EU-Belarus Coordination Group met for the fifth time

The European Union-Belarus Coordination Group, which meets twice a year to take stock of the full scope of EU-Belarus relations and to agree on the next steps, convened in Minsk on 26-27 April 2018 for the fifth time.

The European Union reconfirmed its commitment to a stable, democratic and prosperous future for Belarus, for the benefit of its people, and will continue its work with all stakeholders in achieving this important objective.

As in previous meetings of the Coordination Group, a specific session was dedicated to human rights and political freedoms. The EU side reiterated the need for Belarus to undertake comprehensive reform of its electoral legislation, in line with the ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations, and raised the worrying situation regarding the freedom of assembly and the media. The EU reiterated its opposition to the death penalty under any circumstances and stressed the benefits of Belarus introducing a moratorium as a first step to its abolition. In addition, the EU also raised several concrete human rights cases that are particularly pressing for the EU and its Member States.

A wide range of sectoral cooperation issues was discussed, including mobility, people-to-people contacts, trade, energy, customs, environment, climate, research and innovation, education, sanitary and phyto-sanitary standards, digital economy, private sector development and social security. The participants also discussed issues related to energy security and energy efficiency. The EU reiterated the need for full transparency and cooperation on nuclear safety issues, in particular on the new nuclear power plant under construction in Ostrovets.

The EU and Belarus are currently in advanced negotiations on new, tailor-made EU-Belarus
Partnership Priorities, which will give impetus and direction to the relationship for the coming years. The EU presented its on-going EU assistance programmes and how this toolbox of assistance may be expanded once the Partnership Priorities have been agreed.

In the context of further promotion of people-to-people contacts, youth and business exchanges, the EU highlighted the importance of swift completion of negotiations on both Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements.

This meeting was also an opportunity to discuss the way to advance cooperation in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework.

There was an overall good exchange of views with civil society representatives, in particular in the areas of education, research, energy efficiency, social and labour rights and the EaP framework.

In the margins of the Coordination Group meeting, the EU delegation was received by the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration M. Ryzhenkov and the Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Makei. These meetings focused on human rights and democracy, cooperation in the framework of the EaP, as well as other important issues of mutual interest.

In parallel to the meeting of the Coordination Group, the EU-Belarus Dialogue on Economic and Financial Issues was relaunched. The EU and Belarusian authorities exchanged views on the macroeconomic situation in Belarus, fiscal policies, the financial sector and the need for structural reforms.

In line with its policy of engaging all stakeholders, the EU delegation also met with the leaders of opposition movements and civil society representatives.

The EU delegation was led by Thomas Mayr-Harting, Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia of the European External Action Service (EEAS), and included representatives of the EEAS and the Directorates-General of the European Commission responsible for European Neighbourhood Policy, energy, finance, and customs. The Belarusian side was led by Oleg Kravchenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and included representatives of other relevant ministries. As on previous occasions, experts and non-governmental organisation representatives from Belarus also participated in parts of the meeting.

It was agreed to hold the next meeting of the Coordination Group before the end of the year in Brussels.

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