



TEXTS ADOPTED

P8_TA(2016)0456

Situation in Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2016 on the situation in Belarus (2016/2934(RSP))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions and recommendations on Belarus,
- having regard to the parliamentary elections held on 11 September 2016 and to the presidential elections held on 11 October 2015,
- having regard to the statement by the Chair of its Delegation for relations with Belarus of 13 September 2016 on the recent parliamentary elections in Belarus,
- having regard to the statement by the European External Action Service spokesperson of 12 September 2016 on the parliamentary elections in Belarus,
- having regard to the preliminary statement of the OSCE/ODIHR, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) of 12 September 2016 on parliamentary elections in Belarus,
- having regard to the Council conclusions on Belarus, in particular those of 16 February 2016 lifting restrictive measures against 170 individuals and three Belarusian companies,
- having regard to the OSCE final report of 28 January 2016 on the presidential elections in Belarus of 11 October 2015,
- having regard to the numerous declarations by the Belarusian authorities that some of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations following the 2015 presidential elections will be implemented ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections,
- having regard to the release of six political prisoners by the Belarusian authorities on 22 August 2015 and to the subsequent statement by Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, on the release of political prisoners in Belarus of 22 August 2015,
- having regard to Rule 123(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

- A. whereas, in its final report on the 2015 presidential elections in Belarus, the OSCE/ODIHR, together with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, prepared a set of recommendations to be implemented by Belarus before the 2016 parliamentary elections;
- B. whereas, in order to build better relations with the West, the Belarusian authorities took reluctant steps allowing democratic opposition parties to register more easily than in previous elections, and granting foreign observers greater access to the vote count;
- C. whereas on 6 June 2016 the President of Belarus called elections for the House of Representatives; whereas these elections took place on 11 September 2016; whereas more than 827 international and 32 100 citizen observers were accredited for the elections; whereas, as stated by the OSCE/ODIHR in its conclusions, most citizen observers represented state subsidised public associations which had also engaged in active campaigning for pro-government candidates; whereas an OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission was deployed to observe the elections following an invitation from the Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- D. whereas, according to the assessment by the OSCE/ODIHR, the 2016 parliamentary elections were efficiently organised, but a number of long-standing systemic shortcomings remain, including legal framework restrictions for political rights and fundamental freedoms; whereas counting and tabulation saw a significant number of procedural irregularities and lacked transparency;
- E. whereas, after a long time, a democratic opposition will be represented in the Belarusian parliament; whereas, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, the legal and administrative systems underlying human rights restrictions remain unchanged; whereas two independent members of parliament are expected to act as a real opposition;
- F. whereas since 1994 no free and fair elections have been conducted in Belarus under electoral legislation compliant with OSCE/ODIHR internationally recognised standards;
- G. whereas the EU lifted most of its restrictive measures against Belarusian officials and legal entities in February 2016 as a gesture of good will to encourage Belarus to improve its human rights, democracy and rule of law record; whereas in its conclusions on Belarus of 15 February 2016 the Council stressed the need to enhance EU-Belarus cooperation in a number of economic and trade- and assistance-related fields, which opened the possibility for Belarus to apply for EIB and EBRD financing; whereas a number of efforts to address certain long-standing issues ahead of the 2016 elections were noted, while at the same time many unaddressed issues concerning the legal and procedural electoral framework remain;
- H. whereas Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections (HRD) and Right to Choose-2016 (R2C), the two Belarusian election-monitoring groups, condemned the latest elections for not meeting a number of key international standards and not being a credible reflection of the will of Belarusian citizens;
- I. whereas the Belarusian observer groups collected concrete evidence of massive nationwide efforts to inflate turnout totals during the five-day early vote period (6-10 September 2016) and on election day (11 September 2016), and whereas the only

independent opinion poll institute in Belarus (NISEPI) suspended its activity as a result of pressure from the government, making it very difficult to assess what the real political preferences of Belarusians are;

- J. whereas part of the Belarusian opposition forces presented for the first time on 18 November 2015 a joint cooperation agreement to stand united in the 2016 parliamentary elections;
- K. whereas the first visit of Parliament's Delegation for relations with Belarus since 2002 took place in Minsk on 18 and 19 June 2015; whereas the European Parliament currently has no official relations with the Belarusian parliament;
- L. whereas Belarus played a constructive role in facilitating agreement on the ceasefire in Ukraine;
- M. whereas Russian aggression against Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea have deepened fears in Belarusian society of a destabilisation of the internal situation as a result of a power shift; whereas, however, the Belarusian people have not abandoned their hopes of substantial reforms and a peaceful transformation of their country;
- N. whereas the Belarusian economy has seen more than 20 years of stagnation, with major sectors still remaining under state ownership and under an administrative command and control system; whereas Belarus's economic dependence on Russia's economic aid is continuously increasing, and whereas Belarus's economic performance is among the lowest among the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union – its GDP fell by over USD 30 billion in 2015-2016, for example;
- O. whereas Belarus is the only country in Europe still to carry out capital punishment; whereas on 4 October 2016 the Belarusian Supreme Court upheld the death sentence against Siarhei Vostrykau, which was the fourth confirmation by the Belarusian Supreme Court of a death sentence in 2016;
- P. whereas human rights organisations have drawn attention to new methods of harassment of the opposition; whereas the Belarusian authorities have not abandoned the repressive practices against their political opponents: peaceful protesters are still subjected to administrative liability, other civil and political rights are restricted and the country has new political prisoners; whereas the Belarusian authorities have not taken any measures aimed at systemic and qualitative changes in the field of human rights, especially at legislative level;
- Q. 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; whereas the European Union remains strongly committed to further defending human rights in Belarus, including freedom of speech and of the media;
- R. whereas on 25 October 2016 Belarus adopted its first National Human Rights Action Plan, which was approved by a resolution of the Council of Ministers; whereas according to the Belarusian authorities this plan defines the principal lines of action for implementing the country's human rights commitments;
- S. 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;

- T. whereas Belarus is currently building its first-ever nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, on the EU border; whereas any country that develops nuclear power must strictly adhere to the international nuclear and environmental safety requirements and standards; whereas the Government of Belarus, which bears exclusive responsibility for the safety and security of nuclear facilities on its territory, must fulfil its obligations to its own citizens as well as to the neighbouring countries; whereas the principles of openness and transparency must be the key background against which any nuclear facility is developed, operated and decommissioned;
- U. whereas Belarus is part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and takes part in the 'Zapad' joint military manoeuvres with Russia which cover scenarios involving attacks on its western neighbours that include simulating the use of nuclear weapons against Poland; whereas Belarus is to participate next year in 'Zapad-2017' with possible further aggressive scenarios;
1. Remains deeply concerned by the shortcomings observed by independent international observers during the 2015 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections; recognises the attempts to make progress, which is still insufficient; notes that in the newly elected parliament there will be one representative of the opposition party and one of the non-governmental sector; considers these, however, to be political appointments, rather than a result of the electoral outcome; notes that consideration of the future legislative proposals submitted by these two parliamentarians will serve as a litmus test of the political intentions of the authorities behind their appointments;
 2. Calls on the Belarusian authorities to resume work without delay on a comprehensive electoral reform as part of the broader democratisation process and in cooperation with international partners; stresses the need to introduce the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in due time before the municipal elections of March 2018 and for them to be observed by domestic and international observers; emphasises that this is key to achieving the desired progress in EU-Belarus relations;
 3. 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;
 4. Calls on the Belarusian Government to rehabilitate the political prisoners released and to fully restore their civil and political rights;
 5. Expresses its concern that since 2000 no new political party has been registered in Belarus; calls for all restrictions in this regard to be abandoned; stresses that all political parties must be allowed unrestricted political activities, especially in the electoral campaign period;
 6. Expects the authorities to stop the harassment of independent media for political reasons; urges 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 restrict the right to freedom of expression and the dissemination of information;

7. Calls on the Belarusian Government 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; draws the Commission's attention in particular to the fact that currently, as a result of the application of Article 193/1 and other restrictive measures, there are over 150 Belarusian NGOs registered in Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and elsewhere;
8. Urges the Belarusian authorities to review the policy under which international financial support to the non-governmental sector in Belarus remains subject to a heavy tax burden;
9. Strongly condemns the Belarusian Government's policy of using special forces to interfere in the internal affairs of civil society organisations, including those representing national minorities such as the independent NGO 'Union of Poles in Belarus';
10. Urges Belarus, the only country in Europe still applying capital punishment, and which has recently resumed executions, to join a global moratorium on execution of 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; calls on the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission to strongly prioritise the abovementioned concerns at the ongoing EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue; welcomes, in this context, the adoption by the Council of Ministers of Belarus of the Action Plan for the implementation of the recommendations made by the Universal Periodic Review Working Group of the UN Human Rights Council, and expects it to be carried out in full;
11. Calls on the EU to sustain the momentum for the further normalisation of relations with Belarus; reiterates its view that existing differences can be best addressed through enhanced channels of communication and that further engagement of the EU, and notably the European Parliament, in a dialogue with Belarus and in particular its citizens and civil society, as well as with the parliament and various political parties, can bring tangible results and contribute to the independence, sovereignty and prosperity of the country;
12. 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;
13. Notes the launch in January 2014 of the negotiations on visa facilitation aimed at improving people-to-people contacts and encouraging the emergence of civil society; stresses that the Commission and the EEAS should take necessary measures to speed up progress in this regard;
14. Supports the EU in its policy of 'critical engagement' with the Belarusian authorities, and expresses its readiness also to contribute to it via its Delegation for relations with Belarus; calls on the Commission to monitor the legislative initiatives closely and to scrutinise their implementation; recalls that the EU must make sure that its resources are not used to suppress civil society organisations, human rights defenders, freelance journalists and

opposition leaders;

15. Is concerned about the safety problems raised by the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, less than 50 km from Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and close to the Polish border; stresses the need for comprehensive international supervision of the implementation of this project to ensure that it complies with international nuclear and environmental safety requirements and standards, including the UN Espoo and Aarhus Conventions; calls on the Commission to include the issue of safety and transparency of this nuclear power plant under construction in its dialogue with Belarus and Russia, given that it is financed by Russia and is based on Rosatom technology, and to provide Parliament and the Member States, in particular those neighbouring Belarus, with regular reports; calls on the Council and the Commission to use their levers, including making any EU macro-financial support conditional, in order to ensure that Belarus complies with international safety standards as regards the Ostrovets Nuclear Power Plant, with regard in particular to the conduct of the stress-test exercise as agreed with the Commission on 23 June 2011;
16. Attaches great importance and looks forward to the accession of Belarus to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, in accordance with the Constituent Act, as soon as the political conditions are fulfilled, as this accession would be the natural extension of the participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership multilateral cooperation framework;
17. Reiterates its commitment to working for the benefit of the people of Belarus, supporting their pro-democratic aspirations and initiatives and contributing to a stable, democratic and prosperous future for the country;
18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to 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 Commission, the Member States, the OSCE/ODHIR, the Council of Europe and the Belarusian authorities.