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High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Mr Olivér Várhelyi
Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement
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Letter to HR/VP J. Borrell and the Commissioner O. Várhelyi on the COVID-19 situation in Belarus

Brussels, 29 April 2020

Dear Vice-President,
Dear Commissioner,

We are writing to express our concern at the situation in Belarus where the highest authorities continue to deny the gravity of Covid-19 crisis in the country.

Already in March 2020, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko have called coronavirus a "psychosis" that can be fought with vodka, saunas and driving tractors. In April, he claimed that "nobody will die of coronavirus in his country". Unfortunately, this proved untrue. He continues to blame the citizens for other diseases that aggravate Covid-19 infections.

According to the latest figures, there are 7 281 confirmed cases of COVID-19[1] and 58 deaths. Nevertheless, the real numbers might be much higher. Officials started providing regular updates and data disaggregated by region only on April 8.

People of Belarus apparently do not trust the state and public authorities and have been preparing themselves for the epidemic. In the absence of effective official response, the Belarusian civil society and businesses have organised themselves in a way to effectively help the medical personnel and those in need, while most people have voluntarily chosen self-isolation.

[1] https://eap-csf.eu/

There are unofficial reports from all over the country that increasing numbers of people are sick or in intensive care. However, the state authorities continue to underscore the problem and do not provide reliable information, neither to the public nor to the EU and neighbouring countries. The medical doctors and staff say they are living in parallel reality – meanwhile they are waging the war, the state structure and authorities are not supporting them. The government issued only non-mandatory recommendations and have adopted almost no measures to mitigate the epidemic. In doing so, it would admit that the President Lukashenko had been wrong when playing down the problem.

The EU has provided so far 60 million EUR to Belarus to support immediate and short-term needs. The Commission suggests that these funds go directly to hospitals in the framework of cross-border cooperation with Poland and Ukraine. However, there is little certainty that the funds are allocated where they should go most urgently.

Furthermore, in April 2020, cases of COVID-19 were confirmed among workers building the Ostrovest Nuclear Power Plant, with some sources estimating that there are more than 100 confirmed cases. The EU should express concerns about the official Belarusian plan to make the NPP operational in the near future.

Should the situation in Belarus regarding COVID-19 not be properly reported, assessed and dealt with by national authorities in cooperation with the citizens, civil society and business initiatives, it can be a danger for its neighbours and beyond.

We, undersigned MEPs, call on the HR/VP and the Commission to:

1) Put pressure on Belarusian state authorities to provide reliable data to the population and to the international partners including the EU on the real COVID-19 situation in the country;

2) Provide targeted and flexible support to civil society, civic initiatives and businesses in Belarus who are taking effective actions to limit the spread of the virus;

3) Make sure that the EU financial support gets to the most needed places, e.g. regional hospitals;

4) Ensure effective oversight of the EU funding provided to Belarusian authorities to mitigate the crisis and include the nuclear safety funding condition related to the Ostravets nuclear power plant;

5) Put pressure on Belarusian authorities to introduce amendments to the current legislation regulating donations and crowd-funding from individuals so that it can be used without a worry over repercussions by the hospitals and medical staff, as there were already calls from prosecutors' office about the donations, and lift the income tax imposed on such donations;

6) Put pressure on Belarusian authorities to stop imposing fines and property executions on people who participated in the protest for the independence at the end of last year, as people are losing jobs and have no incomes;

6) Put pressure on Belarusian authorities to implement the recommendations of the recent WHO mission;

7) Put pressure on Belarusian authorities to declare the emergency situation so that mechanism protecting and supporting citizens and businesses under this crisis situation can be launched.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

Members of European Parliament
(Names on the next page)

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