Thursday 24 November 2022

P9_TA(2022)0418

The continuing repression of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus

European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2022 on the continuing repression of the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus (2022/2956(RSP))

(2023/C 167/07)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Belarus,

— having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to all human rights conventions to which Belarus is a party,

— having regard to the Council Conclusions of 12 October 2020,

— having regard to the European Council conclusions of 21 and 22 October 2021,

— having regard to the reports drawn up by international and independent Belarusian human rights organisations,

— having regard to the reports of 4 May 2021 and 20 July 2022 of Anaïs Marin, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, for the UN Human Rights Council and the call by UN experts on 10 October 2022 for the immediate release of a jailed Nobel prize winner and other rights defenders in Belarus,

— having regard to the report of 4 March 2022 of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath,

— having regard to the G7 Foreign Ministers' statement on Belarus of 4 November 2022,

— having regard to the statement by the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) dated 13 July 2022 on the persistent imprisonment of journalists and media workers in Belarus,

— having regard to the statement by the European External Action Service (EEAS) of 7 October 2022 on a court ruling against independent media representatives,

— having regard to Rules 144(5) and 132(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the Belarusian regime's systematic repression against civil society and human rights defenders aims to silence all remaining independent voices in Belarus; whereas more than 10 000 Belarusians are estimated to have been detained at some point for protesting against the regime; whereas human rights defenders, opposition politicians, civil society representatives, artists, independent journalists, trade union leaders and members, and other activists are being systematically subjected to violent repression and forced to flee;

B. whereas the human rights violations in Belarus have escalated since August 2020, with more than 1 400 political prisoners as of November 2022, including the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Ales Bialiatski; whereas the list of prisoners includes minors, persons with disabilities, pensioners and severely ill persons; whereas trials of political prisoners have continued, with sentences handed down on a previously unseen scale;

C. whereas an ever-increasing number of crackdowns on Belarus' widely supported pro-democratic opposition movement have been taking place; whereas in October 2022, Hrodna Regional Court handed down a 25-year sentence to political activist Mikalai Autukhovich on entirely fabricated charges that included high treason; whereas this is the longest ever prison sentence imposed on an opponent of the Lukashenka regime; whereas Mr Autukhovich, who went on a hunger strike over the summer, has been beaten and tortured since the start of his imprisonment;

D. whereas 11 other defendants in the case, together with Mr Autukhovich, are referred to as the 'Autukhovich twelve', and were sentenced to a combined 169,5 years in prison, namely Paval Sava, Halina Dzerbysh, Volha Mayorava, Viktar Snehur, Uladzimer Hundar, Syarhey Razanovich, Paval Razanovich, Lyobov Razanovich, Iryna Melkher, Anton Melkher and Iryna Harachkina; whereas some of the detained individuals were repeatedly placed in solitary confinement after their families had reported violent treatment and even torture of the prisoners by the prison guards;

E. whereas Belarusian courts have delivered many hundreds of unfair and arbitrary verdicts in politically motivated trials in the 'round dance' case, with hearings often held behind closed doors, without due process of law and with no access for EU diplomats to observe proceedings;

F. whereas special *in absentia* proceedings have been initiated by the Investigative Committee of Belarus against leaders of the democratic Belarusian opposition and members of the Coordination Council, namely Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Pavel Latushka, Volha Kavalkova, Maria Maroz, Siarhei Dyleuski, Dmitry Navosha, Valeria Zanemonskaya, Daniil Bogdanovich, Yanina Sazanovich, Volha Vysotskaya, Aleksandra Gerasimova, Aliaksandr Opeikin, and Dmitry Soloviev, among others;

G. whereas leaders and representatives of the democratic opposition parties, including Pavel Seviarynets, Mikalai Kazlou, Antanina Kavaleva, Aksana Alyakseeva, Tatsiana and Dzmitry Kaneuski, Ihar Salavei, Pavel Spiryn, Uladzimir Niapomniashchykh, Aliaksandr Agraitsovich, Pavel Belavus, Andrei Kudzik, Mikolai Siarhienka, Ramuald Ulan, Aliaksandr Nahela, Andrei Kabanau, Artur Smaliakou, Andrei Asmalouski, Dziana Charnushyna, Mikola Statkevich, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka, Maryia Kalesnikava, Maksim Znak, Ihar Losik, Sergey Sparish, continue to be imprisoned in inhumane conditions;

H. whereas the Belarusian regime is not investigating the thousands of reports of police brutality; whereas it is instead promoting and rewarding those responsible for these acts; whereas the widespread impunity of human rights violations perpetuates the desperate situation of the Belarusian people; whereas the absence of the rule of law impedes their right to a fair trial;

I. whereas Belarus is the only country in Europe to use capital punishment, with announcements made recently that executions of political opponents of the regime would be carried out; whereas in January 2022, the Criminal Code of Belarus was amended and signed into law by Lukashenka in May 2022 to extend capital punishment to 'attempted terrorist acts', with the eventual aim of targeting political dissidents and introducing trials *in absentia* on 'extremist' or 'terrorist' grounds;

J. whereas torture is still used by the Lukashenka regime and political prisoners continue to report deteriorating health conditions, humiliation, and inhuman and cruel treatment; whereas Lukashenka has expanded his campaign against human rights activists and journalists, having imprisoned Andrzej Poczobut, a prominent journalist and activist of the Polish minority in Belarus, who was added to its 'terrorist list'; whereas the unacceptable persecution of the Polish and other minorities has intensified, including recent decisions of the Belarusian authorities aimed at eliminating education in the Polish and Lithuanian languages, carrying out searches in houses of Polish leaders and the destruction of Polish cemeteries and the graves of poets, writers, insurgents and soldiers of the Home Army; whereas the authorities terminated the contract allowing the free use of the Red Catholic Church by the Roman Catholic Parish of St Simon and St Helen, which then had to remove its property from the church;

K. whereas, according to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, university students face arbitrary detention, wrongful dismissal and expulsion from studies, clearly threatening their academic freedom;

Thursday 24 November 2022

L. whereas Belarus has withdrawn from the Aarhus Convention, which had had considerable success in strengthening access rights, sustainable development and environmental democracy;

M. whereas the authorities often resort to surveillance, online censorship and disinformation, deploying technologies to control the population; whereas this repressive practice represents another step towards digital authoritarianism and suppression of the digital rights of people in Belarus, resulting in the escalating intimidation of citizens and the shrinking of civic space; whereas, as a result, freedom of speech does not exist anymore;

N. whereas on 14 November 2022, independent media reported on the criminal prosecution of Irena Valius and Renata Dzemanchuk, leaders of the Union of Poles in Belarus;

O. whereas the Lukashenka regime in Belarus continues to enable Russia's unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine, by allowing Russia to use Belarusian territory for military attacks against Ukraine;

P. whereas the Belarusians who joined the anti-war movement are being targeted by repressive measures, placed under administrative arrest or charged with criminal offences, including lawyer Alexander Danilevich who is facing criminal charges in connection with his signature of a public petition against the war in Ukraine and three Belarusian citizens, Dzianis Dzikun, Dzmitry Ravich and Aleh Malchanau, who are facing terrorism charges for sabotaging railway infrastructure to prevent the transportation of Russian military equipment;

Q. whereas the Viasna Human Rights Centre is facing a series of criminal investigations and charges have been brought against, among others, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Marfa Rabkova, Leanid Sudalenka, Tatsiana Lasitsa and Andrei Chapiuk;

R. whereas more than 600 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been liquidated or are being liquidated, including virtually all human rights groups working in the country; whereas the persecution of independent trade unions is still ongoing, and their leaders and activists, including Aliaksandr Yarashuk, Henadz Fiadynich, Siarhei Antusevich, Mikhail Hromau, Iryna Bud-Husaim, Yanina Malash, Vasil Berasnieu, Zinaida Mikhniuk, Aliaksandr Mishuk, Ihar Povarau, Yauhen Hovar, Artsiom Zhernak and Daniil Cheunakou, remain in prison; whereas in July, the Supreme Court of Belarus liquidated the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, which is an umbrella organisation for independent trade unions, to close, thereby effectively banning all independent trade unions;

S. whereas journalists remain one of the most targeted groups by the regime, including Katsiaryna Andreyeva, Iryna Slaunikava, Siarhei Satsuk, Ihar Losik, Ksenia Lutskina and Andrei Kuznechyk; whereas on 6 October 2022, the Minsk Regional Court sentenced three journalists from the banned independent media outlet BelaPAN, namely Iryna Leushyna, editor in chief, Dzmitry Navazhylau, Director, Andrei Aliaksandrau, Deputy Director, as well as an independent journalist, Iryna Zlobina, to terms of imprisonment ranging from 4 to 14 years;

T. whereas freedom of peaceful assembly is being continuously violated; whereas no opposition street protests have been authorised since the fraudulent presidential elections of August 2020;

U. whereas Lukashenka is continuing with his policy of russifying Belarus, pushing towards the marginalisation and destruction of manifestations of the national identity of Belarusians, including in terms of language, education and culture, through arbitrary arrests, detention and, in particular, the brutal treatment of cultural figures;

1. Continues to stand firmly in solidarity with the people of Belarus as well as with the members of the democratic opposition and civil society, who continue to make a stand for a free, sovereign and democratic Belarus;

2. Recalls that the EU and its Member States did not recognise the results of the 2020 presidential election owing to their massive falsification and fabrication and do not recognise Aliaksandr Lukashenka as president of Belarus; calls for continued support for the Belarusian democratic opposition and independent civil society, including members of the European political families; welcomes the formation of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus led by Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya, which follows the establishment of the Coordination Council and the National Anti-Crisis Management; calls on democratic opposition forces to maintain and promote unity based on the objective of a free, democratic and independent Belarus; notes that many Belarusians consider Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to be the winner of the 2020 presidential election;

3. Reiterates its unwavering support to the Belarusian democratic opposition and civil society and calls on them to continue to act in the interests of the Belarusian people and to elaborate a plan to reform the country; notes that Ukraine's victory will accelerate democratic changes in Belarus; reiterates that, in line with the OSCE's principles, the legitimate demands of the people of Belarus for democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms, prosperity, sovereignty and security must be met; reiterates its previous calls for new free and fair elections under international observation by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights;

4. Strongly condemns the unjustified and politically motivated sentences handed down to members of the 'Autukhovich twelve', as well as to the more than 1 400 political prisoners being held; demands an immediate end to the violence and repression, as well as the unconditional release of all political prisoners and all persons arbitrarily detained, arrested or sentenced on politically motivated grounds, and for all charges against them to be dropped; demands also their full rehabilitation and financial compensation for the damages incurred as a result of their illegitimate detention; underlines, in the meantime, the need for information to be provided on their whereabouts and conditions of detention, as well as for them to have access to lawyers of their choice and medical support, and to ensure their communication with family members; demands that the Lukashenka regime make it possible to observe and monitor the trials of all political prisoners, including pro-democracy activists, members of the democratic opposition, human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists;

5. Strongly condemns Belarus' involvement in Russia's unjustified and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine; condemns the new deployment of Russian armed forces in Belarus; condemns the belligerent and threat-based rhetoric of Belarusian officials against Ukraine; notes that Lukashenka and those associated with him are equally responsible for the war crimes in Ukraine and should be held accountable before the international tribunal and the International Criminal Court;

6. Calls on the Commission, the Member States and the EEAS to cooperate with international partners, such as the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism and the UN Human Rights Council, as well as human rights defenders and civil society on the ground to ensure the monitoring, documentation and reporting of human rights violations and subsequent accountability and justice for victims; welcomes and supports the establishment of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus; reiterates the importance of continuing the diplomatic isolation of Belarus, reducing the diplomatic presence of the EU and its Member States in the country and continuing the isolation of Belarus in international organisations;

7. Urges the Belarusian authorities to cease all repression, persecution, torture and ill-treatment of its people, including violence against women and vulnerable groups and enforced disappearances; continues to condemn the inhumane conditions of detention and the incessant humiliation and deteriorating health conditions of the political prisoners;

8. Expresses concern over the alleged use of the forced labour of inmates in Belarusian penal colonies by suppliers to major EU-based companies; calls on all EU-based companies to exercise particular diligence and terminate their relations with any Belarusian suppliers which use forced labour in their supply chains, suppress the civil and political rights of their employees or openly support the violent regime; calls on the Council to impose sanctions on any Belarusian or international companies operating in Belarus which use forced labour in their supply chains, suppress the civil and political rights of their employees or openly support the violent regime; urges the Lukashenka regime to end its practice of imposing forced labour in penal colonies;

9. Condemns Lukashenka's efforts to undermine Belarusian culture, including minority cultures, and russify the nation; calls on the EU to support Belarusian independent cultural organisations such as theatres, choirs, schools, folk groups and artists; deplores the decision of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs to label the country's patriotic motto 'Zhyve Belarus!' ('Long live Belarus!') a Nazi motto;

Thursday 24 November 2022

10. Firmly condemns the Russian military's use of Belarusian territory for its aggression against Ukraine; welcomes the action taken by Belarusian society in opposing the use of the territory of Belarus for facilitating the Russian invasion of Ukraine; expresses support for the Kastuś Kalinoüski and Pahonia Regiment, which is supporting Ukraine in its defence against the Russian war of aggression; endorses the position of the Belarusian democratic opposition and civil society that Belarus should be recognised as an occupied or de facto occupied territory, and joins them in calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Belarus and Ukraine;

11. Reiterates its call on the Council and the Commission to prevent sanctions evasion and calls for a strict mirroring of the sanctions issued against Russia for Belarus and their appropriate application in any future rounds of sanctions; calls on the Commission, the co-legislators and the Member States to complete the legal regime allowing for the confiscation of assets frozen by the EU, which would also make it possible to confiscate the assets of Lukashenka, his family and the inner circle enabling the regime, including judges, prosecutors, propagandists, members of the militia, KGB and security operatives involved in repression, sentencing, unlawful detention and torture, and to channel these resources to support its victims and the Belarusian democratic opposition;

12. Welcomes the awarding of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize to the human rights advocate, founder of the Viasna Human Rights Centre and 2020 Sakharov Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski; denounces the ongoing imprisonment of Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovic and Uladzimir Labkhovich on politically motivated charges of smuggling and financing of collective actions violating public order, which carry a sentence of up to 12 years in prison, and calls for their immediate and unconditional release; echoes the call of the chairperson of the Norwegian Nobel Committee for the Lukashenka regime to ensure Ales Bialiatski's release ahead of the 10 December 2022 Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony;

13. Welcomes the establishment of a Contact Group in the Council of Europe in cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces and civil society; encourages the EU institutions and Member States and international organisations to enhance systemic cooperation with democratic representatives of Belarus;

14. Welcomes the provision by the EU and Member States, in particular Poland and Lithuania, of support and protection to Belarusians forced to flee the country; calls on the Member States to maintain their solidarity with people fleeing Belarus and calls on the Commission to further back these efforts;

15. Welcomes the Commission's comprehensive plan of economic support for a democratic Belarus, but demands that these funds be made immediately accessible in order to support the crucial work of civil society, independent media, trade unions and the Belarusian opposition in exile, as well as those fleeing the oppressive regime; calls on the European political parties and foundations to provide direct support to their Belarusian party members and to the wider opposition; calls on the Commission to further support independent news outlets, especially new media such as Nexta, which has not received any EU financial support despite having a broad audience in Belarus;

16. Urges the Commission and the Member States to continue assisting the democratic opposition, civil society and human rights defenders, trade union representatives and independent media in Belarus and abroad in order to prepare for the country's future democratic transition; commends the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) for his regular invitations to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council, including to the roundtable of 14 November 2022; welcomes, in this regard, the establishment of the Mission for Democratic Belarus in Brussels;

17. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to prepare rules and procedures to deal with cases where human rights defenders and other civil society activists are stripped of their citizenship in Belarus, as well as to provide support to those Belarusians residing in the EU whose identity documents are about to expire and who have no means of renewing them, since they cannot return to Belarus;

18. Calls on the Council and the VP/HR to explore further measures, beyond sanctions, and to develop a coherent and comprehensive long-term approach towards Belarus, closely coordinated with like-minded countries and international organisations; calls for the EEAS to take the lead in coordinating a coherent policy with the Member States and other EU institutions;

19. Denounces the decision by Belarus to withdraw from the Aarhus Convention, in particular in the context of the launch of the Astravyets nuclear power plant (NPP) without fully implementing the stress test recommendations, and deplores further negligence concerning compliance with the highest nuclear safety regulations at the Astravyets NPP site; condemns the Belarusian regime's brutal persecution of environmental and human rights defenders and NGOs raising nuclear safety concerns;

20. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the authorities of the Republic of Belarus and of the Russian Federation, and to the representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition.