

EU policy towards Belarus. Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the EEAS

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Justas Vincas PALECKIS (S&D, LT) containing a proposal for a recommendation to the Council, the Commission and to EEAS on EU Policy towards Belarus.

Members recall that in 1997 the **European Council suspended the ratification of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement and froze the Interim Trade Agreement**, and that therefore, EU-Belarus relations remain regulated by the 1989 Trade and Co-operation Agreement. Over the same period human rights and fundamental freedoms have been systematically violated with particular regard to political opponents.

In this context, Parliament addresses a series of recommendations to the Vice-President of the

Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), the EEAS, the Council, the Commission and Member States aiming to work towards a democratic transition in this country and end its international isolation:

On political dialogue: Members want to take advantage of Lithuania's Presidency and the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius as an opportunity to improve relations with Belarus. They ask that the EU make best use of the temporary and conditional suspension of the incumbent foreign minister from the EU visa ban list with a view to **broadening the main and essential diplomatic communication channel with Belarus**, whilst staying firm on the visa ban and asset freeze targeting those directly involved in violating democratic election standards and human rights.

Members also call for the preparation of a strategic 'roadmap', based on the 'more for more' principle, including priority areas for reforms in Belarus. They consider that the European Parliament must be consulted on this as soon as the elections are recognised as free and fair.

Recommendations are also made to encourage wider **civil society** to increase its involvement in the Dialogue on Modernisation. Members support the idea of creating a civil society conference in Vilnius.

At the same time, they urge Russia and Eastern Partnership countries to call upon Belarus to release immediately and unconditionally, all political prisoners and to restrain from any further politically motivated harassment.

Strategic policy options for reform: Members make several recommendations, amongst which are the following:

- implement fully Electoral Code reforms on the basis of Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) recommendations;
- allow the re-opening of the OSCE office in Minsk, which has been closed;

- lift any obstacles and restrictions to the exercise of freedoms of association, expression, movement, peaceful assembly and thought for the democratic opposition, civil society organisations and NGOs;
- introduce the necessary institutional changes to ensure independence of the judiciary;
- **not implement the execution of those sentenced to death in 2013;**
- introduce a moratorium on followed by the abolition of the death penalty;
- fully modernise the penitentiary system;
- establish an independent and fully functional national human rights institution;
- guarantee equal opportunities and equal rights for, and the inclusion and non-discrimination of, all national minorities, including LGBT;
- ensure the effective freedom of and access to media.

On economic and energy cooperation: Members seek a constructive EU-Belarus technical dialogue on reforms including the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, price, trade and banking system liberalisation, and the fight against corruption.

They encourage Belarus to implement basic International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommendations.

On energy measures, Members call for assistance in developing the diversification of energy resources and supply routes in Belarus and in carrying out ‘green economy’ projects. They ask for continued technical and health assistance to the population affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

On border management, the report calls for strengthening EU-Belarus cooperation on border management and the fight against cross-border crime and assisting Belarus in developing its transit system, and modernising customs and border control procedures. It proposes the provision of **further training for the Belarus border management agency** in line with the Schengen acquis, in view of mutual interests, as well as the provision of adequate training to the relevant Belarusian services on EU best practices in the introduction of biometric passports.

On civil society and people-to-people contacts, Members call for an increase in the share of projects with greater benefit to and visibility for the population at large, which would foster citizens’ understanding of EU values, standards and policies. **They are systematically and uncompromisingly opposed to any disinformation and misleading information by the Belarusian authorities on EU policies and projects.**

Members propose intensifying technical and financial support, to civil society organisations, independent NGOs, human rights defenders and trade unions based in Belarus, or those in the Member States that have a key impact in Belarus, through channels that must include the new European Endowment for Democracy,

Members want to see the Belarusian authorities required to **remove criminal liability for the receipt of foreign grants** and to allow organisations to keep funds in foreign bank accounts.

At the same time, they propose that consideration should be given to **unilaterally** facilitating the issuing of visas and reducing their cost from EUR 60 to an affordable level for Belarusian citizens, together with negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements.

Lastly, Members propose measures to encourage cooperation between cities and municipalities in the EU and Belarus using the good practice examples of some EU countries, especially Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. They also propose measures to support education and vocational programmes through funding for the Erasmus Mundus programme for Belarusian students.