

EU-Belarus people-to-people contacts

The autocratic policies pursued by Belarus's long-standing president, Alexander Lukashenko, have strained EU-Belarus ties over the years. Against this backdrop, the EU has geared its support towards the Belarusian people at large. The crisis in Ukraine slowly rekindled EU-Belarus relations, but the backbone of cooperation remains civil society support and people-to-people contacts.

EU-Belarus ties

In a country where civil society, the independent media and the political opposition have been and still are subject to [repressive policies](#), EU-Belarus ties have long been strained. The EU has adapted its [approach](#) to Belarus over the years, but improvements in bilateral relations have so far been relatively limited and short-lived. Since President Alexander Lukashenko was first elected [president](#) in 1994, human rights [violations](#) have soured Belarus's relations with the EU. The EU first imposed sanctions against the Belarusian regime in 2004, in response to the disappearance of four opposition activists. Since then, [restrictive measures](#) have been imposed in connection with human rights violations and crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators during elections in 2004, 2006, 2010 and 2012. In recent years, Belarus has made some attempts to play a more proactive role in the Eastern Partnership. All the while, a common denominator for EU cooperation with Belarus across all sectors has been engagement with civil society. Correspondingly, the Eastern Partnership '[20 Deliverables for 2020](#)', adopted in 2017, put an enabling environment for civil society high on the agenda.

The role of civil society in Belarus

For years, the situation of Belarusian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society has been characterised by the oppressive policies of the country's leadership. Since 1994, Lukashenko has gradually tightened legislation to mute civil society organisations (CSOs) and limit the margin for manoeuvre for NGOs. Following the 2010 anti-government protests against the presidential elections, Lukashenko launched a particularly tough [crackdown](#) on civil society. In addition to arresting opposition candidates, authorities jailed Ales Bialiatski – head of Viasna, one of the best known human rights organisations in Belarus – for almost three years. Belarus's Ministry of Justice accused Bialitski of receiving foreign funds without declaration or taxation in Belarus. Following this and other related provisions aimed at hampering the functioning of Belarusian civil society, many organisations left the country or chose to open accounts in EU banks to avoid being accused of working as a 'fifth column'. In recent years, however, Belarusian civil society has begun to recover slowly. The release of major political prisoners in 2015 prompted the EU to [delist](#) 170 people and three companies from its restrictive measures. This has made it easier for the EU to connect with civil society and continues engaging with the opposition and the general public. The EU also helps coordinate the [activities](#) of international donors.

EU-Belarus visa facilitation and mobility partnership

MOST: Mobility programme for young professionals

A key priority of the European Neighbourhood Instrument are the [cross-border cooperation](#) programmes that bring together CSOs and local authorities in the neighbouring EU border regions. According to the EU country [roadmap](#) for engagement with civil society in Belarus (2018 to 2020), the results of the implementation of EU 2014-2017 roadmap were modest, as donor coordination appeared limited. One practical, successful example of bilateral cooperation to foster people-to-people ties is [MOST](#), a mobility programme for young professionals; over 2 200 Belarusians have enjoyed professional exchange and mobility opportunities since its launch in October 2015. In view of its success, MOST (which means 'bridge' in Belarusian) was extended for an additional three years in September 2018.

Education and training

Belarus has been a member of the [Bologna Process](#) / European higher education area (EHEA) since 2015, but has been struggling to implement the [roadmap for higher education reform](#). EU support for higher education and vocational training is implemented mainly via [Erasmus+](#), which is available to young people in the Eastern Partnership countries, including Belarus. Some 217 European students came to Belarus through Erasmus+, while 421 students from Belarus travelled to study in EU countries. In addition to this, 12 [Erasmus Mundus](#) scholarships have been awarded to Belarusian Masters students. Belarus also participates in other EU programmes/projects aiming to support education and mobility. Thirteen capacity-building projects – for example, modernising curricula, introducing new MA programmes, and enhancing entrepreneurship and relations with the economic environment – boost the modernisation and contribute to the internationalisation of higher education institutions in Belarus. Six [Jean Monnet projects](#) work to promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies. In addition, the EU4Youth programme helps young Belarusians by supporting skills development, creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as helping youth organisations develop. The overall goal is to empower young people and boost their participation in decision-making processes. NGOs and CSOs can benefit from various EU thematic programmes such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities programme. [Horizon 2020](#), the EU's largest research and innovation programme, is also open to the Belarusian academic community.

The European Humanities University (EHU)

Under the [Annual Action Programme 2016](#) in favour of Belarus, support for the European Humanities University (EHU) – a Belarusian university in exile in Vilnius since 2005 – provides education and training for young Belarusians in an 'environment of academic and political freedom'. This education is aimed specifically at enabling the target group to develop democratic values in Belarus; changing social norms and combating stereotypes in relation to gender equality in Belarusian society; and contributing to the education, housing and subsistence of Belarusian students. The EU has been the biggest donor to the EHU since 2005, contributing some €1 million annually. The university is seen as a '[tool](#) to create a stock of Belarusians who have received Western education and can considerably contribute to the country's development'. The EU argues that the EHU benefits Belarusian society, as it offers courses in areas that are underdeveloped in Belarusian higher education, and because the research carried out is in line with Belarusian development priorities. EHU staff and students have also been involved in activities to support social and cultural developments in Belarus. The overall objective of this support is to boost democratic development in Belarus by giving young Belarusians access to independent higher education. According to the Annual Action Programme, the EU contribution of €2 million to the EHU for two academic years (2016 and 2017) would lend predictability to the EU commitment to supporting the EHU and a longer-term perspective for financial planning.

The role of the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament

At regional level, Belarus is represented in the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership ([CORLEAP](#)) by representatives from Councils of Deputies (*oblast*/regional level). The European Parliament, meanwhile, has been consistent in criticising the Belarusian authorities' pressure on civil society.

In its 19 April 2018 [resolution](#), the European Parliament called for Belarus to be kept on the EHEA agenda and for the European Commission to provide adequate resources to implement the EHEA roadmap, accepting recommendations from civil society. Currently, Belarus does not take part in the activities of the [Euronest](#) Parliamentary Assembly (consisting of the European Parliament delegation and the delegations of eastern European partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) for 'political reasons'.

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