

Eased sanctions for the release of 123 prisoners as US–Belarus relations continue to thaw

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Following talks with Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk on 12–13 December, the US President's Special Envoy for Belarus, John Coale, announced the lifting of the embargo on Belarusian potash fertilisers, originally imposed in 2021. In return, the Belarusian dictator pardoned 123 individuals – mostly Belarusian nationals, including numerous political prisoners and opposition activists. Among them were his 2020 election rival Viktor Babaryka; protest leaders Maria Kalesnikava, Maxim Znak, Paval Sieviaryniec; and the prominent human rights defender Ales Bialiatski. Other released prisoners included citizens of Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Latvia, Japan, and Poland. Of this group, 114 individuals were forcibly deported to Ukraine, with the remainder sent to Lithuania. Minsk cited the 'lifting of illegal sanctions targeting potash exports imposed by Joe Biden's administration' as the reason for the prisoners' release. The Belarusian administration also declared their willingness to 'export fertilisers in any direction that is profitable for us'.

John Coale expressed hope for a 'further normalisation' of relations with Minsk, which he suggested could lead to the release of 'a thousand political prisoners'. He referred to Lukashenka's 'valuable advice' on ending Russia's war against Ukraine and signalled his 'willingness' to de-escalate the dispute with Lithuania (see ['Belarusian balloons prompt emergency situation in Lithuania'](#)). This marked Coale's second visit to Minsk, but his first in the role of Special Envoy. During his previous visit on 11 September, 51 individuals were released in exchange for the lifting of sanctions on the airline Belavia (see ['The Belarusian regime releases 52 political prisoners - Lukashenka is playing a game with the US'](#)).

The lifting of the most severe element of US sanctions on Belarus – the embargo on potash fertilisers – in exchange for the release of several political prisoners represents a success for Minsk. However, the extent of the economic benefits will depend on the EU's position, including whether Vilnius permits the resumption of transshipment through the port of Klaipėda.

Commentary

- **The lifting of the embargo on potash fertilisers, without corresponding concessions from the EU, will only partially improve the situation for Belarusian exporters.** They will regain access to the US market, which before the ban accounted for only 4% of Belarus's potash exports, then valued at an estimated \$2–3 billion annually. Transactions in US

dollars will also be permitted, which should facilitate sales to the Brazilian and Indian markets, both of which were highly profitable prior to 2022. However, without access to the port of Klaipėda – blocked by Vilnius since February 2022 – and without the lifting of EU sanctions, restoring the profitability of exports to their previous high level will remain impossible.

- **The release of a group of political prisoners comes at little cost to the Minsk regime, in exchange for growing international legitimacy and the easing of sanctions pressure.** Major concessions – such as ending repression, engaging in dialogue with the opposition, or holding free elections – would, from Lukashenka's perspective, amount to relinquishing power. This rules out any prospect of dialogue with the EU, which continues to demand precisely those measures from the regime. However, it appears likely that Minsk is seeking to persuade Washington to exert pressure on EU member states, particularly Lithuania, to ease sanctions and reopen access to the port of Klaipėda.
- **The omission of Andrzej Poczobut from the list of pardoned individuals confirms the regime's unwillingness to reach any understanding with Warsaw.** This is a deliberate move, as the regime views Poland, along with Lithuania, as one of its main 'enemies' in the hybrid war it is waging jointly with Moscow. Minsk continues to use aggressive rhetoric, accusing Warsaw of 'unjustified militarisation', despite the Polish authorities having reopened the border crossings at Bobrowniki and Kuźnica on 17 November. Migration pressure also remains high – on 11 December alone, as many as 180 instances of illegal border crossings were recorded. Migrants were transferred as part of a special operation that involved the use of a purpose-built tunnel.
- **By releasing nearly all opposition leaders, the regime aims to escalate tensions within the political exile community.** The reintegration of strong, authoritative figures into life of the diaspora may deepen the already acute disputes surrounding Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's leadership. The release of her husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, in June – also the result of US efforts – has already proved challenging, as he entered into open conflict with Tsikhanouskaya's advisers.
- **The Trump administration's policy towards Belarus allows it to demonstrate the effectiveness of a pragmatic, transactional approach to authoritarian regimes.** The process of releasing political prisoners also aligns with the US President's peace-oriented and humanitarian agenda. Previous statements from White House officials suggest that the stabilisation of relations with Belarus rests on the role the country could play in the peace process in Ukraine, serving as an additional channel of communication with Russia. Washington also hopes to weaken Belarus–Russia ties. Lukashenka is attempting to exploit these expectations by positioning himself as a valuable intermediary in efforts to end the Russia–Ukraine war. His goal is to use the Trump administration's involvement in the peace process to bolster Belarus's regional standing, as was the case in 2014.
- **The lifting of sanctions on potash fertilisers coincides with threats from the US President to impose tariffs on Canadian fertilisers** – measures aimed at boosting domestic production – as well as with a presidential executive order mandating an investigation into unfair pricing practices among fertiliser producers. Trump is under significant pressure from the agricultural sector, which he sought to alleviate a few days

ago by announcing a \$12 billion support package for farmers. One of the key challenges facing US food producers is the high cost of fertilisers. Opening up to imports from Belarus may serve as a means of exerting pressure on Canadian suppliers, who currently account for more than 80% of US potash fertiliser imports.