Introduction

The Republic of Belarus, counting fewer than ten million inhabitants, is located at the EU’s eastern frontier, bordering Poland to the west, Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest, Ukraine to the south and the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) to the northeast. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus declared independence on 25 August 1991, and since 1994, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has headed the government. Under Lukashenka’s rule, the country has retained many Soviet-era policies, including state ownership of significant parts of the economy. Because of its staunch resistance to any form of democratisation, Lukashenka’s Belarus has acquired the unfavourable image of ‘the last dictatorship in Europe’.

Partly due to this image, the EU’s relations with Belarus have never reached the level of engagement achieved with other countries in its eastern neighbourhood. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), negotiated in 1995, has remained frozen since 1997 in response to the political situation in the country. Nevertheless, the EU’s policy towards Belarus has changed over time and undergone several revisions regarding the goals, modes and intensity of the EU’s bilateral engagement.

In the first part of this chapter, a short history of EU–Belarus relations is provided. The different phases of the EU’s engagement with Belarus over the past two and a half decades are outlined, with a specific emphasis on the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the 2009 Eastern Partnership (EaP). The second part of the chapter zooms in on the driving forces behind EU–Belarus relations and explains continuities and change in the relationship by examining the role of values and principles, as well as economic and geopolitical interests in the development of the policy. The final part of the chapter offers an assessment of the impact and effectiveness of the EU’s policy towards Belarus, including a brief outlook of future EU–Belarus relations after the outbreak of the de facto war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Overview of EU–Belarus relations: 1991–2015

The first decade: deterioration of relations

After Belarus declared independence in December 1991, the goal of its leaders was a ‘return to Europe’, including eventual membership in the EU (Piontek 2006). The momentum towards
political and economic reforms had hardly begun when the old communist establishment reclaimed control. Once elected, the new president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, quickly began to consolidate his power. In 1995, he was granted the power to dissolve parliament by way of a referendum, and in 1996 another referendum on amending the constitution assured Lukashenka’s control over the Constitutional Court. At the same time, the president reoriented Belarus’ foreign policy back to closer relations with Russia. As a result, Belarus’ relations with the EU quickly deteriorated. In 1997, the General Affairs Council suspended the ratification of the PCA, froze the previously concluded Interim Trade Agreement, and restricted contacts to Belarus to below ministerial level (General Affairs Council 1997).

The ENP 2004–2006: principled engagement with Belarus

Initially, the EU had only a very limited interest in – and interactions with – Belarus. Belarus was pro forma included in the ENP, but the EU adopted a principled approach, underlining its engagement with Belarus ‘without compromising the EU’s commitment to common and democratic values’ (Commission of the European Communities 2003a: 15). Later in 2004, the Council confirmed this position by imposing targeted sanctions (visa bans) on key actors associated with the disappearance of political activists in 1999 and 2000, and by extending the sanctions against persons responsible for the fraudulent parliamentary elections held in December 2004. The visa bans applied only to six persons. The EU emphasised that it wished Belarus to ‘take its rightful place in Europe’ (Commission of the European Communities 2003b: 1) but was careful not to translate this objective into concrete actions, to avoid jeopardising its relations with Russia. According to a number of EU officials, the then EU-15 had made the tactical choice in early 2004 to institutionalise the status quo of EU–Belarus relations in the ENP, with the intention to counter pressure by prospective Member States to strengthen relations with Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova.2

After their accession to the EU, it did not take long for the new Member States from Central and Eastern Europe to start pushing for a more active eastern policy of the EU, much to the dismay of the ‘old’ EU-15. In October 2005, for example, a meeting between then Lithuanian Prime Minister, Algirdas Brazauskas, and Belarusian Prime Minister, Syarhey Sidorski, caused considerable anger among the ‘old’ Member States, who had not been consulted before the meeting and who interpreted the move as a clear violation of the EU’s restrictions on ministerial-level contacts with the Belarusian government (General Affairs Council 1997). Differences between ‘new’ and ‘old’ Member States also came to the fore after the fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus in 2006, which were marred by violence against the opposition and resulted in the arrest of almost one thousand protesters. Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania wanted to send a clear signal to the Lukashenka regime and proposed a substantial expansion of the visa ban list to up to 300 persons. Germany, France, Italy and Austria, who favoured a more cautious approach, opposed the proposal. Eventually, in April 2006, the Council decided on a compromise, adding 30 names to the visa ‘blacklist’, including President Lukashenka. Later, in May, the assets of the persons blacklisted were frozen, and in December, the EU withdrew the Preferential Trade Arrangement for products originating in Belarus.

Towards an active step-by-step engagement in a maturing ENP

A renewed push towards more engagement with the Belarusian government occurred in early 2007 after Lukashenka had released several political prisoners and had finally given the green light to the opening of an EU delegation in Minsk (outstanding since 2005). Together with the Council Secretariat, the German EU presidency – having reconsidered its policy towards
Belarus – began to lobby for a double track, step-by-step approach with Belarus (pressure on the regime, support for Belarusian people/the opposition, willingness to engage with the authorities) (Jarábik and Rabagliat 2007). The reaction of the other EU Member States was unenthusiastic: the United Kingdom, France and Lithuania warned of possible fake moves by the government of Belarus, while the Polish government opposed any step-by-step approach, arguing that similar approaches had failed in the past. As the relations between Georgia and Russia drastically deteriorated, throughout the spring and summer of 2008, a stronger consensus emerged among the EU Member States towards more engagement with the Belarusian government. Shortly after the escalation of the conflict in Georgia in early August 2008, the General Affairs and External Relations Council decided to suspend for six months the targeted sanctions imposed against leading figures in Belarus, including President Lukashenka (General Affairs and External Relations Council 2008).

Belarus within the Eastern Partnership: emphasising ‘engagement’

In early 2009, preparations for launching the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative were in full swing. The EaP project was largely driven by the Polish and Swedish governments, who became recognised as the main advocates of the full participation of Belarus in the EaP, supporting a policy of ‘critical engagement’ (Kaminska 2014). In February 2009, the EU’s High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, visited Minsk to confirm the willingness of the EU to integrate Belarus into the EaP. Subsequently, the diplomatic contacts between the EU and Belarus increased substantially. Next to the invitation to participate in the EaP, the EU’s greater engagement with Belarus involved clearing the way for new credits from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (USD3.5 billion) in the summer of 2009 and the decision by the Council, in early 2010, to approve the mandate of the Commission for the negotiation of a Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement with Belarus. In addition, the European Commission started to prepare a Joint Interim Plan to serve as a roadmap for enhanced bilateral relations in the trade and economic sectors. Some Member States had even supported a re-launch of the PCA, but the initiative failed to convince the majority – above all the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, who had objected to any such moves.

Crackdown on the opposition after the 2010 presidential elections: back to a critical engagement

In the run-up to the 2010 presidential elections in Belarus, many top officials visited Minsk, among them the Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, as well as the foreign ministers Guido Westerwelle (Germany) and Radosław Sikorski (Poland). The two foreign ministers even promised Belarus financial assistance of over EUR3 billion to persuade Lukashenka to hold free elections. The widespread optimism within the EU was quickly shattered when Belarusian riot police violently suppressed a large protest rally the night after the elections, severely beating and injuring large numbers of protesters, and resulting in the arrest of hundreds of protesters and seven presidential candidates by the Belarusian secret service.

Despite the brutality of the government-led crackdown, the EU was remarkably slow to react to the events in Belarus. At the end of January 2011, the Foreign Affairs Council eventually decided to impose visa bans and an asset freeze on 157 persons responsible for the political repression in Belarus (Foreign Affairs Council 2011a). It took until June 2011 for the Council to reach a consensus on tougher sanctions (Foreign Affairs Council 2011b), which included the
EU–Belarus relations

imposition of an arms embargo and restrictive measures against three companies linked to Belarusian oligarch Vladimir Peftev, who was one of the financiers of the Belarusian government.

In the first two years following the elections, the relations between the EU and Belarus further deteriorated. In late 2011, the Belarusian government introduced new restrictive legislation against the activities of political parties, NGOs and public associations and imprisoned well-known opposition activist Ales Bialiatski. The EU responded with an expansion of the visa ban and assets freeze in October 2011 (Foreign Affairs Council 2011c). Disappointed with the further extension of the EU sanctions list, Belarus asked the head of the EU delegation and the Polish ambassador in Minsk to leave the capital. In response, all EU Member States recalled their ambassadors from Belarus.

Later in March, two men charged for organising the April 2011 terrorist attack on the Minsk metro were executed, following what was widely perceived as a flawed trial – not only by international observers but also by many Belarusians. In turn, the EU imposed additional restrictive measures against 12 individuals – increasing the total number of blacklisted persons to 231 – and against 32 companies, belonging inter alia to Belarusian oligarchs Yuri Chizh and Anatoly Ternavsky (Foreign Affairs Council 2012). At the end of 2012, diplomatic relations between the EU and Belarus suffered yet another blow, when a light aeroplane from Sweden crossed the state border to Belarus and dropped an estimated 800 stuffed teddy bears over Ivianets and Minsk, carrying freedom of speech messages, in response to which Belarus refused to renew the reaccreditation of the Swedish Ambassador in Minsk.

The Ukraine war in 2014: towards normalisation

The outbreak of the undeclared but de facto war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, served as a catalyst for greater rapprochement between the EU and Belarus. In April 2014, the Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, initiated a phone call with President Lukashenka to discuss the ‘international situation in the context of Ukrainian developments’ (BISS 2014: 8–9). By early 2015, the majority of EU Member States agreed that restrictive measures against Belarus should be eased, once all remaining political prisoners in Belarus were released and rehabilitated. Only a few EU diplomats still recalled the importance of democratic standards as a precondition for lifting EU sanctions. Speaking in private, one high-ranking European official in Minsk even suggested that Lukashenka should send the remaining political prisoners for medical treatment abroad, to ‘solve the problem’ of political prisoners, while allowing the president to ‘save face’.

Clearly, attitudes of the EU-28 towards the regime in Minsk were changing quickly. In 2015, high-level representatives from the EU, including Latvian Foreign Minister, Edgars Rinkēvičs, and Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Johannes Hahn, held direct talks with Lukashenka in Minsk. At the same time, the policy approach and focus of the EU Delegation in Minsk began to change. As one EU official pointed out at the time, the delegation was ‘finally’ turning into a proper ‘diplomatic actor’ in Belarus, talking to the Belarusian government directly, instead of ‘adding names’ to a long but apparently futile list of civil society contacts. The EU’s efforts to normalise relations with Belarus provoked a positive response from the Belarusian side. In August 2015, Lukashenka authorised the release of several political prisoners, including former presidential candidate Mikalaj Statkievic. Irrespective of the fact that the released persons were not fully rehabilitated, Lukashenka’s move triggered much enthusiasm among many EU Member States. Despite the flawed presidential elections on 11 October 2015, the EU decided unanimously to first suspend and then lift almost all restrictive measures against Belarus in February 2016 (Foreign Affairs Council 2016).
Explaining continuity and change in the EU’s policy towards Belarus

This section zooms in on the role of the main driving forces behind the EU’s policy towards Belarus, including: concerns for values and principles, such as human rights and democracy; economic and business interests; and geopolitical interests.

Concerns for values and principles

It is undeniable that the autocratic character of the Belarusian regime has acted as a constraint on diplomatic and economic engagement of the EU with the country. Retaining credibility in the eyes of the domestic electorate, for example, appears to have been a key motivation behind the German government’s strong opposition to inviting Lukashenka to the EaP summit in May 2009. A cable from the US embassy in Berlin, cites officials from the German Chancellery, according to whom, such an invite would have helped ‘neither Chancellor Merkel nor FM Steinmeier in a year with multiple European, national and regional elections’ (US Embassy Cable 2009). The decision by the EU to impose sanctions on Belarus in 2011 was also clearly a response to the brutal crackdown on the opposition in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential elections. Several EU officials confirmed that the measure was mainly taken because the EU had to be seen to be doing ‘something’ to satisfy public expectations. 12

Human rights considerations explain the overall limitations on the scope of EU–Belarus relations. Such considerations hardly explain the variation in the intensity of the EU’s engagement with Belarus over the years. All authoritative democracy, human rights, and reform indexes suggest that little (if anything) has changed in Belarus during the past two decades. 13 The Polity IV Index 14 and the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) 15 have consistently ranked Belarus as an autocracy (repeated score of -7) and hard-line autocracy (repeated score of 5); the Political Terror Index indicates no improvements over the years (repeated score of 2.5) and Belarus’ rating in the World Press Freedom Index 16 (154/157 of 180 since 2010) has also remained unchanged.

Economic interests

Trade between the EU and Belarus has been growing gradually over the past two decades, whereby the EU is Belarus’s second most important trade partner after Russia. From 2002 until 2012, the value of exports from the EU to Belarus has grown faster than the value of Belarusian exports into the EU. Since 2013, EU exports to Belarus have been declining (Figure 26.1). The overall trends in EU–Belarus trade do not suggest significant correlations between political relations and the volume of imports/exports. The fact that trade with the EU has been growing steadily, regardless of Belarus’ autocratic character (and despite the EU’s restrictive measures), suggests that economic interests do play a role in the EU’s policy towards the country. For example, significant parts of the gross domestic product of Lithuania and Latvia depend on transporting goods from Belarus, and especially on shipping oil products via the seaports of Klaipeda and Ventspils. A strong business lobby exists in both countries – led by a small but very influential group of large investors and oligarchs, including from Belarus – which has successfully mobilised public opinion and put pressure on the governments to prevent stricter EU economic sanctions against Belarus (Kłysiński 2013).

Economic interests also led the Slovenian government, in early 2012, to threaten to veto the inclusion of Belarusian oligarch Yury Chizh in the EU’s sanction regime, because his companies have guaranteed the involvement of Slovenia’s construction industry in lucrative real estate...
projects in Belarus (The Economist 2012). Belarusian oligarchs also maintain extensive business links with Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the Czech Republic (Rettman 2012) and have actively engaged in lobbying against the inclusion of certain individuals and entities on the EU sanctions list (Shapovalova 2015).

Economic interests have had a significant influence on EU sanctions against Belarus, ensuring that restrictions are not imposed on the main Belarusian exporters to EU markets (such as companies involved in the export of oil products) or Belarusian companies that do business in or with EU countries (such as construction industries). Yet, the EU’s economic interests in Belarus remained limited overall. Between 2009 and 2015, Belarus rarely accounted for more than 0.3 per cent of the EU’s total trade with outside partners (European Commission 2016). Economic interests could soften the EU’s policy towards Belarus, but they are not sufficiently important to act as game changers in the EU’s approach towards Belarus.

**Geopolitical interests**

The policy of the EU towards Belarus in the 1990s and early 2000s reflected a consensus among the ‘old’ EU Member States on non-interference into the Russian sphere of interest. That consensus was in large part conditioned by the legacy of the Cold War: a more active policy towards Belarus – either pushing for more democracy or for more engagement with the political elites – would have created unnecessary obstacles to the EU’s relationship with Russia. With EU eastward enlargement, a group of states joined the EU who had different historical experiences with Russia, and who were primarily interested in seeking security from, rather than with, Russia. The ‘new’ Member States had little illusion that Russia would soon turn into a liberal democracy. Expanding NATO and the EU to Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus would at least create a ‘pro-Western buffer zone’ to what they perceived as an ‘increasingly assertive Russia’.

Against this background, the Russia–Georgia conflict, in August 2008, served as a catalyst for greater EU engagement with Belarus. The conflict exacerbated the security fears of the ‘new’ Member States, and especially the Baltics, while Germany – increasingly taking the lead in the EU’s relations with Eastern Europe – grew more supportive of the EaP initiative including Belarus (Babayev 2014). Germany’s relationship with Putin’s Russia slightly cooled after Angela
Merkel became chancellor, and the war in Georgia prompted her to signal solidarity to the EaP countries, emphasising that they were ‘free and independent countries’ (Merkel quoted in Szabo 2015: 46). Most EU Member States, including Germany and France, subsequently backed the position that ‘Belarusian recognition of the two break-away provinces in Georgia would cross a “red line” foreclosing the potential for Belarus to participate fully in the EaP’ (US Embassy Cable 2009), which clearly underlined the relevance of geopolitics in the EU’s engagement with Belarus.

Following Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014 and the outbreak of a de facto war in the eastern provinces of Ukraine, the EU once again moved towards normalising its relations with Belarus, including the decision in early 2016 to lift almost all sanctions against the country. The Baltic States had pushed hard for a greater engagement with Belarus with the aim of strengthening the country’s autonomy vis-à-vis Russia (and inter alia prevent Russia from building an airbase in Belarus on the border with the EU). Germany remained committed to signalling solidarity with those in the EU advocating a tougher stance against Russia (Bierling 2014). At the same time, the German government was keen to control the EU’s further engagement with Belarus, in order not to jeopardise the ongoing – and from the German point of view more important – process of normalising relations between the EU and Russia.

The analysis above has shown that values and principles have limited the overall scope for the EU’s engagement with Belarus, and that powerful business interests have left a clear mark on the choice and scope of the EU’s restrictive measures. Geopolitical interests had the strongest influence on determining the level of intensity of the EU’s engagement with Belarus.

Impact and effectiveness of the EU’s policy towards Belarus

The following section evaluates the effectiveness of the EU’s policy and instruments to promote values and principles in Belarus and the effectiveness of the EU’s pursuit of its geopolitical interests in Belarus.

The effectiveness of the EU’s instruments for democracy promotion

The EU has developed several policy instruments to foster change in Belarus. It has complemented the restrictive measures imposed on the regime with instruments to support civil society and the people in Belarus.

Support for civil society: The EU, inter alia, included Belarus in the EaP Civil Society Forum (CSF) in 2009, initiated the European Dialogue on Modernisation with Belarusian Society (EDM) in 2012, re-engaged Belarus in a Human Rights Dialogue (HRD) in 2015, and financially assisted reform efforts through instruments such as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) or the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

The CSF and EDM have been perceived by civil society organisations (CSOs) in Belarus as ‘talking shops’, lacking real influence, whereas the HRD does not foresee the participation of civil society (Kozhukov 2015). Nevertheless, many civil society activists have confirmed that the CSF, and also partly the EDM, led to greater cooperation among civil society groups within Belarus (Bosse 2012).

EU financial assistance: The reach and impact of the EU’s financial assistance on Belarusian civil society have been limited. A survey by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2014 showed
that most Belarusian CSOs had never applied for EU funds or been invited by the EU for consultations. Few CSOs believed that European integration (3 per cent) or international donors (11 per cent) had any influence on civil society in Belarus (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2014). This is not surprising, given the EU's limited financial assistance to Belarus overall. According to data available from the Commission's Financial Transparency System (European Commission 2015), between 2007 and 2014 a mere EUR20 million of assistance (EUR8 million national/EUR12 million regional allocations) has actually been disbursed to recipients in Belarus (Figure 26.2). Belarusian recipients received no major funds from the EIDHR, except a EUR0.4 million grant disbursed in 2014 (EuropeAid 2015). Few political CSOs have benefited from larger EU funds, mostly channelled through the Office for a Democratic Belarus in Brussels.

**EU restrictive measures:** Most scholars and commentators agree that the EU's restrictive measures had no discernible impact on the Lukashenka regime (Gebert 2013; Gnedina 2005; Gaidelytė 2010). Others point out, that the sanctions are effective as a symbolic instrument to isolate Lukashenka internationally (Portela 2011), to keep important ‘bargaining chips’ vis-à-vis the regime (Giumelli 2013) or simply – as one EU official put it - to ‘irritate’ the Belarusian elites. Most analysts highlight that the EU’s sanctions have been too light to leave an impression on the regime. In addition, the poor – especially legal – design of the sanctions has damaged their effectiveness to an even greater extent as almost all the measures against Belarusian entities/companies had to be repealed because of successful legal actions taken by Belarusian oligarchs against the EU. In 2014 and 2015, the European Court of Justice (General Court) issued several judgements annulling restrictive measures against all Belarusian oligarchs and (most of) their companies because the Council had failed to present convincing evidence that they had financially supported the Lukashenka regime (Lester and O’Kane 2015).

![EU financial assistance Belarus: 2007–2014](image.png)

**Figure 26.2** EU financial assistance Belarus: 2007–2014

The effectiveness of the EU’s regional geopolitics

Evaluating the effectiveness of the EU’s geopolitics is above all a question of which Member States – and whose geopolitical vision – prevail in the EU’s policy towards the EaP region and, most importantly, towards Russia. Many signs point to the dominance of a pragmatic interest-based engagement with Belarus (Marin 2016), evidenced by the EU’s decision to lift almost all restrictive measures on Belarus in early 2016 (Foreign Affairs Council 2016).

Those writing in the realist school of International Relations are likely to judge the pragmatic approach effective, arguing that the ‘West’ should long have recognised that it has no role to play in Russia’s sphere of interest, and that any attempt to change the status quo in the region (through initiatives such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement or the EaP) will upset the great power balance and subsequently lead to greater instability and insecurity in Europe (Mearsheimer 2014).

In contrast, those who argue that European security is best achieved through the gradual expansion of liberal democracy and who see Russia as a ‘revisionist power’, challenging the liberal internationalist world order (Mead 2014), are likely to regard the pragmatic approach as wholly ineffective: with Russia increasingly challenging the status quo in the EaP countries, it will eventually strive to incorporate Belarus into its sphere of interest unless the EU takes more concerted steps to contain Russian influence in the region overall.

Lukashenka himself prefers a pragmatic engagement with the EU, which is a view partly reflected in public opinion. After the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Lukashenka has been very keen to promote a foreign policy of active neutrality, functioning as a bridge between Russia’s and the EU’s competing integration projects (Jarábik and Melyantsou 2015; Sahm 2015). From this perspective, the EU’s pragmatic approach (no active democratisation but still financial assistance, no substantial economic/legal integration but more trade relations) appears to match Lukashenka’s vision of neutrality. Yet, many observers remain unconvinced about Belarus’s alleged neutrality and the West’s ‘general illusion that the Belarusian leadership needs help to fend off the external threat from Russia’ (Jurkonis 2015). They argue that Belarus is hardly neutral, given Russia’s deeply rooted and profound influence on Belarus’ economy and military. Thus, the main function of the ‘illusion of neutrality’ is to attract the West’s attention and (IMF) funds to keep the highly deficient state-run economy afloat.

Conclusions

Belarus’s autocratic character and its image as the ‘last dictatorship in Europe’ have posed significant normative constraints on the EU’s relations with the country over the past decades. The EU’s emphatic advocacy of a principled approach towards Belarus – an approach partly motivated by the EU’s desire to retain credibility vis-à-vis domestic publics – has clearly limited its engagement with Lukashenka in general. Yet, it is powerful business interests and especially regional geopolitics vis-à-vis the Russian Federation that have influenced the intensity and effectiveness of the EU’s relations with the country. The outbreak of the de facto war in the eastern provinces of Ukraine in 2014 served as a catalyst for a (limited) normalisation of relations between the EU and Belarus. The future of EU–Belarus relations is, however, inextricably linked to the EU’s relations with Russia, on the one hand, and to Russia’s policy towards Belarus on the other. If realpolitik becomes the sole basis of regional inter-state relations, EU–Belarus relations are likely to remain limited, and will deteriorate further should Russia seek to further integrate Belarus into its sphere of interest. The relationship between the EU and Belarus might therefore best be understood as a relationship in custodia (warded) by regional geopolitics.
Notes

1 The author would like to thank the editors of this handbook for their helpful and constructive comments that greatly contributed to improving the final version of this chapter. This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) under VENI Research Grant Ref. 451-12-015.

2 Interviews by the author with EU officials and EU Member State officials in Brussels, May 2006.

3 Interviews by the author with EU officials and EU Member State officials in Brussels, May 2010.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 EU officials have provided different accounts of the number of political prisoners in Belarus, ranging from five to thirteen (Kobzova 2013).

7 Interviews by the author with EU Member State officials in Minsk, February 2015.

8 Interview by the author with a European official in Minsk, February 2015.

9 Interview by the author with an EU official in Minsk, February 2015.

10 The International Election Observation Mission concluded that ‘Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections’ (IEOM 2015: 1), thus issuing exactly the same verdict as for the 2010 presidential elections.

11 The EU retained restrictive measures against four members of Lukashenka’s security service suspected of involvement in the disappearance of four political opponents in 1999–2000.

12 Interviews by the author with EU officials in Brussels, May 2012, see also Bosse (2012).

13 For a more optimistic outlook on Belarus’s future democratisation, see Potocki (2011).

14 The index measures a scale from 10 (full democracy) to −10 (autocracy) (Polity IV Index 2015).


17 Polish diplomats quoted in Nielsen (2012: 1).

18 The EaP CSF is a regional platform of 700 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from the EaP.

19 The EDM is a platform for the EU and Belarusian CSOs to discuss the modernisation of Belarus.


21 Interviews by the author with representatives of Belarusian civil society in Minsk, February 2015.

22 The EU has disbursed funds for Belarus worth EUR50 million between 2007 and 2014: 20 projects (excluding FP7/Horizon, EIDHR, NSA-LA, ENI Civil Society grants), of which EUR8 million was disbursed to recipients in Belarus (EuropeAid 2015).

23 Interview by the author with an EU official in Brussels, May 2012.

24 According to national surveys, Belarusians have a low level of trust towards the ‘West’. In 2010–2011 only 20 per cent assessed EU–Belarus relations as equal/mutually beneficial, with over 30 per cent indicating that relations are based on EU interests (Rotman and Veremeeva 2011).


26 For an excellent discussion of EU Member States’ positions on Russia, see Schmidt-Felzmann (2014).

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EU–Belarus relations


