Elections in Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 26 October 2012 on the situation in Belarus after the parliamentary elections of 23 September 2012
(2012/2815(RSP))

The European Parliament,

– having regard to its previous resolutions on Belarus, in particular those of 5 July 2012, 29 March 2012, 16 February 2012, 15 September 2011, 12 May 2011, 10 March 2011, 20 January 2011, 10 March 2010 and 17 December 2009,

– having regard to the statements of 24 September 2012 by President Schulz, of 24 September 2012 by Vice-President Protasiewicz, Mr Brok and Mr Kaczmarek, of 25 September 2012 by Mr Vigenin and of 26 September 2012 by the Delegation for relations with Belarus, all on the parliamentary elections in Belarus,

– having regard to the statement of 24 September 2012 by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the parliamentary elections in Belarus,

– having regard to the Council conclusions on Belarus (3191st Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 15 October 2012),

– having regard to the conclusions of the European Council of 1-2 March 2012 expressing its deep concern over the further deterioration of the situation in Belarus,

– having regard to Council Decision 2012/126/CFSP of 28 February 2012 implementing Decision 2010/639/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Belarus,

– having regard to the Council conclusions on the launching of a European dialogue of modernisation with Belarusian society (3157th Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 23 March 2012,


4 Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0392.
5 Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0244.
7 OJ C 136 E, 11.5.2012, p. 57.
9 OJ C 286 E, 22.10.2010, p. 16.
– having regard to the statement of 28 February 2012 by High Representative Catherine Ashton on her decision and that of the Polish Government to recall the head of the EU delegation in Minsk and the Polish ambassador to Belarus respectively,

– having regard to Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly resolution 1857 (2012) of 25 January 2012 on the situation in Belarus, which condemns the ongoing persecution of members of the opposition and the harassment of civil society activists, independent media and human rights defenders in Belarus,

– having regard to the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights of 10 April 2012, and to resolution 17/24 of the UN Human Rights Council of 17 June 2011, on the human rights situation in Belarus,

– having regard to the declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit adopted in Prague on 7-9 May 2009 and the declaration on the situation in Belarus adopted at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw on 30 September 2011,

– having regard to the joint statement made by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrád Group and of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in Prague on 5 March 2012,

– having regard to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights,

– having regard to the Needs Assessment Mission Report of 16-18 July 2012, the Interim report of 14 September, and the Statement of the preliminary findings and conclusions on the parliamentary elections in Belarus, presented by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) by 24 September 2012,

– having regard to the ‘Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections’ campaign preliminary report on parliamentary elections in Belarus of 23 September 2012,

– having regard to Rule 110(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas none of the parliamentary or presidential elections held in Belarus since 1995 have been recognised by the OSCE as being free and fair;

B. whereas the parliamentary elections held on 23 September 2012 – in particular the conduct of those elections and their pluralistic nature – were seen by the EU as a new opportunity for Belarus to demonstrate its respect for democratic values and European standards;

C. whereas according to the international election observation mission of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in these parliamentary elections many OSCE commitments – including the citizens’ rights to associate, stand as candidates, and express themselves freely – were not respected, despite some improvements to the electoral law;

D. whereas it is evident that with no democratic opposition candidates elected to the national parliament, and with many political prisoners still in jail, the Belarusian authorities ignored
the numerous calls of the international community, and decided instead to take another step away from democracy and to further isolate their country;

E. whereas a large number of democratic opposition candidates were denied registration on the grounds of minor inaccuracies in their income and property statements, or through the invalidation of ballot-access signatures; whereas many of them were not allowed to be part of the electoral commissions;

F. whereas the registration of candidates was carried out in a discriminatory manner; whereas a majority of those who were denied the right to register were received by the initiative groups in support of Mikola Statkevich and Ales Mikhalevich; whereas Aliaksandr Milinkevich, chairman of the Movement for Freedom, and Mikhail Pashkevich, activist of the ‘Tell the Truth’ campaign, among others, were denied the right to register as candidates;

G. whereas the candidates were only allowed to present a pre-recorded speech of at most five-minutes on state-owned media; whereas airtime was refused to numerous candidates, in particular those who called for the elections to be boycotted, and, as a result, many candidates for the opposition parties were unable to communicate their views to the voters;

H. whereas, notwithstanding the freedom of expression guaranteed in the Belarusian Constitution, freedom of the press remains very restricted in Belarus, independent media face ongoing harassment and critical voices are silenced by aggressive means; whereas news coverage of peaceful demonstrations against President Lukashenko and media reports on the deteriorating economic situation have been curtailed; whereas criticism of the country’s government and President is considered a criminal offence;

I. whereas many students and employees of state-owned companies were forced to vote early under the threat of losing their scholarships or jobs; whereas voters in the armed forces were improperly pressured into voting early;

J. whereas the OSCE Election Observation Mission was invited by the Belarusian authorities to observe elections without any restrictions or limitations; whereas, just a week before of the parliamentary elections, two members of the mission – a German and a Lithuanian MP – were denied entry into Belarus, without any exhaustive explanation or clarification given, casting doubt on the declarations made by the Belarusian authorities and undermining the atmosphere of trust between both sides;

K. whereas the EU welcomed the deployment of the OSCE/ODIHR observers and stressed the importance of guaranteeing those observers effective access to all stages of the electoral process, including the counting of votes, and underlined in particular the importance of guaranteeing the rights of the opposition both to stand for election and to gain access to the electoral monitoring commissions and the media;

L. whereas according to the OSCE/ODIHR preliminary findings and conclusions, these elections were not competitive, and there were many cases where the Belarusian Electoral Code, which was supposed to increase campaigning opportunities, was violated; whereas the election took place in a strictly controlled environment, with barely visible campaigning, and was marked by a lack of transparency in vote counting and in aggregating results from various polling stations;
M. whereas twelve political prisoners remain in detention in Belarus, including the human rights defender and Vice President of the International Federation of Human Rights Ales Bialiatski, Nobel Prize candidate and nominee for the European Parliament Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, as well as the former presidential candidate Mikola Statkevich and the leader of the youth organisation ‘Malady Front’, Zmitser Dashkevich;

N. whereas on 26 September 2012 the prominent opposition activist Siarhei Kavalenka was released from prison after he had asked for clemency under increasing pressure from prison authorities who had put him in solitary confinement and blackmailed him; whereas the release of political prisoners is not unconditional, as they are subject to constant surveillance by the authorities and must regularly report to the police about their whereabouts;

O. whereas Belarus remains the only country in Europe which still issues death sentences and carries out executions; whereas, according to human rights activists, around 400 people have been executed in Belarus since 1991;

P. whereas Belarus endorsed the Prague Declaration at the Eastern Partnership Summit of 7-9 May 2009, reaffirming its commitment to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;

1. Deeply regrets that the conduct of parliamentary elections in Belarus once again failed to meet many of the basic standards set by the OSCE, resulting – notwithstanding some minor improvements in the elections’ legal framework – in unfair, non-free, non-transparent and unbalanced consultations;

2. Believes that the parliament elected in Belarus falls short of democratic legitimacy and that the European Parliament will therefore continue its policy of not recognising it, both in its bilateral relations with Belarus and within the framework of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly; regrets that the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly does not at this stage have grounds to invite the official representatives of the legislative body in Belarus to take their seats in the Assembly, and that their absence deprives the Eastern Partnership of an important tool for bringing Belarus closer to the EU’s democratic values;

3. Points out that the EU hoped for an improvement in the organisation of the elections, noting that the persistent failure to organise free and fair elections is a further setback for Belarus and will remain a serious challenge in the conduct of relations between Belarus and the EU;

4. Condemns the detention of journalists, a tactic obviously aimed at controlling the free flow of information by not allowing journalists to exercise their regular work duties, thus violating one of the most basic freedoms, the freedom of speech;

5. Regrets the decision of the Belarusian authorities repeatedly, in the past couple of years, to refuse entry visas to Members of the European Parliament and to national parliamentarians; calls on the Belarusian authorities not to create any further obstacles that prevent the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Belarus from visiting the country;

6. Urges the Belarusian authorities to review their actions, improve and upgrade the electoral legislation and conduct new, free and fair parliamentary elections in line with international standards; urges them also immediately and unconditionally to release, and rehabilitate, all
political prisoners, without coercing them into signing false confessions and pardon pleas, and to respect their own people by protecting their basic freedoms and allowing them to enjoy their basic rights; expresses deep concern regarding the recurring reports of deliberately inflicted inhumane detention conditions, particularly as regards to Ales Bialiatski, Mikola Statkevich and Dzmitry Dashkevich;

7. Calls in this context on the Belarusian Government to move towards ensuring that genuinely democratic elections are held in the future, in accordance with international democratic standards, by introducing changes to electoral law and practice, such as by:

(a) creating fair conditions and opportunities for all candidates to conduct a genuine electoral campaign;

(b) ensuring that all parties participating in elections are represented at all election commission levels, in particular at precinct commission level;

(c) ensuring that votes cast preclude any doubts as to the possibility of fraud in this connection;

(d) abolishing the early-voting procedure or, at least, guaranteeing that early votes cast are subject to a separate procedure from that for ordinary votes cast, and that early-voting results are recorded separately in electoral protocols;

(e) ensuring transparency during the counting process and the publishing of all final results;

8. Urges the Belarusian Government, in order to end the country’s self-imposed isolation from the rest of Europe and in order for relations between the EU and Belarus to improve significantly, to respect human rights by:

(a) refraining from threatening with criminal prosecution, including for avoiding military service in Belarus, students expelled from universities for their civic stance and obliged to continue their studies abroad;

(b) eliminating all obstacles in the way of proper registration of NGOs in Belarus;

(c) improving the treatment of and respect for national minorities, their culture, churches, education system and historical and material heritage, hereunder also recognising the legitimately elected body of the Union of Poles;

9. Urges, once again, Belarus, the only European country which still carries out capital punishment, to introduce an immediate moratorium on executions and to immediately announce a moratorium on the death penalty as a first step towards complete abolition;

10. Recalls that the European Union declared its readiness to renew its relationship with Belarus and its people within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy as soon as the Belarusian Government demonstrated its respect for democratic values and for the basic rights of the Belarusian people;

11. Welcomes the ‘European dialogue on modernisation with Belarusian society’ on necessary reforms for the modernisation of Belarus and on the related potential development of relations with the EU as well as the related information campaign in Belarus; notes with
satisfaction that the European Dialogue has helped to stimulate a constructive and substantial debate among representatives of Belarusian society in Minsk on concrete ideas on the reform needs of the country;

12. Calls on the Council and the Commission to support initiatives aimed at developing Belarusian civil society, which could result in increasing citizens’ political participation, and raise awareness of the need for change; calls for the creation of a consistent and long-term programme of support and strengthening of Belarusian opposition organisations, and to offer and expand the dialogue with Belarusian civil society; believes that the attempt to empower Belarusian citizens is a vital milestone and the most effective way towards democracy and rule of law in Belarus;

13. Calls on the EEAS, the Council and the Commission to continue the dialogue with – and devise a clearer policy vis-à-vis – Belarus, subject to strict positive conditionality based on a gradual step-by-step approach and equipped with benchmarks, timetables, a revision clause and adequate financial resources;

14. Calls on the Council and the Commission to take further steps, unilaterally if necessary, towards the facilitation and liberalisation of visa procedures for Belarusian citizens, as such action is crucial to fulfil the main goal of EU policy towards Belarus, namely to facilitate and intensify people-to-people contacts and to democratisethe country; urges them, in this context, to consider the scope for lowering the cost of visas for Belarusian citizens entering the Schengen Area, which is the only way to prevent Belarus and its citizens from becoming increasingly isolated;

15. Deplores once more the foreign travel ban list drafted by the Belarus Government that forbids several opponents and human rights activists from leaving the country; expresses its sympathy to all the people included in this list and calls on the Minsk authorities to put an end to such practices that violate the fundamental freedoms of Belarus citizens;

16. Reiterates its call on the Commission to support, with 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; calls for increased attention to the protection of digital freedoms in Belarus which are enablers of other human rights, particularly freedom of expression and freedom of assembly; urges the Belarusian authorities to secure that bloggers and web administrators are not prosecuted for their human rights activities;

17. Calls on the Council and the Commission to consider measures to improve the business climate, trade, investment, energy and transport infrastructure and cross-border cooperation between the EU and Belarus, so as to contribute to the well-being and prosperity of the citizens of Belarus, as well as their ability to communicate with and freely travel to the EU in this context;

18. Calls on international sports organisations to take into account the human rights situation in the country when granting Belarusian authorities the honour to host high-profile international sports events, in order to apply pressure to the regime until it shows clear signs of its commitment to democratic principles and fundamental freedoms;
19. Calls on Belarus, with regard to the planned construction of a new nuclear power plant, to comply fully with the Aarhus Convention and to implement strictly all the norms of the ESPOO Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context;

20. Calls on the EU Member States to avoid using the existing visa procedures in ways that contradict or go against the Council’s and Commission’s efforts to strengthen Belarusian civil society;

21. Calls on the Council and the EU Member States, in the light of a number of recent incidents pertaining to cooperation between Belarusian and EU authorities, to improve the EU’s internal cooperation and information-sharing significantly, and to refrain immediately from cooperating with the Belarusian authorities in the field of police training in order to prevent any further endangerment of Belarusian civil society activists;

22. Regrets that four officials representing the Polish education ministry were denied visas to travel to Belarus, where they were to attend a conference on Polish-language education organised by the Union of Poles in Baranavichy, Brest region, on 13 October 2012;

23. Deplores the decision of the Belarusian authorities not to cooperate with the newly appointed UN Human Rights special rapporteur on Belarus, and calls on them to allow him to fulfil his mandate and to visit the country when needed;

24. Encourages all Belarusian democratic political forces and civil society activists to find a united approach that allows them to increase the effectiveness of their actions and to establish concrete programmes for policy change that aim at improving and democratising the lives of the Belarusian people;

25. Calls on the EU institutions to use the findings of the Belarusian Round Table, held on 17 October 2012 in the European Parliament, to reach a deep and comprehensive assessment of the current situation of the opposition in, and of the possible future scenarios for, Belarus;

26. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the EEAS, the parliaments and governments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, the Secretariat of the CIS and the Belarusian authorities.