

#BerlinPerspectives

Analysing German European Policy

One Year after the Presidential Election in Belarus

Germany's role and policy recommendations for the political crisis in Belarus

by Katrin Boettger and Nicolas Butylin

- *Over the past twelve months, protests against Alyaksandr Lukashenka have continued while political relations between the EU and Belarus have deteriorated significantly.*
- *The crisis remains high on the EU agenda due to the aggressive policies and rhetoric of the Belarusian authorities.*
- *The EU sanctions pursue the political objective of a new free and fair election as well as the release of all political prisoners. They now also target the Belarusian economy.*
- *Belarus's membership within the Eastern Partnership should remain open, with a stronger focus on cooperation with civil society and the diaspora in Europe.*

On 9 August 2020, a political crisis broke out in Belarus, triggered by the fraudulent presidential election and violence against subsequent peaceful demonstrations. The escalating confrontation between President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the Coordination Council led by the opposition's election candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has been the focus of attention in many European capitals. Since the election Tsikhanouskaya has met more EU state heads of state and government than Lukashenka has in his 27 years in office. While on the surface the situation in Belarus has calmed down in contrast to the protest marches seen last summer and autumn, the regime's retaliation against political opponents has steadily increased. The events of the last months illustrate how far the regime in Belarus has distanced itself from the common European framework of values. Diplomatic and civil society channels are increasingly cut off: Minsk's reaction to the EU sanctions since the election have culminated so far with the expulsion of the EU's ambassador to Belarus, Dirk Schuebel. The closure of member-state embassies cannot be ruled out, as indicated in the forced reductions in the staff of the Latvian and Lithuanian embassies. The regime shutting down the Goethe-Institute and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Belarus will also reduce the capacity for externally supported cultural activities in the country.

The improvement in EU-Belarusian relations between 2015 and 2020, including the lifting of sanctions six years ago and cooperation within the Eastern Partnership, did not lead to democratization in Belarus. Today the EU needs a different strategy combining sanctions against the illegitimate regime and enhanced cooperation with civil society actors inside and outside Belarus. And, even though the EU has achieved little to change the situation in Belarus in the past twelve months, it still has scope for further action to put more political pressure on Lukashenka to schedule a new presidential election, stop the violence against peaceful protesters and release political prisoners.

The events of the last months illustrate how far the regime in Belarus has distanced itself from the common European framework of values.

Since the presidential election last August, the EU has taken multifaceted measures against Belarus. In the weeks following the poll, EU heads of state and government expressed concern about the political situation and called for the end of state-organized violence against peaceful demonstrators and the release of political prisoners. The EU and its member states did not recognize the official results of the election, which the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) deemed neither free nor fair. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania imposed sanctions against Belarus in August, and in October 2020 a **first package of EU sanctions** followed, which imposed travel bans and asset freezes on 40 people. In November 2020, the European Council adopted a **second package of sanctions**, targeting Lukashenka, his son and national security advisor, Viktor Lukashenka, and 15 other members of Belarusian authorities. The worsening repression of the democracy movement, including the targeting of journalists and civil society, resulted in a **third package of EU sanctions**, which was ratified in December 2020. Included for the first time were actors in the Belarusian economy who were not specifically linked to the election but who either benefit from or actively support the regime. In May 2021, the European Commission presented a €3

billion support package for a democratic Belarus. Its key elements are financial support for economic recovery, increased connectivity between the EU and Belarus, and support for the Belarusian IT industry and environmental projects. However, the package is conditioned on democratic progress and should be understood as an incentive for reform.

The EU's attention to Belarus was heightened in June 2021 when the authorities forced the landing in Minsk of a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius in order to arrest opposition blogger Raman Pratasevič and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega. Following this unprecedented incident, the European Council reacted immediately and decided upon a **fourth, so far the largest, sanctions package**, primarily targeting the financial sector of the economy (potash, tobacco and oil products).

The EU support package based on conditionality for democratic progress should be understood as an incentive for reform.

The political crisis in Belarus is of high relevance for the rest of Europe and for Germany. The EU has an almost 1,300 km border with the country, which has received more attention in recent weeks due to a record number of refugees from the Middle East and the Caucasus crossing from Belarus into member states. In January 2020 the EU and Belarus signed a visa facilitation and readmission agreement that provided for the return of persons present irregularly in either, making the route via Belarus to the EU less attractive for refugees. Following the fourth EU sanctions package, Minsk has moved to suspend the readmission agreement with the aim to put pressure on neighbouring EU members Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Resolving the confrontation with the government in Minsk continues to be a high priority and the EU and its member states as the situation in Belarus is a test for the EU's ability to act in foreign policy and geopolitically. Furthermore, the EU is facing a regime that is disavowing democracy, the rule of law and universal values and freedoms – and also at stake is

the potential imitation of Lukashenka's actions elsewhere in Europe's neighbourhood.

Germany's role

Germany's approach for dealing with the political crisis in Belarus is in line with EU measures. For example, there has been no questioning of or suggestion of vetoing the EU sanctions imposed so far in Berlin. However, the German government is more cautious than its Eastern European and Baltic counterparts when it comes to taking more action to solve the crisis. Germany's role in formulating an EU strategy on Belarus is also linked to its relationship with Russia, which is illustrated by Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement that she wanted to speak to President Vladimir Putin about the Ryanair incident before taking direct measures against Belarus. As in the conflict in Ukraine, Germany is trying to mediate among the EU member states, supporting sanctions while keeping stronger measures for possible future circumstances.

German-Belarusian relations have deteriorated in the last twelve months after their upturn since 2015. The Strategic Advisory Group, which was initiated in 2019 during the visit of Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei to Germany, was suspended right after the 2020 presidential election. To date, two meetings have taken place with representatives from the respective government, business and scientific circles, enabling exchanges at the highest diplomatic level. The Belarusian-German History Commission, which was constituted in February 2020, also has an unclear future after the contracts of members of the Historical Institute of the Academy of Sciences in Minsk were not extended by the Belarusian government due to their attendance at demonstrations.

The several visits of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to Berlin in the last twelve months have highlighted the importance of Germany for solving the Belarus crisis. She has had meetings with Chancellor Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier as well as politicians from the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Free Democrats to discuss ways for Germany to support Belarus's

democracy movement and civil society. The country's continuing presence on Germany's agenda is also thanks to the more active Belarusian diaspora, which in the aftermath of the presidential election organized solidarity demonstrations in several German cities.

The visits of presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to Berlin in the last twelve months have highlighted the importance of Germany's role for solving the Belarus crisis.

Germany's government was most clear when it dealt with the forced landing in Minsk of the Ryanair aircraft, which had four German citizens on board. It condemned this action by the Belarusian authorities as well as the mistreatment of Pratsievič, which government spokesperson Steffen Seibert described as 'a disgrace'. Belarus's ambassador, Denis Sidorenko, was summoned to the Foreign Ministry for the second time since the election.

Policy Recommendations

While the ongoing actions of Belarus's authorities against its citizens will probably result in a fifth package of EU sanctions, so far the EU and Germany have achieved little to change the situation in the country. Yet it is in the EU's interest to keep Belarus high on the political agenda and to increase the pressure on Lukashenka to release political prisoners and call a new free and fair election, even while keeping in mind the lifeline he has to Russia.

The following policy recommendations are based on two pillars. The first consists of the expansion of sanctions, persistent demands, and positive incentives towards the government in Minsk at the political level. The second consists of measures in relation to civil society actors in Belarus.

(1.) Continue to demand the release of political prisoners: The EU should continue to demand the release of political prisoners (of which there were 610 on 9 August) as well as to offer benefits to the Belarusian authorities if they show 'goodwill' in this

respect, such as lifting the sanctions on the national airline Belavia.

(2.) Continue to demand a free and fair presidential election: The EU and other international institutions should maintain their demand of holding a free and fair presidential election under international observation by the OSCE, of which Belarus is a member.

(3.) Create a new EU special representative for Belarus: The EU would benefit from the creation of a special representative for Belarus. This would once again highlight the relevance of the situation to European and Belarusian audiences, and it would allow the EU to act more intensively and more resiliently in relation to the country. The special representative could better coordinate political and civil society activities using Track II practices.

(4.) Strengthen visa facilitation for Belarusians: A major step would be to introduce temporary visa facilitation for Belarusians in the Schengen area to protect them from violence and lawlessness in their country. However, there is no consensus for an EU approach. While the likes of Lithuania and Poland have eased visa regulations, Germany and France in particular should do the same to ensure that Belarusian citizens are not subject to Lukashenka's policy of isolation.

(5.) Open criminal investigations against Lukashenka and security officers: The example of criminal procedures in Germany and Lithuania should be followed at the EU level with investigations against Lukashenka and the perpetrators of state-ordered torture of peaceful demonstrators. This would follow the principle of universal jurisdiction according to which crimes against humanity can also be prosecuted from abroad.

(6.) Cut off Belarus from international banking: A major blow to the Lukashenka regime would be the decoupling of Belarus from the SWIFT international payments system for financial institutions, which would have the effect of isolating Belarusian banks from international financial flows. Export-oriented state-owned enterprises would be hit hard, as has been the case in Iran as a result of similar measures.

EU action in this regard would have a greater impact in coordination with the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and countries from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. However, this would also impact the people in Belarus as payments and transfers in and out of the country would no longer be possible and would have to be made via third parties or couriers.

(7.) Establish an EU-Belarus civil society forum: While the prospect of a Belarus summit, as called for by Tsikhanouskaya, between representatives of the government in Minsk, members of the Coordination Council and representatives of the EU and Russia seems very unrealistic, a civil society forum along the lines of the German-Russian Petersburg Dialogue could be a first step towards an all-Belarusian exchange of views.

(8.) Support the Belarusian diaspora: In addition to the financial contributions to civil society organizations and independent media included in the support package of the European Commission, financial support should also be channelled to the Belarusian community in the EU. The diaspora plays a crucial role in the international dissemination of information about developments inside Belarus. German and other European security and intelligence agencies need to monitor even more closely the threat to exiles from the Belarusian security authorities. This was underlined by several recent cases not only including the arrest of Prataševič, but also the fact that the Belarusian Olympian Kristina Tsminaouskaya refused to return to Belarus for fear of oppression, and the death of Vitaly Shyshou in Kyiv under mysterious circumstances that are currently being investigated. Measures must be considered to counteract this threat in EU countries and offer protection to those targeted.

(9.) Establish Eastern European University: As several experts have called for in a letter to the European Commission, the EU should consider establishing an Eastern European University on the territory of the EU. A university with an integrative approach and free education would be significant to help the young generation in Belarus (and other autocratic countries in Eastern Europe). Furthermore, the EU should extend Erasmus+ programs and scholarships for Belarusians to study

abroad. This would foster cultural contacts between the EU and Belarus for many decades to come.

To sum up, one year since the start of the political crisis in Belarus, the EU has scope for more actions to increase political pressure on Lukashenka to schedule a new election, stop the violence against peaceful protesters and release political prisoners. With the temporary closure of cultural and administrative institutions in Belarus, the EU should continue to work with Belarusian civil society under the Eastern Partnership framework. In particular, the EU and Germany should work together in cooperating with NGOs, journalists and small-and medium-sized enterprises in Belarus to maintain people-to-people contacts. If the humanitarian situation in Belarus deteriorates further, EU assistance will have to focus mainly on the diaspora, while deeper cooperation with civil society actors in the country seems unrealistic under current circumstances since democratic actors in Belarus are at risk when cooperating with the EU. Moreover, the EU should not fall for any slight democratization processes within the Lukashenka apparatus as a reason for easing its pressure.

This #BerlinPerspectives reflects the author's views only.

About the authors

Dr. Katrin Boettger is one of the two directors of Institut fuer Europaeische Politik.
Nicolas Butylin is a Student Assistant at Institut fuer Europaeische Politik.

#BerlinPerspectives

#BerlinPerspectives is published by the Institut fuer Europische Politik and provides precise analyses and policy recommendations for Germany's European policy on current issues and debates.

About IEP

Since 1959, the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) has been active in the field of European integration as a non-profit organisation. It is one of Germany's leading research institutes on foreign and European policy. IEP works at the intersection of academia, politics, administration, and civic education.

Publishers

Dr. Katrin Boettger and Dr. Funda Tekin

Editorial team

Julian Rappold

Layout

Dmytro Mokryy-Voronovskyy
Inga Kjer

 This text is licensed Creative Commons Attribution- Non Commercial- No Derivatives 4.0 International.

Institut fuer Europaeische Politik e.V.
Bundesallee 23, 10717 Berlin

 www.iep-berlin.de // info@iep-berlin.de

 [@iep_berlin](https://twitter.com/iep_berlin)

 [@IEP.Berlin](https://www.facebook.com/IEP.Berlin)

 [@iepberlin](https://www.instagram.com/iepberlin)

ISSN: 2701-3014

Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office



With the support of the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

