

People, Power & Politics: Protecting & Promoting Human Rights in Belarus

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Dear colleagues,

At this meeting, I am wearing two hats.

First, one of the Latvian MP, vice-chair of the Committee on Human Rights.

Belarus is our closest neighbour with centuries-long friendly and family ties with the Latvian people. Belarusians make the second biggest minority in Latvia. Belarus is also a very important economic partner, particularly in the field of transit and electricity supply.

Apparently, due to these reasons, Latvia has always played a special role in the EU's relations with Belarus – not as an advocate but rather a sort of a “good cop”. However, after the recent events we are discussing now, this is hardly possible any longer.

The position of the Latvian Saeima is very clear. On 18 August, the Saeima, at its extraordinary session, unanimously adopted a strong statement. Besides general political condemnation, it called for some practical measures. In particular, introduction of personal sanctions against the persons responsible for human rights violations. At the national level, these sanctions have been adopted, last week, against 30 persons, including Mr Lukashenko. We also strongly supported similar sanctions at the EU level.

Besides, Latvia allocated 150,000 Eur for supporting civil society and independent media in Belarus in cooperation with Latvian NGOs.

As to “general” economic sanctions, it is essential to find a way to impose them on perpetrators of the human rights violations, not on the Belarusian people as a whole.

Now I am putting on my another hat and will say some words about the Council of Europe position. I am authorised to represent neither the Assembly nor the organization in general. So my remarks are in a personal capacity.

Formally, Belarus is not a Council of Europe member state and, therefore, is not formally bound by its standards. However, even if Belarus is not a part of the Council of Europe, it is a part of Europe, and has applied for membership in the Council of Europe. Grave and massive violations of human rights such as those observed since the presidential elections, in particular, amount to breaches of international *ius cogens* norms, therefore, we cannot stay indifferent.

The Council of Europe made several statements with regard to Belarus, notably a joint statement of 26 August by the President of the Committee of Ministers Miltiadis Varvitsiotis, President of the Parliamentary Assembly Rik Daems, and Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić.

In my personal view, this is not enough for the organization which defines itself as a watchdog for human rights and democracy in Europe.

Several Assembly committees will, at their meetings next week, consider the current situation in Belarus. I believe that even if the Council of Europe does not have a formal jurisdiction over Belarus, it has sufficient expertise, mechanisms and experience to substantially contribute to documentation and investigation of grave violations committed by the authorities, and into restoration of justice and ensuring accountability of the perpetrators. Impunity is unacceptable. Our committee will explore proper ways how to achieve this goal.

Thank you.