



EU-Belarus RELATIONS



In recent years, relations between the European Union and Belarus have gone through a number of stages. The Belarusian authorities' December 2010 post-election crackdown and their imprisonment of opposition leaders led to a number of restrictive measures being applied by the European Union, as well as a wider **policy of critical engagement**.

Over the past two years, however, there has been **progress in EU-Belarus relations**. Belarus has been participating more pro-actively in the Eastern Partnership, in particular in the multilateral formats, negotiations on a [Mobility Partnership](#) were concluded and [negotiations on a Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements](#) are underway. Tangible steps taken by Belarus to respect universal freedoms, the rule of law, and human rights, including fundamental labour rights, will remain fundamental criteria for the shaping of the EU's future policy towards Belarus, as stated in the [Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions of 15 February 2016](#).

On the initiative of Belarus, the annual [EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue resumed in July 2015](#). The most recent Dialogue was [held in July 2017](#). On 22 August 2015, the remaining political prisoners were released from Belarusian jails. [The EU welcomed this long-sought step](#), which represents an important milestone in relations between the EU and Belarus. The [EU lifted most of the restrictive measures in February 2016](#), also activating a key package of economic and other cooperation-related measures. The package includes 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 (the arms embargo and the restrictive measures against the four individuals listed in connection with unresolved disappearances) are currently [in place until 28 February 2018](#). All decisions regarding EU restrictive measures require unanimity among the 28 EU Member States.

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. Four executions were carried out in 2016 and one in 2017 (situation as of 6 November 2017). Four people are currently on death row in Belarus and [the last two death sentences were handed down on 21 July 2017](#). 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 EU repeatedly raises human rights issues, including the death penalty, with the Belarusian authorities at all levels. The remaining death sentences should be commuted and a moratorium introduced as a first step towards its abolition.

The **EU-Belarus Coordination Group** was established in 2016 to provide a forum for a 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 first meeting took place in April 2016 in Brussels. Since then, there have been another two meetings, held in Minsk (16-17 November 2016 and [3-4 April 2017](#)). 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. Special attention is also given to the promotion of fundamental rights and freedoms, in particular the abolition of the death penalty, the fight against torture and ill-treatment, and the freedom of expression and assembly. The Belarus 'National Action Plan on Human Rights', adopted in October 2016, underpins the process of domestic reforms and the legislative amendments. The EU stands ready to support this process.

Technical and financial support

The European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) is currently the key EU financial instrument for the period 2014-2017. From 2014-2017, the EU's assistance package to Belarus under the European Neighbourhood Instrument amounted to €91.5 million. This followed a [decision](#) taken in September 2016 to reinforce the amount initially allocated.

EU assistance to Belarus takes mainly the form of country Action Programmes funded every year under the ENI. The three priority sectors under the [Multiannual Indicative Programme 2014-2017](#) were social inclusion, the environment, and local/regional economic development.

The operational guidelines for the EU's bilateral cooperation with Belarus for the period 2017-2020 will be set out in the Single Support Framework under the Partnership Priorities that are being finalised as the policy framework for cooperation. The Single Support Framework will focus on economic development and market opportunities, strengthening institutions and good governance, connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change, mobility, and people-to-people contacts.

Increasing mobility and contacts between the European Union and Belarusian citizens

Belarus participates in the European Union's flagship mobility programme, [Erasmus+](#). From 2015-2017, 1,000 students and academic staff members from Belarus have benefited from studying or teaching in the EU, and 420 have studied or taught in Belarus. Twelve [Erasmus Mundus scholarships](#) have been awarded to Masters students from Belarus. Thirteen capacity-building projects support the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education institutions in Belarus. Six Jean Monnet projects promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies. Belarusian youth organisations and almost 2,300 young people from Belarus have been actively involved in the Erasmus+ youth exchange and volunteering programme.

Erasmus+ The EU programme for education, training, youth and sport

providing a range of opportunities for youth in Belarus



Scholarships to study in Europe



Student exchanges



Youth exchanges



European Voluntary Service



Mobility for youth workers



Youth involvement in reform dialogue



Belarus obtained **€2.4 million** for student and staff exchanges under the 2015-16 selection of Erasmus+, with **114 projects** chosen for funding involving universities from Belarus



As a result, **566 students and staff** from Belarus will go for exchanges to EU universities



65 master's students from Belarus have received full Erasmus scholarships for Joint Masters Degrees since 2004



Brain gain: 90% of Erasmus exchange students return home after their degree



Career boost: 96% of Erasmus exchange students believe their Erasmus experience was important in helping them to find a job (**55%** 'very important')



Mobility is also made possible through the [ongoing MOST](#) (Mobility Scheme for Targeted People-to-People-Contacts) project offering short-term mobility and cultural exchanges for professionals.

[The EU4Youth programme](#) will benefit young Belarusians through its support to skills development, creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as capacity building for youth organisations. The goal is to empower young people and enhance their participation in decision-making.

Support for civil society remains 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.

Trade relations

The European Union is Belarus' second main [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.

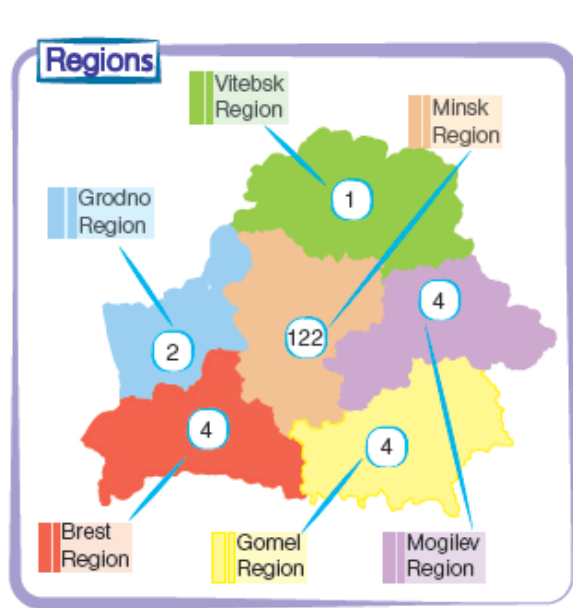
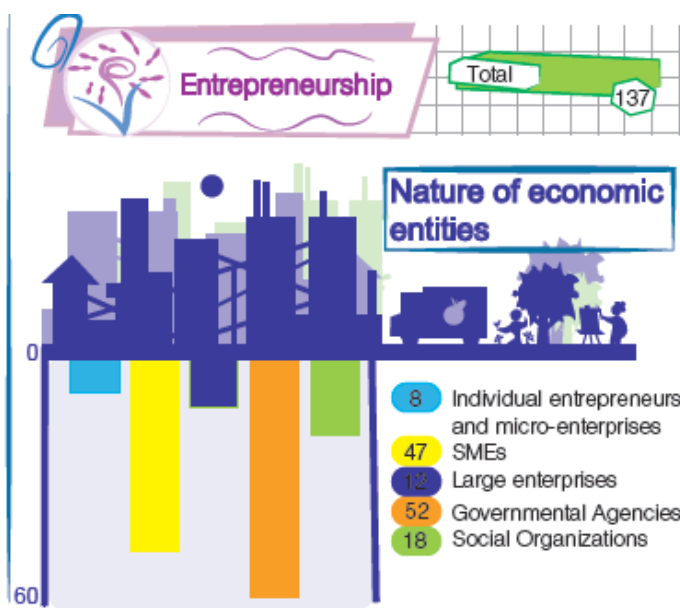
In the past two years, the EU and Belarus have established a formal **Dialogue on Trade**, which gathers twice a year in order to exchange on a regular basis, including on domestic regulations and other trade concerns. This dialogue also offers a platform to reflect on relevant opportunities to improve mutual trade, for example the abolition in 2017 of textiles quotas. The EU considers that the **WTO accession process** should be at the top of the agenda. Belarus' accession to the WTO 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** was initiated in 2016 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. Another important goal is to ensure the smooth flow of goods in border crossing points, including the convergence of customs and border procedures.

Boosting sustainable development and green growth

The EU is also stepping up the implementation of a number of measures that will enhance EU-Belarus relations in several fields related to the **economy, trade, and assistance**. 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 September 2017, the conference “From innovative ideas to successful businesses: promoting national systems of early stage financing of innovative companies in EaP countries” was

held in Minsk. 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.

In this context, 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. It is important for the European Union that nuclear safety is ensured beyond its own borders and Belarus should cooperate constructively with the relevant international authorities. This cooperation is of particular importance for the nuclear power plant under construction in Ostrovets (Belarus). The EU has already been engaged in capacity-building assisting to Belarus’ nuclear safety authority, through the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation and in close cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.