Commentary No. 63
July 8, 2026

Western Lack of Expertise on Belarus

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Summary

Weak expertise is the Achilles heel of Western policy towards Belarus.

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Recently, a discussion about a possible policy revision towards Belarus has surfaced in Western diplomatic and expert circles. The discussion remains at an incipient stage, but its reasons appear clear. Economic sanctions and political isolation, which have underpinned the West's approach since late 2020, have failed to bring about the intended changes in Minsk's domestic and foreign policies. On the contrary, many changes the West aimed to stimulate look far more distant today than they were before the sanctions' imposition. Moreover, the severing of nearly all cooperation with Belarus has also produced several unintended consequences that have negatively impacted Western interests in Eastern Europe.

Therefore, it seems hardly surprising that, after Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, Washington tried a different approach: instead of sanctions, political pressure and diplomatic isolation, the Americans opted for cautious engagement. Revealingly, discussions about adjusting the US policy towards Belarus began already in the final months of the Biden administration, which additionally points to the reason behind this shift – that is, the lack of desired results from the maximum pressure policy. And once the dialogue between Washington and Minsk started to bear some fruit, voices began to emerge increasingly across the EU that also favour revising the Belarus policy.

Facts, logic, and strategy

Such cyclical dynamics have long been typical of Belarus-West relations. They repeated themselves more than once already. Most notably, in 2008-2010 and in 2015-2020. Back then, after several years of sanctions and frozen political ties, cautious proposals to shift the Belarus policy towards the opposite approach – dialogue and engagement – were put forward in Western capitals.

> What we are witnessing today is not exactly the same process. If anything, the overall context in the relationship looks fundamentally different.

Besides traditional bilateral political disagreements, it is now further aggravated by more complex regional security issues, which to a significant extent have become structural. Nevertheless, the emerging rationale behind the rethinking of the West's policy towards Belarus appears similar.

Of course, not everyone in Western capitals subscribes to this rationale. Numerous opponents insist on their position: no dialogue until Minsk meets several preconditions. Some even deny the very possibility of de-escalating tensions as long as Aleksandr Lukashenko remains in power.

A philosophical and logical gap exists between the proponents of dialogue with Minsk and those who advocate for expanding pressure. Even the same empirical facts – for example, the release of over 500 prisoners as a result of the US-Belarusian engagement – they tend to interpret in diametrically opposite ways. The former attribute these results to the effectiveness of negotiations without preconditions. The latter argue that progress was made possible solely through sanctions and pressure, which, in their view, forced Minsk to negotiate.

Perhaps the only thing that the adherents of both approaches agree on is the need to develop a strategy towards Belarus. Without a strategy, they maintain, neither approach can lead to long-term results. Therefore, many see the lack of any Belarus strategy as the main problem throughout the three and a half decades of West-Belarus relations.

Real Achilles heel

Indeed, the EU and certainly the West as a whole, have never had a fully-fledged strategy vis-à-vis Minsk. In some periods, the Western policy was shaped *ad hoc*, as a mere reaction to specific events inside Belarus; in other periods, it became a derivative of the strategy towards Russia. However, this is not at all the central problem of the West's Belarus policy.

As the events of the last six years have clearly demonstrated, the core problem – even the Achilles heel – of Western policy towards Minsk is the lack of expert knowledge. Such expertise that should allow understanding the real logic behind developments in Belarusian domestic and foreign policy and warn Western policymakers against decisions that even hypothetically cannot lead to their stated goals vis-à-vis Belarus.

> Due to the lack of such expertise, the West can neither develop an effective strategy in bilateral relations nor understand how the Belarus factor may play out in broader geopolitical scenarios.

If we look at the Belarusian discourse in the Western media and analytical community, all too often it proves largely irrelevant to real Belarus. Not in a sense that real Belarus is better or worse than its portrayal. But rather, the existing discourse mostly fails to reflect the actual cause-and-effect patterns in Belarusian politics.

Moreover, many commentators that Western media and diplomatic circles perceive as Belarus experts, in reality, lack relevant expertise. In some cases, their knowledge about the country is limited to publications in the very media that they comment for. And in other cases, under the disguise of expertise, these people simply promote certain political agenda.

Again, the question is not whether their agenda are justified or not. The point is that expertise serves a fundamentally different purpose than politically biased commentary. Yet, in the Western discourse on Belarus, these two genres have merged into one. What is meant to offer informed analysis has become part of outright lobbying and influence campaigns. As a result, not only does such “expertise” fail to help design policies in the West’s best interest, but it also disorients decision-makers.

The problem looks similar to the one that the renowned researcher Hans Kundnani described in the context of the Western analytical discourse on Ukraine in recent years. According to him, many analysts in Europe and the United States have abandoned their roles as analysts and instead joined the ranks of vocal advocates of certain policies. “Instead of realistically assessing the situation in Ukraine and asking difficult questions about Western strategy,” as Kundnani put it, numerous commentators have turned into “cheerleaders.”

Old problem that needs a solution

In the Belarusian case, this phenomenon has manifested itself for a long time and has become particularly striking in recent years. The multiple side effects and negative consequences of the Western policy of maximum pressure and sanctions, which are now incentivising discussions about a possible policy shift, were easy to predict already when deliberated and applied in 2020-2021. Of course, if one understood the interplay of fundamental variables in Minsk's domestic and foreign policy.

Yet, throughout all these years, calls for reckless pressure and sanctions have dominated the Western public discourse almost without question. After August 2020 and then February 2022, predictions (made on questionable grounds) prevailed that only such a principled policy line would inevitably force the Belarusian authorities to make concessions sought by the West.

> At the same time, serious strategic dilemmas associated with this approach, both for Western countries themselves and for Belarusian statehood, were simply ignored.

For ethical reasons, I will abstain from citing specific examples of incompetent analysis that consistently called on this flawed policy approach without accounting for broader strategic dilemmas involved, but they appear ubiquitous. Anyone can review them retrospectively and compare forecasts and promised effects with the actual reality on the ground.

Here the issue does not amount just to the fact that most of the same people who have a track record of incompetent and biased analysis continue to shape analytical narratives on Belarus today. Rather, this reveals a systemic problem which must be dealt with.

Ameliorating the problem would be in the interest of Minsk, which for a long time demonstrated little appetite for engaging with the Western analytical community. To no lesser extent, it would also correspond to the needs of Western capitals, if decision-makers there really want to start designing a sustainable Belarus strategy that can advance long-term stability in Eastern Europe. This is especially the case given that, in the currently changing geopolitical landscape, the significance of Belarus for regional security will likely continue to grow.

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