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EU-Belarus: No need to wait for political rapprochement to start mutually beneficial cooperation

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

As global geopolitical competition grows and instability proliferates, pragmatic cooperation with neighbours becomes a strategic imperative, not a matter of a normative choice. These circumstances necessitate that the EU should find a way of cooperating with Belarus on critical issues of mutual interest, even as political relations remain deadlocked. Reviving such pragmatic cooperation will benefit both the EU and Belarus; and, on the contrary, continued lack of engagement will ensure growing risks and costs for the two sides and overall regional stability.

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Looking beyond the political deadlock

The European Union's relations with Belarus are currently at their lowest point ever. Since late 2020, an action-reaction spiral amid a deepening diplomatic crisis and sanctions-driven confrontation has effectively dismantled most achievements that the bilateral relationship had seen in the three previous decades. Revealingly, the volume of trade in goods between Belarus and the EU shrank from over €12 bln in 2019 (pre-COVID) and about €10 bln in 2020 to less then €3.5 bln in 2025. Belarusian exports into the EU have fallen even more dramatically: from nearly €7.6 bln in 2020 to roughly €0.4 bln in 2025.

The plunge in the intensity and level of diplomatic contacts has been similarly pronounced. Currently, only two EU member states – Hungary and Slovakia – are represented in Minsk at the ambassadorial level, whereas the European Union Delegation and other EU national missions have reduced their diplomatic staff and are headed by *chargés d'affaires*, not ambassadors. Belarus has undertaken similar moves regarding its own embassies across the EU. Consequently, political dialogue has stalled. Numerous cooperation projects, including at business-to-business and societal levels, that previously kept the very tissue of EU-Belarus relations intact even during periods of heightened political tensions, have largely disappeared. And the very foundations of the relations, which for decades contributed to regional security, stability and development, have been significantly undermined.

Not only have the EU-Belarus relations fallen to an all-time low, but their current deadlock seems hardly resolvable as political disagreements between Minsk and European capitals appear insurmountable and cooperation opportunities remain blocked. Each side expects the other to make a first move towards reviving dialogue, but, due to the lack of mutual trust and unwillingness to appear weak, such expectations only prolong and exacerbate the deadlock.

> From a strategic standpoint, this *status quo* looks increasingly problematic, as both Belarus and the EU clearly have a lot to gain from mutually beneficial cooperation.

Relations with Belarus, even though widely overlooked in recent decades, appear to carry sizeable potential for improving the EU's standing as a geopolitical actor and for allowing European governments and businesses to gain a competitive geostrategic edge amid growing rivalries in a turbulent world. This is primarily due to Belarus's geographic location, which makes it a crucial factor for the EU's security and logistical needs not only in its immediate neighbourhood but also further eastwards.

In the past, in the times of relative geopolitical calm across Eurasia, decision-makers in Brussels and other European capitals could largely ignore the Belarus factor. Yet now that instability and security threats are literally encircling Europe, keeping the *status quo* vis-à-vis Minsk only aggravates the multiplying challenges that the EU faces and further undermines the Union's international leverage and competitiveness.

This is because the Belarus factor for the EU is by definition geostrategic and security related. Hence, any serious problems in bilateral dealings with Minsk automatically lead to heightened challenges the EU faces in these realms. How the Belarus variable has

recently played out in contexts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, soaring Russia-NATO tensions, illegal migration flows, interrupted East-West logistical routes and production chains, and rapidly increasing energy prices presents the empirical cases in point.

To put it simply, Belarus is too important a factor for European security and stability to be treated only through the prism of Russia or the protracted bilateral normative disagreements, which have long shaped the EU's policy towards Minsk.

> In other words, continued non-engagement may increasingly limit the EU's ability to address practical security and strategic challenges linked to Belarus and, more broadly, its eastern neighbourhood.

Recent developments in regional security, including the nuclear dimension and the growing risks of a horizontal escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, seem to only further reinforce this reality. Therefore, as never before, the EU needs a strategic and interest-based approach to its dealings with Belarus, which will build on both sides' shared interests and, thus, cement a positive cooperative agenda even as various normative and political disagreements will inevitably persist. Importantly, such a pragmatic approach would not only respond to the objective needs of the EU and Belarus and reflect lessons learned from the over three decades of their relations, but it would also be in step with the EU's most global relationships in an increasingly transactional world.

Moreover, reviving pragmatic engagement with Minsk while broader political disagreements remain unresolved would not amount to a radical change of gears in Western policies towards Belarus. Instead, it would effectively build on a similar approach that has already emerged in the framework of Belarus's dialogue with the United States and Poland. Most recently, a bilateral meeting between the Polish and Belarusian foreign ministers – the first such meeting in seven years – showed that irrespective of the current political deadlock, Warsaw sees practical value in engaging Minsk directly on a variety of issues, including regional and border security. Similarly, the US-Belarus dialogue provides another example-in-progress of results-oriented engagement that focuses on specific objectives while broader political differences persist.

Regional security

Understanding what specific benefits EU-Belarus cooperation could imply for both sides' fundamental interests and how it could help strengthen European geostrategic standing appears important for making decisions today and, even more so, for designing

a realistic long-term vision.

First and foremost, is the realm of regional security where Belarus's role is becoming truly exceptional for controlling and potentially mitigating future military risks in Europe, as the post-Ukraine war security environment will be fraught with numerous dangers and unprecedented challenges. The country's critical position in-between Russia and the EU/NATO makes its policies a key variable that to a significant degree will define how stable and effective any regional security arrangement, negotiated or *de facto*, can be after the Ukraine war ends.

While Minsk remains Moscow's close ally and now hosts on its territory Russian tactical nuclear weapons and intermediate-range missile systems, it emphatically stresses interest in avoiding any further escalation of regional tensions. Here, the core strategic imperatives of Minsk clearly coincide with those of the European Union, which creates a promising ground for at least limited mutually beneficial cooperation. Importantly, the Belarusian government has recently demonstrated openness to transparency and dialogue with the EU/NATO on regional security issues and put forward concrete proposals in that regard.

Unlike Russia, Belarus remains party to the Open Skies Treaty and the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Mines. Minsk has suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty), in response to the same moves by NATO countries, but emphasizes interest in restoring its implementation or designing a modernized alternative to it. Also, the Belarusian government supports the idea of reviving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which both Russia and the U.S. have abandoned.

Most uniquely, Belarus maintains bilateral agreements with all its EU/NATO neighbours – Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia – on advanced confidence- and security-building measures, which were concluded in the early 2000s within the framework of Chapter X of the Vienna Document. While largely inactive now, potentially, they could lay the foundation for a "regional de-escalation belt" in Europe's east and pave the way for a more overarching new security arrangement around the volatile contact line between the EU and Russia. They could also become a basis for urgently needed military-to-military cooperation in countering the growing problem of stray drone incursions in the Baltics, which has recently highlighted the EU's additional security vulnerability in the east.

> Thus, if the EU aspires to stabilise and reduce military risk in eastern Europe and mitigate its core security concern – which is the perceived military threat from Russia – engaging Belarus on matters of European security becomes a strategic imperative.

Of course, through cooperation with Minsk, the EU will not resolve all security challenges it faces in the eastern neighbourhood, but it can significantly lower their urgency and intensity and return a degree of transparency on the EU-Belarus borders. Minsk will equally benefit from reducing military risk and raising predictability on its borders with EU/NATO member states.

Importantly, such result-oriented cooperation can start unfolding without fully-fledged political rapprochement and, even at a technical level, it can establish effective communication channels and confidence-building measures to address both conventional and nuclear risks. This seems particularly important given that the United States appears determined to retrench its military presence and security commitments in Europe.

Illegal migration and transborder security

Illegal migrant flows into the EU that go via the Belarusian territory make up only a tiny fraction of the overall number of illegal crossings into the EU. The analysis of Frontex data on illegal migration shows that since 2019 the share of illegal border crossings through the Belarusian-EU border has stayed within the mere 0,31 – 1,15 per cent of the entire number of such crossings into the EU.[1] However, in recent years, the issue has become highly political as the European Union and its member-states, primarily Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, have accused Belarus of hybrid attacks through the instrumentalization of migration flows. In that context, multi-million budget allocations have been made to establish infrastructure for countering illegal migration on the EU's eastern borders.

> Yet, a sustainable and cost-efficient solution to the problem can only be found by targeting transnational criminal networks that facilitate channels of illegal migration into the EU and span across countries and continents.

This requires cooperation with numerous actors, including the Belarusian government. The EU's own experience in recent years demonstrates that this is the sole pathway to restoring predictability on the borders and lowering the longer-term vulnerability of

Europe to illegal migration as such and external actors' possibilities to instrumentalize it for political or economic purposes.

Similarly, other transborder threats – such as contraband smuggling, drug, illegal arms and human trafficking, terrorism and extremism, as well as the spread of infectious diseases – require cooperative transnational responses. If engaged constructively, Minsk can offer its competences and quite developed border and institutional infrastructure for such multilateral endeavours, which it will be equally interested in advancing, given Belarusian own threat perceptions in the realm of transborder security.

Transcontinental logistics and sectoral cooperation

Another area where Belarus's role for the EU will continue to grow is ensuring the safety and stability of transcontinental transport corridors and supply chains. Even earlier, Belarus was a key territorial linkage and logistical hub within the Northern Corridor connecting China and Europe. Its well-functioning railway and road network, border infrastructure and governance system turned Belarus into a natural gateway to the EU for Chinese and other Asian manufacturers and a reliable partner for European businesses. With growing instability across Eurasia, the logistical attractiveness of the Belarusian land bridge can be expected to increase further.

Even after the war between Russia and Ukraine ends, time and massive investment will be required to restore the latter's transit infrastructure, while questions about that route's security will persist. At the same time, the diversification of Europe–Asia connectivity is likely to remain an important strategic objective. In this context, Belarus's geographic position and existing transport infrastructure could, under different political circumstances, complement broader European connectivity networks and provide additional capacity for transcontinental trade. Importantly, Minsk can easily enlarge its transit capacities provided there is market demand: according to the Belarusian authorities, in 2020, prior to the outbreak of the political crisis in EU-Belarus relations, the country's cargo transit corridors were used only up to 25-40 per cent of their capacity.

> Finally, the EU could extract multiple benefits by reviving sectoral cooperation with Minsk.

Currently untapped opportunities span from sectors not affected by EU sanctions, such as pharmaceuticals and healthcare, to nuclear and environmental safety, biotechnologies, wood processing, the production of fertilizers and other chemicals, IT and artificial intelligence, and veterinary standards.[2] Belarus can offer some advanced

competences for R&D drawing on its internationally recognized engineering and IT schools. Such sectoral cooperation could not only help optimize development and manufacturing costs but will also enhance the security and accessibility of certain critical supplies by bringing their production closer to the EU.

Conclusions

After years of heightened political and diplomatic tensions, the idea of engaging Belarus for the sake of the EU's strategic interests might sound counterintuitive to European decision-makers. Yet, revived EU-Belarus cooperation on core matters of mutual interest, even as broader political disagreements remain unresolved, could help strengthen the EU's long-term geostrategic standing in the world in flux by mitigating some of the Union's core geopolitical vulnerabilities. In particular, it could be instrumental for reducing military risk in Europe, ensuring the protection of the EU's eastern borders against illegal migration and other transborder threats, securing and diversifying its logistical and supply chains, and, ultimately, even putting to action the concept of European strategic autonomy as the U.S. is set to downsize its defence commitments on the continent.

Similarly, Belarus also has a lot to benefit from such pragmatic and focused cooperation, which creates a crucial entry point for working together despite normative differences and numerous geopolitical challenges.

> Arguably, the potential that such cooperation can unleash is significantly larger than what both sides seem to believe today.

Yet, to unlock it, the EU should stop viewing Minsk through the lens of either its Russia policy or the disagreements that have shaped bilateral relations for decades and, instead, place Belarus onto the broader map of its geostrategic interests. While Belarus will remain outside of enlargement-driven frameworks that the EU has long preferred as institutional foundations of its neighbourhood policies, Minsk has a fundamental stake in restoring and advancing cooperation with the EU in the above-described thematic areas.

Thus, instead of waiting for the other side to make a first move towards a de-escalated relationship, Brussels and Minsk should not waste any more time and should explore the potential of working together on mutually beneficial matters. In doing so, they would build on the methodology that has already proved instrumental in Belarus's dialogue with the United States and Poland.

1 In Frontex classification, migration from/via Belarus is part of the “Eastern land border route”, which also includes migrant flows from Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. In most instances, Frontex statistics on illegal border crossings through this route is presented in an aggregate form – that is, illegal crossings from all four eastern neighbours are shown as a single number. However, monthly detailed statistics on the detections of illegal border crossings allows disaggregating the data according to the migrants’ nationalities. Using these data, Ukrainian nationals can be excluded from the aggregate numbers (as Ukrainians represent the lion’s share of all illegal crossings). As a result, even without disaggregating the data further, illegal migration flows that Belarus can be associated with have amounted to no more than 1,15 per cent of the overall total of irregular migration into the EU in the last six years.

2 These areas should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive, as identifying specific cooperation priorities will require further assessment.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations