



Brussels, 15 February 2016

FACT SHEET

EU-Belarus relations

The EU remains committed to a policy of critical engagement towards Belarus and highlights the importance it attaches to relations with the country and its people.

The situation of human rights in Belarus remains a concern to the EU, which recalls that EU-Belarus relations should be based on common values, especially respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The EU acknowledges that over the last two years Belarus has taken a number of steps which have contributed to improving EU-Belarus relations. These steps include the start of negotiations on a Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement and on a Mobility Partnership, the resumption of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, the signature of a Cooperation Arrangement on an Early Warning Mechanism in the energy sector, and the proactive participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership. Belarus has also played a constructive role in the region.

The release of all remaining political prisoners in August 2015 was a long sought step that the EU had consistently asked for and the 11 October 2015 presidential elections were held in an environment free from violence.

The Council recognises that there is an opportunity for EU-Belarus relations to develop on a more positive agenda and that progress in a variety of fields can be better achieved through enhanced channels of communication.

In this context, the Council decided that the EU will not extend the restrictive measures for 170 individuals and three companies whose listings were suspended until the end of February 2016. The Council further decided that the arms embargo and the restrictive measures related to the four individuals listed in connection with the unresolved

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disappearances of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist would be extended for a period of twelve months.

The EU recalls the importance it attaches to improvements to respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law in Belarus. In view of the 2016 Belarusian parliamentary elections the EU urges the Belarusian authorities to swiftly take forward the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR's final report on the conduct of the 11 October 2015 presidential elections. In this context it is also important to reinstate the civil and political rights of former political prisoners and to ensure that administrative obstacles do not hamper the registration of new political parties of all political currents and of civil society organisations.

The EU also urges Belarus to set up a moratorium on the death penalty in view of its total abolition and looks forward to forthcoming expert and public events on the death penalty planned to take place in 2016. The EU also looks forward to the next round of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue which Belarus has offered to host in late spring.

The EU is ready to assist Belarus in meeting its obligations towards democratisation and full respect for human rights.

Support for civil society has been and will remain an essential part of the EU's policy towards Belarus. Regular meetings are held to coordinate the work of international donors. The EU will also remain engaged with the opposition and the public at large.

The promotion of people-to-people contacts will be encouraged through programmes such as Erasmus+ and the ongoing MOST project for professional and cultural exchanges. At the same time the EU looks forward to the swift conclusion of the negotiations and signature of the Visa Facilitation Agreement, the Readmission Agreement and the Mobility Partnership.

The EU is also stepping up the implementation of a number of measures which will enhance EU-Belarus relations in a number of economic, trade and assistance related fields. The goal is to modernise Belarus and its economy for the benefit of the Belarusian people. Tangible steps taken by Belarus to respect universal freedoms, rule of law and human rights will remain key for the shaping of the EU's future policy towards Belarus.

Background

A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Belarus was signed on 6 March 1995, but the ratification by EU member states remains suspended since 1997.

