

Policy Paper: “Analysing the European perspective for a democratic Belarus: views from experts and Belarusian democratic forces”.

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Introduction

Belarus-European Union (EU) relations have had a complex history, marked by periods of tension and rapprochement. The EU has consistently called for democratic reforms in Belarus while imposing sanctions in response to violations and abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Phases of a diplomatic thaw contributed to increasing cooperation with the democratic opposition, the civil society sector and independent media. Yet, after nearly three decades of engagement with the official Minsk, the EU has not yet succeeded in bringing about democratic changes in Belarus.

The 2020 post-electoral crisis and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 are the two major events which have shaped the current political environment in Belarus. On the one hand, they led to an increase in authoritarian trends in Belarus. Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, has brutally suppressed mass demonstrations, persecuted those who opposed the regime and forced many to flee Belarus.

On the other hand, these events resulted in forming a strong group of supporters for democratic changes in Belarus. Belarusian democratic forces in exile led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, have been very active in advocating for Western support to put pressure on the Lukashenka regime and bring about political changes in Belarus. A democratic transition of Belarus can also play an important role in securing a sustainable peace in Ukraine - the very issue that is often left out from discussions about the successful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war.

In August 2023, Belarusian democratic forces adopted an important [document](#) laying out a strategy for European integration of Belarus. The pro-EU aspiration of the Belarusian opposition sends a strong signal and demonstrates its willingness to end the era of "geopolitical neutrality" of Belarus that has been promoted by the Lukashenka regime, pulling Belarus out of Russia's embrace and bringing it to the European family of nations. This is a crucial time for the EU to rethink and re-evaluate its strategy towards Belarus.

How has this strategy changed over time? Does it reflect a new international environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine? To what extent is it effective and sustainable and which areas can be improved?

This policy paper summarises and analyses the results of the round table discussion "Belarus - EU: from neutrality to European integration" held in November 2023. The discussion was divided into two parts – expert and political. The expert panel analysed the debate around the European perspective for a democratic Belarus and discussed proposals for strengthening the Belarus-EU relations. At the political panel, representatives of democratic forces outlined their positions regarding Belarus' potential membership in the EU and formulated their proposals for developing Belarus-EU cooperation in the future. Based on the speakers' presentations, 10 policy recommendations were developed for EU's strategy towards the Lukashenka regime as well as EU's relations with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society.

Panel 1. Views of the Belarusian and EU experts on Belarus-EU relations, EU Strategy for Belarus and the process of a European enlargement.

During this panel discussion the experts from Belarus and the EU analysed various aspects of Belarus-EU relations; main pillars of the current EU's approach towards Belarus; and the challenges to the EU enlargement. In addition to that, the main findings of the survey on European strategy for Belarus and the arguments for and against a European perspective for Belarus were discussed.

1. Historical overview of Belarus-EU relations: lessons learned and the way forward for a democratic Belarus.

During the last 30 years of Lukashenka's rule in Belarus, the EU has tried many different strategies towards the country. The overarching EU's approach has been guided by the principle of a closer political and economic integration in exchange for democratic reforms in Belarus.

The changes in different phases of Belarus-EU relations have been influenced by one major factor – the Belarusian regime's degree of repression and violations of human rights, to which the EU had to respond and adjust its policy approach. The major critical junctures often coincided with an electoral cycle, in particular presidential elections, which were always followed by harsh repressions, and as a result, led to freezing of the relations between the EU and Belarus.

The EU has used various restrictive measures against the Lukashenka regime. The sanctions policy was especially hardened after the 2020 presidential elections. As a result, the EU introduced several rounds of restrictive measures, including both personal sanctions against specific individuals involved in human right violations and economic (sectoral) sanctions targeting crucial sectors of the Belarusian economy.

However, the EU's policy has not yet brought significant positive results and has not sufficiently weakened the Lukashenka regime.

The main point of criticism concerning the EU's policy towards Belarus is its lack of consistency. The EU did not maintain a steady course of action vis-à-vis Belarus and during different time periods it set different conditions which the official Minsk had to fulfil to restore cooperation and improve relations with the EU. For example, after the 2010 presidential elections which were followed by brutal repressions, the EU froze relations with the official Minsk. The necessary conditions for restoring friendly relations with the EU included freeing and rehabilitating political prisoners. Despite the Lukashenka regime failing to fulfil these conditions, the EU softened its approach towards Belarus when the geopolitical situation regarding regional security changed. In particular, after Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 and annexed Crimea, Lukashenka did not openly support Russia and declared Belarus as a guarantor and donor of regional security as well as a mediator of the crisis. The EU welcomed this step by the

official Minsk and tried to restore diplomatic relations with the Lukashenka regime, although the latter did not fulfil the conditions set by the EU on freeing and rehabilitating political prisoners.

Which approach can be considered more successful – sanctions or cooperation with the Lukashenka regime?

According to Pavel Slunkin, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), the periods of rapprochement and cooperation between Belarus and the EU were much more beneficial for both sides, in comparison to periods of stagnation and freezing of relations. The former were beneficial for the Belarusians living inside Belarus as well as for the EU. During the rapprochement from 2014 until 2020, the Belarusian authorities provided an unprecedented amount of freedom in the country. Belarus became more open to foreign direct investments, and the visa-free regime was established with 75 countries increasing international tourism. These steps led to growth in certain sectors of the Belarusian economy, such as the IT sector, and resulted in forming a positive image of Belarus in the international arena.

This phase of rapprochement finished with the presidential elections in 2020 during which Lukashenka showed that he was not ready to give away his power. The present human rights situation in Belarus has never been so bad before was never. The diplomatic, political and economic relations between Belarus and the EU have been brought to a minimum.

The history of Belarus-EU relations has shown that the evolution of the political regime in Belarus into a more democratic form is not possible until Lukashenka stays in power. Although Lukashenka had allowed some democratic changes to happen before the 2020 presidential elections, when he felt an existential threat to his own survival as well as to the survival of his family and close entourage he returned to “business as usual” and did everything to preserve his power.

As for sanctions, proponents of this approach knew that Lukashenka’s dependence on the Kremlin and the dependence of the Belarusian economy on Russia would increase significantly after introducing the restrictive measures. In theory, Lukashenka should have wanted to avoid this scenario and as a result would have tried to make some concessions, such as release of political prisoners and decreasing the degree of repressions. However, this has not happened yet. Instead, Lukashenka has adopted new rules of the game and decided to follow a new approach, accepting Putin’s domination over him and ensuring his political survival in the short-term perspective.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Lukashenka is satisfied with this status quo, and that he might not try to change it at a later stage. For the time being he thinks that time is on his side and he uses it to fully suppress any sign of protest activity in Belarusian society while waiting for the geopolitical situation to improve which could grant him more space for manoeuvre towards Moscow. Thus, so far the political machine under the Lukashenka regime has managed to adapt itself to the new circumstances and increase its resilience. It is important that policy-makers in Brussels keep this new reality in mind when developing their strategy towards Belarus.

2. EU's approach to Belarus: perspective from Brussels.

In August 2023, Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, noted that the EU will support democratic Belarus as long as necessary on its way to building a free and prosperous country, which would be ready to become part of a peaceful Europe. The EU's current approach towards Belarus, as outlined by Dirk Schuebel, the EU Special Envoy for Eastern Partnership countries, is based on several pillars:

1. Protecting democracy and human rights

For a long time, the EU has called on the Belarusian regime to adhere to its international commitments regarding the respect of fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of assembly and association and freedom of speech and media.

Three years have passed since the 2020 fraudulent presidential elections but the massive repressions in Belarus have not decreased. According to the Human Rights Center Viasna, there are over 1500 political prisoners in Belarus now. Many of them, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktor Babaryka are held in complete isolation. Belarusians abroad are also living under constant threat of being persecuted by the regime. In September 2023, Lukashenka signed a decree which forbade Belarusian citizens abroad to apply for new passports, make contractual agreements with their property or register new-borns. These operations can now only be done in Belarus, where exiles face the danger of receiving prison sentences.

The EU has a long history of fighting totalitarian regimes, for example, in Spain, Italy and Germany. That is why the EU immediately reacted with sharp criticism of the 2020 fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus and brutal repressions which the Lukashenka regime used to suppress mass demonstrations. The EU stopped bilateral cooperation with the Belarusian authorities, adopted sanctions and increased its support for the Belarusian people and civil society. The main goal of sanctions is to put pressure on the Belarusian regime to stop repressions, free political prisoners and other unlawfully detained citizens as well as initiate an inclusive dialogue with the Belarusian society on comprehensive political and economic reforms. Since 2020, the EU has allocated over 138 mln. euros to support Belarusian people, including victims of repressions, civil society activists and independent mass media.

2. Ensuring sovereignty and independence of Belarus

Belarus under the Lukashenka regime has become an accomplice of Russia's war in Ukraine. Lukashenka allowed Russia to use Belarusian territory as a launching pad for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for stationing Wagner paramilitary group and for deployment of Russia's nuclear weapons. Illegal migration is also continued to be used as an instrument for destabilising the situation on the borders with the EU. With these actions the Lukashenka regime has not only threatened regional security but has also

traded Belarusian sovereignty for the Kremlin's support, especially by intensifying cooperation with Russia within the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

In response to these developments the EU set a goal to provide support to various initiatives which aim to preserve and strengthen Belarusian language, identity and culture. The EU strongly believes that none of the countries can invade their neighbours and violate their sovereignty and territorial integrity and it is ready to utilise its mechanisms, such as sanctions, to stop such actions of unjustified aggression.

3. Providing support to the Belarusian people

The EU has supported Belarusian people since the first day of the 2020 post-electoral crisis and will continue doing that until the start of democratic transformations in Belarus. The EU is committed to stabilising the Belarusian economy, including with the plan of comprehensive support. This would contribute to creating new workplaces and increasing the quality of people's lives. In addition to that, the EU aims to support Belarusian businesses in exile. Furthermore, in June 2023, the EU launched the consultative group with the Belarusian Democratic Forces and civil society which aims to become the main platform for communication and common action to support democratic Belarus. Finally, the Eastern Partnership remains an important instrument of communication with Belarus, especially with civil society and Belarusian democratic forces, and the EU is committed to continuing its support to the EaP. Poland has already announced that it will be organising the EaP summit in 2025 during its EU presidency.

3. Survey on the European Strategy for Belarus and Germany's role in supporting democratic Belarus.

According to Konrad Adenauer stf. (KAS) Belarus Office Director Jakob Woellenstein, although the process of entering the EU is long and cumbersome even in the most optimistic scenario, it is important to use the momentum and draw attention to Belarus and its "Europeanness" already now and work more on the so-called "extension of European consciousness". Big and powerful EU countries like Germany can play a crucial role in this process. The EU needs to invest in forming a positive image of Belarus, so that it is perceived as a European country. When the window of opportunity opens and the government of a democratic Belarus might decide to apply for the EU membership, this would be seen in Brussels as a way "back home" to joining the European family.

Main findings of the survey

KAS Belarus Office, in collaboration with Martens Centre, conducted a survey among European bureaucrats, diplomats and policymakers, assessing the need for a unified European approach towards Belarus. The title of the survey is "The survey of decision-makers: in search of European strategy for Belarus" and it was launched in

spring 2023. In total, 13 professionals working on Belarus affairs in various capacities, including ambassadors, members of parliament, directors and heads of divisions in different institutions, took part in the survey. The majority of the respondents are from Germany, whilst others are from other EU and non-EU states, including Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Georgia, Norway and Ukraine.

According to the survey, only 30 percent of the respondents said that the EU had pursued a strategic approach towards Belarus, while nearly 70 percent admitted the opposite - that the EU does not have a strategic approach towards the country. In response to the question of whether there is need for such a strategic approach, **all respondents said yes, confirming that there is demand for European strategy towards Belarus.**

Another question posed in the survey was “What should be the main goal of the strategic plan for Belarus?”. The majority of respondents chose the option “to restore human rights and democratic rule in Belarus” (53 per cent). The other answers chosen by the participants were also not related to geopolitical goals and focused on domestic political issues such as “helping Belarusians decide on their own fate and speeding up democratic transformation”. Preparing Belarus for EU membership was the second most popular answer in this category which scored about 23 per cent. None of the respondents chose an option that the goal of the strategic approach should be to make Belarus a geopolitically neutral country as before 2020.

In response to another question “Do you think the strategic interests of Belarus (general population) coincide with those of the European Union?”, the majority of participants provided a positive answer (85 per cent).

Germany's support to democratic Belarus

In November 2023, an International alliance of ‘friendship groups’ with Belarus’ in different parliaments was launched in Germany. In total, representatives of 17 countries participated in the inauguration meeting, which acknowledged that Belarus belongs to the European family.

In addition to that, during the same month, the German government represented by the coalition of three parties - Social democrats, the Greens and Liberals - made the motion for a resolution and held debates on Belarus in the German Parliament. This marks the second significant discussion on Belarus within the German Parliament of similar magnitude. The first one was initiated by the CDU-CSU party in January 2023 which had a wording of “returning Belarus into the European family of nations”. Thus, the first high-level debate on Belarus in Germany took place even before the Belarusian democratic forces had declared their ambition to join the EU in August 2023. The only party which was outspokenly against this motion was the AfD, Germany's right-wing populist party. Although the first resolution was not accepted back in January, the one initiated by the Government got the necessary support and was adopted by Parliament. It has a lot of similarities with the first motion, including “acknowledging Belarus’ place in the family of European nations”, but also provides a set of concrete measures to support the Belarusian democratic movement and civil

society, such as providing assistance to those in exile, closing loopholes in sanctions and supporting pro-democratic reforms. In addition to that, the second resolution puts a strong emphasis on liberating political prisoners and on developing a plan on European perspective for Belarus. Now the task for the German government is to develop concrete steps in accordance with the plan which would contribute to safeguarding Belarus' sovereignty and freedom.

Thus, overall, there is a strong support among German policy-makers for Europeanisation and democratisation of Belarus which is based on two main pillars: support for Belarusian people in exile now and support for the European aspiration of a democratic Belarus in the future. In general, Germany sees the process of helping democratic Belarus as part of the bigger question of 'historical responsibility' and obligation to support democracy and movements for freedom in Europe and beyond.

4. Main challenges to European enlargement

According to Katia Glod, policy analyst at the European Leadership Network, enlargement is back on the agenda of the European Union. After 10 years of stagnation in enlargement negotiations, the war in Ukraine has forced the EU to start thinking seriously about its neighbourhood as well as stability and security around its borders. In July 2023, during one of the opening events of the EU Spanish Presidency, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez [remarked](#) that “ the European order is currently changing and the EU should change together with it”.

However, there are several main challenges to the European enlargement, which also impact the chances of a democratic Belarus to acquire a European perspective from the EU. These challenges relate to internal reforms which the EU has to carry out to accommodate new member states. One of them focuses on a qualified majority voting and its application to taxation policy and common foreign and security policy. The second major issue deals with distribution of the EU regional funds and its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Many experts agree that implementing reforms concerning a qualified majority voting could be challenging and may reduce the interest of countries like Germany and France in pursuing the enlargement policy. As a result, this can become a serious stumbling block on the way of accession for the applicant countries.

As for CAP, several major developments are needed in restructuring the EU funds. Ukraine is a country with one of the largest agricultural sectors in Europe whilst also being one of the poorest ones. This means that if Ukraine joins the EU, the agricultural funds would need to be restructured. The same would hold true if Moldova were to join the EU. There is a danger that as soon as the general public and the political elites in European capitals realise that, their interest in the EU enlargement and acceptance of Ukraine and Moldova as the EU members may considerably decrease.

Additionally, the entry of all candidate countries into the EU is contingent upon an unanimous agreement. So, any EU country can block a decision on accepting an applicant at any time. This primarily concerns Hungary, which has often raised the

issue of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine as a reason for slowing down the accession process. Other countries who could negatively impact Ukraine's chances of joining the EU include Slovakia and Poland, where [farmers have been blocking the](#) Polish-Ukraine border since November 2023, fearing the impact of opening the EU market to Ukraine.

There is also considerable uncertainty regarding the French political leadership. President Emmanuel Macron, who generally supports the enlargement policy, will have to leave his post in about three years' time and it is not certain who will come to power in France after him. One could not rule out the possibility that Marine le Pen could become France's next president, and she holds a negative stance towards EU enlargement. Additional uncertainty is caused by referendums, which some EU member states will have to hold before agreeing to enlargement.

Another challenge for Ukraine's accession process to the EU is the ongoing war. Even when the war is over, much attention will have to be paid to implementing comprehensive domestic reforms focusing on fighting corruption and ensuring the rule of law before Ukraine can join the EU.

Thus, due to the numerous challenges identified above, the enlargement might not be realised in a full format. It might be possible for the applicant countries to join only some separate instruments of the EU, such as applying for special funding or participating only in some of the voting mechanisms of the EU. In this respect, the [European Political Community](#) can become an inclusive platform for both EU and non-EU member states to exchange views, develop ideas and take action addressing common challenges.

5. Arguments for and against the European perspective for Belarus.

The European perspective for Belarus is one of the polarising topics among the Belarusian experts. There is no unanimous agreement on it among the Belarusian democratic forces either. Nevertheless, in August 2023, they adopted a [“Declaration of Future Membership of Belarus in the EU”](#) at the conference of New Belarus. According to Roza Turarbekava, a policy analyst at the Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe (IDSMEE), the two main groups of factors contributed to the development of this document.

The first group includes the geopolitical factors. Based on them, the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine, the increasing ideological confrontation and the abolishment of the principle of neutrality and non-nuclear status in the new version of the Belarusian Constitution adopted in February 2022, have changed the image of Belarus as a country balancing in-between Russia and the EU. The time of the “situational neutrality” which was once developed in the policy papers of the ‘Minsk Dialogue’ platform is already over. The new Constitution of 2022 put an end to the status of Belarus as a guarantor of a regional security.

The second group consists of the structural factors. According to them, the 2020 post-electoral protests and the subsequent events contributed to forming a group of strong supporters of political changes in Belarus as well as solidified Belarusian democratic forces in exile.

The Declaration and the whole idea of the European perspective for a democratic Belarus have sparked heated debates among Belarusian experts. The first set of arguments against pro-European ambitions of Belarus can be termed as “it is not the time yet”. According to those, it is not the right time to think about the European perspective because of the ongoing war, harsh repressions and the growing totalitarian trends in Belarus. Thus, the main task of the democratic forces should be to fight for changing the political regime and facilitating a democratic transition in Belarus.

The second set of arguments revolves around sociological considerations. According to [available opinion polls](#), there is currently a rather small number of Belarusians who support the pro-European choice for their country.

The arguments in favour of a European perspective claim that Belarus is part of Europe, and Belarusian society has values similar to European. Related to this, there is a historical group of arguments, which state that the history of Belarus is a history of a European country. References to the Magdeburg law, the history of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Belarusian People's Republic are frequently cited in connection with Belarus in the historical literature. All these political formations were European in their nature.

The argument around the pro-European perspective is also often framed in a way that the European choice represents the choice of ‘dreamers’ and idealists, while a more critical standpoint demonstrates a realistic perspective.

Although based on the available opinion polls the number of supporters of a pro-European choice of Belarus might be currently rather low, it is important to keep in mind that Belarusian society over the last three decades has not been used to making choices concerning both domestic political processes and the geopolitical issues. So, the Belarusian society which has been repressed by the Belarusian regime is not ready for making a pro-European geopolitical choice. Lukashenka and his entourage practically forced on Belarusian society the model of close relations with Russia within the Union State of Russia and Belarus. This has led to increased dependence of Belarus on the Kremlin's support; inability to cooperate on equal terms with Russia; and, as a result, to a gradual loss of Belarusian sovereignty.

One of the major challenges to establishing pro-European foreign policy is Russia's response, i.e., Russia can intervene, even in a military way, if Belarus decides to leave its orbit of influence and orient itself towards the West. However, these fears are unfounded because the geopolitical context has significantly changed since Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian army no longer has the image of an undefeatable army, and Russia is under significant pressure of economic sanctions as well as political isolation.

In the mid- to long-term, there is a possibility of opening a window of opportunity, which would allow the democratic Belarus to seize the momentum and

bring about political change in Belarus. Therefore, now is the right time for self-identification of the Belarusian nation. While the process of EU accession may be lengthy and challenging, it presents a chance to start writing the history of democratic Belarus from a new page.

Panel 2. Positions and programmes of the Belarusian democratic forces regarding the European perspective for Belarus.

During this panel, Belarusian political actors presented their positions towards the [Declaration of Future Membership of Belarus in the EU](#) as well as their vision of how the process of Belarus' accession to the EU could be carried out. They discussed the directions, programmes, and campaigns that can be used to achieve this goal, as well as what can be done “here and now” in exile.

1. Differences in strategy.

Although the Declaration on Future Membership of Belarus in the EU adopted at the Second Conference “New Belarus” represents a common position of the Belarusian democratic forces, there are several Belarusian political actors which explicitly or implicitly speak against the prospect of Belarus joining the EU. During the “New Belarus” conference itself, as well as in the media, [sceptical assessments](#) of the European prospects for Belarus were expressed by such public figures as Ivan Krautsou (Coordination Council Secretariat) and Volha Kavalkova (Coordination Council member). In addition, during this panel discussion, the representative of the International Office of “Our Party” (“Tell the Truth”) Volha Tsesakova presented a programme on behalf of Andrei Dzmitryeu (political prisoner and head of “Our Party”), which underlined the need to adhere to the position of “striving for neutrality,” reforming the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and focusing on cooperation between the EEU and the EU. In addition, Mrs. Tsesakova proposed to leave the Union State, review relations with Russia and sign an agreement on a responsible neighbourhood. She underlined the need for full participation in the Eastern Partnership programme and accession to the Council of Europe, but not to the European Union. The emphasis was placed on the need to be guided by “national interests” in foreign policy.

Volha Tsesakova's suggestions, which represent the position of “Our Party”, demonstrate that not all political actors among the Belarusian democratic forces are ready to adhere to the goal of joining the European Union in the future.

Nevertheless, it can be stated that the overwhelming majority supports the main goal proclaimed in the Declaration of Future Membership of Belarus in the European Union. For example, a strong support for the Declaration during this panel discussion was expressed by the Deputy Head and Representative for Foreign Affairs United

Transitional Cabinet of Belarus, Valery Kavaleuski, and the representative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office Anatol Liabedzka; the Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Coordination Council Tatsiana Marynich; representatives of the banned party Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) Hanna Kanius; leader of the Christian Democrats and the Movement of Belarusian Solidarity Vital Rymasheuski; as well as by the representative of the Movement "For Freedom" Yury Hubarevich.

The willingness and readiness of the Belarusian democratic forces to take measures towards realising the European perspective for a democratic Belarus is a significant political step reflecting an important geopolitical choice of the Belarusian pro-democratic elites.

2. Arguments in favour of European integration

The speakers at this panel presented their positions and justification for their policy stances structured around three main aspects: values, public opinion as well as national and regional security.

Values

Continuing the discussion from the first panel regarding the values of Belarusians and the appeal of the EU, the speakers emphasised that the 2020 protests were pro-European in nature in a value-based sense, rather than geopolitical. Valery Kavaleuski and Tatsiana Marynich pointed out that protesters' demands were based on European values, such as fair elections, human rights, democracy, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. Tatsiana Marynich emphasised that during the 2020 protests, the number of supporters of European integration reached 40 percent. According to Valery Kavaleuski, it was through these demands that the Belarusians actually expressed their commitment to the European path. Thus, this argument – the European values of Belarusians – became the first argument in favour of the pro-European choice.

Vitaly Rymasheuski, in a conversation with Jacob Woellenstein, said that European material values such as a good healthcare and education system, high wages, and the opportunity to travel in the Schengen zone are perhaps the most attractive ones for Belarusians. According to Rymasheuski, they do not signal the pragmatism of Belarusians, but rather their desire for "personal growth" in contrast to the old Soviet values of belonging to a "great country."

Public opinion

This argument is highly controversial and the representatives of democratic forces have different assessments of it. On the one hand, it is recognized that a significant part of Belarusian society expresses [sympathy for Russia](#), but this does not mean that it supports integration with Russia, including becoming one state with Russia. On the other hand, the number of supporters of European integration is

estimated to be [around 14-15 percent](#). During the discussion, Yury Hubarevich drew attention to the difficult conditions for conducting sociological surveys in Belarus. Tatsiana Marynich pointed out that given the years of the anti-European rhetoric in the official media and present-day outright intimidation, 25 percent can be considered very high. In addition, she emphasised, as noted above, that the number of supporters of European integration increased at the time of the 2020 protests. The Belarusian politicians concluded that under favourable conditions public opinion could swing in favour of the EU. However, to enhance the attractiveness of the EU and the prospect of accession, concrete actions are necessary” here and now”.

National and regional security

The majority of speakers stated that in 2022 the situation in Belarus changed dramatically, raising the question of a geopolitical choice for Belarusians. According to Valery Kavaleuski, Lukashenka has “crossed the Rubicon” by taking part in the aggression against Ukraine. From that moment onwards, the threat of loss of sovereignty and independence became really tangible for Belarus. In addition, the persecution of the Belarusian language, culture, and education intensified within the country. The political platform of ‘striving for neutrality’ has lost its relevance. Hanna Kanius representing the banned Hramada party, presented the results of an internal party discussion and stated that in the future, Belarus needs not only accession to the EU, but also to NATO.

Hence, Belarus's membership in the European Union is depicted by the Belarusian democratic forces as a safeguard against the Lukashenka regime's alignment with the Kremlin and the potential loss of Belarusian sovereignty due to Belarus' absorption by Russia within the Union State.

3. Areas of cooperation: nuanced differences

Positions and proposals of Belarusian political actors to bring the European perspective closer can be analysed and systematised in accordance with the strategic and tactical approaches.

The strategic approach means developing reform proposals, Association Agreement with the EU and a roadmap, with the expectations and goals of accelerating the accession to the EU.

The tactical approach means advocacy efforts for Belarusians, lobbying for an increased access to visas; cultural, educational and professional exchange, support for grassroots initiatives of civil society.

The division into two approaches helps to pay attention to the emphasis made by some political actors. Their visions of foreign policy for a future Belarus differ, depending on their political capital, resources, self-identification, and goals.

The strategic approach in its expanded form was demonstrated by representatives of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office. In particular, Valery Kavaleuski, proposed three areas of

work: 1) work with Belarusian society to explain all the advantages of joining the EU; 2) work with European partners to strengthen the narrative about Belarus as a European country; 3) institutionalisation of relations with the EU through the creation of formalised groups: Contact Group with the EU, Consultative Group with the Council of Europe, the possibility of appointing a Special Representative of the EU for cooperation with the democratic forces. Kavaleuski indicated work on the draft Association Agreement as one of the main directions for bringing the European perspective closer, especially noting the complexity of work on the economic bloc.

A detailed plan for a number of areas was presented by Anatol Liabedzka, who generally demonstrates a purely strategic approach. He proposed starting a Strategic Dialogue with the EU, signing an Agreement with the European Parliament, appointing a Special Representative for Belarus, preparing legislation for future integration taking into account the experience of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, as well as further developing cooperation with the parliaments of European countries and creating friendship groups in each of them.

Hanna Kanius proposed an approach close to the strategic one, emphasising the necessity of developing a reform project and conducting an audit of the current Belarusian legislation to ascertain the extent of required actions.

Yury Hubarevich (Movement for Freedom) also presented the position with a dominant strategic approach. He proposed developing roadmaps for changing the Belarusian legislation - from draft constitutional reforms to reforms in various areas. Tatsiana Marynich proposed developing a roadmap for accession to the EU based on the Resolution adopted by the Coordination Council.

The tactical approach was largely proposed by those political actors who aimed at supporting grass-roots organisations.

In particular, Vital Rymasheuski expressed criticism of the strategic approach, deeming it to be a waste of time. Instead, he suggested focusing on "lobbying (for Belarusians) for such things as mobility, opportunities to do business and study abroad." He advocated for making this the foundation of the roadmap for cooperation with the EU, including support for cultural and educational initiatives.

In addition, within the framework of the tactical approach, which can be done "here and now", Hanna Kanius pointed out the need for solving visa issues, resuming passenger transportation by rail, working with regional border officials (reminding them of successful projects), and also continuing inter-party cooperation (between EU and Belarusian democratic parties).

Tatsiana Marynich also proposed a number of instruments fitting the tactical approach, including a road map to simplify the visa regime, strengthen exchanges in the field of culture, education, business and other professional exchanges, replacing representatives of the regime with representatives of the democratic forces in the Eastern Partnership program, using the opportunities of this program to further support the Belarusian civil society. In addition, Mrs. Marynich highlighted the need for meaningful cooperation between the Coordination Council and the parliaments of European countries.

The results of this panel discussion represent a snapshot of the current foreign policy preferences among the Belarusian political forces. The electoral campaign to the Coordination Council, which is expected to take place in spring 2024, can serve as an important critical juncture for the Belarusian political elites to clearly define their programmes and priorities reflecting strategic and tactical approaches for the next electoral cycle.

Conclusions

Belarus-EU relations are currently going through a crucial phase in their development. Since the start of 2022, the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus has played a significant role in enabling Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine. As Russia's only formal ally in Europe, Belarus' significance for regional security is currently greater than ever.

The democratic Belarus, represented by the Belarusian democratic forces, civil society organisations and ordinary Belarusians, who had to flee from repressions, continue their struggle against the Lukashenka regime. The pro-European choice promoted by the Belarusian democratic forces demonstrates the readiness of the Belarusian opposition to see their country as part of the European family in the future. This is an important time when the EU can help Belarus to preserve its independence and sovereignty, strengthen Belarusian identity and help the Belarusian nation to survive.

Therefore, Western policymakers need to assign a higher priority to Belarus and develop a robust policy framework aimed at removing Belarus from Russia's sphere of influence and at democratising the Belarusian political system. This policy should also enhance the West's positive image in the Belarusian society and provide assistance to the Belarusian pro-democracy movement, which has actively supported Ukraine's fight for freedom. Without developing a comprehensive strategy towards Belarus, Western governments risk to be in a weaker position in relation to the Lukashenka and Putin regimes, and, hence, have fewer effective tools to weaken Russia's expansionist ambitions in the region.

Policy recommendations below which have been formulated on the basis of the roundtable discussion "Belarus and the EU: from Neutrality to European Integration" with experts and representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces aim to inform EU policymakers about the needs of Belarusian society and can be used as a basis for new EU's strategy towards Belarus.

Policy recommendations:

- 1. The EU should continue its support of Belarusian democratic forces, civil society and exiled Belarusians for as long as necessary and until the Lukashenka regime is substantially weakened and democratic changes take place in Belarus.**

If the EU wants democratic changes in Belarus, the investments in these changes need to be consistent with the declared objectives. First of all, the EU needs to underline that the future of democratic Belarus and Ukraine are closely interlinked and support to Ukraine also means investment in the democratic future of Belarus. Only if the Kremlin and Russian elites are substantially weakened, there could be significant political changes in Belarus.

2. The EU should appoint a Special Envoy for relations with democratic Belarus.

A Special Envoy could act as a central figure in the EU responsible for coordinating and taking action on matters related to Belarus. The Envoy would oversee the work of the national representatives for cooperation with democratic forces which, for example, have been already appointed by such countries as Poland, Estonia, Sweden, Lithuania and Ukraine and who could be accountable before the European Parliament and European Commission.

3. The EU needs to clearly articulate the possibility of European integration for democratic Belarus, including the benefits it provides. In addition, the EU should develop a strategy on how to communicate this idea to the Belarusian citizens.

The EU should not side-line democratic Belarus due to the start of the accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Conditions and a clear roadmap of cooperation with democratic Belarus should be developed and clearly articulated. One of the more concrete steps could include translating *acquis communautaire* and Copenhagen criteria into Belarusian and trying to communicate with the Belarusian public regarding the meaning of the European perspective.

4. It is imperative for the EU to bolster opportunities for people-to-people contacts with Belarus and enhance investments in areas such as freedom of movement, the ability to work and study in the EU for Belarusian citizens.

Although visa policy belongs to the national competence of each EU member state, the EU institutions can provide a recommendation to the national governments to adopt a more favourable approach towards Belarusians who seek visas having to flee their country due to political reasons. The EU could also consider holding close consultation with its member states regarding the idea of a New Passport for Belarus promoted by the Belarusian Democratic Forces.

5. The EU should invest in making the European perspective for Belarusians a more attractive alternative to the Eurasian choice promoted and enforced by Russia.

It is important for the EU to ensure and provide good conditions for the exiled Belarusians, so that they can live and work in a non-discriminatory supportive

environment, not worrying about the need to extend their residence permits or opening bank accounts. In this case, the Belarusians living abroad can speak positively about the EU and popularise the positive image of the EU back home in Belarus. Hence, the EU can serve as a magnet for Belarusians, akin to the role Western Germany played for Eastern Germany before the unification of the country.

6. It is crucial for the EU to provide more support for various educational opportunities for Belarusians, targeting specifically school children and bachelor students.

The EU's financial support should be extended to other educational initiatives beyond the flagship Belarusian university in exile, the European Humanities University. More attention should be paid to targeting the younger generation of Belarusians, i.e., schoolchildren and university students. Some concrete examples could include essay competitions on various EU-related topics, which could be promoted through mass media and would contribute to spreading the European values among young generations of Belarusians. Erasmus+ could be revised to include university personnel who were fired by the Belarusian regime due to political reasons (which currently amounts to over 1000 individuals).

7. The EU should step up its support to the initiatives focusing on preserving Belarusian culture and national identity, independent media which broadcast in Belarusian as well as publishing houses, which print materials in the Belarusian language.

Support of this sphere is particularly important now when the democratic Belarus has declared its ambition to break the links with Russia and step on the pro-European path while Belarusians inside Belarus risk losing their identity due to increasing presence of Russian language in media space, education and everyday life.

8. The EU should develop and support projects aiming to form a new generation of Belarusian civil servants, who will become the main implementers of the reforms for transforming the Belarusian society on its way to European integration.

Some of the means to realising this objective include creating expert groups for developing reforms in different spheres, organising public discussions and hearings of draft reforms as well as exchanging best practices with experts from the candidate countries, including Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

9. The EU should consider conducting monitoring sentiments and preferences of civil servants inside Belarus by maintaining open informal channels of communication with them.

This would allow the EU to gather valuable information and get a more nuanced understanding about the functioning of the system in Belarus under Lukashenka and

formulate ways of influencing those groups of civil servants, which could be more inclined and receptive to the idea of closer cooperation with the EU in the future (for example, regional elites or those working in specific ministries).

10. The EU should have a clear understanding of the challenges hindering the successful implementation of its enlargement policy and develop efficient mitigating mechanisms to reduce the negative impact of these challenges.

Some of the ways to address the challenges facing enlargement policy include commissioning a comprehensive study on the necessary institutional reforms inside the EU, developing mechanisms for influencing public opinion in the European capitals in favour of enlargement agenda and working out an efficient strategy to minimise the destructive actions of illiberal democracies such as Hungary, which could compromise the accession process of the candidate countries (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) and the prospect of European perspective for democratic Belarus.