

The EU needs to adopt a more pragmatic policy towards Belarus based on cooperation rather than sanctions.

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The EU's sanction regime against Belarus and the government of President Alexander Lukashenka has been in place for more than 16 years. In an abridged version of a [brief](#) originally published by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, [Ondrej Ditrych](#) writes that while the sanctions illustrate the EU's objections to the regime in Belarus, all the available evidence has shown that they have been largely ineffective in their objective of changing the political climate in the country. He argues that the best way to make sanctions effective may be to terminate them, and instead establish a roadmap for engagement with the country that makes EU assistance and cooperation conditional on positive reform.



Since 1996, the EU has imposed, suspended, lifted and re-imposed a variety of sanctions on Belarus. All evidence seems to suggest that these sanctions are not working. It is true they may well show the Union's 'actorness' in international relations and, notably, in its own neighbourhood. They also signal legitimate moral indignation and ostensibly punish the regime, which can be seen as an end in itself, and possibly also act as an indirect means of promoting norms of good governance worldwide. Last but not least, they may represent political tools to prevent the regime from taking steps that it would otherwise have contemplated. But, in terms of primary objectives, the sanctions appear to be ineffective: political prisoners remain behind bars (unless they bend to pressure and, like Andrei Sannikov, ask for a presidential pardon), and the regime has not created a more permissive political environment.

What is the cause of this? First, the regime enjoys relative stability due to the economic lifeline provided or facilitated by Russia – special energy prices, subsidies (amounting to approx. 70 per cent of foreign direct investment), privileged market access and easy access to credit – and the existence of a fragmented and isolated domestic opposition. Second, the regime perceives relations with EU as a dependent variable of Belarus' own ambitions (but also concerns) *vis-à-vis* Russia. Third, the very design of the sanctions may be to blame. Their core objective is not merely a change of *policy* (e.g. unconditional release of political prisoners) but rather of *politics*, as reflected in the demands to make changes to the electoral code to assure free and fair elections, and to introduce freedom of expression and assembly. At the same time, the sanctions are limited insofar as they conform to the definition of

'smart' or targeted sanctions, with no sectoral embargoes or similar 'crippling' measures being implemented (243 individuals are currently on the travel ban list, and assets have been frozen to 32 entities associated with three business tycoons – Vladimir Peftiev, Yuri Chyzh and Anatoly Ternavski). That EU restrictive measures do not work does not mean that they are useless. But instead of recommending that the black lists be perfected or expanded (e.g. to include other prominent businessmen like Aleksandr Moshensky or Aleksandr Shakutin), or that entire sectors like oil products be targeted (which would bring a triple adverse effect: increase dependence on Russia, negatively impact society, and cause further economic losses for EU member states), their timely *suspension* might well be taken into consideration. Paradoxically, the best way to make sanctions effective may be to terminate them.



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This should not be an isolated step but rather the result of a bargaining process which also reviews the current policy of ‘critical engagement’ (with ‘engagement’ being limited to civil society). The EU did attempt to use both carrot and stick previously, in 2008-2010. The infamous ending of that *détente* – caused by the violent repression of political protests in the aftermath of the presidential election in December 2010 – left a sour taste and undermined faith in the idea that a lasting solution could be achieved. As a result, the list of targeted persons and entities grew dramatically, possibly to punish the regime for ‘cheating’ the EU. Now it is time to move beyond that position and adopt a more pragmatic policy.

Admittedly, from a geopolitical perspective, the window of opportunity that was once open is now closed. But while relations between Minsk and Moscow have normalised, President Alexander Lukashenka is wary of excessive dependence on Russia and continues to see relations with the EU as a constituent part of his balancing act. At the same time, there seems to be a more acute awareness that changes in governance need to be made to guarantee the regime’s longer-term survival. In this regard, EU assistance would be most welcome. Lastly, the Union is becoming an ever more important trading partner for Belarus, increasing its lead over Russia as the most important destination for its exports – a fact which could propel the regime to seek better relations.

A ‘smart’ opening move could be to suspend the restrictions on Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makey as both a gesture of good will and a practical means of facilitating diplomatic dialogue. It is crucial that any package then proposed to Minsk includes two items: first, clear and explicit assurances that closer cooperation is conditional on positive steps by Belarus, whilst not going so far as to threaten the regime. While it cannot be entirely ruled out that President Lukashenka would remain in power even if free elections were held tomorrow, the current regime will never accept sweeping changes in *politics*, not least because such external intervention would present it as weak.

Second, a possible package could include a clear roadmap of what would follow if Minsk makes the first step and releases its political prisoners. Belarus could thus be allowed to immediately begin to reap benefits, which would then increase if Lukashenka proceeds with administrative and economic modernisation and allows the transfer of expertise which, in turn, could strengthen the regime’s independence from Moscow.

It is important to stress that, by agreeing to such roadmap, the EU would not betray its own principles but only follow the logic of *relative differentiation*, of distributing benefits based on changes from a previous state of affairs. Engagement of civil society should not be given up on, but perhaps it would less complicate relations with the regime if it were carried out by a few interested member states rather than by the EU as a whole. Some pragmatic constraint in rhetorical terms, avoiding the impression that the Union is on a civilising mission in the neighbourhood, could also be welcome.

It is by no means guaranteed that Lukashenka would agree to the offer. And he is not omnipotent: pressure by spoilers, both internal and external, would undoubtedly occur. In other words, making the package acceptable is not a *sufficient* condition for a positive outcome; it is, however, a *necessary* one. It is also preferable to a policy that is unlikely to yield positive results in the foreseeable future.

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