Commentary
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# Belarus Hopes to Reset U.S. Ties

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**Summary**

Belarus wants to de-escalate tensions with Western countries, including with the United States under the new Trump administration. Minsk aims to restore political dialogue, hoping for reciprocal diplomatic gestures.

On 12 February, Minsk released three prisoners from captivity, including one U.S. citizen and two Belarusian nationals. The U.S. citizen was identified as 56-year-old Nikolai Shugaev. The other Belarusian nationals are Andrey Kuznechyk, a journalist with the Belarus Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and opposition activist Alena Maushuk. On the same day, all three individuals were handed over to U.S. diplomats, who then took them across the border to Lithuania. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued a statement welcoming "the release of an American unjustly detained in Belarus and two political prisoners".

This is the second time since U.S. President Donald Trump's inauguration that Minsk has freed U.S. citizens held captive in Belarus. On 26 January, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka stated that several foreign governments, including the United States, had asked through backchannel contacts for the release of their imprisoned nationals. He stressed that Minsk "hears them" and is ready to engage in a direct dialogue to find solutions. Shortly afterward, dual Belarusian-American citizen Anastasia Nuhfer was set free.

These recent releases follow several waves of freeing individuals whom Western governments qualify as political prisoners, which took place throughout the last year. Now, the process appears likely to continue. According to Natalia Eismont, Lukashenka's press secretary, Minsk has received additional similar requests from the new U.S. administration. She did not provide further details, however, explaining that the Belarusian side prefers confidentiality on this matter and that all questions can be directed to the White House and the U.S. State Department.

Commenting on the most recent release of the three individuals, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Christopher W. Smith, who visited Minsk to meet Belarusian counterparts and transport the freed prisoners to Lithuania, said that Belarus "did not get anything for this exchange". In his words, this "was a unilateral gesture by the Lukashenka authorities" looking to improve ties with the United States. The New York Times, however, reported that while in Minsk, the U.S. delegation held talks with Lukashenka and the head of the State Security Committee (KGB), Ivan Tertel. According to the paper's sources, Washington offered a "possible grand bargain" to Belarus, whereby the latter would "release a slew of political prisoners, including prominent ones" and, in return, the United States would relax sanctions on Belarusian banks and its potash industry.

Minsk's interest in deescalating tensions with both the U.S. and other Western countries as well appears increasingly obvious. Since at least the spring of 2024, the Belarusian government has sent such signals to the West by releasing prisoners and making public statements on bilateral relations. No positive changes in Belarus-West relations, however, have materialized so far. With the new Trump administration in office, Minsk hopes restoring political dialogue and proper diplomatic communication could finally be possible.

> Nothing in the words and actions of Belarusian officials, however, indicates that they intend to continue making long-term unilateral gestures without reciprocal steps from their Western counterparts.

If anything, even the recent prisoner release is considered in Minsk as a "cautious start to a substantive and mutually respectful discussion about the present and future of bilateral relations"[1]. In this regard, Minsk noticed that the Trump administration abstained from signing the joint Western declaration that deplored the 26 January presidential election in Belarus and considers it a positive gesture from the United States in response to the initial Belarusian gesture. In the eyes of Belarusian officials, the absence of Washington's signature under the joint statement signals the United States' readiness to respect non-interference in domestic affairs—a principle that Belarus presents as its red line in relations with the West.

Overall, even as Minsk signals its interest in improving ties with the United States and the West, it does not seem to be excessively optimistic about such prospects in the near term. Most European countries, especially the neighbouring Baltic states and Poland, maintain a tough position on Belarus, making quick progress in unfreezing relations with the West impossible. Nonetheless, the Belarusian government appears hopeful that

the Trump administration, unlike its predecessor, will see interest in at least resuming proper diplomatic communication with Minsk and will, thus, set an example for other Western countries to follow.

As a Belarusian diplomat put it, “Were such communication to begin in a mutually respectful way and without any unrealistic preconditions, all problematic issues can be discussed and resolved to both sides’ satisfaction”[2]. This phrase appears to sum up Belarus’s main expectations toward the West.

> Thus, after almost five years of heightened political tensions, broken channels of diplomatic communication, and unprecedented Western economic sanctions amounting to the semi-blockade on Belarus’s western borders, Belarusian expectations sound rather modest.

Minsk hopes that the U.S. administration, in line with Trump’s promises on the campaign trail and efforts undertaken in the last several days, will help to reach an end to the fighting in Russia-Ukraine war and create conditions for a serious negotiation about a long-term peace treaty between Moscow and Kyiv. This would automatically reduce multiple security risks that Belarus has faced since the war’s outbreak and make it easier for Minsk to start restoring economic cooperation with the European Union and other Western actors.

Moreover, a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine would open the way for a substantive discussion about the future of European security, which Belarus sees as crucial for its sovereignty and national security. Minsk, like other European governments, desires to be part of such talks to ensure that the country’s interests are represented at the negotiation table and taken into account in any future regional security arrangement. The recent prisoner releases, in this respect, may also be aimed at easing tensions with the United States and other Western countries to facilitate Minsk’s participation in potential peace talks.

1 Author’s interview with a Belarusian diplomat, 13 February 2025.

2 Author’s interview with a Belarusian diplomat, 13 February 2025.

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