment of Belsat TV reporters have been recorded since 12 March 2017, and whereas on 31 March 2017 the offices of Belsat TV were raided and searched by the police, and some equipment seized and removed;
- I. whereas these events are the most serious that have occurred since the harsh crackdown on demonstrations in 2010 and can be seen as a regretful setback; whereas this new wave of repression is taking place exactly one year after the EU's decision to enter into a so-called re-engagement policy for relations with Belarus;
- J. whereas Belarus is an OSCE participating state and has agreed to respect the rights of peaceful assembly and association; whereas the above-mentioned mass arrests, excessive use of force against protesters and the reported raids of civil society organisations are clear violations of these commitments;
- K. whereas Belarus is the only country in Europe still to carry out capital punishment; whereas the first death penalty sentence in 2017 was handed down on 17 March 2017;
- L. whereas the EU lifted most of the restrictive measures in regard to Belarusian officials and legal entities in February 2016 as a gesture of goodwill to encourage Belarus to improve its human rights, democracy and rule of law record; whereas the Council in its conclusions on Belarus of 15 February 2016 stressed the need to enhance EU-Belarus cooperation in a number of economic, trade and assistance-related fields, which would open up the possibility for Belarus to apply for EIB and EBRD financing;
- M. whereas the difficult economic situation in Belarus faces further prospects of deterioration, with major sectors still remaining under state ownership and under an administrative command and control system; whereas Belarus's dependence on Russia's economic aid is continuously increasing;
- N. whereas one of the objectives of Belarus's participation in the Eastern Partnership and

its parliamentary branch, Euronest, is to intensify cooperation between the country and the EU; whereas the Belarusian Parliament has no official status in the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly;

- O. whereas Belarus is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and takes part in the 'Zapad 2017' joint military manoeuvres with Russia, which cover scenarios involving attacks on its western neighbours that include simulating the use of nuclear weapons and which have a potential negative impact on the security and national sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus and the region;
 - P. whereas the EU is committed to a stable, democratic and prosperous future for Belarus, for the benefit of its people; whereas a significant improvement in freedom of speech and freedom of the media, respect for the political rights of ordinary citizens and opposition activists alike and respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights are all prerequisites for better relations between the EU and Belarus;
1. Condemns the crackdown on peaceful protesters and the repressions in the run-up to and during the demonstrations of 25 March 2017; stresses that despite the international community's calls for restraint, the response by the security services was indiscriminate and inappropriate; expresses its concern over the latest developments in Belarus and highlights a clear need for a broader democratisation process in the country;
 2. Condemns the undue restrictions on the right of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of association, including on those expressing opinions about social and other public issues, and, most particularly, the harassment and detention of independent journalists, opposition members, human rights activists and other protesters;
 3. Calls on the Belarusian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release and drop all judicial charges against all peaceful protesters, journalists, human rights defenders, civil society activists and opposition members who have been detained in connection with the current wave of demonstrations; considers the practice of preventive arrests totally unacceptable; urges the authorities to immediately disclose information about all those arrested to their families and the wider public;
 4. Reiterates that the use of force against anyone exercising her/his right to peaceful protest cannot be justified under any circumstances, and that repressions which violate the right to freedom of speech and assembly are contrary to Belarus's international obligations and to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus; urges the Government of Belarus to get involved in an open dialogue with its citizens, independent civil society organisations and independent media;
 5. Urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately carry out thorough and impartial investigations into all allegations of arbitrary detention and other violations of the rights of protesters in connection with the recent demonstrations; warns that in the event of failure to carry out such investigations, the EU may apply new restrictive measures vis-à-vis those highest Belarusian officials responsible for the recent crackdowns;
 6. Urges the authorities to end the harassment of independent media for political reasons and to put a stop to the practice of administrative prosecution and the arbitrary use of Article 22.9(2) of the Administrative Code against freelance journalists for working with foreign media without accreditation, which restricts the right to freedom of

expression and the dissemination of information;

7. Urges the Belarusian authorities to stop the harassment of its civil society, to allow full and free legal functioning of public organisations, to repeal without delay Article 193/1 of the Criminal Code, which penalises the organisation of, and participation in, the activities of non-registered public associations and organisations, and to allow the full, free and unhampered legal functioning of public associations and organisations, including those of national minorities and their independent organisations;
8. Urges the OSCE PA, which plans to hold its 26th Annual Session in Minsk in July 2017, to take into account recent events in Belarus and as a minimum to ensure involvement of political democratic opposition parties, independent media and civil society organisations;
9. Calls on the Belarusian Government to engage in a constructive dialogue with the opposition and civil society organisations, as well as to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, carrying out long-overdue reforms to protect human rights and strengthen democracy; calls on the EEAS and on the Commission to continue and strengthen 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; calls, furthermore, on the EU Special Representative for Human Rights to examine ways and means to promote the full and effective protection of human rights in Belarus;
10. Recommends the repeal of Presidential Decree No 3 as an arbitrary, harsh and morally questionable measure, violating international human rights, which is estimated to affect more than 470 000 Belarusians;
11. 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 recognise the mandate and cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur; calls on the EEAS to better coordinate the EU's policy towards Belarus with the UN Special Rapporteur; calls on the EU and its Member States to promote and support the extension of the UN Special Rapporteur's mandate in order to continue to monitor the situation in the country;
12. Calls on the Belarusian authorities to resume without delay the work on a comprehensive electoral reform as part of the broader democratisation process and in cooperation with international partners; stresses the need to introduce the relevant OSCE/ODIHR recommendations well in advance of the local elections due to be held in March 2018;
13. Urges the government to join a global moratorium on the use of the death penalty as a first step towards its permanent abolition;
14. Calls on the Commission to further support educational programmes allowing young Belarusians to study in the EU by speeding up the visa and scholarship applications process;
15. Welcomes the Council decision of 27 February 2017 to prolong the restrictive measures on four individuals and the arms embargo against Belarus until 28 February 2018; calls on the EEAS to continue closely following and monitoring the situation in the country

with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the EU policy of constructive re-engagement; believes that clear benchmarks should be set by the EU, which should apply consistent human rights conditionalities in order to ensure reforms that protect fundamental freedoms and human rights;

16. Calls on the Commission to assess whether the highest nuclear safety standards are guaranteed for the Ostrovets nuclear power plant currently under construction and whether an EU guarantee to the EIB would not eventually be used for the financing of this nuclear site in Belarus, and to assess whether such a guarantee would be in compliance with the EU sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation;
17. Reiterates its commitment to work for the benefit of the people of Belarus, to support their pro-democratic aspirations and initiatives, and to contribute to a stable, democratic and prosperous future of Belarus; reiterates that respect for fundamental civil liberties, the rule of law and human rights will be crucial for shaping further relations between the EU and Belarus;
18. 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 (VP/HR), the European External Action Service, the Member States, the OSCE/ODIHR, the Council of Europe, the Belarusian authorities and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.