Fundamentals of the relationship

Bilateral relations between the EU and the Republic of Belarus developed gradually since early 1990s. Negotiations on a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the two partners were completed in 1995 but the agreement was not ratified. The development of EU-Belarus relations is subject to progress in the areas of democracy, respect of human rights, and the rule of law in Belarus. As the other partner countries, Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership initiative in May 2009. However, it participates mostly in the multilateral track of the initiative, with the only exception on bilateral track being the Visa-Facilitation and Readmission Agreement negotiations. The EU is the second largest trade partner of Belarus with 26.2 % share in the country’s overall trade.

Projects and Programmes

EU-funded assistance and cooperation with Belarus involves approximately €30 million on projects annually. EU's assistance to Belarus focuses directly and indirectly on supporting the needs of the population and democratisation. The priority areas are social inclusion, regional and local development.

The bilateral allocations funded under the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument (ENPI) aim to support cooperation in sectors of mutual interest and those benefitting most directly the citizens, such as border management, regional development, environment, energy efficiency, green economy and food safety, putting emphasis on civil society participation and at the same time

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and European Commission Vice-President Federica Mogherini (R) meets Vladimir Makei (L) Foreign Minister of Belarus during the S1 Security Conference in Munich, Germany on February 7, 2015.
maintaining technical level contacts with the local administration.

In the area of local and regional development, programmes such as the “Support to regional and local development in Belarus”, “EaP Territorial Cooperation Support Programme” and “European Parliament Pilot Regional Development Programme” were introduced to strengthen the capacity of local institutions and promote social and economic development in Belarus.

Bilateral assistance to Belarus is complemented by thematic and regional programmes in the following fields: education (Tempus, Erasmus Mundus), the eradication of landmines, waste governance, air quality, nuclear safety - Chernobyl, and TAIEX. Furthermore, special additional financial measures are allocated for support to civil society.

**Cooperation in Education**

Since 2009, Belarus can participate in international partnership projects of intra-EU programmes such as Comenius, Erasmus, Grundtvig, Leonardo, Jean Monnet and Transversal Programme. To further enhance people-to-people contacts between the EU and Belarusian society programmes such as the “EU Language Courses for Young Belarusians” and “Mobility Scheme for Targeted People-to-People Contacts” were introduced by the EC.

**Energy issues**

In energy sector, cooperation takes place in both bilateral and regional dimensions as well as through regular sector dialogue. Projects such as the “Support to the Implementation of a Comprehensive Energy Strategy of the Republic of Belarus” help the Ministry of Energy and Department of Energy Efficiency of the State Committee on Standardisation to implement reforms and improve efficiency of management. Under the Energy Efficiency Programme the EU is funding small pilot projects in schools to renovate the heating, lighting and ventilation systems. This improves the quality of life for children and leads to considerable budget savings. Another similar example is the EU Environment programme which addresses bio-diversity (including eco-tourism), water management and waste management issues.

**Cooperation in integrated border management**

Multilateral track of the Eastern Partnership is also extensively used to promote cooperation between Belarus and the EU, and a positive dynamic in sectoral dialogues on economic, cultural, energy and customs issues between the two partners was observed in recent years. Belarus has been actively engaged in several regional activities, including Integrated Border Management (IBM). The country’s border services are currently developing an Integrated Border Management Strategy with the support of an EU assistance project, which takes into account EU standards. The Belarusian State Border Committee and State Customs Committee also participate regularly in the bi-annual IBM Flagship Initiative Panel Meetings, chaired by EEAS.

In border management and customs, the EU allocated more than €74 million to assistance to the borders in Belarus since 2001. EU assistance included help to demarcate the Belarusian-Lithuanian and Belarusian-Latvian borders, significant equipment deliveries, major infrastructure development projects (e.g. border crossing point Kozlovichi 2 at Belarusian-Polish border worth more than 16 million EUR) as well as training and policy advice.

**Visa Facilitation**

Negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements between the two partners were launched in January 2014. In the meantime, EU member states unilaterally continue to make optimal use of the existing flexibilities offered by the Visa Code, in particular the possibilities to waive and reduce visa fees for certain categories of Belarusian citizens or in individual cases. As a result, Belarus is currently one of the world leaders in the per capita number of Schengen of visas issued to its citizens.