



Prospects for EU-Belarus Relations

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In response to Belarusian authorities' violations of human rights and forcing a Ryanair flight to land in Minsk, the European Union has imposed a fourth package of individual sanctions on Belarus and will introduce additional economic restrictions. The Belarusian authorities responded by suspending the state's participation in the Eastern Partnership. So far, this is the most serious crisis in EU-Belarusian relations, and as long as Alexander Lukashenka remains in power, no improvement should be expected.

The EU imposed sanctions on Belarus for the first time in 2004 in connection with the unexplained disappearance of four people who were Lukashenka's political opponents. Additional sanctions were introduced after the presidential elections in 2006 and 2010 in reaction to the regime's persecution of the [democratic opposition](#) and violations of human rights and election standards. Most of the sanctions were abolished by the EU in 2016, but in response to the rigging of the [presidential elections](#) in 2020 and the [wave of repression](#) that followed against civil society institutions and Belarusians who participated in protests, the EU returned to the policy of sanctions. The first package was imposed on Belarus in October 2020 (they included 44 people found responsible for the repression of the demonstrators), followed by two additional packages in November and December.

The EU Sanctions and Their Effects. On 21 June, the EU adopted the fourth sanctions package, targeting 166 natural persons and 15 economic entities. The restrictions mainly cover people responsible for the persecution of Belarusian protesters (police officers, prosecutors, judges, prison service officers), as well as some parliamentarians, pro-regime journalists, and the chancellors of several universities. They also affect enterprises whose owners are directly connected to Lukashenka.

What is more, on 24 June, the European Council approved economic sanctions enacting restrictions on trade in petroleum products (excluding gasoline and diesel oil), potassium fertilisers, and goods used in the production of tobacco products. A ban on the export to Belarus of equipment, technology, or software designed to monitor or intercept

internet and telephone communications, as well as dual-use goods and technologies was also introduced. Moreover, new loans may not be granted to Belarusian banks majority-owned by the state (in practice, three banks), trade in Belarusian securities or short-term bonds is blocked, and providing investment and insurance services to the state authorities was banned. In addition, the European Investment Bank will cease all payments for public sector projects, including existing contracts.

The economic restrictions introduced on 24 June are the most serious of all those the EU has imposed on Belarus so far. They will impact the Belarusian economy—leading to a probable decline in GDP of several percent—because they affect significant sectors, such as finance and the [petrochemicals](#), which are an important source of budgetary revenues for Belarus. The sanctions also make it significantly more difficult for the Belarusian authorities and economic entities to obtain foreign loans other than from Russia or China. Belarus also will have to find alternative markets for goods covered by the EU restrictions.

The Belarusian Authorities' Response. Belarus suspended its participation in the [Eastern Partnership](#) (EaP), the readmission agreement with the EU, and temporarily downgraded diplomatic relations with the EU—the Belarusian permanent representative to the EU was called back for consultations to Minsk, and the EU ambassador was ordered to leave Belarus.

The scope of cooperation with Belarus within the EaP was already limited (for example, it did not participate in the work

of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly), especially compared to countries that had signed Association Agreements with the EU. However, for both sides, this format was an important tool of political communication, which played a role during the crisis in bilateral relations following the elections in December 2010, among others. The suspension of Belarus' participation in the EaP will therefore deprive the Belarusian authorities of not only tools of financial support amounting to tens of millions of euros per year (including projects such as exchange of officials, building border infrastructure), but above all, an additional channel of dialogue with the EU.

Meanwhile, the suspension of the readmission agreement means that the EU countries bordering Belarus have lost the possibility to send back people detained during irregular crossings of the border. This is important mainly for Lithuania, which has been struggling with a wave of illegal migrants mainly from Iraq since June. The migrants are arriving in Belarus with the permission of the authorities—flown on Belarusian state airlines Belavia from Baghdad to Minsk—and then the border services have de facto ceased control, allowing the migrants to enter Lithuania.

Perspectives. EU-Belarus relations will remain tense in the coming months. At the request of Lithuania, the EU will prepare a fifth package of sanctions. Further violations of human rights by the regime and the lack of real reforms will not pave the way to a return to any form of bilateral dialogue.

However, it cannot be excluded that the Belarusian authorities, fearing further restrictions and hoping to ease the existing ones, will want to start a “game” with the EU and release at least some political prisoners, as they did before the lifting of most EU sanctions in 2016. In that case, the EU may consider suspending the imposition of further restrictions but point out that for the current sanctions to be lifted, the Belarusian authorities must comply with all demands, including the holding of new, democratic presidential elections, and to guarantee the protection of the state border.

It is also worth emphasising that sanctions are not the only way for the EU to influence Belarus. In May, the European Commission presented a plan of financial support for the country if there were any pro-democratic changes there. It provides financial support of at least €3 billion in five priority areas: innovative and competitive economy, transport and connectivity, innovation and digital transformation, green

economy, and democratisation of the state. Of this amount, €1.5 billion is to be allocated for investment and credit support and €400 million for assistance in structural reforms in the judiciary, healthcare, education, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises and civil society organisations. This package is intended to help Belarus stabilise its economy after the start of the transformation and be a source of economic growth.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The EU should continue to demand that the Belarusian authorities respect human rights, release political prisoners, carry out pro-democratic political reforms, and hold new, clean presidential elections. It is worthwhile for the EU and its Member States to increase the support package for Belarus in the event of democratic changes in the country, especially in areas related to institutional changes, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and modernisation of agriculture.

At the same time, the EU should continue to support all civil society initiatives, including non-governmental organisations and the media (grants, scholarships), and should not withdraw financing instruments of this type implemented so far under the EaP. Regardless of the suspension of the readmission agreement, the EU should maintain a simplified visa system for Belarusian citizens, which will be a clear signal that the EU supports Belarusians.

EU countries bordering Belarus should increase border protection with that country. These activities should be supported by Frontex and not only in Lithuania. In addition, EU countries should increase counterintelligence cooperation aimed at countering possible special operations conducted by the KGB against the Belarusian diaspora. The EU should also counteract the disinformation campaigns carried out by the Belarusian authorities by, for example, extending the scope and number of language versions of the EUvsDisinfo platform developed by the East StratCom Task Force (part of the European External Action Service) and better communication in this regard among EU Member States.

The EU should not engage in talks about the future of Belarus with Russia, as this would mean that it not only recognises in practice the concepts of dividing Europe into spheres of influence proposed by the Russian authorities, but because it also undermines Belarusian sovereignty.