Commentary
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# Hungary Defies EU Policy Toward Belarus

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**Summary**

Budapest is the only EU capital that fully recognizes the post-2020 political status quo in Minsk and remains willing to advance relations with Belarus.

On 29 May, Belarus hosted Hungarian government and business delegations, headed by Foreign and Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó. The visit was particularly noteworthy, as Hungary is the only EU member state that currently maintains regular diplomatic and economic contact with Minsk. Budapest's increased contact with Minsk takes on new meaning as Hungary assumes the EU rotating presidency on 1 July.

The European Union has condemned the August 2020 Belarusian presidential elections as "neither free nor fair" and has since applied multiple packages of economic sanctions on Belarus. A Minsk-based lawyer who advises Belarusian and Western companies on the legal implications of the sanctions estimates[1] that around 1,500 separate measures now target various sectors of the Belarusian economy. Additionally, Western businesses and banks increasingly refuse to have any dealings with their Belarusian counterparts, even in sectors not affected by sanctions. This happens in humanitarian-related areas as well, including the supply of spare parts for medical equipment and medicines.

In the diplomatic sphere, the situation looks similar. Communications between EU capitals and Minsk have been largely terminated, not only between top government officials but also at the working level. Since late 2020, EU member states have stopped appointing new ambassadors to Belarus. When acting EU ambassadors end their missions, chargés d'affaires replace them, not new ambassadors. These officials do not present their credentials to the president of the host state but only to the minister of foreign affairs. Equally, most EU governments have stopped receiving Belarusian ambassadors on their territories. For Brussels, this stance emphasizes the non-recognition of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's current presidential tenure as legitimate.

> Effectively, the overall policy amounts to a lowering of diplomatic relations —both symbolically and functionally.

Until recently, only two EU member states, Bulgaria and Hungary, were represented at the ambassadorial level in Minsk. Sofia had appointed its ambassador before the 2020 elections, who stayed in Minsk until early June when his mission ended. The Hungarian ambassador, Zita Ilona Benchik, assumed office in September 2023. She is the only EU diplomat to have presented credentials to Lukashenka since 2020 and is now the only member state ambassador in Belarus. Additionally, Budapest approved the appointment of Belarus's new ambassador to Hungary in February 2022. Thus, the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán is the only EU government that recognizes the political status quo in Minsk and remains willing to advance relations with the Lukashenka government.

Budapest and Minsk seek to maintain political and economic relations amid the rupture in EU-Belarus ties. Szijjártó's visit on 29 May was his third to Minsk in the past three years. During the previous trip in October 2023, he spoke at the inaugural session of the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security and held a separate meeting with Lukashenka. Earlier, in April 2023, Budapest hosted a Belarusian government delegation headed by Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik.

On this occasion, Szijjártó attended the 12th meeting of the Belarusian-Hungarian Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation, which he and Aleinik co-chair. The agenda focused primarily on collaboration in areas not affected by sanctions, such as agriculture, construction, energy, healthcare, education, science, and tourism. The delegations discussed increasing mutual trade turnover, which contracted by over 45 percent in 2023 as compared to the pre-sanctions level of 2021, constituting only $138.8 million. Belarus's exports dropped by 57.8 percent year-on-year, while imports from Hungary grew by 13 percent. In the first quarter of 2024, however, trade turnover increased by 5 percent as compared to the same period in 2023. The Belarusian-Hungarian business forum also took place on 29 May with more than 100 companies from both countries in attendance.

Additionally, Aleinik and Szijjártó held a one-on-one discussion. They exchanged assessments of the regional situation, including the war in Ukraine. At the concluding press briefing, Aleinik welcomed Hungary's "peaceful, constructive and pragmatic course aimed at mutually respectful dialogue and cooperation" and promised to keep

reciprocating. He also stressed that Minsk understands the limitations that EU sanctions impose on Hungary's ability to work with Belarus and said that the countries would continue advancing their partnership with that in mind.

Separately, Szijjártó met with Belarusian Energy Minister Viktor Karankevich and signed a memorandum of understanding on deepening cooperation in nuclear energy. In addition, both countries' nuclear power plants (NPP)—Paks NPP in Hungary and Astravets NPP in Belarus—endorsed a 2024–25 roadmap for cooperation. According to the Hungarian CEO, his company is interested in Belarus's assistance for the construction of the Paks-2 NPP.

These bilateral events and Budapest's overall position on relations with Minsk have received heavy criticism from most other EU member states and Brussels. In public statements, and even more so in private conversations, Hungarian representatives present three central points to justify their approach.

> First, they stress that the EU policy of maximum pressure and sanctions, coupled with the termination of diplomatic communications, has failed to produce the intended results.

According to the EU documents, the sanctions are meant to prevent further authoritarian manifestations in Belarusian domestic politics and limit Minsk's military cooperation with Russia in light of the war in Ukraine. From Brussels' point of view, the situation has evidently deteriorated on both accounts compared to what it looked like prior to the sanctions.

Second, Hungarian officials argue that the policy of pressuring Belarus economically and isolating it diplomatically only serves to further undermine regional security in Eastern Europe. In Budapest's opinion, keeping communication channels open is important for better understanding official Minsk's thinking and discussing ways to deescalate regional tensions.

Third, Budapest contends that the current EU approach to Belarus goes against the economic and security interests of Europe and the West more generally. For these reasons, Hungarian officials think that continuing—and even doubling down on—the existing EU policy toward Minsk would be ineffective and dangerous. They will therefore likely continue to defy Brussels and other EU member states when dealing with Belarus.

1 Author's interview, 1 June.

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