EU-Belarus Coordination Group meets in Brussels

The 8th meeting of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group took place in Brussels on 17-18 December 2019. In an open and constructive dialogue, the delegations discussed the state of play in EU-Belarus relations and the way forward.

In line with the Council Conclusions of 15 February 2016 and the policy of critical engagement, the European Union delegation confirmed its openness to the further development of EU-Belarus relations to the benefit of Belarusian citizens and in view of strengthening the resilience of Belarusian society, supporting the sovereignty and independence of Belarus.

The delegations discussed the state of play in negotiations of the EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities, and agreed on the importance of this document for defining the political priorities for the next phase of engagement between the EU and Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities expressed their commitment to nuclear safety and emphasised the voluntary nature of their cooperation with the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG). The EU highlighted the importance of continued close cooperation with ENSREG in the next steps of the process.

The EU and Belarus discussed developments in the field of human rights and democracy since the last meeting of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue in June 2019. The EU raised a number of concerns related to fundamental freedoms, notably the freedom of media, expression and assembly. Furthermore, the EU reiterated its opposition to the death penalty under any circumstances and advocated the introduction by Belarus of a moratorium as a first step to its abolition.

Assessing the recent parliamentary elections, the EU referred to the EEAS spokesperson's statement, concluding that it was a “lost opportunity” to conduct elections in line with international standards. In view of the presidential elections of 2020, the EU called on the Belarusian authorities to resume work on comprehensive electoral reform without delay, in line with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and Venice Commission recommendations.
The EU welcomed Belarus’ active participation in regional cooperation through the Eastern Partnership and the Northern Dimension. The delegations discussed the state of play in the implementation of the 20 deliverables for 2020, as well as the preparations for the Eastern Partnership summit in 2020, in light of structured consultations on the future of the Eastern Partnership post-2020 to which Belarus had actively contributed.

During the Coordination Group meeting, EU assistance to Belarus was discussed in depth. The delegations took stock of the cooperation and the existing challenges, including registration of projects, and reflected on the way forward to ensure that joint actions continue to deliver tangible results for citizens. Looking ahead, the EU presented the state of play and next steps in preparation for the post-2020 multi-annual programming of financial assistance. The EU underlined that it would take account of the priorities of the new European Commission when designing the assistance programmes.

Both the EU and Belarus expressed satisfaction with the continued sectoral dialogues on customs, economic and financial affairs, trade as well as environment and climate action. The Commission informed that on 19 December the EU Council will decide on authorising the Commission to open negotiations for 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.

Cooperation in other sectors, including digital economy, private sector development, transport, agriculture, education and youth, labour, employment, social protection, research and innovation was discussed. For the first time, the participants also discussed cooperation in the area of civil protection.

In the context of further promotion of people-to-people contacts, the EU and Belarus discussed the state of play on the Visa Facilitation and Readmission agreements. The participants welcomed the respective decisions taken by the President of Belarus and the Council of the EU on authorising the signature of both Agreements. The EU proposed to sign both agreements in Brussels in January 2020.

They discussed the details of the final procedural steps necessary for the Agreements to be concluded and enter into force. After signing the Agreements, the texts will have to be approved respectively by the European Parliament and Belarus’ National Assembly.

The EU recalled that on 2 February 2020 the revised EU Visa Code will become applicable, which, among other changes, will increase the visa fee worldwide, including in Belarus. However, the EU also pointed out that such an increase would be temporary only until the Visa Facilitation Agreement enters into force. The visa fee would then automatically decrease from €80 to €35 for all Belarusian citizens. In addition, it foresees for an enlarged number of categories of travellers the possibility to apply for a Schengen visa free of charge, as well as to receive multiple-entry visas with increasingly longer validity periods (up to 5 years).

The EU delegation was led by Luc Devigne, Deputy Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia of the European External Action Service. The European Commission was represented by Lawrence Meredith, Director for Neighbourhood East and Institution Building, as well as representatives from many sectoral Commission Directorates. The Belarusian delegation was led by Oleg Kravchenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and included representatives of sector ministries and agencies. As on previous occasions, experts and representatives of Belarusian non-governmental organisations also participated in parts of the meeting and exchanged their views with the delegations.
It was agreed to hold the next meeting of the Coordination Group in the first half of 2020 in Minsk.

Press contacts

Press Contacts:

Peter STANO

Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
+32 (0)460 75 45 53
Adam KAZNOWSKI

Adam KAZNOWSKI

Press Officer for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
+32 (0) 2 29 89359
+32 (0)460 768 088
www.eeas.europa.eu

Source URL: