

# What Is Wrong With the West's Belarus Policy?

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## Executive Summary

Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime is emerging as a beneficiary of Russia's war against Ukraine. Despite Western sanctions, the economy is experiencing growth, fuelled by the Kremlin's support. The conflict has shifted the international spotlight away from Belarus and allowed Lukashenka to reshape the regime's relations with society. The only significant risk for the regime is its dependence on Russia, which reached an extreme level after the events of 2022.

The West's Belarus policy suffers from a lack of attention and a limited toolkit. In the immediate future, the West should prioritise specific objectives aimed at extricating Belarus from its entanglement with Russia and preventing further deterioration: namely, the release of political prisoners and decreasing Belarus's role in regional instability. Engaging with the regime may be necessary to achieve that goal, and some might perceive it as a victory for Lukashenka. However, continuing the current policy and allowing Belarus to remain in a spiral of degradation might have even worse consequences, not only for the country, but also for the West and Ukraine.

Additionally, there is a crucial need to bolster the West's own policy toolbox by increasing funding for Belarusian independent media, promoting a positive agenda for Belarusians, communicating with the mid-level management of the ruling class, and fostering coordination among like-minded states.

## Lukashenka's Success

Two years after the start of the full-scale war, Aliaksandr Lukashenka can be content with his position within the conflict. Russian authorities stopped using Belarusian territory for military actions in October 2022; instead, they are flooding Belarusian enterprises with orders.

Thanks to Russian support (and despite Western sanctions), the Belarusian economy is growing. In the first three months of 2024, it grew by 4 percent year-on-year, according to official data, which is trusted by independent economists. Because of people's fear of war and the revitalisation of the economy, Lukashenka began to sell the idea that he provides stability to the nation that attempted to dismiss him in 2020. Simultaneously, thanks to unprecedented repression, Lukashenka has managed to instill an atmosphere of fear, making it difficult to imagine how people could now openly oppose the system inside the country.

Lukashenka's system in relation to the West appears so self-assured that it continues to use migrants to create tension on the border between Belarus and the European Union for the third year.

Despite this, some form of communication between Minsk and Western capitals persists; despite the regime's temporary successes, it surely recognises that its dependence on Russia is much greater than it would like. Therefore, Lukashenka repeatedly returns to the idea that "we should talk to the Poles," "not all Anglo-Saxons are neo-Nazis," and so on. Lukashenka's regime also engages in negotiations with Western capitals for the release of specific political prisoners, such as representatives of the Polish minority, a journalist from Radio Liberty, the spouse of an American diplomat, and a Swiss citizen.

### **Problems with the West's Belarus Policy**

Without the solidarity of the EU and its partners, Belarusian pro-democracy actors would be in worse condition. However, the West, with its resources, can do more to act as a catalyst for positive changes in Belarus. These changes are also crucial for regional security, as the Russian state currently uses Belarus as one of its tools to threaten Ukraine and NATO members, including through the positioning of its tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory.

To build a better Belarus policy, the West needs to overcome two key problems: a lack of attention and a limited toolkit.

Take the lack of attention, for instance. The West does not view Belarus as a country with high added value or urgency. So, there is no need to develop long-term strategies, nor is there a requirement for short-term plans that yield immediate results.

The lack of attention can result in unintended consequences, even with actions aimed at achieving morally justifiable goals; some measures intended to punish Lukashenka may inadvertently harm Belarusian society and deepen its dependence on Russia. A prime example of this is the ban on overflight in EU airspace and the restriction of access to EU airports for Belarusian carriers, which was introduced after Lukashenka's regime diverted a Ryanair aircraft to arrest two political activists.

The Western toolbox for both escalating and de-escalating relations with Lukashenka's regime is rather limited. Despite imposing extensive economic sanctions on Belarus, the West discovered that its economic leverage is insufficient, as Russia can compensate for the damage. Currently, Western governments are occasionally expanding sanction lists and closing loopholes to punish the regime and prevent circumvention of sanctions against Russia through Belarus. However, they likely do not expect any significant impact on the regime's behaviour.

On the other hand, Western governments are hesitant to publicly engage with Lukashenka, the ultimate decision-maker in Belarus, who holds the power to either worsen or improve the situation. For instance, he can choose to release political prisoners or to cease provocations on the border with EU. The West's reluctance stems not only from Lukashenka's involvement in human rights crimes but also from his role in Russia's war against Ukraine.

That said, Western states probably still consider that talking with Lukashenka's regime is the best means to release political prisoners. This conclusion can be drawn because this is precisely what Western diplomacy has been doing to secure the release of individuals whose interests they deem necessary to represent. These releases have hardly led to the legitimisation of the regime. Quite the opposite, for when officials of Western states negotiate for the release of political prisoners, it strengthens the moral positions of democratic countries in Belarusian society.

That's why this commentary argues not for a shift in Western policy, but to broaden the already existing practice of talking with the regime. If the West is willing to make genuine concessions, then its concessions will appear rational and will not result in significant reputational damage. Moreover, engaging in a broader conversation with the regime might eventually make more sense than the current quid-pro-quo approach regarding one or a couple of political prisoners. This transactional approach allows the regime to demand more concessions than it grants.

In some policy areas, it is generally unclear how the West, with its toolbox, can address developments in Belarus. For example, this decade is a time of transit of power within the Belarusian political system, and it would be worth building relations with those who aspire to power in post-Lukashenka's Belarus. However, it appears that the EU and its partners cannot do that now as they have so limited access to these people.

Any decrease in Western support for independent media, civil society, and political actors would limit Western leverage on the situation in Belarus. Some independent outlets have already announced that they are facing financial issues, which may indicate an overall trend of decreasing support.

This trend occurs at a time when pro-Western sentiments may be waning. A 2022 Chatham House study showed a correlation between individuals who have travelled to the EU and their favourable attitudes toward the West. As opportunities for Belarusians to travel to the EU diminish, it is probable that pro-European sentiment will also decline, particularly in light of discriminatory practices against Belarusians observed in some EU member states. For example, Lithuanian authorities, in order to restrict migration into the country, are widely designating Belarusians as threats to national security.

The deficit of ideas for corresponding actions seems to be a logical result of attention deficits and a limited toolbox. When such a policy encounters Lukashenka, whose attention is entirely focused on Belarus and whose toolbox is quite extensive, it does not prevail, no matter how significant the difference in the political and economic potential of Belarus and the West may be. Moreover, Lukashenka understands that the West is far from being monolithic: some of its representatives do talk to the regime. This is evident in the evolving relations between Belarus and certain Western allies, such as Moldova, Israel and Türkiye, which have undergone dramatic changes over the last four years.

## Recommendations for the EU and the West

- Put more political weight behind Belarus policy and set short-term goals, without which Western attention would risk diminishing and the toolbox lose relevance. These objectives should serve the long-term goals of reducing Russian influence in Belarus and democratisation. They should include reducing Belarus's role in the Russian war, countering hybrid threats from Belarus, releasing political prisoners, and stopping repression. Achieving the desired trajectory for Belarus requires both pressure and incentives, including communication with the regime, where mutual concessions can be discussed. If Lukashenka is ready to make serious concessions, the West can consider lifting some of the sanctions.
- The West needs a clear communication strategy supported by a strengthened policy toolbox. To help society, it is worth increasing funding for independent media that play a crucial role in the development of free thinking inside the country. Promoting a positive agenda for Belarus and people-to-people contacts necessitates granting more visas to Belarusians, providing more opportunities for travel, and making larger commitments to supporting future economic transformation.
- The West needs to study the Lukashenka regime and build new channels of communication with the middle echelon of the Belarusian ruling class as the regime starts the process of transition of power. The degree to which these officials lean favourably towards the West could have substantial implications for democratisation within the country when such an opportunity emerges.



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