

AS/Mig/Inf (2024) 01

11 January 2024

English only

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons

Helsinki Dialogue - A democratic future for Belarus

Remarks made by Mr Paul Galles (Luxembourg, EPP/CD), Rapporteur on “Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile”

**11-12 January 2024, *Pikkuparlamentti, Arkadiankatu 3, 00100
Helsinki, Finland***

One of the important consequences of the struggle for democracy after the rigged elections of 2020, albeit perhaps unexpected, has been the revival of Belarusian identity. I have tackled this aspect in my report devoted to the challenges facing the Belarusians in exile, which the Parliamentary Assembly adopted last June.

The political crisis born after the elections has led to a renaissance of the interest for Belarusian language and culture among Belarusians in exile, while at the same time, it has been repressed in Belarus itself. Thus, many artists and writers who joined the mass protests after the elections were detained on administrative charges or criminally prosecuted. The regime has censored and prohibited the publishing of specific books considered as extremists, such as those of Sviatlana Alexievich, Nobel Laureate for literature.

Today, effectively, the defence of the Belarusian language and culture is done from abroad, as it leads to prison in Belarus itself. Belarus is probably the only country in the world which denies its own national identity.

These are the aspects which I have underlined in my report:

- It is high time that Belarusian language and culture leave the shadows of Russia. Even its name is not properly transliterated into foreign languages, since there was no distinction made between «руський / рускі», which designates the people, languages, cultures and religion of the Eastern Slavs at the time of Rus', and «російський / расейські», which designates today the people, language, culture and Russian State. Thus, many countries still erroneously refer to Belarus as “Belorussia” or “White Russia” instead of Belarus/Belarusian which is the correct transliteration of Беларусь/ Беларускі in English. All names and terms should now be transliterated correctly from the Belarusian language.
- After having visited the Belarus Youth Club in Warsaw and the Francysk Skaryna Gymnasium in Vilnius, I strongly support the initiatives by civil society organisations to preserve and strengthen these among the members of long-lasting diaspora and the more recent arrivals. I encourage member States to facilitate the creation of publishing houses in Belarusian, while Belarusian literature and books in Belarusian have been practically erased in Belarus., the teaching of Belarusian language and culture in universities, the development of new tools supporting the dissemination of Belarusian language and culture among those in exile but also within Belarus. I believe that it is crucial for Belarusian statehood that its culture and language find again their rightful place.

- The Belarusian Council for Culture, a non-governmental organisation that unites cultural actors forming the sustainable infrastructure of the free Belarusian culture should be supported and the road map it is preparing for the European Commission on the preservation of Belarusian culture should be taken into consideration in the programming period of the European Commission for the next three years.
- Recognising that children can be adversely affected by the forced exile of their parents, I encourage their prompt integration in the host country while strengthening their national identity and culture while at the same time, I call for the creation of classes in Belarusian in schools where there are sufficient Belarusian children, open not only to members of the Belarusian national minority but also to those who have recently arrived.
- In the report, I also insist that culture should not be market-driven; it cannot be translated into figures on an Excel sheet. It is crucial that support is given to allow theatre troops to perform their plays, musicians to play, books to be published and read, so that art becomes the cement of Belarusian identity, and that Belarusian language and culture again find their place in the sun, as they are key to Belarusian statehood.

I am delighted to inform you that the report is now available in Belarusian language. I invite you to widely spread it beyond the usual circles.

I am pleased to inform you that the Luxembourg Parliament will host a conference to be held of 6 – 7 June, which aim will be to generate a discussion on the role national parliaments can play to support the recommendations made in my report, notably through the newly established international parliamentary Alliance for Democratic Belarus. I hope to see you there as well.

Recently, I was also happy to sign a petition calling for the introduction of the Belarusian language in Duolingo. I very much hope that it will bear its fruits. I would also like to propose that the Council of Europe itself introduces Belarusian classes for the increasing number of its staff working to support the Belarus democratic forces and civil society. The adoption in the coming weeks of a cooperation document for 2024-2025 could be the right momentum for such an endeavour.

Mark Chagall and Sviatlana Alexievich are perhaps the most famous cultural figures from Belarus. They both had to leave their country to pursue their art. This is not right. While being abroad undoubtedly broadens horizons, national identity should be nurtured at home.

Nurturing one's own identity and language does not mean being closed to others, it does not mean making tabula rasa of past influences. Growing strong roots, which allow to know where ones belongs, enables enrichment with others' cultures.

By supporting the efforts undertaken by the Belarus democratic forces and civil society, we enrich our own European identity.