

## The Bureau of the Congress

**CG-BUR(2025)63-18<sup>1</sup>**

27 January 2025

## **Future participation of representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces in Congress sessions and meetings**

Action required: for decision

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<sup>1</sup> This document is classified confidential until it has been examined by the Bureau of the Congress

## 1. Political background

1. In a context of democratic backsliding, which poses threats to human rights, democracy and the rule of law, it is important for the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities to seek out and cement alliances with those who uphold the values and principles of the Council of Europe. Since the launching by the Russian Federation of its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, the Lukashenko regime has further aligned itself with the Russian aggressor, and amplified repression of the Belarusian people, while undermining regional stability. More recently, referring to the “so-called presidential election” held in Belarus on 26 January 2025, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe found that it showed “blatant contempt...for basic democratic norms and international law”.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Belarusian democratic forces have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to the principles enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Their vision for a future democratic Belarus aligns with the principles of the Council of Europe.

2. The Belarusian democratic forces follow the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, even under relentless repression. Following the 2020 fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus, which were neither free nor fair and did not comply with any international standards, Belarusian people have peacefully protested and faced extremely violent repression in response. Forced to leave the country, they quickly organised themselves around the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transitional Cabinet and the Co-ordination Council, as well as through a larger civic movement. Since then, Belarusian democrats have aligned themselves with the aspirations of the Council of Europe and the European Union. They have structured themselves in the Co-ordination Council, an independent body of the Belarusian democratic forces elected through a proportional electoral system, with the last elections held in May 2024.

3. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Congress to forge a more institutionalised and sustainable partnership with the Belarusian democratic forces, which would additionally contribute to broader European stability and democratic integrity. The Congress has much to offer – political support, international visibility, and expertise. Yet, equally, the Belarusian democratic forces would bring with them knowledge, experience, as well as resilience and commitment to the ideals of the European community.

## 2. Ongoing co-operation with the Belarusian democratic forces

4. Although Belarus has never been a member of the Council of Europe, the country was part of several of its conventions and projects as of 1992. This co-operation ended following the support given by Belarus to the full-scale war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022, but new forms of co-operation started with the Belarusian democratic forces. In September 2022, the Council of Europe Contact Group on Co-operation with Belarusian Democratic Forces and Civil Society<sup>3</sup> was established as a platform to guide the co-operation with Belarusian democratic forces, and received the support of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in the 2023 Reykjavík Declaration.<sup>4</sup> The promotion of pluralist democracy at the national and local level was set as a priority, inviting the Congress to get involved.

5. The Congress is already co-operating with Belarusian democratic forces through the provision of political support and capacity building. In 2023, the Congress organised a “Leaders for change” programme gathering 24 Belarusian participants. Within the framework of the two-year project “Leading the change for democracy and human rights at local level with Belarusian democratic forces” (2024-2025), the Congress Bureau invited a representative of the Belarusian democratic forces to an exchange of views at its 57th meeting on 12 February 2024, and subsequently invited Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Leader of the Belarusian democratic forces, to address the Congress at its 46th session on 27 March 2024. In her address to the plenary, she listed priorities for co-operation. The European Charter on Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and its Contemporary Commentary have been translated into Belarusian and disseminated among Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. Moreover, an expert review of the Local Self-Government Concept for a New Belarus, a strategic document drafted by Belarusian experts, served as a basis for a series of three workshops organised in October and November 2024 on key concepts of local self-government and local democracy, dimensions of

<sup>2</sup> Parliamentary Assembly [Resolution 2587 \(2025\)](#) “The urgent need for free and fair elections in Belarus”.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/contact-group-on-belarus>

<sup>4</sup> [Reykjavík Declaration: United around our values](#), adopted by the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government, Reykjavík, 16-17 May 2023.

decentralisation, and decentralisation reform management, transition stages and risk management. Strengthening this co-operation is essential to ensure that their perspectives are represented in international discussions and that the support of the Congress remains visible and effective.

6. In parallel, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has already invited the Co-ordination Council of the Belarusian democratic forces to appoint a representative delegation of Belarusian democratic forces to take part in the Assembly's 2025 session (3 representatives and 3 substitutes) in order to include them in the work of its committees and networks during the four part-sessions to represent the interests of the Belarusian people and to work together with member states towards a democratic future for the country.

7. To enable exchanges with Belarusian democratic forces on local self-government, local democracy and governance, the Congress should consider a similar approach.

### **3. Establishing a sustainable dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces**

8. By deepening its engagement with Belarusian democratic forces, the Congress would reaffirm its commitment to promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law at local and regional levels throughout Europe and signal that it is ready to support these democratic forces to enhance their capacities in the field of local democracy. Moreover, maintaining a steady and regular dialogue with the Belarusian democratic forces would lay the foundation for a sustainable partnership with the Congress. When the window of opportunity for democratisation arises, this pre-established relationship would enable swift action and effective collaboration.

9. Co-operating with the Belarusian democratic forces also presents the Congress with a unique opportunity to gain valuable insights and perspectives on issues that directly affect Belarusian citizens in exile in Council of Europe member states and those who remain in the country. Moreover, by including representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces in its work, the Congress will create an enabling platform to disseminate the principles of the European Charter on Local Self-Government, multilevel governance and local democracy among Belarusian democratic actors. This engagement will not only amplify their efforts but also empower them to envision and drive future reforms in local self-government, firmly anchored in European democratic principles. Finally, their presence will enrich the work of the Congress, as Belarusian experts can bring firsthand knowledge of the political climate in their country, offering insights into how to address pressing issues like governance and migration in a post-authoritarian context. This collaboration would not only strengthen the legitimacy of the Congress in supporting democratic values, but also ensure that its strategies for supporting democracy in Belarus are informed, effective and rooted in the lived experiences of those most affected.

### **4. Modalities for a sustainable dialogue**

10. The Congress Rules and Procedures set out several categories of special partnership status allowing for participation in the statutory work of the Congress in forms other than that of a national delegation of a Council of Europe member State.

11. To be granted such status, the bodies and representatives concerned must meet certain requirements (set out in Rules 72-75). They must at very least:

- adhere to / aspire to uphold the values, principles and objectives of the Council of Europe;
- have expertise in the areas of local and/or regional authorities;
- commit themselves to promoting the values of the Congress and the Council of Europe;
- commit themselves to participating in Congress activities and events.

12. Requests for participation as a Special guest delegation (Rule 72) or Partner for Local Democracy (Rule 73), giving the most extensive participation rights, must be made by public authorities (national and/or local or regional, as appropriate). Requests for these types of status must be approved by the Congress itself, on the basis of a draft resolution prepared by the Bureau.

13. Requests for status as a Statutory Partner (Rule 77), Institutional Partner (Rule 78) or Observer Partner (Rule 79) must be made by organisations or associations operating at pan-European level or across several European countries. The status of Guest Observer (Rule 80) may be granted to associations representing local and/or regional authorities from territories without a national delegation

to the Congress (as is currently the case for the Association of Kosovo\* Municipalities, for example). All these categories of status may be granted by the Bureau.

14. Each of the above types of status gives the delegation, partner or observer concerned a different combination of rights to participate in the statutory activities of the Congress (sessions, statutory forum meetings and committee meetings). These may include the right to speak in different contexts (subject to the approval of the president or chair), to sign procedural documents in some cases, or to submit proposals with respect to the agenda or items on the agenda of committees.

15. At the same time, none of the above categories corresponds to the situation of the Belarusian democratic forces, which are neither authorities, nor a pan-European or multinational association, nor an association representing local and/or regional authorities.

16. Nevertheless, in view of the overall context described in earlier sections of this document, the Bureau could decide to invite representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces to participate on an ad hoc basis, and within clear parameters, in certain statutory activities of the Congress, with a view to strengthening dialogue with these forces and placing it on a stable footing.

17. In light of the above considerations, the following draft decision is submitted to the Bureau for its consideration.

#### **DRAFT DECISION**

#### **proposed to the Bureau for adoption at its 63rd meeting on 10 February 2025**

The Bureau decided as follows:

- i. to appoint a Congress rapporteur for a democratic Belarus who shall be entrusted with following the situation in this regard and keeping the Bureau informed of key developments, including in relation to the Belarusian democratic forces and civil society;
- ii. to invite the Co-ordination Council to appoint from among its members elected on 25-27 May 2024 three representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces to attend the sessions of the Congress and its Chambers to be held in 2025 and the committee meetings held during these sessions; three substitutes may also be appointed, each of whom may replace a representative should the need arise;
- iii. in making these appointments, the Co-ordination Council shall ensure fair representation of the political parties, groups or factions within the Co-ordination Council and shall include amongst the representatives and amongst the substitutes at least one member of the gender that is less well represented in the Co-ordination Council;
- iv. the Co-ordination Council shall transmit the list of persons appointed to the President of the Congress by the closing date for registration for the first session of the Congress following this Bureau decision;
- v. the representatives, or the substitutes duly replacing them, shall have the right to speak in the above-mentioned sessions, subject to the consent of the President of the Congress or of the relevant Chamber, and in the above-mentioned committee meetings, subject to the consent of the chairperson of the committee; they shall not have the right to vote;
- vi. the Co-ordination Council may appoint one secretary/advisor to assist the representatives and substitutes, who may accompany them to sessions and committee meetings, without the right to speak or vote;
- vii. the representatives of Belarusian democratic forces may participate in meetings of the political groups of the Congress at the discretion of the groups themselves and according to the conditions established by the groups;
- viii. travel and subsistence expenses arising from the participation of the representatives and, if applicable, their secretary/advisor, shall not be charged to the ordinary budget of the Congress;

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\* All references to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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| ix. | the Bureau shall take stock of the implementation of this decision in December 2025, or earlier should this be considered necessary, with a view, as appropriate, to its renewal or modification or to the termination of the above arrangements. |
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