

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH BELARUS

NOTICE TO MEMBERS

INFORMATION NOTE

ON THE WORK OF THE DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH BELARUS

**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR
EXTERNAL POLICIES OF THE UNION**

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EUR/TB/ES

Introduction

The European Parliament delegation for relations with Belarus has until now been part of the joint delegation for relations with Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus. The background to the current delegation is the negotiation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) between the European Union and the three countries. The PCAs are designed to provide a clear framework for the development of political and economic cooperation and are based on the assumption that the countries concerned proceed with market reforms and enable their political institutions to function on the basis of democratic principles.

A key element of each Agreement is the process of interparliamentary cooperation. It is intended that a Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) should exert parliamentary control over the implementation of the agreements and act as an open forum for debate on questions of mutual interest.

However the PCA between the EU and Belarus, which was signed in 1995, has not been concluded because of political problems with the government of Belarus. Consequently no PCC between the European Parliament and the Belarus Parliament - as was foreseen in the agreement - has been in operation. The PCAs with both Moldova and Ukraine were concluded and the PCCs with these two countries have taken place for a number of years.

At present there are only very limited contacts between the Belarus regime and the European Union. This state of affairs has existed since President Lukashenko replaced the directly elected parliament in 1996 with a national assembly nominated by the president, and also carried out a policy of repression of the opposition and the media, and interference with the judiciary.

There was no significant change in this approach after the parliamentary elections in October 2000 and the presidential elections of September 2001, which Mr Lukashenko won by a large majority. After the latter elections the post-election statement issued by the International Election Observer Mission, which included the European Parliament, concluded that the election process failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections. The Parliamentary Troika of the European Parliament and the assemblies of the Council of Europe and the OSCE, which monitored the elections in 2000 and 2001, has been maintained and there have been attempts to make another visit to Belarus to assess the situation in advance of the October 2004 parliamentary elections. However these efforts have been blocked to date by the Belarusian authorities. It is still uncertain whether the European Parliament will be able to observe the elections in October.

Since 2001 there has been little discernible improvement in the internal situation in Belarus and consequently in its relationship with the European Union. The Minsk government appears to be determined to maintain an authoritarian, autocratic style of government and a command economy. The Belarusian authorities have drawn heavy criticism from human rights organisations and the West for suppressing freedom of speech; muzzling the independent press and denying the opposition access to state-owned media. Government-controlled newspapers in Belarus enjoy considerable state subsidies and financial privileges, while many of the opposition print media have been forced to close down, change name or even be published abroad.

Belarus is seeking closer ties with Russia and on the political front there has been much talk of union but only limited progress. Belarus depends very heavily on Russian gas to meet its energy needs. In recent months there have been concerns that Gazprom will not continue to supply gas at subsidised rates to Belarus as such extra energy costs would place an even greater burden on the Belarusian economy.

The OSCE office in Minsk has the responsibility of encouraging a return to the respect of democratic principles, human rights and press freedom. Most EU activity is channelled through this office or through member states' diplomatic missions in the Belarus capital. The Commission manages affairs in Belarus from its Moscow Delegation Office.

Enlargement means that Belarus is now a neighbour of the EU and there are significant cross-border issues to be addressed. The most recent European Commission pronouncement on Belarus is the "European Neighbourhood Policy" Strategy Paper of 12 May 2004. This stresses that there is scope for more active engagement with the Belarusian authorities at the political level, however that this is subject to "significant positive developments in democratisation" in Belarus. The paper also proposes that EU assistance to Belarus be strengthened with a clear focus on civil society. It underlines that the EU's long term goal for Belarus is to be a "democratic, stable, reliable and increasingly prosperous partner with which the enlarged EU will share not only common borders, but also a common agenda driven by shared values".

Members of the European Parliament delegation have been generally obliged to follow events in Belarus on the basis of contacts with the OSCE and NGOs. The Parliament secretariat also maintains diplomatic contacts with the Belarus Mission to the EU. The Belarusian ambassador has spoken at the delegation's meetings on a number of occasions. Periodic meetings have also been organised with the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Council Presidency in order to co-ordinate activities with the other institutions.

Nevertheless the European Parliament follows developments in Belarus very closely and has stated its position in a number of resolutions. The most significant statement of the Parliament's position is the resolution of 11 February 2003 "On relations between the European Union and Belarus: towards a future partnership" (the MARSET CAMPOS report). This expressed concern at "the increasing and dangerous self-imposed isolation from the West and from the East into which Belarus is sinking as a result of the authoritarian and anti-democratic course charted by its President". It called for steps to be taken by the EU to support democratic forces in Belarus.

Throughout the current legislature the European Parliament has endeavoured to maintain a political dialogue with the democratic forces in Belarus. The delegation has also met with a number of representatives of the Belarus opposition and NGOs. In January 2004, for example, members were addressed by Ms Olga Tarasov of the International League for Human Rights. The delegation has therefore provided a focus for the expression of concerns about human rights abuses.

The most recent visit to Belarus was in November 2002 when the Chair Jan Marinus WIERSMA (PSE, Netherlands), Vice-Chair Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (Greens/EFA, Germany) and delegation member Robert GOODWILL (EPP-ED, UK) met with members of government and opposition and representatives of civil society.

The Chairman between 1999 and 2004 was Mr Jan Marinus WIERSMA (PSE, Netherlands). Previous chairs of the Delegation were Mrs Erika MANN (PSE, Germany) between 1997 and 1999, and Mrs Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (Greens/EFA, Germany) between 1994 and 1996.

Visits to Belarus:

Parliamentary Troika visit 1 - 4 March 2000 in Minsk
(Chairman + Rapporteur)

Parliamentary Troika visit 19 – 21 June 2000 in Minsk
(Chairman)

Ad hoc delegation Belarus 13 – 17 October 2000 in Minsk
(Parliamentary Elections)

Parliamentary Troika visit 5 – 7 March 2001 in Minsk
(Bureau + Rapporteur)

Parliamentary Troika visit 7 – 10 September 2001 in Minsk
(Presidential Elections/Bureau + Rapporteur)

Bureau visit 27 - 29 November 2002 in Minsk
(Chairman, First Vice-Chair, Member)

Technical Conferences:

7 April 2000 (Vienna), 29 June 2000 (Vienna) 30 August 2000 (Vienna), 5 July 2001 (Paris),
8 August 2001 (Vienna)

Other:

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meeting (Chair) 19 - 20 February 2004 (Vienna)
- Discussion with OSCE representatives on future cooperation regarding Belarus