



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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EU policy towards Belarus

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European Parliament Plenary Paleckis report 'EU policy towards Belarus',
in Strasbourg

11 September 2013

Chairman, Honourable Members,

Thank you for this timely opportunity to discuss European Union policy towards Belarus. I believe that there is broad convergence between our analysis and visions. Your recommendations will help our further deliberations on how to approach the difficult situation we face with this neighbouring country.

The contrast between our dynamic relations with some Eastern Partnership countries and the long-standing stagnation of our relations with Belarus is stark.

This regrettable situation is of Belarus' own doing. The European Union maintains its offer to Belarus, but it is a conditional one. Political prisoners must be released and rehabilitated, and there must be progress on human rights.

The ball remains in Belarus' court. But I am afraid that there is little progress to report.

- The last time a political prisoner was given early release was September last year. Seven political prisoners are still in prison and we are receiving most worrying reports concerning their detention conditions (including the lack of access to lawyers and restricted contacts with the families).
- It is also greatly disturbing that on the European continent we still have a country where a moratorium on the death penalty is far away.
- The petty harassment of civil society activists and the oppression of regime critics continue unabated.

So we have no choice but to maintain our policy of targeted restrictive measures. European Union sanctions continue to remind the Belarusian authorities that their actions violating basic principles to which Belarus adhered in the context of the Eastern Partnership have consequences. Similarly, the lack of respect for human rights and basic freedoms still keeps Belarus far from membership in the Council of Europe. Against this background, we will shortly launch our annual review of the restrictive measures which expire in October.

We focus our efforts and find ways of supporting the Belarusian people. During the last two years, the European Union has strengthened its assistance and engagement with Belarusian civil society and with the Belarusian public at large. In particular, the European Union has intensified its dialogue with civil society, including via the European Dialogue on Modernisation.

This Dialogue has the potential to become a channel for communication both with wider Belarusian society and with the authorities. We are working towards this objective with the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and with the support of Belarusian civil society.

Since Foreign Minister Makey's appointment, Minsk has taken a number of diplomatic steps to improve relations with the European Union. This includes, for example, the re-opening of the Swedish Embassy in Minsk. We welcome this, and within the constraints we face, we are doing what we can to enhance our cooperation in certain areas. These include for example our technical dialogues on economic and financial issues and also the environment.

However, it is regrettable that after two years, there has been no reply from the Belarusian authorities to our offer to launch negotiations for a visa facilitation agreement.

Of course, as soon as Belarus takes the necessary steps, we can resume work on our Joint Interim Plan, paving the way for the full participation of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership. We look forward to that day, and stand ready to offer our full support for a comprehensive reform process in Belarus.

Thank you.

Closing remarks

Chairman, Honourable Members,

To conclude I will make three remarks:

1. Let there be no doubt that the situation in Belarus in terms of human rights and democracy remains of serious concern. Against this background, I feel that the European Union policy of critical engagement towards Belarus remains valid.

2. I would react to those who call on the EU to step up its role in dealing with Belarus. I agree with those who say that EaP is policy not only for the good weather. It offers enough of instruments to engage with our partners based on the principle more for more but also less for less. I also heard some of you mentioning couple of important issues and will refer three of them

- Ice Hockey World Championship, indeed an important event. I am not a friend of boycotts in particular when it comes to sports. But it does not mean that we should not use this event to turn the focus of Europe and the whole world to situation with human rights in Belarus. It would be a great opportunity to make that case very clear in Belarus itself, in Europe but also in the whole world

- Civil societies: since 2011 we have increased our support to the Civil Society six fold, let me make it clear, there has been no change of our policy vis-a-vis financing the activities of Civil Society in Belarus

- you also mentioned visa and visa facilitation: Belarus is the only country in the world, I am aware of, that has not reacted to our offer to negotiate visa facilitation agreement. In the meantime we continue to work with the EU Member States to make the best use of the Visa Code and it is encouraging to see that number of Member States are increasing their flexibility the Visa Code offers.

3. Belarus can still use the opportunity and give us grounds to look at this country more positively in the context of the forthcoming Eastern Partnership summit, where we hope to take a qualitative leap forward with our partners in the Eastern Partnership. I call upon the authorities of Belarus to take the necessary steps and bring Belarus back to the heart of Europe where it belongs. The more openness to political and economic reform, the more engagement you will find from the European Union.