

PRESS RELEASE

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Council conclusions on Belarus

1. Recalling the Council conclusions of 31 January 2011, 20 June 2011, 23 March 2012 and 15 October 2012, the Council highlights the importance it attaches to relations with the Republic of Belarus and its people.
2. At the same time, the Council remains concerned with the situation of human rights in Belarus and recalls that EU-Belarus relations should be based on common values, especially respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.
3. The Council acknowledges the steps taken by Belarus over the last two years that have contributed to improving EU-Belarus relations, such as the proactive participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership and in the Interim Phase on Modernisation Issues, the resumption of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, the start of negotiations on Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements and on a Mobility Partnership, the active pursuit cooperation in harmonisation of digital markets and the signature of a Cooperation Arrangement on an Early Warning Mechanism in the energy sector. The Council also values Belarus' constructive role in the region.
4. The release of all the remaining political prisoners on 22 August 2015 was a long sought step that the EU had consistently called for. In response to the releases and the presidential elections of 11 October 2015 that were held in an environment free from violence, and taking into consideration the overall state of EU-Belarus relations, the Council agreed in October 2015 on a four-month suspension of most of the restrictive measures. The Council recognises that there is an opportunity for EU-Belarus relations to develop on a more positive agenda and that progress in a variety of fields can better be achieved through enhanced channels of communication.
5. In this context, the Council agrees that the EU will not extend the restrictive measures for 170 individuals and three companies whose listings are currently suspended. The Council further agrees that the arms embargo and the restrictive measures related to the four individuals listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist, will be extended for a period of twelve months.
6. In view of the Belarusian 2016 parliamentary elections, the Council urges the Belarusian authorities to swiftly take forward the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR's final report on the conduct of the 11 October 2015 Presidential elections, including on the legal and procedural framework. The Council welcomes Belarus' growing openness to dialogue and cooperation with the OSCE/ODIHR. The Council recalls the importance it attaches to improvements in this area and to respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Belarus.
7. The Council condemns the application of the death penalty in Belarus, and notably deplores the two recent death sentences pronounced, and urges the Belarusian authorities to set up a moratorium as a first step towards its abolition. The Council looks forward to forthcoming expert and public events on the death penalty planned to take place in 2016. The Council reiterates its call for the reinstatement of the civil and political rights of former political prisoners and highlights the need to ensure freedom of association and assembly, including by allowing the registration of political and civil society organisations. The Council stresses the importance of a vibrant civil society to the social and economic well-being of a country, and calls on the Belarusian authorities to allow civil society to be more involved in the discussions on government policy. The Council further urges the Belarusian authorities to eliminate all obstacles to the exercise of a free and independent media, including through the registration of new media outlets and the accreditation of journalists. The Council further calls on Belarus to respect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The Council will continue to follow closely the situation in this regard.
8. The Council welcomes the resumption of the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue and looks forward to its next round, which Belarus has offered to host in Minsk in late spring. Together with Belarus' engagement in the 2015 Universal Periodic Review these are positive steps and the Council encourages the Belarusian authorities to continue work in these areas and calls on Belarus to do so with the participation of civil society. The EU further calls on Belarus to follow up on recommendations made by UN treaty bodies and to cooperate fully with UN special procedures - including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus - and other mechanisms. The Council encourages increased cooperation between Belarus and the Council of Europe with a view to becoming a full member. The Council reiterates the EU's willingness to assist Belarus to meet its obligations towards democratisation and full respect for human rights, and looks forward to discuss these matters soon at a bilateral level.
9. The Council reiterates its firm commitment to strengthening the EU's engagement with the Belarusian people and civil society. The EU attaches great importance to enhanced people-to-people contacts with Belarus, to be encouraged through programmes such as Erasmus+, and looks forward to the swift conclusion of the negotiations and signature of the Visa Facilitation Agreement, the Readmission Agreement and the Mobility Partnership.
10. The Council reaffirms that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are important elements for enhancing EU-Belarus cooperation. Recalling its conclusions of 20 July 2015 on Energy Diplomacy the Council reiterates the importance of ensuring nuclear safety beyond the borders of the EU and calls on Belarus to cooperate constructively with the relevant international authorities in this regard.
11. The Council remains 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. The Council welcomes the Commission's intention to start Twinning cooperation with Belarus this year. It underlines the importance of the ENP Review and notes that Belarus provides a good opportunity to apply a differentiated approach. The Council therefore decided to accelerate the implementation of measures aimed at enhancing EU-Belarus cooperation in a number of economic, trade and assistance related fields, with the goal of modernising Belarus and its economy and for the benefit of the Belarusian population, including in view of WTO accession and in cooperation with International Financial Institutions, in particular the EIB and the EBRD in line with their respective mandates. The Council also encourages Belarus to accelerate much needed economic reforms. Tangible steps taken by Belarus to respect universal fundamental freedoms, rule of law and human rights will remain key for the shaping of the EU's future policy towards Belarus.

12. The Council will remain seized of the work of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group as a follow-up to the Interim Phase on modernisation issues, including an agenda which contains human rights issues, and looks forward to the involvement of civil society.

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