Belarus and the EU

Summary

There has been progress in EU-Belarus relations over the past several years, since the EU lifted most of the restrictive measures against Belarus in February 2016. Belarus is actively participating in the multilateral format of the Eastern Partnership initiative. The EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities are under negotiation and, once concluded, will strengthen the bilateral relationship and set the strategic framework for cooperation in the coming years. Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements were signed on 8 January 2020 and are expected to come into force in 2020. The EU is the largest donor in Belarus. Following the positive developments in 2016, the EU more than doubled its financial assistance to a total amount of around €30 million annually for the following years. More than €170 million have been allocated from the European Neighbourhood Instrument to Belarus in the period 2014-2020.

Political relations

The EU's relations with Belarus are guided by the Council Conclusions of 15 February 2016. The EU is open to the further development of EU-Belarus relations, and to taking further steps to enhance political relations and sectoral cooperation in the appropriate context. Tangible steps taken by Belarus to respect universal freedoms, the rule of law, and human rights, remain fundamental criteria for shaping the EU's future policy towards Belarus.

The release of the remaining political prisoners from Belarusian jails on 22 August 2015 was a positive turning-point and led the EU to the decision to lift most of the restrictive measures in February 2016, also activating a key package of economic and other cooperation-related measures. The package included cooperation with international financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), enhanced preparations for World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession, and the removal of textile quotas for exports.

The remaining restrictive measures (an embargo on arms and equipment that could be used for internal repression; an asset freeze; and a travel ban against four people listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist in 1999 and in 2000) are currently in place until 28 February 2021. All decisions regarding EU restrictive measures require unanimity among the 28 EU
The European Union takes the situation regarding human rights and democracy in Belarus very seriously, especially when it comes to the freedom of assembly and association, fundamental labour standards, and freedom of speech and the media. Belarus is the only country in Europe where the death penalty is still in use. The European Union has an unequivocal stance regarding the death penalty, which violates the right to life and is a cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. The remaining death sentences should be commuted and a moratorium introduced as a first step towards its abolition. The EU stands ready to support implementation of Belarus' 'National Action Plan on Human Rights for 2016-2019', underpinning the process of domestic reforms and the legislative amendments, and the preparation of a new plan following the 3rd Universal Periodic Review in 2020.

The EU repeatedly raises human rights issues, including the death penalty, with the Belarusian authorities at all levels. The EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue resumed in July 2015 and takes place annually with the most recent dialogue held in June 2019. Civil society representatives participate in these meetings.

Belarus has been participating actively in the multilateral formats of the Eastern Partnership. In 2019 Belarus hosted a number of technical level meetings on spectrum coordination, benchmarking of telecom markets, development of broadband strategies as well as a panel on migration and integrated border management. In 2018, the 10th round of informal ministerial dialogues took place in Minsk. Negotiations on the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities (PPs) started in 2016 and are close to completion. This document, once concluded, will be an important and unprecedented building-block in EU's relations with Belarus and will set the strategic framework and enhance cooperation in all areas, including human rights, nuclear safety, good governance and rule of law.

The EU-Belarus Coordination Group was established in 2016 to provide a forum for policy dialogue at the level of senior officials. The Coordination Group steers cooperation between the EU and Belarus and oversees the further development of relations. The latest Coordination Group meeting took place on 17-18 December 2019. During each meeting, in keeping with the European Union's policy of cooperation and involvement of civil society, the EU encourages Belarusian authorities to consult widely with all stakeholders.

Financial Cooperation

The EU is the largest donor in Belarus. The EU assistance to Belarus under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) was programmed between €129 and €158 million over seven years (2014-2020). Following the positive developments in 2016, the EU more than doubled its financial assistance to a total amount of around €30 million annually for the following years. In the period 2014-2018, more than €110 million were allocated from the European Neighbourhood Instrument.

For more information on financial cooperation, please see here: Belarus Page of DG NEAR (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations)
Mobility and contacts between the European Union and Belarusian citizens

The EU is committed to strengthening the engagement with the Belarusian people and civil society and in the last years support to Belarus in education, mobility, youth and the facilitation of people-to-people contacts has been growing.

The EU-Belarus Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements were signed on 8 January 2020, paving the way for improved mobility of citizens, contributing to closer links between the EU and its Eastern Partnership neighbours. The agreements will be now submitted to the European Parliament for consent. The Council will then be able to formally conclude the ratification of both agreements, after having received the Commission assessment of the security and integrity of Belarus’ diplomatic biometric passport. Both agreements will enter into force on the first day of the second month following ratification.

The visa facilitation agreement, once it enters into force, will make it easier for Belarusian citizens to acquire short-term visas to come to the European Union as the visa fee will be reduced to €35, the service fee will be limited and the deadline for consulates to take a decision on a visa application will be shortened. Several categories of travellers, including journalists, students and members of official delegations, will be able to receive multiple-entry visas with increasingly longer validity, while having to submit less supporting documents to prove their purpose of travel. The readmission agreement will establish, on the basis of reciprocity, procedures for the safe and orderly return of persons who reside irregularly in the EU or Belarus, in full respect of their rights under international law. Belarus has unilaterally introduced measures to facilitate short-term visa-free travel for EU citizens arriving in Minsk.

The EU support combines different tools, such as Erasmus+ (Tempus), research and cooperation programme (currently Horizon 2020), EU4youth, Vocational Education and Training Programme, European School for Eastern Partnership in Georgia, Scholarship Scheme for young Belarusians. Since 2014 a dedicated mobility programme "MOST" was launched to promote mobility of Belarusian professionals, who wish to establish contacts in the EU countries.

EU's support to civil society remains strong, as it is a cornerstone of a well-functioning and prosperous society. On 11 September 2018 EU and 17 Minsk based EU Member states adopted "EU Roadmap for engagement with civil society" for the period of 2018-2020. The document has been warmly welcomed by the civil society organisations, notably because it allows them to plan their activities further, according to the priorities declared for the coming years.

Trade relations

The European Union is Belarus' second trade partner with almost a one third share in the country's overall trade. EU-Belarus bilateral trade in goods has been growing steadily over the past years. Belarus' exports to the EU are dominated by mineral fuels, while the EU exports mainly machinery, transport equipment and chemicals to Belarus.
The EU and Belarus have established a formal **Dialogue on Trade**, which gathers twice a year in order to exchange on a regular basis, including on domestic regulations and other trade concerns. This dialogue also offers a platform to reflect on relevant opportunities to improve mutual trade. The EU supports Belarus’ **WTO accession process** which would contribute to the creation of a more predictable and stable business environment in the country, which is a necessary condition to attract investors and diversify the Belarusian economy. The European Union is providing technical assistance to help with this process through the **TAIEX** twinning instrument.

In recent years, the lending mandate of the **European Investment Bank (EIB)** has been extended to include Belarus, while the financing activities of the **European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)** have also been extended.

The **EU-Belarus Customs Dialogue**, initiated in 2016, continues on an annual basis and is aimed at identifying possible cooperation and assistance activities with a view to facilitating trade, ensuring supply chain security and safety, and combating fraud. In December 2019, the **EU Council authorised** the Commission to open negotiations on a **Customs Cooperation and Mutual Administrative Assistance Agreement** with Belarus. Such an agreement will aim to improve the application of customs legislation, reducing customs fraud, especially tobacco smuggling, and is expected to contribute to higher levels of customs and tax revenues in the EU.

**Boosting sustainable development and green growth**

Sectoral dialogues on economic and financial issues as well as environment and climate action take place on an annual basis. The EU is stepping up the implementation of a number of measures that will enhance EU-Belarus relations in several fields related to the **economy, trade, and energy**. The **Strengthening Private Initiative Growth in Belarus (SPRING) Programme** backs private local economic initiatives in order to develop the private sector, increase job creation, and promote economic growth in Belarus. EU support also includes a large-scale business consultancy programme implemented by the EBRD and a project supporting the development of employment-generating strategies and eco-systems to support SMEs and entrepreneurship at the local level, implemented by the UNDP.

Other EU initiatives such as the **Covenant of Mayors East - Phase II** and **Mayors for Economic Growth** projects offer grant support to local authorities most active in adopting pilot measures in energy efficiency and job creation, reinforcing the roles of local authorities in economic development.

On 19 June 2017, Belarus joined the **Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership (E5P)**. This Trust Fund, managed by the EBRD, supports loans for municipal sector projects across the Eastern Partnership countries on energy efficiency and the environment.

Belarus is one of the strongest-performing Eastern Partnership countries in the **Horizon 2020** programme for research and innovation. In the **2018-2020 Work Programme for Horizon 2020**, almost €200 million have been allocated to a series of calls focusing on energy and resource efficiency in the process industry ("**SPIRE**") with a particular geographical focus on the Eastern Partnership countries.
The EU has been supporting the Belarusian nuclear regulatory authority with technical assistance since 2011 under the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation (INSC) with more than €8 million allocated so far. This cooperation is important for the nuclear power plant under construction in Ostrovets (Astraviec) in Belarus.

The respect of the highest **nuclear safety standards** is a key priority for the EU, especially since new facilities are being constructed so close to EU borders, and the EU expects Belarus to cooperate constructively with the relevant international authorities.

**See also**

EU-Belarus factsheet  
DG TRADE website  
Exporting from the EU - what you need to know  
Export Helpdesk  
Country Updates on Human Rights and Democracy 2018  
EU-Belarus Cooperation  
www.eeas.europa.eu

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