

Political situation and independence of the media in Belarus

European Parliament resolution on the political situation and the independence of the media in Belarus

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on the situation in Belarus,
 - having regard, in particular, to its resolution of 10 March 2005 on Belarus¹,
 - having regard to the resolutions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the situation in Belarus and, in particular, to its resolution of 28 April 2004 on the persecution of the press in the Republic of Belarus,
 - having regard to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights' resolution of 14 April 2005 on the situation of human rights in Belarus,
 - having regard to the March 2005 report on Belarus of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media,
 - having regard, in particular, to the 'EU action plan for promoting democracy in Belarus' adopted by the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with Belarus on 23 February 2005,
 - having regard to its Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought, which was awarded to the Belarussian Association of Journalists in December 2004,
 - having regard to the Communication from the Commission of 12 May 2004 on the European Neighbourhood Policy (COM(2004)0373),
 - having regard to the EU sanctions adopted on 2 July 2004 against Belarussian officials following the disappearance of three Belarussian opposition leaders and one journalist,
 - having regard to Rule 103(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas, instead of improving, the situation in Belarus has further deteriorated, which has resulted in basic human rights being brutally violated, the Lower House being deprived of its legislative rights and economic life being controlled by the President; whereas such violations include the imprisonment of, and other repressive measures against, members of the democratic opposition,

¹ *Texts Adopted*, P6_TA(2005)0080.

- B. whereas the EU has repeatedly condemned the arrest of prominent opposition leaders by the Lukashenko government and whereas no progress has been made in the unsolved cases of a number of disappeared persons,
- C. whereas over the past few years several political parties, 22 independent newspapers, more than 50 pro-democracy NGOs of different levels and varying political orientations, and several educational establishments have been closed down for 'technical' reasons, but it is clear that in every case those organisations were being punished for criticising the President and his policies,
- D. whereas, in April 2005, the UN Commission on Human Rights criticised Belarus on account of persistent reports of harassment and closure of NGOs, national minority organisations, independent media outlets, opposition political parties, independent trade unions and religious organisations, and harassment of individuals engaged in democratic activities, including in the independent media,
- E. whereas all registration of new newspapers has been stopped by the State authorities, and many existing newspapers have received heavy fines, which makes it impossible for them to continue publishing,
- F. whereas politically motivated arrests and trials of activists of the democratic movement and independent journalists, and deportations of foreign citizens, are continually taking place in Belarus; whereas two journalists from the newspaper 'Pahonia' – Pawał Mażejka and Mikoła Markievič – as well as the editor of the newspaper 'Rabočy', Viktor Ivaškievič, have been sentenced to between 6 and 9 months in prison,
- G. whereas, on 12 May 2005, the leadership of the Union of Poles in Belarus were declared illegitimate by the Belarussian Ministry of Justice, a printing plant under instructions from the government refused to print the Polish weekly 'Głos znad Niemna' and fake issues were printed under the umbrella of the government,
- H. whereas in 2000 ORT correspondent Dźmitry Zavadski disappeared and the Belarussian authorities appear to be dragging their feet in the investigation; whereas, on 20 October 2004, Vieranika Čarkasava, a journalist from the newspaper 'Solidarność', was murdered, and incidents of violence against journalists are becoming more common,
- I. whereas publishing and distribution have been monopolised by the State, and the remaining private publishers face heavy fines if they publish independent newspapers; whereas, as a result, many independent newspapers published abroad, including in Russia, are often confiscated at the border by the Belarussian authorities,
- J. whereas all television and radio broadcasts, both national and regional, are in government hands, or are controlled by the State,
- K. whereas all cable operators are persecuted for transmitting the foreign channels not approved by the Belarussian Government and on this basis Belarussian cable TV operators were banned from transmitting all Ukrainian channels as well as the Polish channel Polonia,

- L. whereas all internet connections are routed through a State-run corporation which has blocked numerous accounts and www pages,
- M. whereas, in March 2005, the Representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in a report on the Freedom of the Media, raised serious concerns regarding the grave situation of the independent media in Belarus, in particular the declining number of registrations of independent newspapers and the increasing pressure on the media through judicial, extrajudicial, and economic means,
1. Strongly condemns the Belarus regime's indiscriminate attacks on the media, journalists, members of the opposition, human rights activists and any person who attempts freely to voice criticism of the President and the regime, as evidenced by arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment of detainees, disappearances, politically-motivated persecution and other acts of repression that flout the basic principles of democracy and the rule of law;
 2. Calls on the Council and the Commission to create a complex, multi-annual programme of support for the independent media in Belarus which will encompass support for the broadcasting of independent radio and television programmes from abroad, as well as support for independent journalists and newspapers;
 3. Welcomes the project for the creation of a radio network broadcasting from Poland, Lithuania and possibly Ukraine, and calls on the Commission to support its implementation;
 4. Calls on the Council and the Commission, in this regard, to provide the necessary assistance as soon as possible to enable the broadcasting of independent radio programmes to Belarus from abroad to begin;
 5. Emphasises that the radio network should be able to use all transmission bandwidths, including on the internet, and should be available on a continuous basis;
 6. Calls on the Council and the Commission to assist journalists and their families who are the victims of repression;
 7. Calls on the Council and the Commission to create a programme of scholarships and traineeships for independent journalists, and to create training programmes for young independent journalists;
 8. Calls on the Commission to consult Parliament on the implementation of this programme for free and independent media and information to the people of Belarus;
 9. Should the Belarussian authorities fail to improve the situation regarding freedom of speech and the mass media or if it deteriorated any further, the Commission, the Council and Parliament should initiate the procedure to add more names to the visa-ban list of Belarussian authorities involved in persecution of the mass media;
 10. Condemns the government's action against the Union of Poles in Belarus as an attempt to curb the largest NGO and one of the few not controlled by the government; recalls that respect for minority rights extends to freedom of association and the recognition of the

elected statutory bodies of that organisation; deplores the government's attempt to take control of 'Głos znad Niemna';

11. Is in particular appalled by the recent sentencing to long terms of forced labour of Mikola Statkevič, the chairman of the Belarussian Social Democratic Party ('Narodnaja Hramada'), Paval Seviarynec, one of the Young Front leaders, and Andrei Klimau, a businessman and member of the 13th Supreme Soviet;
12. Calls on the Belarussian authorities to stop the expulsion of young democrats from universities and higher-education establishments, and declares its full support for those students who were expelled from such establishments for promoting democratic values and defending human rights and who went on hunger strike on 25 May 2005;
13. Welcomes the inauguration of the European Humanities University for Belarussian students in exile in Vilnius, and calls on the Commission and Member States to assist the that University in the pursuit of its teaching and research programmes;
14. Calls on the Member States to recognise the degrees awarded by the European Humanities University by way of confirmation of a high level of competence and outstanding academic skills, and calls on European universities to enter into a closer cooperation with it;
15. Emphasises once again that the further development of EU relations with Belarus will also continue to depend on the progress made towards democratisation and reform in the country and access for Belarussians to objective, free and transparent media;
16. Calls on the Council and the Commission to raise the issue of Belarus with the Russian authorities so as to define common action to bring about concrete democratic changes in that country;
17. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the parliaments and governments of the Member States, and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe.