Commentary
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Belarus Looking to Normalize Relations with the United States

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Summary

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka welcomed U.S. Special Envoy to Ukraine, General Keith Kellogg, to Minsk on 21 June in the highest-level meeting between U.S. and Belarusian officials since February 2020. The meeting symbolizes a broader effort by Minsk to achieve normal relations with Washington and demonstrate the role and place of Belarus in regional security.

On 21 June, a U.S. delegation led by General Keith Kellogg, Assistant to President Trump and Special Envoy for Ukraine, paid an official visit to Minsk for talks with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The event marked the highest-level visit to Belarus by a U.S. official since February 2020, when then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Minsk. Kellogg's visit shed some public light on the behind-the-scenes contacts that have taken place between the two countries in recent months. The meeting, however, highlighted some fundamental challenges that Belarus and the United States would need to overcome if they truly were to normalize their relations.

The first public signs that Minsk and Washington might be looking for ways to de-escalate bilateral tensions appeared in late January with the release of prisoners. According to several Western diplomats, however, some officials in the outgoing Joe Biden administration began to suggest a reassessment of U.S. policy toward Belarus as early as late 2024[1]. The policy as it stood amounted to isolating Belarus by means of reducing diplomatic ties with Minsk and exerting maximum political pressure and harsh economic sanctions on it.

> With that pressure, the United States and other Western countries likely aimed to change the Lukashenka government's behaviour in both domestic affairs and foreign policy.

According to official statements, the expansion of U.S. sanctions on Belarus was meant to force Minsk to liberalize the political climate inside the country, free numerous individuals that the West categorizes as political prisoners, and also distance itself from Moscow amid the war between Russia and Ukraine. On all those accounts, according to the United States's own assessments, no improvements took place despite the ever-expanding sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

Recently, Minsk has been responding differently to the United States compared to previous years. This change is most notable in releasing individuals qualified by Western governments as political prisoners at the request of the United States. In the early days of the second Trump administration, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that Belarus released a dual Belarusian-American citizen, Anastasia Nuhfer, from prison. In February, three more individuals, including a U.S. citizen, were freed and handed over to U.S. diplomats who visited Minsk for confidential talks with Lukashenka. At the time, The New York Times reported that Washington offered a "possible grand bargain" to Minsk, which could involve the release of "a slew of political prisoners" in exchange for sanctions relief on Belarusian banks and potash industry. In late April, yet another group of U.S. officials held confidential talks with Lukashenka, resulting in the release from prison of another dual American-Belarusian citizen, Yury Ziankovich.

This series of behind-closed-doors meetings appears to have helped establish at least a minimal level of trust between Minsk and Washington ahead of the Lukashenka-Kellogg meeting on 21 June. Kellogg's visit was big news in itself, but the Belarusian president's decision to pardon 14 more prisoners following the meeting made it even bigger news. Among them were ten foreign nationals and Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian opposition in exile.

According to Belarusian officials, the Lukashenka-Kellogg talks covered a wide range of topics, including the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Belarus's role in Eastern European security, the conflicts in the Middle East, and Belarus-U.S. bilateral relations. Valentin Rybakov, Belarus's ambassador to the United Nations, claims that the Trump administration understands the role and place of Belarus in regional security, which is an important pillar of the evolving dialogue between the countries. Based on this understanding and Minsk's own interest in de-escalating tensions with the West in general and the United States in particular, the sides are discussing possibilities for a full normalization of diplomatic relations. This includes the resumption of full operations by their respective embassies, the exchange of high-level visits, and the lifting of sanctions against Belarus.

The extent to which the Lukashenka-Kellogg meeting managed to advance this normalization discussion and whether a “grand bargain” between Minsk and Washington is really in the making remains unclear for now.

> The talks clearly contributed to further improving the diplomatic dynamic and demonstrated the benefits of constructive engagement. They seem to have emphasized, however, the multiple challenges that the sides need to overcome to make significant progress in repairing their ties.

Key among these challenges is the lack of mutual trust on both sides. Without it, Minsk has come to believe that concessions and goodwill gestures, which they are prepared to make in principle toward the United States, will hardly lead to reciprocal positive moves on the part of the United States[2]. Instead, Belarusian officials are convinced that such steps will be interpreted as weakness, not goodwill, and will therefore result in further sanctions. Kellogg’s visit to Minsk appears to have done little to dispel this belief. In its immediate aftermath, many voices in Western capitals and the Belarusian opposition, including freshly released Siarhei Tsikhanouski, called for tougher sanctions against Minsk.

While both Minsk and Washington appear to agree that they would benefit from improved relations, the process of starting and structuring a normalization agenda is much less certain. A strategic vision of a realistic long-term model of bilateral relations and a feasible roadmap to normal relations are also missing. Without adequately addressing all these challenges, Belarus and the United States will likely struggle to convert numerous meetings into a sustainable and meaningful rapprochement.

1 Author’s interviews with a former U.S. official in Washington, 26 February; Author’s interviews with a European diplomat in Minsk, 7 May.

2 Author’s interview with a Belarusian official, 30 June.

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