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Situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential election

Recommendation 1734 (2006)

Reply from the Committee of Ministers
adopted at the 962nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (26 April 2006)

1. The Committee of Ministers informs the Parliamentary Assembly that the following reply was adopted by a majority as provided by Article 20 (d) of the Statute.
2. With serious concern, the Committee of Ministers has examined Recommendation 1734 (2006) on the situation in Belarus on the eve of the presidential election, adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly on 26 January 2006 and Resolution 1482 (2006) on the same subject, which was adopted at the same time. It considers that unfortunately the content of these texts faithfully reflects the current deteriorating situation with respect to pluralist democracy, human rights and independent media in Belarus and fully shares the concerns expressed in these texts as well as those formulated by the Romanian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers in several statements before and after the elections. The policy followed by the country's authorities is indeed not conducive to the desired aim of bringing Belarus closer to the international community. This was confirmed by massive violations of candidate rights in the pre-election period and the findings of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission during the election process. The Committee of Ministers condemns the methods applied by the Belarusian authorities to intimidate the opposition and falsify the election results. It regrets that the whole process of the presidential elections in Belarus cannot be considered as complying with democratic electoral standards, as stated in the preliminary conclusions of the OSCE/ODIHR International Elections Observation Mission, and that the official results do not reflect the will of the people of Belarus.
3. Whilst the Committee of Ministers welcomes the Belarusian authorities' invitation to the OSCE/ODIHR to observe the presidential elections, it deplores that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was not given this opportunity.
4. The Committee of Ministers also expresses its concern at the recent action by the Belarus authorities to prevent peaceful demonstrations, as well as with the continuing massive arrests of participants and opposition politicians. The Committee of Ministers will continue to follow closely the situation and developments in Belarus after the elections, devoting special attention to the conditions of exercise of the right of assembly and the right to freedom of expression.
5. The Committee of Ministers, bearing in mind the views expressed by the Parliamentary Assembly regarding the respect by Belarus of European standards in the field of pluralist democracy, the rule of law and human rights, calls for Belarus to move in the direction of these Council of Europe standards.
6. In this spirit, the Committee of Ministers hopes that Belarus, as an integral part of Europe and a country whose people contributed to the common European heritage, will soon fulfil the conditions to become a fully-fledged member of the Council of Europe. In order to bring Belarus closer to the international community and the Council of Europe, it is evident that there must be adherence to democratic standards and the human rights situation must improve. One of the keys to achieving that are internationally recognised free and fair elections.

7. Active support is provided to civil society actors in Belarus within the existing Programme of Activities in order to promote Council of Europe values and principles. The Committee of Ministers will continue to focus on the development of civil society, which will provide fertile ground for forging a European future for the country. It is aware that the international community – including the Council of Europe – has only a limited capacity to bring about favourable developments in Belarus. This capacity will be even more limited if action is taken only from outside the country. The Committee of Ministers agrees that any enlarged co-operation with civil society in Belarus would be more effective with the overall consent of the incumbent authorities. It aims to convey the message in Belarusian society that the country can have a different future and to convince the population that its present leaders are making a tragic mistake in not choosing the path of democratic development followed by all the other countries in Europe.

8. As a party to the European Cultural Convention, Belarus participates in the activities set under the convention. Representatives from Belarus attend plenary sessions of the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR) and the Steering Committee on Education (CDED) on a regular basis. Partners in the work on education in Belarus are primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Higher Education, the Belarusian State University and the Belarus State Pedagogical University. This participation could offer potential for increased co-operation, in particular in the field of civil education and youth, provided the Belarusian authorities so wish.

9. Currently, the Rapporteur Group on Democracy (GR-DEM) is considering possible measures based on a realistic step-by-step approach which could be undertaken by the Council of Europe on the question of Belarus. Given the lack of constructive co-operation by official partners in Belarus with the Council of Europe, priority is attached to civil society, free media and the promotion of contacts at the level of local authorities, as well as to strengthening the dissemination of information about Council of Europe standards and the development of a democratic political culture in Belarus. The Committee of Ministers expects that Belarus would take the opportunity for better relations with the international community and embark resolutely on the path of democratic reforms.

10. The Committee of Ministers takes note of the initiatives voiced at the recent Prague Conference on Belarus in the run-up to the presidential election which was organised by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and during which the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe delivered an introductory speech on Belarus in democratic Europe. The Committee of Ministers will examine the conclusions of the Prague Conference in the context of its preparation of the assistance activities for Belarus.

11. The Committee of Ministers continues to attach high priority to co-operation with the OSCE, the European Union and other international partners in assisting Belarus to return to the road of democratic reform. The Committee of Ministers notes past activities of the Parliamentary Troika, a token of the joint commitment of the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in support of efforts within Belarus to restore credible democratic institutions by peaceful means. In this respect, the Committee of Ministers welcomes the call by the Parliamentary Assembly for closer co-operation between the Council of Europe, the European Union and the OSCE, and its wish to resume activities of the Parliamentary Troika on Belarus on a durable basis.

12. The Committee of Ministers expresses the wish that long-term efforts in Belarus to uphold civil society, free media, local democracy, enhanced information on European values and standards, as well as transborder co-operation, will benefit from support through joint programmes of co-operation with the European Commission. Experts or members of the Secretariat could take part, on an ad hoc basis, in activities organised by the OSCE and the European Union in relation to Belarus.

13. The Committee of Ministers welcomes the good example of the bilateral contributions made by member states, including neighbours of Belarus, which might usefully be followed by others. In this connection, the Committee of Ministers endorses the measures recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly in Resolution 1482 (2006). It encourages its member and observer states to support them in their contacts with the Belarusian authorities and will, for its part, take all appropriate action to implement them.