Commentary
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It Is Increasingly Difficult for the EU to Silently Watch Belarus-US Dialogue

Yauheni Preiherman

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After a summer lull, September brought renewed vigour in Belarusian-Western dialogue. Minsk's conversations with Washington and some European capitals are becoming more interesting, although a thaw in these frozen relations doesn't seem imminent.

Belarus and the United States have been engaged in active political dialogue for nearly two years. The conversation is taking place at several levels, including the highest, and its interim highlights include visits to Minsk by US Special Envoy John Cole. The beginning of this process in January 2025 caught virtually everyone by surprise, including the European Union and key European capitals. Throughout this period, the latter have watched the US-Belarusian dialogue with keen interest, but have pointedly maintained aloofness. They sought to better understand the prospects for negotiations while simultaneously emphasizing the lack of grounds for adjusting their tough stance of pressuring Minsk and refusing meaningful engagement with the Belarusian authorities.

> However, as the agenda of Belarus-US negotiations gradually expands and becomes more substantive, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the EU to remain merely an observer. In this context, it is significant that September brought intensified dialogue between Minsk and not only Washington, but also Warsaw.

Minsk to Washington: pacta sunt servanda

Minsk, Washington, and European capitals have become accustomed to the periodic visits of the American delegation led by John Cole to Belarus. Everyone has also become accustomed to the media coverage that often accompanies them. These visits are usually anticipated long before they materialize, leading the media to actively speculate on the difficulties in the negotiation process and the waning interest of both sides in continuing the dialogue. The September visit of US representatives was no exception.

Cole himself announced his next visit several months ago. Since the Washington guests failed to reach Minsk this summer, speculation about the possible exhaustion of negotiating potential has once again flared up in Western diplomatic circles. The prevailing assumption was that, given the war with Iran, the US had no time for Belarus. And that the Trump administration had concluded that dialogue with Minsk was futile. However, as has often happened before, the 15 September talks between Alexander Lukashenko and the US president's special envoy demonstrated the inaccuracy of these speculations.

> At the same time, it's no secret that the dialogue is indeed fraught with numerous complexities and difficult issues. Minsk has made it clear from the outset that it has no intention of making any concessions unless it sees commensurate reciprocity from Washington.

And now this issue has become particularly pressing.

The Belarusian president stated directly, on camera:

"We are open to discussing any issues. The only thing (this is not a demand, but my request of you) is that we strictly adhere to our agreements. On our part and on the part of the United States."

In this regard, Lukashenko publicly identified a specific problem for the first time: several years ago, the American Citibank froze $43-44 million that had been deposited into the account of a Belarusian company under a contract with a counterparty in the United States. Despite all the progress achieved in negotiations with the Trump administration since the beginning of 2025, including the lifting of several sanctions against Belarusian entities by Washington, this issue remains unresolved.

The problem here isn't so much this quite modest sum, but rather that the Trump administration's political decisions remain largely on paper and are not translated into real economic opportunities. Belarusian companies are unable to fully resume

operations in the US market, as the American banking system remains inaccessible to them. For the same reason, even purchasing spare parts for the national airline Belavia, which has been exempted from sanctions, remains problematic.

Americans in Minsk – Belarusian potash in the US

In this context, it is noteworthy that Belarusian Prime Minister Alexander Turchin was for the first time present at the negotiations with the Americans as part of the Belarusian delegation. Lukashenko made no secret of the fact that he invited him to understand how the economic agreements reached during previous stages of the negotiations are being implemented in practice.

Besides the banking sector, the Belarusian potash industry was also obviously discussed. Cole announced its exemption from sanctions back in December of last year. However, even here, the decision still appears largely symbolic, as European sanctions prevent Belarus from exporting its products to Western markets via the most natural logistics routes—the Baltic ports of Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. And the only Russian ports accessible to Belarus clearly don't suit Western partners, and, moreover, they increase the cost of the final product and entail a number of other costs.

> Interestingly, the very next day after the Minsk talks, it became clear that the potash issue was important not only for Belarus. The United States also sees a clear interest in Belarusian fertilizers entering the American market.

Amid the aforementioned speculation about Washington's cooling stance on the Belarusian track, Donald Trump announced to the world that his administration was negotiating with Minsk on large-scale potash purchases. As the White House boss wrote on his social media account, Truth Social, *"The US is working on a major deal to buy potash from Belarus. The price will be significantly lower than what we currently pay Canada. Very good news for our farmers and cattle breeders."*

Even on the eve of Cole's visit, Alexander Lukashenko announced that the first small shipment of Belaruskali products to the Americans was being prepared. It is scheduled to arrive at the port of New Orleans in October. However, after his American counterpart's remarks, he clarified that Belarusian production capacity is already fully contracted until the end of this year, and even if it wanted to, Minsk does not have the physical capacity to send any significant volumes to the United States.

Therefore, Trump's statement should likely be viewed less as a reflection of existing agreements than as rhetoric ahead of the November midterm congressional elections. He likely wants to send a signal to voters in the agricultural sector that would be electorally advantageous to Republicans: that his government is working to secure favourable fertilizer supplies amid the trade war with Canada, which traditionally covers the United States' primary fertilizer needs.

It is, therefore, difficult to predict how far the potash negotiations will go. However, it is clear that the matter is of significant mutual interest. It is no coincidence that after meeting with the Belarusian President, John Cole travelled to Vilnius and Riga, where he held additional talks with the Lithuanian and Latvian leadership.

It is also difficult to speak with certainty about the prospects for a "grand bargain" between the US and Belarus, which both sides have been mentioning in public comments for months now.

> Yet, Minsk's position here is easy to read: if political agreements with Washington yield concrete economic benefits, Belarus will be open not only to such a deal itself, but also to its broadest possible scope of mutually beneficial topics.

Warsaw at the forefront of European policy on Belarus

Just a week after John Cole's visit, an even more significant event for Belarusian-Western relations took place. On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly High-Level Week, the first bilateral meeting in eight years between the foreign ministers of Belarus and Poland took place. Following the meeting, both sides expressed a mutual interest in improving their relations. Given the level of tension between the neighbours in recent years, as well as the central importance of Belarusian-Polish cooperation for Minsk's prospects for cooperation with the entire European Union, this meeting attracts particular attention.

The renewed momentum in Belarusian-American dialogue is not the only reason for the first public signs of constructive talks between Minsk and Warsaw. However, it is clear that, in the grand scheme of things, Washington's policies are exerting some stimulating influence.

> It is becoming increasingly difficult and less practical for European countries to maintain a “no dialogue with Minsk” stance if the United States is not only conducting such a dialogue but also achieving some success.

First, some issues discussed by Minsk and Washington require the direct involvement of Belarus’s neighbours. *Second*, there is a growing understanding in a number of European capitals that the only result of a demonstrative refusal to talk to Minsk is a diminution of the EU’s geopolitical role in Eastern Europe. *Third*, the contrast between the American and European approaches demonstrates that dialogue opens up opportunities for at least limited mutually beneficial cooperation, while sanctions and pressure virtually eliminate such opportunities.

Of course, all this doesn't mean that a thaw will begin tomorrow in the deeply frozen relations between Belarus and the EU, or that the Belarusian-Polish negotiating track will rapidly reach a breakthrough trajectory. Too many factors complicate such a prospect. However, at a minimum, the September contacts between Minsk and Western capitals demonstrate that the parties have much to discuss and work on. And that even gradual, limited progress in their dialogue is better than demonstrative and futile silence.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations