

Minsk seeks to revive its relations with the US

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On 20 June, General Keith Kellogg, the US President's special envoy for Ukraine, met with Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk. He was accompanied by his deputy, John Cole, and Christopher Smith, who is responsible for Belarusian affairs at the State Department. According to information shared by the Belarusian side, the topics of discussion included the resolution of the 'conflict in Ukraine', Western sanctions against Belarus, the situation in the Middle East, and Minsk's relations with Moscow and Beijing. The following day, 14 political prisoners were released, pardoned by Lukashenka 'on humanitarian grounds' and 'at the request of the US President'. Among them was Siarhei Tsikhanouski, one of the leaders of the opposition in 2020 and husband of the democratic movement's leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Also pardoned were three Polish citizens, two citizens of Japan and Latvia each, and one each from Estonia, the United States, and Sweden.

The visit by the US delegation marks a continuation of Minsk–Washington talks that have been ongoing since at least February this year, when Smith's visit resulted in the release of three political prisoners, including a US citizen. Subsequent negotiations with the regime were reportedly conducted by Cole, resulting in the late April release of Youras Ziankovich (a Belarusian-American dual citizen). Minsk is determined to leverage the US administration's policy towards Russia to increase its own agency on the international stage. Thus, the release of Tsikhanouski may be regarded as the price the regime was prepared to pay for Kellogg's visit – and as an investment in deeper engagement with the United States.

Commentary

- **Lukashenka regards Donald Trump's administration as an opportunity to at least ease Belarus's international isolation.** The pardon of 14 political prisoners is intended to encourage the United States to continue dialogue and official visits, thereby partially legitimising Lukashenka as a politician seeking peace in the region. The ultimate objective is likely to be positioning Minsk as the venue for potential Russian-Ukrainian talks, as was the case in 2014–2015. Statements by Russian officials suggest that Moscow is considering such an option – but it remains unacceptable to both Kyiv and the West. It is also unlikely that the reactivation of Belarus–US contacts is taking place without the Kremlin's knowledge.
- **Beyond its desire to gain reputational benefits, Minsk is also seeking a relaxation of US economic sanctions.** Despite official declarations of 'full resilience' to Western sanctions, Belarus has felt their effects acutely. The US embargo on potash fertilisers, introduced in early 2022, led to a 40–60% drop in exports of this product, which is of strategic

importance to the Belarusian economy (exact figures have not been made public). Thus far, however, there has been no confirmation of any actual decision by the US to ease the sanctions regime.

- **Minsk has traditionally sought to capitalise on divisions among Western countries.** In a lengthy interview given after Kellogg's visit, KGB chief General Ivan Tertel praised the 'good' Trump, who 'shows understanding and is ready to cooperate', while criticising the 'bad, unconstructive EU'. Tertel explicitly pointed to EU member states – particularly 'confrontational neighbours', namely Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia – claiming that they are responsible for the crisis in Belarus–EU relations. Consequently, it appears that Minsk's goal is to open dialogue solely with the United States. Meanwhile, the Belarusian regime will continue to strengthen cooperation with Hungary and Slovakia in order to block EU decisions that are unfavourable to it (such as new sanctions) and will persist in discrediting countries that firmly support sanctions pressure.
- **The release of Siarhei Tsikhanouski is likely to create a new dynamic within the Belarusian political exile community.** The pardon of one of the most vocal critics of Alyaksandr Lukashenka during the 2020 presidential campaign may lead to shifts in the balance of power within the Belarusian opposition, the nature of which remain difficult to predict at this stage. It is unlikely that the ambitious and energetic Tsikhanouski will refrain from re-engaging in efforts to overthrow the regime that made him a victim (in December 2021, more than a year after his arrest, he was sentenced to 18 years in a penal colony). His strong determination to oppose Lukashenka was evident during his press conference, where he stated that he had 'many plans' for opposition and media activity, including launching his own YouTube channels. His remarks also suggest that he will be one of the most uncompromising critics of the regime. Coupled with the fact that he spent five years in extremely harsh prison conditions, this may position him as a leader of the radical wing of the exile community.