

Artificial intelligence: Presidency issues conclusions on ensuring respect for fundamental rights



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Press release – The EU needs to comprehensively review its relations with Belarus



On Wednesday, the European Parliament adopted a set of recommendations on how the EU should reassess its relations with Belarus, by 602 votes in favour, 44 against and 44 abstentions. The assessment takes stock of developments both before and after the rigged presidential elections held in the country on 9 August this year, which resulted in a popular uprising against the current regime.

The text reiterates many aspects of the [European Parliament's latest resolution on Belarus](#), adopted on 17 September, and:

- supports the decision taken by the EU and its member states not to recognise the fraudulent election results as announced by the Belarusian Central Election Commission;
- underlines that Aliaksandr Lukashenka will not be the legitimate president of the country once his current term of office expires on 5 November;
- unequivocally supports the people of Belarus in their legitimate demands for new, free and fair elections, under international supervision;
- notes that Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who, according to independent sociological surveys, received more than half of the votes in the elections, is president-elect in the eyes of the Belarusian people;
- recognises the Coordination Council initiated by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as the legitimate representative of the people, demanding democratic change and freedom in Belarus;
- demands an immediate halt to the violence, cruel repression, torture and crackdown against peaceful protesters, and that all political prisoners and imprisoned civil society representatives and journalists are immediately and unconditionally released;
- calls on the EU to implement the sanctions agreed by the EU's foreign affairs ministers and the European Council as soon as possible, targeting a large group of people with asset freezes and travel bans, and widening the scope to include Aliaksandr Lukashenka;
- supports the initiative to set up a high-level mission to Belarus composed of former heads of state or government, whose task should be to

help stop the violence, assist in freeing political prisoners and promote political dialogue; and

- says the negotiations on the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities must be put on hold until free and fair elections can be organised.

The full set of recommendations, which in addition to the political situation in Belarus also address matters related to economic and sectoral cooperation, people-to-people contacts, nuclear energy and many other things, will be available in full [here](#). (21.10.2020)

Quote

“Belarus is in our immediate neighbourhood; its people share our European values and aspire to the same freedoms and citizens’ rights as EU citizens. They want to be decision makers in their own country. The European Union cannot be a passive observer. Active measures to prevent hybrid or direct Russian intervention in Belarus must be taken. I urge the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union to lead diplomatic efforts to prevent any interference and to support the Belarusian people’s democratic aspirations”, said rapporteur [Petras Auštrevičius](#) (Renew Europe, LT) after the vote.

More information

The original report was prepared by the [Foreign Affairs Committee](#). Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya also [addressed Members of the same committee](#) and the Subcommittee on Human Rights during their meeting on 21 September. You can watch the debate again [here](#).

Improved rail passenger rights: Council approves the informal deal



EU ambassadors today endorsed a reform of rail passenger rights which will **strengthen the rights of all passengers, and in particular those with disabilities or reduced mobility**. The updated provisions will reinforce the rules on re-routing and make it easier to transport bicycles on trains. They will also promote the use of through-tickets, which improves protection in the event of missed connections. The reform had been provisionally agreed by the Council presidency and the European Parliament on 1 October.

These new rules will mean clearer and stronger protection for those who want to travel in an environmentally friendly manner, even by bringing their bikes along. People with reduced mobility also want to, and have the same right to, travel by train, and this will be

made much easier. A modal shift to rail is vital for the EU's efforts to meet its climate targets and promote inclusive connectivity.

Christine Lambrecht, German Federal Minister for Justice and Consumer Protection

Rail companies will be encouraged to increase the offer of **through-tickets**. These are single tickets which are valid for successive legs in a journey, and they safeguard the rights to re-routing and compensation in the event of delays or missed connections. Through-tickets will be mandatory if connecting trains are run by a sole railway undertaking, for example when a journey involves a connection between a regional and a long-distance train.

Passengers must be clearly informed whether tickets bought in a single transaction constitute a through-ticket. The rail company will otherwise be liable as if those tickets were a through-ticket.

Passengers will enjoy **improved protection in an increased number of different rail services**, as a large number of exemptions allowed by the current regulation will be phased out.

Stronger rights for **people with disabilities or with reduced mobility** will apply in the future as the current exemption of regional trains from most of the provisions related to persons with disabilities or reduced mobility will be completely phased out by 2023. From that date on, in particular the right to receive assistance when boarding and disembarking from trains will apply to all regional and long-distance trains in the Union, provided trained staff are on duty. Other improvements include the right to buy a ticket on board if there is no accessible alternative to buy the ticket beforehand, improved provision of information, training of staff and clearer rules on compensation for lost or damaged mobility equipment. The advance notice to be given by persons with disabilities or reduced mobility who require assistance will be reduced from a maximum of 48 hours to 24 hours, and voluntary arrangements for shorter pre-notification periods will be encouraged. Until June 2026, member states may allow a maximum pre-notification time of 36 hours if shorter periods are not feasible.

To encourage green mobility, it will become much easier for passengers to take their **bikes on board**. Passengers will be informed of available capacity. The transport of bicycles may be denied if the rolling stock does not permit it. So that such situations arise less often, railway undertakings will be obliged to install spaces for bicycles. The general rule will be at least four spaces for bikes per train. After consulting the public, railway undertakings may determine a different number of spaces based on the type of service, the size of the train and the foreseeable demand for the transport of bicycles. Member states may also set this number higher if there is more demand for carrying bikes. The bike place requirements will apply when a railway undertaking orders new rolling stock or when it performs a major upgrade of older rolling stock. These requirements will be applicable four years after the entry into force of the regulation.

The new rules will clarify and expand protection in cases where passengers need **re-routing** to their final destination. The rail operator will have to try to re-route the passenger in all circumstances, including cases requiring alternative modes of transport. If the operator has not managed to communicate the available options to the passenger within 100 minutes, the passenger may take alternative public land transport on his own initiative and the train company must reimburse the necessary cost.

The minimum **compensation for delays** will remain unchanged (25% of the ticket price for a delay of 60 to 119 minutes, and 50% of the ticket price for a delay of 120 minutes or more).

A **force majeure** clause addressing compensation for delayed rail services will bring legal clarity and create a more level playing field in relation to other modes of transport, for which such clauses already exist. Rail companies will not need to pay compensation for delays or cancellations in circumstances they could not have avoided, such as extreme weather conditions, major natural disasters or major public health crises, including pandemics. Rail staff strikes will not be covered by this exemption. In addition, re-routing obligations will apply even in the event of a force majeure.

As the regulation lays down a **minimum level of protection**, railway undertakings are free and encouraged to introduce more stringent rules to protect passengers' rights.

The revised regulation will enter into force twenty days after it is published in the EU Official Journal. It will be applicable **two years** later.

Procedure

The Commission presented the proposal in September 2017.

Today's endorsement of the provisional agreement took place in the Council's Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper). The European Parliament's transport committee is expected to vote on the provisional agreement shortly. The agreed text will then undergo legal-linguistic revision, and a formal vote in both Council and the Parliament ('early second reading') will follow at a later date.

Article – Deal on EU-UK relations must not compromise EU values



Reporting to Parliament on the outcome of the 15-16 October summit, European Council President Charles Michel said that the EU welcomes a close relationship with the UK, but not in a scenario where the UK wants access to the single market and at the same time diverges from EU standards and regulations. "You can't have your cake and eat it," he said.

Chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier said that the EU will continue pursuing a deal that is mutually beneficial. "The European Union's attitude to these negotiations has in no way shifted and will not shift, not up until the very last day and not even then. We will remain calm, constructive and respectful, but we will also remain firm and determined when it comes to defending the principles and the interests of each of the EU member states and the EU itself."

Withdrawal agreement must be fully respected

MEPs stressed the importance of reaching an agreement without compromising the EU's interests and values. [Iratxe García Pérez](#) (S&D, Spain) said that an agreement should not be reached at all costs: "Mr Barnier, you have the support of the S&D family in your final efforts to achieve the best possible relations with the UK. However, let's not do it at the cost of sacrificing, for example, the internal market. We shouldn't accept distorted state aid or social and environmental dumping."

[Ska Keller](#) (Greens/EFA) agreed. Despite there being little time to reach an agreement because the UK government has decided to not ask for an extension to the Brexit transition period, "we cannot accept a deal that would endanger the single market, social rights or environmental standards", she said.

[Dacian Cioloș](#) (Renew Europe, Romania) said the future of EU-UK relations has reached a "critical point" and called on the UK to stop using "delaying tactics". The EU wants and needs a strong partnership with the UK, but for that to happen, the UK must be "a serious partner", he said. "We will not ratify any trade deal as long as the withdrawal agreement is not fully respected, especially the protocol on Northern Ireland."

[Derk Jan Eppink](#) (ECR, Netherlands) focused on the situation of the fishing industry in case of a no-deal Brexit. "When it comes to fisheries I think that the positions of the two sides is particularly distant." If there is no agreement, bilateral negotiations must be possible, especially for small countries with a significant fishing sector, he said.

[Nicolas Bay](#) (ID, France) was of the view that a no-deal Brexit would be much worse for the EU than for the UK. "Brussels' position has always been to punish the British people" for their decision to leave, he said.

Covid-19 recovery plan

MEPs also discussed other issues tackled by EU leaders during the 15-16 October summit, including the pandemic and [long-term budget](#).

"The developments of recent days have shown that the corona crisis is not a short-term crisis," said [Siegfried Mureșan](#) (EPP, Romania), reiterating his group's commitment to a quick approval of the EU long-term budget and recovery fund to ensure they can be in place on 1 January 2021.

The severity of the Covid-19 crisis makes a more ambitious EU budget necessary to protect public health, society and the economy, [Dimitris Papadimoulis](#) (GUE/NGL, Greece) said. "Stop bullying the European Parliament by accusing us, through fake news, of being the ones blocking an agreement. In order to have an agreement, the Council has to move towards Parliament's position."

Just transition towards climate neutrality – Council agrees its position on new public sector loan facility



Just Transition Mechanism

The EU institutions are working to address the social and economic consequences of the transition process towards the EU's 2030 climate targets and the objective of EU climate neutrality by 2050.

Member states' EU ambassadors today agreed the Council's position on a new public sector loan facility to be created under the Just Transition Mechanism to support public sector investment in the regions that are most affected in the transition towards a climate neutral economy due to their carbon-intensive economies and lesser capacity to deal with the challenges of the transition.

The new public sector loan facility will provide €1.5 billion in grants from the EU budget to allow finance partners to support projects addressing the challenges of the transition process. As finance partner, the European Investment Bank is expected to provide €10 billion in loans, which are expected to mobilise up to €25-30 billion in investments to help the most affected regions identified in member states' just transition plans.

In its position, the Council suggests some limited changes to the Commission's proposal presented in May. Most notably, the Council specifies that the facility should not support activities excluded from the scope of support under the Just Transition Fund. This includes investments related to nuclear power stations, tobacco products and fossil fuels, according to the Council's position on this fund. In addition, the Council's position includes the possibility for projects receiving support under the facility to also receive advisory and technical support from other EU programmes.

The Council's position agreed today will guide the presidency in negotiations with the European Parliament.