



Policy Brief

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How To Help Belarus Preserve Its Sovereignty and Democratic Resilience

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Summary

Belarus has entered a phase of authoritarian consolidation, built on systemic repression, aimed at preventing any repetition of the mass protests of 2020. “Extremism” designations, criminal prosecutions, constant surveillance, and discrimination against perceived opponents increasingly established in law have pushed most meaningful public activity abroad or into low-visibility forms at home. Governance has become more vertical and personalist. The 2022 constitutional reforms and the empowerment of the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly have created a transition architecture, for which there is no timetable, offering a potential base for Lukashenka’s influence if he steps down from the presidency. Civil society has been devastated domestically, with about 2,000 organizations liquidated since 2020. The political opposition remains institutionalized and internationally recognized, but it is becoming more pluralistic, especially after the release of prominent figures arrested around the 2020 election.

The international position of Belarus is anchored in asymmetric dependence on Russia. Moscow remains its key economic donor and security patron, offering privileged market access, logistic routes for sanctions adaptation, preferential energy supplies, and debt relief. The country’s role in the Russia–Ukraine war has evolved: it is now less a staging ground for invasion than a channel for Moscow to apply strategic pressure on NATO, including high-profile signaling through deployments and exercises. At the same time, last year saw a notable foreign-policy shift with a partial thaw with the United States, structured around prisoner releases in exchange for sanctions relief. By contrast, the EU’s approach is essentially frozen: sanctions have continued to expand, and Minsk’s relations with Lithuania and Poland remain especially turbulent.

Three plausible scenarios for 2026 emerge from this landscape. First, engagement with the United States could fail, leading the regime to end political prisoner releases, empower hardliners, and step up repression and “escalation for de-escalation” tactics on its border with the EU. Second, a deeper thaw with Washington could proceed while EU relations remain frozen, producing large-scale prisoner releases without meaningful reforms and reshaping exile politics. Third, a “frozen front” in Ukraine and fragmenting Western unity could create wider diplomatic space for Minsk, reduce the salience of human rights, tighten Lukashenka’s grip on power, and weaken European coherence and the democratic forces.

External actors need to combine deterrence, containment, and long-term societal investment toward Belarus. They should avoid measures that further push Belarusian mobility, education, and travel flows toward Russia. Visa and mobility policies are among the EU’s best instruments for sustaining the connection of Belarusians to democratic societies Europe. War-linked sanctions should continue to constrain Minsk’s ability to support Russia’s war effort. Reinforcing NATO’s eastern flank and maintaining military-to-military communication with Belarus reduce the risk of unintended escalation. At the same time, “non-war” sanctions and broader isolation tools should be leveraged to secure large prisoner releases and reductions in repression as well as to support de-escalation on the Belarus–EU border. Finally, European actors should increase support for Belarusian civil society and democratic forces as US funding has fallen, prioritizing initiatives with real domestic reach and backing low-visibility networks inside Belarus through more flexible support mechanisms.

Introduction

Belarus's situation today is shaped by the interplay of the entrenched domestic authoritarian regime and the rapidly evolving regional security environment. Since the fraudulent 2020 presidential election and the ensuing mass protests, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has rebuilt the stability of his regime through systemic repression, the securitization of governance, and a renewed push for personalist rule. At the same time, Belarus's external posture has been reshaped by its deepened alliance with Russia, the consequences of the Russia's war on Ukraine, and signs of a more transactional engagement by the United States, while relations with the EU, particularly the neighboring member states, remain strained. This brief assesses Belarus's domestic trajectory and power structures, the condition of civil society and the opposition, and key socioeconomic trends. It then examines the country's international context, outlines three scenarios for the next 12 to 18 months, and concludes with recommendations for external actors.

The Domestic Context

Belarus's political trajectory since 2020 has been defined by a hard turn toward comprehensive coercive governance. The protests around the election posed an unprecedented challenge to Lukashenka's rule, whose response was designed to make a repetition of the events of that year impossible. The initial wave of violent repression, mass detentions, and torture in custody was followed by a sustained campaign of criminal prosecutions, administrative harassment of opponents and critics, and the steady expansion of designating independent media, civic initiatives, and informal networks as "extremist". Even as the regime has released some high-profile political prisoners last year, the security services have continued to arrest others, ensuring that the overall number has declined only slowly, if at all. The chilling effect has been reinforced through constant surveillance, pressure in workplaces and universities, and discrimination increasingly embedded in law against the regime's political opponents. As a result, the earlier facade of competitive politics has been eliminated and most meaningful public political activity has either relocated abroad or persists domestically in reduced, low-visibility forms. Alongside coercion, the state has also intensified a system-wide push to standardize "ideological work", formalized at the top level by Directive No. 12 on implementing the "fundamental principles of the ideology of the Belarusian state", which Lukashenka signed last April. Part of this campaign is a more explicit messianic personality cult portraying Lukashenka as the indispensable guarantor of sovereignty, stability, and order. The regime has increasingly used extraterritorial repression against its opponents abroad, combining harassment and intimidation of their relatives who remain in Belarus (including summonses, searches, and administrative pressure) with property seizures and other forms of coercion. Most notably, a September 2023 decree bars Belarusian embassies and consulates from issuing or renewing passports and other key documents for most citizens abroad, effectively forcing emigrants to return to Belarus to resolve issues relating to official documents.¹

Since 2020, the regime has consolidated itself into a highly vertical and personalist model, with decision-making concentrated around Lukashenka and the Presidential Administration. Formal state bodies such as the government, parliament, and local executive committees carry out implementation and routine administration but do not set the political direction. The growth in the political influence of the security services has been a significant change. They are no longer merely an enforcement arm of the regime;

they also increasingly set the agenda and operation rules for other branches of government. This shift, which deepened after 2022, when the regime's security mindset hardened further amid the Russia-Ukraine war and Minsk's closer alignment with Moscow. The State Security Committee (KGB) has played a leading role in this, alongside the Interior Ministry and other bodies that manage internal control. The constitutional revisions introduced in 2022 have also embedded the Security Council in the emergency succession framework, giving it a central role in decision-making in case of developments such as the assassination or sudden incapacitation of the president.

The 2022 constitutional changes created mechanisms that could support a managed transition to a post-Lukashenka system without committing to any timeline. The most important element is the embedding of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly into the constitution. It was granted powers that, in theory, could enable it to constrain future presidents and even annul the result of a presidential election. The assembly also offers a base for Lukashenka's influence if he were to step down from the presidency and still want to remain the system's ultimate arbiter. His rhetoric keeps the question of a transition alive. He regularly speaks about "a change of generations" and frames himself as a leader who is leaving the stage. Yet there is little evidence of preparations for a handover of the presidency. There is no clearly designated successor, no visible legitimacy-building for one, and no redistribution of authority that would reduce the system's dependence on Lukashenka.

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Civil society inside Belarus is squeezed and fragmented, having been forced into survival mode. Many organizations that once provided social services, human rights protection, community development, and cultural activities have been liquidated, forced into self-dissolution, or driven into exile under the pressure of criminal charges. By the end of last September, at least 1,970 civil society organizations (including associations, foundations, nonstate institutions, trade unions, etc.) had been dissolved or compelled to self-dissolve due to the regime's "cleanup" campaign launched in 2021—more than half of those that had been registered before 2020.² The boundary between political and nonpolitical activity has blurred considerably in the eyes of the regime because independence itself is treated as a potential threat. This has produced deep self-censorship in civil society and a shift toward low-visibility, informal solidarity efforts rather than institutional work. At the same time, civil society abroad has expanded and become more structured; experts estimate that 400–600 organizations have been established abroad, mainly in Poland and Lithuania.³ Exiled actors now carry out much of the documentation of abuses by the regime, humanitarian assistance, legal support for political prisoners and their families, independent monitoring, and international advocacy. However, they face considerable challenges, notably funding volatility (especially after the end of US government funding last year), transnational repression, and a widening disconnect from audiences in Belarus.

The political opposition is best understood as an exile-centered ecosystem with a shared origin in 2020 but growing pluralism. The core remains associated with 2020 presidential candidate Sviatlana

Tsikhanouskaya, who continues to be widely recognized internationally as the leader of Belarus's democratic forces. Institutionally, this ecosystem includes her office, the United Transitional Cabinet, and the Coordination Council. This architecture has helped preserve continuity and keep Belarus on the international agenda. However, as the events of 2020 have receded, strategic disagreements have become more visible. One major debate concerns whether to engage with the regime or to pursue its isolation. A group led by Tatsiana Khomich and two former members of the Tsikhanouskaya's Transitional Cabinet, Valery Kavaleuski and Volha Harbunova, has argued for more active dialogue with the regime, often framed around the release of political prisoners. However, the dominant approach still prioritizes pressure and nonrecognition of Lukashenka. The release from prison last year of prominent figures arrested around the 2020 election—Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka, and Maria Kalesnikava—has added a new dimension to the opposition ecosystem. Their return to public life increases pluralism and reintroduces alternative leadership brands with their own constituencies. This raises the question of whether Tsikhanouskaya can sustain broadly accepted primacy, or whether the opposition will evolve into a looser coalition with multiple centers of authority.

Belarus's economy saw rapid growth in 2023–2024, primarily driven by Russian demand and by adaptation to a sanctions-shaped environment in which trade and production were reoriented eastward. However, momentum slowed in 2025 and the country is drifting toward stagnation. Structural constraints are accumulating: sanctions limit access to Western markets, technology, and finance; dependence on Russia for transit, credit, and demand has deepened. At the same time, emigration and demographic decline have tightened the labor market, prompting employers to compete aggressively for workers. This has resulted in sharp wage increases in recent years, with particularly strong growth since 2022. In the short run, this supports household consumption and can lift reported satisfaction with personal circumstances and socioeconomic optimism.⁴ Public opinion research by Belarusian and international pollsters has also indicated a notable "stability preference" among the population, reinforced by the perception that Belarus has avoided war on its territory while Ukraine continues to suffer.⁵

The International Context

Belarus's international context is shaped above all by its alliance with Russia, which remains its key economic backer and shock absorber. Moscow offers privileged access to the Russian market at a time when Belarus has lost much of its Western markets. Russia also provides the practical infrastructure for sanctions adaptation: transit routes, ports, and logistical services that enable Belarusian firms to continue to export, albeit at higher costs. Belarus continues to benefit from Russian oil and gas supplies on preferential terms, which is central to its economic model. Russia has also repeatedly assisted with debt servicing through restructurings and deferrals, thereby easing the fiscal pressure on the regime.⁶ In return, Minsk has stayed tightly aligned with Moscow's foreign policy and security priorities. Since 2022, Belarus's role in the war in Ukraine has evolved. It is no longer a potential staging ground for a large-scale invasion or the site of missile or drone launches. Instead, it has become a channel for Moscow to apply strategic pressure on NATO. In December, Lukashenka announced the deployment of Russia's Oreshnik missile system in the country. President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka have claimed that Belarus also provided facilities for Russia's tactical nuclear deployment in 2023, though there has not been clear evidence of this. The 2025 iteration of the annual Zapad joint strategic exercise was drew much attention, yet the

reported number of troops involved (approximately 30,000, with only about 1,000 Russian troops in Belarus) suggested limited Russian personnel and a degree of overstretch.

The most notable foreign-policy trend over the past year has been the partial thaw with the United States. Contacts have moved from occasional to a more structured, transactional process. The core bargain has been straightforward: releases of political prisoners in exchange for calibrated sanctions relief. Last September, US envoy John Coale visited Minsk, and the immediate outcome was the release of dozens of detainees and the lifting of US sanctions on the Belarusian state airline Belavia. A more significant step followed in December, when Belarus released (and expelled) 123 political prisoners, the largest single release since the crackdown after the 2020 election, while Washington eased sanctions on Belarusian potash exporters and indicated openness to further normalization. Coale's role has also been formalized as the US president's special envoy for Belarus. In January, President Donald Trump invited Lukashenka to join his newly proposed Board of Peace (an international body tied to his Gaza peace plan) as one of the founding members.⁷ Lukashenka has framed the engagement with the United States as an opportunity for a "big deal" with Trump, implicitly suggesting a broad lifting of remaining sanctions in exchange for the release of remaining political prisoners, and he has floated related ideas such as a possible presidential meeting and reopening the US embassy.⁸ The regime's ambition goes beyond sanctions relief. Lukashenka is trying to reinsert Belarus into regional diplomacy by positioning himself as a useful interlocutor with Russia and as a "translator" of Putin's intentions for Washington. The release of prisoners has also included the handover of dozens of Ukrainians to Kyiv, which Minsk uses to claim that it wants de-escalation. In addition, Belarus has become a venue for regular exchanges of prisoners of war and the bodies of fallen soldiers between Russia and Ukraine.

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Relations with the EU, by contrast, remain largely frozen and conflictual. The EU has not rushed to mirror the US experiment with engagement, maintaining its approach of nonrecognition of Lukashenka, sanctions, and support for civil society and the democratic forces. EU sanctions have been extended repeatedly, with the economy heavily affected by sectoral and financial ones related to its role in enabling Russia's war effort and for facilitating the circumvention of sanctions on Russia. Minsk has so far not made the kind of political gestures that the EU would see as meaningful change, either with regard to domestic repression or strategic alignment with Russia. Instead, it appears to be probing for indirect ways to engage. One has been diplomatic relations with the Vatican, historically a useful "starter" for cautious engagement with the EU. Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti's visit to Belarus last October was followed by the release of two imprisoned Catholic priests. In parallel, Minsk has assigned a senior diplomat, Yuri Ambrazevich, to restore communications with Western Europe.⁹ Track-Two dialog sessions in Minsk over the course of last year, bringing together the Foreign Ministry and Western (mostly European) experts, fit the same pattern. The result to date has been tactical messaging and occasional friendly rhetoric from Minsk rather than a tangible shift in relations.

The sharpest frictions are with Belarus's immediate EU neighbors, especially Poland and Lithuania, with security concerns and border politics dominant. The migration crisis that Minsk unleashed on the EU in 2021 has become a chronic feature of the relationship and a driver of hardening EU policies. This dynamic was compounded by military signaling surrounding Zapad-2025. Poland temporarily closed its border with Belarus in September, citing security concerns linked to the exercise. Lithuania's relationship with Belarus became especially turbulent late last year after repeated incursions of air balloons loaded with contraband cigarettes disrupted air traffic and fed a broader "hybrid threat" narrative. Vilnius closed its last two open border crossings temporarily, leaving approximately 1,000 Lithuanian trucks stranded in Belarus and prompting public threats from Lukashenka about possible confiscation. Such disputes matter because a significant easing of US sanctions would have limited economic impact if the main logistical constraints—EU sanctions, the loss of access to Lithuanian ports, and restrictive border regimes in neighboring states—remain in place. For example, after losing the route through the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda in 2022, potash exporters were forced onto more expensive alternatives via Russia. Against this backdrop, Minsk's diplomatic tactic has been to engage the United States since the start of the Trump administration. The fact that the group of political prisoners released in December has been sent to Ukraine rather than to Lithuania, as was common with earlier releases, reinforces the impression that the regime wants to sideline neighboring hawkish EU states in any normalization process.

Finally, Belarus has intensified its outreach to China as well as to other partners in the Global South—largely with political results rather than economic or trade achievements. In addition to Lukashenka's regular visits to China over the past years, Belarus joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member in 2024, a mostly symbolic move that helps it present itself as part of a China-led institutional space. Last April, Minsk engaged with Pakistan around on a headline initiative to bring large numbers of Pakistani workers to Belarus to ease labor shortages. Last August, Lukashenka hosted Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian in Minsk, when the two sides discussed expanding military-technical and sanctions-circumvention cooperation. Lukashenka has also invested in ties with the Gulf states, including with a trip to the United Arab Emirates in December 2024. There is an active track with Oman with Lukashenka visiting Muscat in 2024, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik paying a first visit to Minsk last October, and Lukashenka following up with a working visit in November. These relationships have not produced an economic breakthrough comparable to Belarus's significant gains from Russian energy and market access. Their primary functions are to demonstrate that efforts to isolate Lukashenka have not fully worked and to claim a role as a partner for non-Western powers, particularly by signaling to China that Belarus is willing to act as its most politically reliable foothold in Europe, even as its room to maneuver remains constrained by Russia's primacy in its security and economic model.

What Lies Ahead?

Looking ahead, Belarus's trajectory over the next 12–18 months will likely be shaped less by incremental domestic change than by shifts in the external environment and Western policy cohesion. The key variables are whether the US engagement with Minsk deepens or collapses, whether the EU remains unified behind a hard line driven by security concerns in Eastern Europe, and how the war in Ukraine evolves. The scenarios below outline three plausible pathways that follow from different combinations of these factors, and highlight their implications for repression levels, regional escalation risks, and the

viability of Belarus's democratic forces in exile. In the most likely one, the recent US engagement ends, and Lukashenka increases repression and escalates towards the EU. In the second-most likely scenario, Washington's frustration at the continuing absence of a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine leads a greater thaw with Belarus that Lukashenka uses to get US sanctions removed through some concessions, while the EU hardens its position on sanctions and increases support to civil society. In the least likely scenario, Ukraine is forced to accept a ceasefire in an agreement that includes the end of US sanctions on Russia and Belarus, removing incentives for Lukashenka to ease repression, while the EU's position on Belarus begins to fragment.

Failed Engagement with the United States and Heightened Repression

Dialogue with the United States stalls as Washington expects the regime to release political prisoners in much larger numbers and to halt new detentions. Belarus, in turn, insists on US assistance in lifting EU sanctions and refuses to stop the deporting of released political prisoners. There is little enthusiasm within the EU to support this process: Belarus's EU neighbors view it as a source of hybrid threats and favor tightening sanctions rather than easing them. Meanwhile, the United States does not consider the Belarus issue sufficiently strategic to push it onto the transatlantic agenda, and it increasingly views engagement as fruitless.

Lukashenka no longer feels compelled to make concessions, the release of political prisoners ceases, and repression remains at a high level. The officials who advocated the thaw are sidelined. The collapse of the dialogue with Washington having confirmed their suspicions, the security services become even more influential and a hardline stance dominates the internal agenda once again.

Having concluded that the EU, particularly its eastern members, is the main obstacle to exiting its isolation, Minsk returns to its traditional tactic of escalation for de-escalation. Cross-border provocations against Poland and the Baltic states intensify and there is a renewed surge in the migrant crisis. Lithuania is forced to reroute more than half of international air traffic to Kaunas as Vilnius airport is repeatedly targeted by more hot-air balloons. Lithuania and Poland deem the late 2025 experiment to reopen border crossings a failure and restrict the movement of goods and passengers, leaving only one checkpoint operational at each border, citing heightened security risks.

Meanwhile, the democratic forces double down on their efforts to advocate tougher sanctions but continue to struggle to persuade EU decision-makers to design new ones in ways that minimize harm to the population. The exiled civil society and the diaspora in general are unenthusiastic about the EU's growing mobility restrictions, as these limit their ability to interact with people inside the country.

This scenario appears plausible because the US engagement with the regime in Minsk emerged from a set of circumstances that may no longer hold in the coming months, namely high attention by the Trump administration as it has sought a peace settlement and to open a dialogue with Russia, and an apparent belief among Trump's aides that Belarus could be a quick, low-cost diplomatic-humanitarian win. The United States may now reassess the difficulty of securing a mass political amnesty, or shift its attention away from Eastern Europe altogether; for example, if the peace process between Russia and Ukraine

collapses. Minsk, in turn, has already signaled that EU sanctions are a barrier to progress in the dialogue with Washington.¹⁰ Hence, the US dialogue could hit a wall, and little would restrain Lukashenka from an even more provocative external posture and intensified domestic repression if he concludes that it is no longer valuable.

A Thaw With the United States Amid Frozen EU Relations

The United States is increasingly frustrated by its inability to end the war in Ukraine, and its regional policy becomes even more transactional. It treats its sanctions on Belarus and Russia as bargaining chips in bilateral dealings. No longer seeking to push Moscow into peace negotiations, Washington is now open to easing restrictions on it and, by extension, on Minsk.

Lukashenka seizes the opportunity to accelerate the thaw with Washington. Through several rounds of negotiations, more than 1,000 political prisoners are released. The regime persuades the US administration that up to 100 “most radical” detainees, convicted of “terrorism”, must remain behind bars. Repression continues but in a milder form: most newly arrested individuals receive fines or other non-custodial penalties. Domestic politics remains highly restrictive and there is no incentive for the regime to roll back repression meaningfully. However, several of the most hawkish propagandists and senior security officials responsible for the crackdown since 2020 are moved into secondary positions, as Lukashenka suspects they are dissatisfied with the new phase in domestic politics.

The release of most of the political prisoners allows Trump to declare the crisis in Belarus resolved, to lift most US sanctions, and appoint an ambassador to Minsk, the first since 2008. Washington reduces its dialogue with the democratic forces to a minimum, while the remaining democracy-support programs funded by the National Endowment for Democracy are shut down.

Meanwhile, angered by what it sees as the United States’ realpolitik softening toward Russia and Belarus, the EU hardens its stance. It adopts new sanctions against both countries and increases its financial support for Belarusian civil society. Increased European support enables independent media and civil society organizations to absorb newly freed activists and journalists and to expand their activities. The release and expulsion of hundreds of former political prisoners reshapes the exiled civil society. Within the opposition, more new voices come to the fore with the recently released 2020 leaders such as Babaryka, Kalesnikava, Maksim Znak, and others. This reduces messaging unity in communication with the West, but it reinvigorates parts of the previously depoliticized diaspora.

This scenario’s plausibility rests on the extension of currently prevailing trends. In the coming months, it is quite possible that the United States will take further engagement steps alone, without parallel movement from the EU, and then that the regime in Minsk will be willing to release substantially more political prisoners in return. Lukashenka is likely to see a deeper thaw with Washington as strategically worthwhile—for the immediate relief it brings and for the longer-term possibility that normalization between the two countries could eventually drive some EU members to reengage with Minsk bilaterally.

Frozen Front, Fragmented West, and a New Space for Lukashenka

As a result of Russian advances in Ukraine, combined with US pressure, Kyiv accepts a ceasefire agreement based on a phased withdrawal from the remaining Ukraine-controlled parts of Donbas in exchange for Russia-controlled territories in the Kharkiv and Dnipro regions, accompanied by symbolic US security guarantees and an EU commitment to fund reconstruction. Russia, meanwhile, uses the ceasefire to rebuild its military capacity while continuing periodic hybrid provocations against European states.

As part of the agreement, the United States lifts most sanctions on Russia and on Belarus. This reduces Lukashenka's incentive to release all political prisoners or to ease repression. Washington requests only the release of the most prominent and medically vulnerable prisoners as a goodwill gesture, and Minsk complies.

In Europe, the voices of more transactional actors grow louder, arguing that the hard line on Russia and Belarus has reached a dead end and that regional stability requires alignment with the US engagement effort. Still, the United Kingdom and the Nordic, and Baltic states remain firm. The EU becomes bogged down in internal divisions: Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia obstruct the development of a common policy, threatening to block aid to Ukraine if energy sanctions on Russia are not weakened. France and Germany fail in their attempt to repair the rift within the EU. Several member states—including Austria, Czechia, France, and Italy—decide to send ambassadors back to Minsk, believing that isolation has exhausted its purpose and that Lukashenka must be included in regional security discussions to reduce risks to NATO's eastern flank.

Amid this EU disarray, appeals from the exiled opposition regarding the ongoing repression do not resonate as they did before, and Tsikhanouskaya struggles to maintain the visibility she has enjoyed. Growing disunity in the West mirrors a similar dynamic within the opposition: the factions challenging Tsikhanouskaya's leadership and advocating a more transactional, pragmatic diplomacy toward Lukashenka become increasingly vocal, gaining traction in Washington and some European capitals. Civil society suffers from an acute drop in international funding, as the human rights agenda rapidly slips down the list of European priorities. Lukashenka's grip on power tightens further, any need for meaningful changes to his rigid authoritarian regime having been eliminated by the more favorable external conditions: fragmentation among his European critics, removal of most US sanctions, continued Russian military restoration fueling Belarus's economy, and a new space to present himself as a constructive "pro-peace" actor.

This scenario is not implausible, given Russia's recent battlefield progress, the United States' clear reluctance to date to exert sustained pressure on the Kremlin, Trump's eagerness for a quick peace deal, and the rise of Russia-friendlier parties across Europe. At some point, the fragile equilibrium of European solidarity and Ukrainian military resilience may fracture under the combined weight of economic overstretch, war fatigue, and growing public exhaustion as well as sustained US pressure, paving the way for the developments outlined above.

What Help Does Belarus Need?

The leverage of external actors, such as the EU and its member states, over Lukashenka's regime is limited. Belarus's political economy is now deeply embedded in Russia's, and Minsk has largely adapted to sanctions through market reorientation, logistical rerouting, and new intermediaries, even if often at a higher cost and with long-term damage to modernization. These limitations matter, but they have not produced regime-threatening instability. On current trends, Russia appears willing and able to support Belarus to a degree sufficient for Lukashenka's survival. As a result, external actors should be realistic about what pressure alone can achieve.

At the same time, some factors create space for policies to keep Belarusian society connected to the rest of Europe and resistant to deeper "Russification". The democratic forces in exile remains institutionalized and internationally recognized, providing external actors with a credible counterpart and a channel for long-term engagement with Belarusian society. Public opinion shows a strong desire to preserve national distinctiveness and to avoid direct participation in the war. External actors could also use of the gap between the Kremlin's expansionism and the Lukashenka regime's interest in preserving at least minimal autonomy, even if Minsk remains strategically aligned with Moscow.

The widening divergence between European and US approaches is becoming a challenge. Limited coordination increases the risk of mixed signals and competing incentives. This could become even more consequential if the war in Ukraine ends in a way that leaves Moscow sufficiently strong to continue underwriting a pro-Russian dictatorship in Belarus. In this context, external actors should pursue a more integrated strategy that combines containment with sustained investment in social ties, democratic resilience, and conditional humanitarian outcomes.

External actors seeking to influence the political evolution of Belarus in a democratic direction should:

- **Avoid policies that accelerate the redirection of society toward Russia.** Even in an era of securitization, measures that unintentionally push Belarusian education, tourism, mobility, and professional networks away from Europe and toward Russia can be counterproductive. The isolation of Belarusian society strengthens the long-term interests of the Lukashenka and Putin regimes.
- **Treat visa and mobility policies as strategic instruments, not as technical afterthoughts.** For European actors in particular, visa facilitation, humanitarian pathways, academic mobility, and structured opportunities for work, study, and exchange are among the most potent remaining means for sustaining the connection of Belarusians to democratic societies Europe.
- **Continue constraining the ability of Belarus to support Russia's war effort through war-linked sanctions and their robust enforcement.** The priority should remain limiting the country's role in military logistics, dual-use goods flows, and sanctions circumvention. Military deterrence should remain robust and paramount, so that the regime in Minsk clearly understands the catastrophic consequences to itself and to Belarus of any escalation or participation in new Russian military efforts. Alongside the reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank, this requires the maintenance of

existing military-to-military communication channels with Belarus to reduce the risk of unintended escalation.¹¹

- **Use the existing “non-war” sanctions and broader isolation tools for leverage with the regime.** Restrictions on participation in sporting events, limits on selective official contacts, and certain other sanctions unrelated to the war in Ukraine can be used more flexibly than they are now to secure large releases of political prisoners and verifiable steps to reduce repression, as well as to support de-escalation, especially at the Belarus–EU border.¹² Any easing of them should be strictly conditional, incremental, and reversible. It should be linked to clear benchmarks and monitoring, and swiftly rolled back if Minsk backtracks or deepens its involvement in Russian military efforts.
- **Increase support for civil society as the voice of an alternative Belarus, prioritizing actors with demonstrable reach inside the country and practical, problem-solving impact.** Given Belarus’s strategic position and the stakes for European security, European and other external actors should increase assistance, especially as US funding might diminish further after its reduction last year. Funding should focus on initiatives that maintain significant domestic audiences and deliver tangible services. These include independent media, human rights and monitoring organizations, providers of legal aid and humanitarian assistance for refugees and former political prisoners, and projects that support free education and enhance Belarusian culture as an antidote to Russification.
- **Support the democratic forces as agenda-setters and encourage their unity as their pluralism grows.** The democratic forces have been effective at keeping Belarus on the international agenda, compared with many other exile movements. This achievement should be protected. Support should also reward efforts by political actors to maintain links with pro-democracy constituencies inside the country and to credibly represent their interests instead of drifting into exclusively diaspora-facing politics.
- **Invest in civic networks and low-visibility initiatives inside Belarus through creative support models.** This may require more flexible funding instruments than standard donor procedures and requirements allows, including smaller grants and partnerships that reduce exposure risks for recipients. In moments of political turbulence, it is such nonpolitical horizontal infrastructure that often becomes decisive for rapid coordination, trust-building, and the consolidation of domestic pro-democracy constituencies.

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