Commentary
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Belarus Offers to Host Peace Talks between Russia and Ukraine

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Summary

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has proposed hosting peace talks between Ukraine, Russia, and U.S. Even partially reviving the status of a venue for peace talks would amount to the best possible scenario for Belarus's national interests. It would equally be in the West's strategic interest, as Minsk will be able and willing to contribute positively to regional military transparency, risk reduction, and confidence-building.

On 27 February, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka offered to host talks for a peace settlement between Ukraine and Russia during an interview with American blogger Mario Nawfal. This was the first time Lukashenka had ever been interviewed by what he calls "new media". Nawfal, deemed a representative of new media, claims to host the largest show on X (formerly Twitter), with more than 2.1 million followers.

The conversation spanned numerous topics related to Belarusian domestic and foreign politics. Clearly, Minsk saw the interview as an opportunity to address the U.S. audience and, primarily, the U.S. government, which Belarus hopes to mend ties with under the leadership of U.S. President Donald Trump. In that regard, one theme appears to have stood out among Lukashenka's remarks—his offer to host peace talks in Belarus with the participation of U.S., Ukrainian, and Russian leadership. According to Lukashenka:

"You should not be forcing anything on [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy, irrespective of what kind of person he is. We must convince Zelenskyy and find an agreement with him because a large part of Ukrainian society is behind him. Therefore, it is necessary to negotiate. If you want to, come here. It is 200 kilometres [approximately 124 miles] from the Belarusian border to Kyiv. Half an hour by plane. You are welcome.

We will sit here and reach an agreement in a calm, hassle-free atmosphere. So, please tell Trump that I am waiting for him here for talks with [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Zelenskyy. We will negotiate calmly if you want to make a deal."

Typically, representatives of the Belarusian opposition interpret similar suggestions by the government in Minsk simply as Lukashenka's attempts to legitimize himself in the eyes of Western governments. Based on this premise, they demand that the West ignore these Belarusian proposals.

> Such interpretations, however, seem to be blinded by political partisanship and look short-sighted as they ignore Minsk's broader rationale, which ultimately corresponds to Western strategic interests.

Belarus already functioned as a neutral venue for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine throughout 2014 to 2020. Thus, that experience is empirical evidence to indicate Minsk's motivations today.

In August 2014 and then February 2015, Minsk hosted major summits on ending hostilities in Donbas, where the Ukrainian armed forces were then fighting Russian-backed separatists. The latter summit produced the Minsk II agreements, which, until 24 February 2022, served as the foundation for finding a diplomatic solution to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Additionally, as part of the agreements, the Trilateral Contact Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which comprised Ukrainian, Russian, and international negotiators, met in Minsk for thematic talks every two weeks from 2015 to 2020.

Everything changed in 2020. The OSCE Trilateral Contact Group moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ukraine and European countries then refused to send their delegations to Minsk, saying they did not recognize the results of the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections. Amid repeated ceasefire violations and the presence and use of banned weapons, the Contact Group reached a deadlock. These developments were bad news for Minsk, which effectively lost its status as the peace talks host. As a result, in late February 2022, when full-scale hostilities began, Belarus could no longer rely on that status to preserve its situational neutrality.

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war in February 2022, the Minsk agreements have become synonymous with a diplomatic failure. Many in the West, Ukraine, and Russia now refer to those agreements as examples of what should be avoided in future negotiations. Naturally, the very name of the failed deal casts a shadow on Belarus itself and any discussions about its possible new diplomatic role.

> Focusing on the agreements' fiasco, however, distracts attention from something more consequential—why Minsk is seeking new opportunities to host peace talks and what difference Belarus as a venue for peace talks can make to regional security.

The status of a neutral venue or, in diplomatic parlance, the provider of "good offices" significantly affected Belarus's own foreign and security policy and its role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The neutral status allowed Minsk to avoid confrontations between its two neighbours and gave it a strong argument as to why it could not join or support Russia's military in Ukraine. As part of its neutral stance, Minsk officially supported Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As long as the Belarusian capital hosted various formats of peace talks, Minsk could adhere to the "situational neutrality" policy in relation to the conflict, even though it was in a close defence alliance with Moscow. Belarusian situational neutrality, which relied on its status as a venue for peace talks, helped to secure the 1,084-kilometer-long border (approximately 674 miles) between Belarus and Ukraine. It served as an assurance that Kyiv would not face major military threats from Belarusian territory (an assurance that no longer existed once the Trilateral Contact Group reached a deadlock in late 2021). That the Ukrainian leadership at the time appreciated Minsk's position and attempted to sustain excellent relations with Lukashenka empirically proved this.

Minsk's status as a neutral venue for talks and the policy of situational neutrality that resulted from it also corresponded to Western interests. These two factors helped to lower military pressures on Kyiv and kept the risks of the conflict's vertical escalation (the seriousness and danger of a conflict) and horizontal escalation (the geographic scope of a conflict) in check. As a host of peace negotiations, Belarus could ensure its own security interests by protecting itself against any involvement in the fighting. It could also continue advancing economic relations and trade with both parties to the conflict, which the Belarusian export-oriented economy required.

While international realities have changed tremendously since 2020, and fully returning to the same situational neutrality does not seem feasible for Belarus, the 2014–2020 experience continues to shape the thinking of the Belarusian government. Even partially reviving the status of a venue for peace talks would simply amount to the best possible scenario for Belarus's national interests as the war and escalating regional tensions continue to pose serious threats to its security. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that

Lukashenka and other officials use any occasion to offer to host peace talks. Similarly, Belarus eagerly facilitates sensitive exchanges between Russia and Ukraine, such as exchanging prisoners of war and the remains of fallen soldiers.

> Even as the Ukraine-U.S.-Russia summit that Lukashenka proposed to host in Minsk does not look likely, Belarus should be considered as a venue for other talks.

Re-establishing itself as a provider of "good offices," especially as future European security arrangements are negotiated, Belarus will be able and willing to contribute positively to regional military transparency, risk reduction, and confidence-building simply because it would be in Belarus's own best interest. It would equally be in the West's strategic interest.

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