

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

2013/2036(INI) - 12/09/2013 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution containing a proposal for a recommendation to the Council, the Commission and to EEAS on EU Policy towards Belarus.

Parliament recalls 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. It also recalls that although EU-Belarus relations improved between 2008-2010, the brutal crackdown following the **2010 presidential elections** and tightening of repressive policy, led to a significant deterioration of these relations.

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: Parliament wants to take advantage of Lithuania's Presidency and the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius as an opportunity to improve relations with Belarus. In an amendment adopted in plenary, Parliament takes note of the release from prison of Dzmitry Dashkevich and Aliaksandr Franskevich, in August and September 2013 respectively, but deplore the fact that these former political prisoners only regained their freedom once they had served their full prison sentences.

Members 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.

Parliament also calls for the preparation of a strategic 'roadmap', based on the 'more for more' principle, including priority areas for reforms in Belarus. It considers 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: Parliament makes 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.

Plenary insists that Belarus should fully cooperate with the **UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights** in Belarus to address the serious concerns expressed in his report of April 2013 and, as a first step, grant him entry into the country.

On economic and energy cooperation: Parliament seeks 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.

It encourages Belarus to implement basic International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommendations.

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

On border management, the resolution 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, Parliament calls 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. **It is systematically and uncompromisingly opposed to any disinformation and misleading information by the Belarusian authorities on EU policies and projects.**

In an amendment adopted in plenary, Parliament requests that support should be given to organisations working to promote democracy and human rights, not only those based in Belarus, but also those based abroad, given that the Belarusian authorities consistently deny such organisations the possibility of registration. **A revision should be made, as a matter of urgency, of the latest new rules on applying for EU funding under the EIDHR/NSLA instrument,** which in practice exclude well-known and respected Belarusian NGOs from the application process.

Parliament proposes 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 given that Belarusians have been obtaining the greatest number of Schengen visas per capita in the world in recent years.

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.

Lastly, Parliament calls on the International Ice Hockey Federation to seriously reconsider its decision to allow Belarus to host the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship.