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# EU STRATEGY TOWARD BELARUS



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# EU Strategy Towards Belarus

*This policy brief is based on a webinar convened on 31 January 2024. The speakers were: MEP Juozas Olekas, chair of the European Parliament's delegation to Belarus; Valery Kavaleuski, representative for foreign affairs in the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus; Pavel Slunkin, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations; and Lydia Stone, team leader on Belarus and Moldova, from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. While this document is based on the webinar speakers' comments, responsibility for the accuracy of the content rests with the author.*

## *Executive summary*

- The European Union (EU)'s goals in respect of Belarus are for the country to improve its human rights situation, respect freedoms related to the media and civil society, and ultimately transition to democracy. The EU presently has 'policies' for the country which limit its ability to attain these goals. The EU should adopt a clearer *strategy*.
- Strategy is about marshalling one's resources in the best way possible to attain one or more defined goals. An effective strategy can be based around policy linkage, proactive engagement, and policy innovation.
- Challenges include Russia's support for Belarus, the fact that EU institutions do not have exclusive competence in foreign policy matters, and the weak consensus among EU members. The consequences include policies based on the lowest common denominator of agreement among member states. The EU should better avail itself of the opportunities that arise from an organised democratic movement in exile and Russia's preoccupation with its war in Ukraine.
- **Policy linkage:** To deny the autocratic Belarus regime leverage, the EU must link its Belarus and Russia policies on sanctions and diplomacy. The benefits of a unified policy firmly outweigh the drawbacks and can help to affect the human rights situation, media freedoms and civil society.
- **Proactive engagement:** The EU cannot waver in seeing Lukashenka as delegitimised and could do more to endorse the opposition as a future government. It should focus its work on supporting people-to-people contacts with Belarusians inside Belarus and preparing the opposition for leadership through training and capacity-building. At the same time, EU institutions could maintain working relationships with lower-ranking officials inside the regime so that they do not grow to view the EU with hostility.
- **Policy innovation:** A successful strategy requires the EU to be proactive in helping Belarusians move towards democracy. The EU should therefore take an active role in developing the opposition's European integration ambitions, for example by appointing an EU-wide Special Envoy to conduct relations with the opposition. The EU could also organise donor summits to help encourage external donors to invest into Belarus's future.

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## 1. Introduction

The European Union's strategy to Belarus could be better: it could make better use of resources and it could do better to attain its goals.

Arguably, the EU does not have a full-fledged strategy. As MEP Juozas Olekas stated, 'The EU has "policies" not strategies.' Policies respond to a particular issue area or challenge and the nature of policymaking does not necessarily amount to a strategy which would try to align the resources available to the EU with specific goals for Belarus.

The process for developing an EU strategy must begin by specifying the goals that the strategy aims to attain. These may be, *inter alia*, a people capable of a smooth democratic transition and improvements in the human rights situation in Belarus. While war-related goals are understandable, the EU member states may have more efficient means available to them in this respect and might instead recognise their limited ability to constrain Belarus's role.

The second step is to assess the kinds and quantities of resources available to the EU – for example in terms of the competencies that member states have handed the institutions in the Treaties and budgets for relevant activities – and relate these to the goals that have been set out in the European Council's conclusions.

### EU goals for Belarus

Prior to August 2020, EU relations were guided by the February 2016 European Council conclusions.<sup>1</sup> The Council expressed its continued concerns about the human rights situation in Belarus, called on the Belarusian authorities to implement the recommendations of various international election bodies, and called for the removal of obstacles to a free media. At the same time, it 'acknowledge[d] the steps taken by Belarus ... that have contributed to improving EU-Belarus relations' such as the release of political prisoners in 2015 and engagement in the Eastern Partnership. As a consequence, it lifted most of its restrictive measures ('sanctions') on the country.

The EU reviewed those conclusions in the aftermath of the August 2020 election and in light of the violence meted out by the regime on protesters. Thereafter policy was guided by the Council's conclusions of their meeting on 12 October 2020.<sup>2</sup> As well as condemning violence and torture, the Council announced sanctions against individuals – significantly, it left Lukashenka himself off the initial list as an olive branch of sorts. A series of sanctions packages, including both targeted and sectoral sanctions, followed in an effort to bring about an improvement in the situation in the country.

While sanctions were ratcheted up in phases, they were largely reactive rather than reflecting planned escalation. For example, the EU adopted its fourth package of sanctions in June 2021, a month after the Belarusian authorities forced a passenger jet crossing its airspace to land in order to arrest a dissident on board. The fifth set of sanctions was in reaction to the Belarusian authorities' role in fostering a migration crisis in the autumn of 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Council conclusions on Belarus (15 February 2016). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/02/15/fac-belarus-conclusions/> (accessed 12 February 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Council conclusions on Belarus (12 October 2020). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46076/council-conclusions-on-belarus.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2024).

In its October 2020 conclusions, the Council had reiterated the importance of people-to-people contacts and underscored its willingness to support a democratic transition. Both of these positions, however, were connected to the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative. Belarus formally suspended its participation in the initiative in mid-2021 which foreclosed an avenue for influencing the authorities and reaching what remained of civil society. This discomfited the EU's 'support, solidarity and sanctions' policy.

The EU's policy was further compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Belarus's role in the ongoing war. This has muddied the purpose of EU sanctions: it may always have been the case that different stakeholders had different goals for, and expectations of, sanctions; but that became increasingly the case as existing sanctions came to be linked to goals related to the war that were not the basis of their adoption. The Council adopted new conclusions in February 2024 that did not significantly change its positions.<sup>3</sup>

The political environment will keep shifting in directions that are largely unforeseeable. This paper therefore proposes that the EU moves away from a reactive Belarus policy and instead adopt a clearly defined strategy that will bring Belarusians a future that the EU envisages for all Europeans.

## EU resources

The EU does have resources. This is evident from the range of policies it has tried in respect of Belarus, from engagement to soft power to isolation and sanctions. Pavel Slunkin emphasised the lack of consistency over time and how this has undermined the power of the EU's resources. He pointed out how, after the 2010 presidential election, the EU had stated that the release of political prisoners was the condition for improved relations although the EU allowed relations to improve before the condition was fully met. Engagement between 2015 and 2020 brought improvements in media freedom and civil society, but Slunkin noted that each approach – whether based on engagement with the regime or its isolation – keep coming up against the same problem: can the EU accept the authoritarian regime of Lukashenka and continued human rights abuses? By repeatedly answering No, the EU kept having to reverse its course and adopt a contradictory approach.

After the falsified 2020 presidential election in Belarus, the EU pursued a two-handed policy. On the one hand, it adopted restrictive measures ('sanctions') against the Belarus regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and increased these through a series of new 'packages'. The EU believed that this would bring concessions although this appears to have been a miscalculation and, as Slunkin said, Lukashenka appears to believe that time is on his side.

On the other hand, the EU endorsed Lukashenka's rival on the 2020 ballot paper, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and earmarked financial support to Belarusian civil society initiatives for the post-Lukashenka future. But Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine led to a loss of focus in Belarus policy because the country's role in the war has shifted the goals for policies already in place. Nonetheless the EU retains strong soft power resources which, applied with care, can complement its economic and diplomatic power.

Finally, Slunkin said that the EU could organise donor summits for Belarus as it does for Ukraine. This would be a way of communicating the EU's strategy more widely and augmenting its resources.

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<sup>3</sup> Council conclusions on Belarus (19 February 2024), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/belarus-council-conclusions-confirm-eu-s-unwavering-support-for-democracy-and-human-rights/> (accessed 26 March 2024).

## 2. Continuing and changing challenges

If the European Union is to adopt an effective strategy towards Belarus, it must recognise that it faces several challenges. The participants in the WUB Hub webinar identified several such challenges:

- (i) *Policies have seen limited success to date:* Lukashenka has clearly not responded favourably and the situation inside Belarus has deteriorated since 2020. As one speaker at the webinar suggested, many now see Belarus sliding towards totalitarianism. While what has happened in the past does not determine future success or failure, the lack of success of past policies does suggest that a rebooting and rethink would be beneficial, not least given the severe changes taking place in the region at a time of war.
- (ii) *Achieving consensus among member states:* Member states have not granted the EU institutions exclusive competence over foreign policy, with the consequences that the EU requires consensus from its member states to act. This results in policies that oftener than not reflect the lowest common denominator. To some extent this is unavoidable given the member states' different positions: geography ensures that Poland's political and economic interests differ greatly from Ireland's, for example. It may also find echo in differences between the EU institutions with the Parliament directly accountable to voters whereas the European External Action Service answers to the Commission or Council. Despite this, the EU members proclaim common values that they guide their policies and that provides the starting point for developing a better strategy.
- (iii) *Turning political will into proactive measures:* As already noted, sanctions have generally been adopted as reactions to dismal behaviour by the Lukashenka regime, such as the clampdown in 2020 or the forced landing of a passenger jet flying through Belarusian airspace. Valery Kavaleuski said that he saw plenty of political will but that it needed to be matched by practical steps and he pointed out that only one package of sanctions had been imposed on the country in 2023. He also remarked on a lack of concrete actions to hold Lukashenka accountable for crimes committed in the context of the Ukraine war (e.g. complicity in the forced relocation of children from Ukraine).
- (iv) *Russian 'life support' for Belarus:* Russia is a major obstacle for the EU in dealing with Belarus. MEP Olekas spoke of Russia's 'life support' for the Lukashenka regime and Kavaleuski noted that Russia is 'not sleeping on Belarus' as it strives to subjugate the country. Olekas also noted that other outside actors such as China have considerable influence with Belarus.

## 3. Opening up the opportunities

### Policy linkage

- (i) *Aligning Russia and Belarus policies:* Some argue that Belarus and Russia should be treated identically, others that they should be treated differently. The guiding principle must be what will achieve the specified goals of the EU's strategy.

Those who argue that Belarusian sovereignty must be prioritised usually argue that Belarus policy must be separate from Russia policy to help maintain its separateness. The drawback of this approach, most evident in the case of sanctions, is that it creates loopholes that the Belarusian state can exploit; if a good is sanctioned in Russia but not Belarus, the latter simply imports and reexports the good, regardless of ostensible export controls. That is clearly a counterproductive situation for the EU and reduces its ability to attain policy goals.

The risk of the alternative approach is that Lukashenka abandons any pretence of independence. Although one might argue this would also lead to Belarus joining Russia's war effort, that is unlikely given the unpopularity of the war in Belarus and also because of Lukashenka's evident enjoyment of presenting himself as an autonomous actor and national leader. Treating Belarus similarly to Russia, therefore, is more likely to constrain the Belarusian state's manoeuvrability in its foreign policy. While it will weaken the few remaining ties to EU states in the short term, this will resolve over the longer term owing to geography, with eastern European states being the most logical markets for Belarusian goods and services.

The EU's trenchant criticism of Russia's presidential election of March 2024 offers an opportunity to align policies.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, of course, the EU could be more active in closing loopholes and penalising firms involved in sanctions busting trade.

- (ii) *A distracted Russia?* Recognising that Russia is preoccupied with its invasion of Ukraine, and its resources focused on that theatre, there is some opportunity to act in ways that Russia cannot counter. A strategy that weakens Lukashenka does therefore have a chance of undermining the lifeline Putin gives to Lukashenka at a time when Russia is weakened in its capacity to respond.

For this reason, MEP Olekas noted that Belarus policy should be coordinated with policy measures taken in respect of Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine's victory over Russia and the democratisation of Russia itself, while not imminent outcomes, would nonetheless both facilitate democratic change in Belarus. However, as Kavaleuski argued, it is limiting to assume that Belarus's democratisation can only follow change in other countries, and he implored the EU not to fall into this 'misconception.' The EU should not allow a belief that Russia or Ukraine must change first become a pretext for continuing its reactive policymaking to Belarus.

## Proactive engagement

- (iii) *From reactive to proactive:* The current reactive approach to Belarus is a poor use of resources. As MEP Olekas remarked, a consultation across EU institutions is necessary to change the culture to one that fosters proactive strategies. Moreover, Kavaleuski observed that Russia has a very proactive approach to Belarus and, in his view, is

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<sup>4</sup> Statement by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on Russian presidential elections (18 March 2024), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/statement-high-representative-behalf-eu-russian-presidential-elections-and-their-non-applicability\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/statement-high-representative-behalf-eu-russian-presidential-elections-and-their-non-applicability_en) (accessed 26 March 2024).



succeeding because of the lack of pushback from the international community. A proactive EU strategy is therefore essential.

- (iv) *EU institutions' engagement with Belarusians:* According to MEP Olekas, the EU pursues an 'all-inclusive' approach. The European Parliament's delegation, for example, has regular meetings with the democratic opposition to Lukashenka, independent media and think tanks, all of whom are in exile. Importantly, the engagement with the Belarusian democratic movement must focus on preparing them for the post-Lukashenka future: this might mean, for example, working with the opposition to train them for leadership and with those in the diaspora who wish to return to Belarus in the future.
- (v) *Coordination with Canada, the US, the UK, and the Council of Europe:* As Kavaleuski emphasised in his remarks, coordination between different actors produces efficiency. He welcomed those EU states that have appointed special envoys for relations with the Belarusian democratic forces and encouraged the EU – and also the US and UK – to institutionalise ties more formally in this way. He also expressed gratitude for member states' positions on not recognising Lukashenka but called on all member states to go further and to recognise Tsikhanouskaya as the legitimate representative of the Belarusian people, considering that not doing so was 'stopping halfway'.

The United Kingdom has played a role in lobbying for democracy and human rights issues pertaining to Belarus in international organisations. Lydia Stone highlighted, *inter alia*, the UK's role in forming the OSCE Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus and the efforts the UK goes to maintain regular dialogue with the European External Action Service as well as with individual member states. The UK continues to share EU objectives and values and cooperates with the EU and US on the ground in Minsk and elsewhere, and there are 'points of contact at many levels.'

- (vi) *Lukashenka is not the regime:* Belarus has been instrumental in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and many in the political system complicit in the repression of society since 2021. At the same time, Slunkin noted that Lukashenka is not the whole regime and there are individuals in the system that could be engaged with if the EU chose that as part of its strategy. Given the large numbers employed in the political system, the EU might think about not turning all these individuals against the EU since they may be important for the country's future stability.

## Policy innovation

- (vii) *The Belarus democratic opposition's ambitions:* Kavaleuski emphasised the opposition's shared values with the EU and the opportunities it provides for the country's development. But he says the Belarusian opposition need the EU on board and as partners and pointed out a pathway, which begins with a route into the Council of Europe since one cannot be a member of the EU without also being a member of the Council of Europe.
- (viii) *Communicating with those inside the country:* The EU's engagement with the opposition must also be tied to ensuring Belarusians inside Belarus are involved as far as is possible. The 'European Path' that the opposition-in-exile recently proclaimed must find ways of carrying the Belarusian public with it.



## *4. Policy recommendations: From policy to strategy*

### **1. The EU should adopt a proactive strategy for Belarus based on clearly specified goals**

The EU has largely adopted reactive policies in respect of Belarus. An EU-wide consultation should establish clear goals and assess the ways and means it has available to best meet those goals. It is natural that different stakeholders have different goals in respect of any country but that fosters incoherence; the goals must be established and maintained, while being reviewed against suitable benchmarks. Suitable goals based on existing EU policy include improving the human rights situation and eventually a transition to democracy.

### **2. To constrain Belarus's freedom of manoeuvre, the EU should align its Belarus and Russia policies on sanctions and diplomacy**

A coordinated set of sanctions on Belarus and Russia will minimise the possibility of Belarus exploiting loopholes. The risk of Belarus losing its sovereignty is not greatly affected by the EU's policy in this respect. The EU should also link its diplomatic policies for the two countries for similar reasons, working through international organisations and with partners.

### **3. To underscore the de-legitimisation of Lukashenka and its support for a transition to democracy, the EU should appoint a Special Envoy to work with the exiled Belarusian democratic movement**

While the opposition is calling for all member states to recognise Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a legitimate representative of the Belarusian people, the EU could also find other ways of institutionalising its relations with the democratic opposition. The appointment of an EU-wide Special Envoy would be a logical step to help to work towards the opposition's ambitions of acceding to the EU in the future, which aligns with the EU's own goal of a democratic transition for Belarus. It could also organise donor conferences to engage outside actors with the country's future.

### **4. Include an element of surprise**

Current EU policy has been a predictable cycle of sanctions. The Belarusian regime has been able to take steps to mitigate the effects of sanctions and it has some success in adapting its economy through import substitution and trade reorientation. With few parts of the economy left to sanction the effects risk becoming ever weaker. A good strategy includes an element of surprise for the target state and the EU could try to develop innovative measures that the autocratic regime will not be prepared for.

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