Commentary
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U.S. – Belarus Dialogue Continues to Advance

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Summary

Washington has signalled an interest in normalizing relations with Belarus under U.S. President Donald Trump's administration — conducting months of confidential dialogue and high-level visits. Minsk and Washington are actively exploring a "grand bargain" to restore diplomatic ties, with Belarus seeking specific benefits and non-interference guarantees while maintaining its alliances with Russia and the People's Republic of China.

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On 9 November, U.S. President Donald Trump nominated lawyer John Coale as the United States Special Envoy to Belarus. The decision marked a new development in the already eventful dialogue process between Washington and Minsk, which began almost immediately after Trump's inauguration on 20 January.

More precisely, Belarus and the United States started a confidential dialogue behind closed doors already in the final months of the former U.S. President Joe Biden administration, when the U.S. State Department even held "tentative discussions" with European allies about possibly easing sanctions against Belarus. This dialogue began to yield results only after the new administration took office. In late January, at Washington's request and as a sign of goodwill, Minsk released a U.S. citizen from jail. At the time, Fox News called it U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first win under the Trump administration.

Several weeks later, a U.S. delegation discreetly visited Minsk and held talks with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, resulting in additional prisoner releases. Similarly, another confidential visit by U.S. officials in late April led to the freeing of one more dual U.S.-Belarusian citizen. Through those behind-closed-doors talks, the sides managed to establish at least a minimal level of mutual trust, which paved the way for a

first publicly announced high-level meeting on 21 June. The Belarusian president received a U.S. delegation headed by Keith Kellogg, assistant to the U.S. president and special envoy for Ukraine. After the meeting, Lukashenka pardoned 14 more prisoners, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the husband of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the Belarusian opposition in exile.

Belarus's prisoner releases have not been the only item on the two countries' negotiation agenda. According to Kellogg, when engaging Minsk, U.S. officials have focused primarily on "ensuring lines of communication" to Russia, because they know that Lukashenka "talks to [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin a lot." In his words, "we weren't going in there initially to get political prisoners out". Trump's initiation of a phone call with his Belarusian counterpart on 15 August, just hours before his meeting with Putin in Alaska, further underscores that Russia's war against Ukraine is a major topic on the U.S.–Belarus agenda.

> Regardless of Washington's primary objective in unfreezing communication with Minsk, all the meetings and talks ultimately enhanced bilateral dialogue.

The Trump–Lukashenka phone conversation is a good case in point. Even as it focused on ways to end the war in Ukraine, it marked the first-ever phone call between the presidents of Belarus and the United States. The highly laudatory comments that both sides made after the call clearly helped to further improve the atmosphere in their dialogue.

Unsurprisingly, following the conversation, bilateral dialogue became even more promising. On 11 September, the Belarusian president received yet another U.S. delegation, which brought news that Washington had lifted sanctions against Belarus's national airline *Belavia*. Minsk, on its part, freed the largest group of prisoners to date—52 individuals, including numerous leaders and well-known opposition activists. Coale, who headed the U.S. delegation, stated that "the paramount objective of our engagement is to normalize bilateral relations [and] to deepen and strengthen our economic and political cooperation". He added that Washington wanted to reopen its embassy in Minsk and appoint an ambassador.

A month later, the Belarus–U.S. dialogue seemed to have paused, and rumours began circulating in Western diplomatic circles that it had effectively exhausted its potential[1].

First, the United States had only partially lifted the sanctions on *Belavia*, and serious limitations on its operations remained in place. This made the Belarusian government doubt Washington's seriousness and reliability. *Second*, Minsk did not hide its annoyance when, according to Lukashenka, U.S. representatives demanded that Belarus apologize to Lithuania for incidents involving balloons from Belarus that posed a security threat to the airport in Vilnius. The authorities in Minsk claimed it was unfair to blame Belarus and alleged that it was a result of activities by an international criminal network that smuggles cheaper Belarusian cigarettes into Lithuania using balloons.

On 4 November, the United States corrected its previously incomplete removal of sanctions on *Belavia*, as the Office of Foreign Assets Control fully delisted the company.

> Both this decision and Coale's appointment as special envoy appear to signal Washington's determination to continue pursuing normalization with Belarus, which was well received in Minsk[2].

It remains to be seen exactly what the special envoy role will entail, especially as the two countries have indicated interest in restoring proper diplomatic relations. From 2021 to 2023, the United States had a special envoy for Belarus, Julia Fisher (now Julia Davis). She resided in Vilnius, however, and dealt primarily with Belarusian opposition structures in exile, rather than the government in Minsk. Coale's mandate and working methods will differ.

While the U.S. State Department looks set to continue playing a coordinating role in shaping U.S. policy toward Belarus, Coale is expected to take the driving seat, as after months of preliminary talks, U.S.–Belarus dialogue appears to be entering a more advanced stage. In addition to regional security matters, dialogue will increasingly focus on the future of bilateral relations. While both sides seem to recognize that the process will be difficult, they express interest in reaching a sort of grand bargain.

> For Minsk, the idea of a grand deal with the United States looks attractive for several reasons.

First, it promises a longer-term vision of where the current rapprochement can lead and what specific, not abstract, benefits Belarus can secure. *Second*, Minsk hopes that a grand-bargain framework will help clarify whether the concessions that Washington asks of Belarus are worth making and whether the United States can be trusted to deliver on its part of the hypothetical deal. *Third*, Minsk intends to make its priorities and red lines an inseparable part of any larger agreement. In particular, Belarusian

officials stress the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and Belarus's fundamental interest in sustaining close relations with both Russia and the People's Republic of China. *Finally*, Minsk hopes that a grand bargain with Washington could help it gradually improve relations with Poland, the Baltic states, and other EU members.

1 Author's interviews with Western diplomats in Minsk, 17 October, 30 October.

2 Author's interview with a Belarusian diplomat, 10 November.

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