

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

BUREAU VISIT TO BELARUS

27 - 29 November 2002

Minsk

REPORT FROM THE CHAIRMAN:

Mr Jan Marinus WIERSMA

Annex: List of participants
Programme

**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR
COMMITTEES & DELEGATIONS**

19 December 2002
EUR/TB/ES

Introduction

A delegation of the European Parliament visited Belarus between 27 and 29 November 2002. The group was headed by Mr Jan Marinus WIERSMA (PES, Netherlands), Chair of the EP Standing Delegation to Belarus. He was accompanied by Mrs Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (Greens/EFA, Germany), First Vice-Chair of the delegation, and Mr Robert GOODWILL (EPP-ED, United Kingdom), Member of the delegation.

The principal aim of the visit was to examine how the internal political situation in Belarus had developed since the presidential elections in September 2001, at which President LUKASHENKO had won 75% of the vote. The visiting “troika” of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and the OSCE had concluded at the time that the elections fell short of international democratic standards. There had been similar concerns about the parliamentary elections of 2000, which the EP had also monitored as part of the “troika”.

In particular the delegation wanted to establish whether there had been any improvements in the situation regarding the freedom of the media, freedom of expression, the development of an independent parliamentary system and the establishment of a fully functioning civil society and a pluralistic democratic system.

The visit came during the preparation of the report by Mr Pedro MARSET CAMPOS (EUL/NGL, Spain) on relations between the EU and Belarus, which is due to be adopted early in 2003. It also coincided with the preparation of an EU strategy towards its “new neighbours” after the current enlargement process – the “wider Europe” debate.

The members came within the context of an invitation to address a TACIS supported Conference organised by the Belarusian State University and the European Documentation Centre on the consequences of enlargement for the EU’s neighbours.

During the trip the delegation met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Presidential Administration, opposition parties, trade unions, NGOs and diplomatic representatives. The delegation also had several contacts with organisations and medical staff engaged in tackling the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. A proposal from the European Parliament for a specific medical aid programme is expected to be included in the 2003 budget. Shortly after the visit the delegation chair Mr WIERSMA sponsored an exhibition in the European Parliament on the effects of the Chernobyl catastrophe on Belarus. The full programme of the visit is attached.

OSCE activity in Belarus

The visit followed the decision taken by the Belarusian authorities not to extend the visas of the principal OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) staff in Minsk. These moves have effectively prevented the AMG from playing any role within the country at present.

The EP side stressed the need to maintain dialogue on the role of the AMG in Belarus. They argued that this should be based on main element of the original Belarus-OSCE mandate; viz. to monitor and assist democratic developments in Belarus. They stressed that the efforts of the AMG to encourage a dialogue between the government and opposition had been a worthwhile and valid exercise. They noted that the previous OSCE Ambassador Hans-Georg WIECK had enjoyed the support of his institution and of the EU. He had however been confronted by a government which was unwilling to implement political and economic

reforms. The delegation underlined that it would support every sincere effort to enable the return of the AMG to Minsk.

The Belarusian authorities argued that the activities of the AMG in Belarus had contravened their mandate by interfering in the domestic political process. In principle the authorities were not opposed to an OSCE presence in Minsk and they were open to negotiations on the matter. They also rejected any suggestion that the Ambassador Eberhard HEYKEN, Special Envoy for matters related to OSCE Cooperation with Belarus, had been refused a visa.

Some other interlocutors considered that the approach of Ambassador WIECK had exacerbated the situation and that his activities had weakened the opposition and trade unions. It was not the role of the OSCE to promote the opposition forces and to provide their “headquarters” during the last election. The OSCE had not followed a similar line in other places such as Chechnya where it followed a policy of cooperation with the government. In addition Belarus had been the only place where there had been no real limits to the mandate of the OSCE. These speakers also believed that the Belarus authorities were ready in principle to negotiate with the OSCE.

EU Visa ban

On 19 November 2002 14 of the 15 EU member states, as well as some candidate countries, implemented a visa ban on eight prominent political figures in Belarus, including President LUKASHENKO. This action followed a statement by the General Affairs Council on October 21 expressing serious concern about the situation of democracy and human rights in Belarus and the actions of the Belarusian authorities towards the OSCE AMG. The Czech Republic refused to grant a visa to Mr LUKASHENKO to participate in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) summit on November 22. The Belarusian ambassador to the Czech Republic had been recalled for “consultation” and the Czech chargé d'affaires in Minsk had returned home “on holiday”. The Belarusian authorities had protested in extremely strong terms against the visa ban. Portugal had been the one dissenting voice among the member states, principally because it was due to host the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Lisbon taking place on 6-7 December 2002.

The EP delegation argued that the decision not to grant visas to these individuals was a proportionate response to the refusal by the Belarusian authorities to cooperate with European democracy and in particular to refuse visa extensions to the members of the OSCE AMG.

The delegation heard that the list of eight individuals could be amended and that it had been based on consultation with the western embassies in Minsk. However the delegation were not able to establish what criteria had been used to determine which particular individuals should be on the list. They stressed that the EU was not seeking to isolate Belarus – it was the current government that was isolating the country.

The Belarusian authorities expressed strong displeasure at the visa ban. They also considered that the non-participation of Belarusian parliamentarians in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly ran counter to OSCE rules.

Views on the visa ban among non-government interlocutors were mixed. One speaker considered that it would worsen the situation and that more moderate members of the government would be pushed aside by hard-line elements. One opposition speaker also considered the ban to be counterproductive, while another supported it. The delegation also

heard arguments in favour of a non-confrontational approach to the Belarusian authorities in this matter.

EU-Belarus relations

The EP side stressed that the extension of the EU to the Belarusian border following the current enlargement process made cooperation between the two sides essential and ever more urgent. It was vital to cooperate on issues of mutual concern such as management of borders, asylum issues and combating trafficking in people and drugs. The EU however was more than simply an economic organisation: it was based on common values of democracy and respect for human rights. Belarus and the EU's other "new neighbours" would have to decide whether they wished to follow the same path of democratic development. The EU certainly had no interest in a new Iron Curtain. Indeed the delegation strongly rejected the recent reported comments of President Romano PRODI, which appeared to rule out the prospect of eventual EU membership for countries like Ukraine and Moldova.

The Belarus authorities underlined the need for cooperation, dialogue and mutual understanding. They believed there to be no alternative to such an approach and they emphasised that the EU was of central importance to Belarus, particularly after enlargement. Comments were made such as "we cannot run away from each other" or (by a non-government speaker) "geography is more important than history". The authorities agreed that both parties had a common interest in security, fighting terrorism and trafficking in drugs and human beings. The government was currently cooperating with its neighbours on minimising the problems after enlargement.

The authorities regretted the growing mistrust between the EU and Minsk and argued that putting Belarus under pressure did not help the situation. They considered too that the EU had not paid sufficient attention to Belarus since the early 1990s and tended to see its relationship with the country "through the prism" of opposition parties and NGOs. As a consequence the government generally mistrusted the EU and considered that Brussels would never be satisfied with what it did. They regretted this mutual distrust and emphasised the need to overcome it.

They also accused the EU of having double standards in having formal links with Central Asian countries where democracy was far less developed than in Belarus.

The authorities stressed the need for economic cooperation as a first step. At present a provisional trade agreement, rather than a fully-fledged Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, would improve the economic situation in the country. They were particularly unhappy with the approach of the Belgian Presidency, which they claimed had stated that there could be no economic cooperation between the two sides until Belarus had established a market economy. This approach was unrealistic, as Belarus needed EU assistance to build a market economy. They stressed that Belarus could be a good trading partner of the EU. Cooperation on trade and economic matters could lead to a deeper political dialogue.

Belarus-Russia relations

Whereas the policy of Ukraine and Moldova is to work towards eventual EU accession, Belarus is aiming at closer integration with Russia. Several speakers stressed the strong economic involvement of Russia in Belarus. One Belarusian parliamentarian noted that trade with Russia amounted to 55% of his country's trade. Some of those interviewed considered that many Russian voters were sympathetic to Mr LUKASHENKO and that President

PUTIN would not want to upset this group of his supporters, although the situation might change after he was re-elected.

The delegation heard the view that the rapprochement and economic integration of Russia and Belarus ought to promote political and economic reform in Belarus. Such an approach would be more productive than imposing travel restrictions on leading Belarusian politicians and relations between Belarus and the EU should be normalised. This opinion was broadly supported by another speaker who considered that Russia was adopting a more positive approach towards Belarus and was now urging the authorities to introduce reforms.

Freedom of the media and human rights

Views differed on whether restrictions on freedom of the press were increasing or decreasing. Some speakers reported that the situation had worsened and that new restrictions had been placed on the electronic media coming from Russia (although even this was not very independent and often portrayed Mr LUKASHENKO in a positive light). In addition it was extremely expensive to access the international media. Others stated that restrictions were not as severe as five years ago as the independent media was in such a dire financial situation that the government did not need to crack down on it any more.

One speaker spoke of the harassment and punishment of leading opponents of the regime and of many cases of imprisonment without trial and general intimidation. It had become difficult for those who were active in the opposition to secure a job.

Many speakers reported that the financial burden on the independent press was extremely high. It cost 48% more to produce independent newspapers and 30% more to distribute them than state newspapers. The independent press had also been hit by a 5% tax on advertising on non-state newspapers. (70% of newspaper income came from advertisers). Consequently it cost two to three times more to produce an independent newspaper than one supported by the authorities. As a consequence the circulation of independent newspapers had significantly reduced - for example the circulation of "Narodnaya Volya" had halved. Further massive support for the state press was anticipated in the 2003 budget. The situation in the provinces was even more serious than that in Minsk.

However the delegation heard a view that that it was possible to have a dialogue with the authorities on certain religious matters and that the situation of the Roman Catholic Church had improved over the last ten years, although many difficulties and administrative barriers still remained. Any political pressure by the West should be accompanied by a process of dialogue.

There were complaints that the independent trade unions were facing increased restrictions. The government had taken over the Federation of Trade Unions in July 2002 and had filled it with presidential appointees. One speaker stated that the "remnants of democracy" were being destroyed. Trade unionists were being forced out of their job and were facing intimidation and pressure. Some were looking for support from western trade unions and were also working with Russian trade unions. One speaker recognised that the unions were not well organised and could be "picked off" by the government. They faced a common problem as the government refused to register them and was thereby effectively banning their activities. The EP delegation stressed that the organisation of working people was a basic European value.

It was reported that there are around 2,500 NGOs in Belarus, of which around 40% are active. Those who met the delegation reported that they were operating in a generally hostile environment, although there was some progress - generally in non-political areas where cooperation with the authorities was not too problematic. There was, for example, NGO activity in schools and hospitals. The delegation heard the view that TACIS, by its support of NGOs, could facilitate the start of a dialogue with the authorities and that more should be done in this field.

The Commission reported that it had, with some difficulties, almost completed the implementation of the benchmark programme on civil society. The liability of TACIS funds to taxation was raised on several occasions. It was explained that the issue of tax exemption was currently under discussion between the Commission and the Belarusian authorities, however it was a requirement for the receipt of TACIS funding that it should not be subject to taxation. Belarusian parliamentarians stated that draft legislation was being prepared that would ensure that TACIS aid was tax exempt.

The view was heard from another speaker that the priority task should be to build a strong civil society and that politicisation of the efforts of NGOs was counterproductive.

Belarus Parliament

The delegation heard a view from several speakers that little progress had been made in the measures promised by the government to extend the powers of the parliament. There was a small and weak opposition in the lower chamber – the House of Representatives. For example some parliamentarians had launched a number of initiatives, including a proposal for the establishment of a Commission on the disappearances of certain individuals. However the President's allies had blocked this. In general, these speakers said, the opposition in parliament was ineffective and was subject to warnings of prosecution for their business activities and other threats.

The Belarusian authorities regretted the absence of normal parliamentary relations between the EP and Belarus. They thought that the complaints that the EU made about the fairness of the parliamentary elections in Belarus could apply to other countries with which the EU enjoyed normal inter-parliamentary relations.

The members of the Belarusian parliament argued that they enjoyed extensive powers and could have an impact on the political situation. They did not consider the issue of parliamentary control of the presidential budget to be a priority and stated that the funds under this heading went to social and humanitarian projects. However they stressed that the majority of funds fell within the general budget

Economic situation

Many speakers reported that the economic situation was deteriorating. Although a small minority enjoyed considerable wealth, there was significant economic hardship. Salaries were low and were often not paid on time. One speaker argued that the deteriorating situation would cause the authorities to crack down. Some considered that this economic crisis would weaken the government, while others argued that many people would cling even more to Mr LUKASHENKO, seeing him as their only hope of salvation.

The delegation heard the view that the development of a market economy was at an embryonic stage: economic improvement would boost the reform process and promote the development of a middle class and a civil society that would be favourable to democratic reform. At present President LUKASHENKO's views were closer to the "social base" of the country. Belarusian parliamentarians stressed that the country had only begun to move towards a market economy in 1990 and that it was inevitable that it would lag behind the West. However legislation was being prepared to implement market orientated reforms.

Some speakers underlined the paramount importance of removing the administrative barriers to business, which were very burdensome (although corruption was less of a problem). They warned that economic restructuring would entail the loss of many jobs and noted that in around 150 towns there was only one enterprise. There was therefore a need to promote small and medium sized businesses. They underlined that an educated workforce existed in the country, which was not fulfilling its potential.

Presidential and local elections

In the view of one speaker some "administrative resources" might have been used to boost Mr LUKASHENKO's support during the presidential elections in September 2001. However this could have only counted for a maximum of 20% of the votes and Mr LUKASHENKO would clearly have won a free and fair election and achieved around 60% of the votes.

A view was expressed by non-government speakers that the local elections that are due to be held on 2 March 2003 would not be free or fair, and that supporters of the government would be the winners. They argued that in some places the electoral authorities did not have the necessary experience or training to carry out their functions. There were reports that the authorities had already harassed the opposition forces by creating administrative barriers to registration and closing down telephone lines. The mass media had received instructions that they should only give coverage to government approved parties. There were attempts by the opposition parties to ensure that only one opposition candidate stood in each constituency. Indeed this had been achieved in the provinces but discussions on how the Minsk districts should be divided were still continuing.

There were also concerns that the opposition forces would have insufficient trained and experienced personnel in the unlikely event that they won the elections. However they were fielding candidates, as they wanted to get their message across to the population and to identify the issues that were important to people.

President LUKASHENKO

There were conflicting opinions on how far the popularity of President LUKASHENKO had declined. Some opposition speakers argued that he was now in a precarious position as Russia was putting pressure on him and the economic situation was worsening. A number of speakers argued that Mr LUKASHENKO had chosen the path of isolation and not of Europe. A view was expressed that the EU was seeking to implement a rational policy but it was dealing with an "irrational and emotional" leader. It was possible that a member of the current ruling elite could replace Mr LUKASHENKO if he proved to become too much of a liability in the future. However the delegation also heard that a view that seeking to exert pressure on President LUKASHENKO was counterproductive, as "such problems were not solved with a hammer".

Conclusion

The delegation concluded that no significant progress had been made by the Belarusian authorities to promote democratic reforms. They gave their support to all efforts to enable the return of the OSCE AMG to Minsk and for the AMG to pursue the main elements of its mandate to monitor and assist democratic developments in Belarus. They underlined that Belarus was part of the European continent but that the continuing refusal by the authorities to implement the fundamental democratic values which form the basis of the European Union and other European institutions, would increasingly isolate the country from developments in the rest of Europe.

They expressed support for all those in Belarus who are willing to reject the path of isolation and are prepared to promote the democratic and economic transition of Belarus and its integration into European structures. They emphasised that it is also in the interest of the European Union that Belarus should develop into a democratic neighbour.

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MINSK

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List of participants

Members

Mr Jan Marinus WIERSMA, *Chairman* PSE, Netherlands
Ms Elisabeth SCHROEDTER, *1st Vice-Chairman* Verts/ALE, Germany
Mr Robert GOODWILL, *Member* PPE-DE, United Kingdom

Secretariat

Mr Tim BODEN, Administrator responsible for the delegation
Ms Elke SCHMUTTERER, Assistant

Political Groups

Mr Rob VAN DE WATER, Group of the Party of European Socialists

European Commission

H.E. Mr Norbert JOUSTEN, EU Ambassador to Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus
Mr Raul de LUZENBERGER, Head of the TACIS Branch Office in Minsk

Interpreters

Ms Tatiana LYASHENKO, Russian – English - Russian
Mr Yuri GARIEV, Russian – English - Russian

Others

Ms Irena BOUGLAK, Assistant of Mr Goodwill

Abbreviations :

PPE-DE	European People's Party/European Democrats	UEN	Union for a Europe of Nations
PSE	Party of European Socialists	NI	Non-attached
ELDR	Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party	EDD	Europe of Democracies and Diversities
Verts/ALE	Greens/European Free Alliance	TDI	Technical Group of Independent
GUE/NGL	European United Left/Nordic Green Left	Members	

5 December 2002/es

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BUREAU VISIT TO BELARUS

27 – 29 November 2002

FINAL PROGRAMME

Coordination:

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Wednesday, 27 November 2002

12h45 Arrival of the delegation (LH 3256/Frankfurt) and transfer to hotel

Hotel YUBILEYNAYA
220078 Minsk, Masherov Ave., 19
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Fax +375(017) 2269171

(arranged by the TACIS Branch Office Minsk)

5 December 2002
TB/ES

Wednesday, 27 November 2002

- 14h15 *Departure hotel for*
14h30 Meeting with **H.E. Mr Stefano BENAZZO**, Ambassador of Italy to Belarus, representing the Presidency-in-Office of the Council of the European Union, and other EU Ambassadors (Germany, UK, France and the Finnish Ambassador to Lithuania, Belarus)
Venue: Italian Embassy, Uliza Karl Marx 37, Tel. +375 17 229 29 69
- 15h30 Meeting with **Journalists**
(Mr Feduta, -Independent Analyst, Ms Tomashevskaya – Belarussian Delavaia Gazeta, Mr Potemkin – Belapan, Ms Kalinovskaya – Belarussian Rynok, Mr Lebedev – Svobodnie Novostie, Mr Krivin, TBN Regional Television)
Venue: TACIS Branch Office, Internatsionalnaya Str. 21, 2nd floor, Tel. +375-17-2066613, 2066916
- 17h00 Meeting with **NGOs**
(Lev Sapeha, Belarussian Helsinki Committee, United Way, Ratusha, Rada of Youth Organisations, SCAF, Children’s Hospice, Lene Petersen of the European House, Susanne Mueller of DRA)
Venue: TACIS Branch Office, Internatsionalnaya Str. 21, 2nd floor, Tel. +375-17-2066613, 2066916
- 18h45 *Departure for*
19h00 Dinner for EP Delegation and EU Ambassadors, hosted by **H.E. Mr Stefano BENAZZO**, Ambassador of Italy to Belarus, representing the Presidency-in-Office of the Council of the European Union
Venue: Residence of the Italian Ambassador, 9a Osvobozhdenia Str., 1st floor
- 21h30 *Return to hotel*

Thursday, 28 November 2002

- 08h45 *Departure hotel for*
09h00 – 10h15 Meeting with **H.E. Mr Alexander BLOKIN**, Russian Ambassador to Belarus
Venue: Russian Embassy, 48 Starovilenskaya Str.
- 10h15 *Departure for*
10h30 – 11h30 Conference on consequences of EU Enlargement for neighbours
Venue: Belarussian State University, Skaryna av. 4, Tel. +375-17-226 59 40
- 11h15 *Departure for (Mr Goodwill)*
11h30 Meeting with **doctors on Chernobyl**
Venue: TACIS Branch Office, Internatsionalnaya Str. 21, 2nd floor, Tel. +375-17-2066613, 2066916

Thursday, 28 November 2002

- 11h30 *Departure for*
11h45 Meeting with **H.E. Mr Ivan YURKOVICH**, Apostolic Nuncio
Venue: Nunziatura, Volodarskogo Str. N.6, tel. 2891584
- 12h20 *Departure for*
- 12h30 Lunch with **H.E. Mr KOZAK**, American Ambassador,
hosted by **Mr Jan Marinus WIERSMA**, Chairman of the Delegation
Venue: Restaurant "Krinitsa" 2 Lenina Str.
- 14h00 *Return to hotel*
- 15h00 *Departure hotel for*
15h30 Meeting with **Mr Igor LESCHENIA** – President's Aide
Venue: Presidential Administration, 38 Karl Marx Str.
- 16h10 *Departure for*
16h15 Meeting with **Mr Anatoli MIKHAILOV** – Rector of European Humanities
University
Venue: European Humanities University, 24 Skoriny ave.
- 16h45 *Departure for*
17h00 Meeting with **Mr Mikhail KHVOSTOV** – Minister of Foreign Affairs
Venue: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 Lenina Str.
- 17h50 *Departure for*
18h00 Meeting with the **Council of Opposition Forces**
(Mr Kalyakin, Communist Party of Belarus, Mr Statkevitch – Social
Democrats, Mr Chigir - United Civic Party, Belarussian Popular Front)
*Venue: TACIS Branch Office, Internatsionalnaya Str. 21, 2nd floor,
Tel. +375-17-2066613, 2066916*
- 19h15 Meeting with representatives of **Trade Unions**
(Mr Fedynich, Federation of Trade Unions, Mr Bykov, Free Trade Unions,
Mr Yaroshuk, Congress of Democratic Trade Union)
*Venue: TACIS Branch Office, Internatsionalnaya Str. 21, 2nd floor,
Tel. +375-17-2066613, 2066916*
- 20h45 *Departure for*
21h00 Dinner with the representatives of **TACIS projects** (Mr Tibbs, Mr
Lehmann, Ms Mueller, Ms Mozhaiski, Mr Liverani, Mr Poulsen), hosted by
the **H.E. Mr Norbert JOUSTEN**, EU Ambassador to Ukraine, Moldova and
Belarus
Venue: Restaurant "Bergamo", 37 Kulman Str.
- For Mr Goodwill:*
19h00 Dinner at the British Residence
Venue: 37 Karl Marx Str.

Friday, 29 November 2002

- 08h15 *Departure hotel for (EP Delegation only)*
08h30 Breakfast with Belarusian Parliamentarians (Mr VOITOV – Chairman of the Council of the Republic, Mr CHERGINETS – Chairman of the International Relations and National Security Committee)
Venue: Hotel “Oktiabrskaya”, 13 Engelsa Str.
- 09h35 *Departure for*
09h45 Meeting with representatives of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP),
World Bank, Chernobyl Committee
(discussion on Chernobyl and other assistance programmes)
Venue: UN Office, 17 Kirov Str., Tel: +375 17 227 38 17, 227 81 49
- 10h00 Meeting with **H.E. Mr Tadeusz PAVLAK**, Polish Ambassador to Belarus
(Mr Wiersma/Mr Jousten only)
Venue: Polish Embassy
- 11h00 *Departure for*
11h15 Debriefing with EU Ambassadors
Venue: Italian Embassy, Uliza Karl Marx 37
- 11h30 Visit to the Mercy House – A charitable institution of the Orthodox Church, The Mercy House also hosts the offices of Mr Nesterenko Belrad Institute working on the effects of radiations on the population (Mr Goodwill only)
Venue: The Mercy House, 11 Staroborisovski trakt
- 12h30 *Departure for (Mr Wiersma, Mr Van De Water, Ms Schmutterer)*
12h45 *Departure for (Mr Goodwill – from the Mercy House)*
14h00 *Flight LH 3329 to Frankfurt*
- 12h30 *Transfer to IBB Hotel (Ms Schroedter) (TBO in charge)*
- 16h00 *Departure hotel for (Mr Boden, Mr Lyashenko, Mr Gariev) (TBO in charge)*
17h40 *Flight OS5688 to Vienna*
19h00 *Flight B2 1994 to Moscow*