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Bargaining chips and backroom deals

Belarus and the US may be opening a new chapter of diplomatic relations. But on what terms?

At any other time, a New York Times (NYT) article about a secret meeting between US State Department official Christopher Smith and Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and a potential deal between Washington and Minsk would have caused a sensation, and not just in Belarus.

But as things stand the news is overshadowed by the scandalous Munich Security Conference and Washington's attempts to revive relations with Moscow. Under the cover of the latest global storm, indeed largely thanks to it, new opportunities are opening up for Lukashenko that did not exist before.

Part of a larger strategy

It was public knowledge that Smith, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Eastern Europe (including Belarus), arrived in Minsk on 12 February and from there was taken to Vilnius where three political prisoners were handed over — Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Andrey Kuznechyk, Belarusian mother and activist Yelena Movshuk and Nikolai Shugayev, a citizen of the US and Ukraine.

The release comes a day after American citizen Marc Fogel was freed from a Russian jail in exchange for Alexander Vinnik. Consequently, many interpreted Lukashenko's move, at least initially, as simply an attempt to get in on the deal between the big powers — to increase his own importance and standing. Indeed, Minsk had already participated in an exchange between Russia and the West in the summer of 2024 involving the release of a German citizen, Rico Krieger, who had been sentenced to death.

In actual fact, the recent releases by Belarus were most likely only timed to coincide with Fogel's transfer to the US to maximise the media impact, with the aim of attracting the attention of the White House with

coverage in prime-time American media. But, as was later confirmed by the NYT article, Lukashenko's reasoning for taking this step was undeniably two-fold. The transfer of these three detainees to Smith was part of a longer dialogue between Belarus and the US and an exchange of signals that has been ongoing since early autumn last year, perhaps even longer.

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In September, after several waves of pardons for other political prisoners not connected with the US, Belarusian state television showed a film about Yuri Zenkovich — an American citizen charged with plotting a coup who has been detained in a Belarusian penal colony since the beginning of 2021. In the broadcast, Zenkovich called on US presidential candidates to help secure his release. In January, the Belarusian authorities showed interviews with four people — Zenkovich and three former employees of the American Radio Liberty. Minsk was making every effort to signal to Washington that it wanted to discuss the fate of these prisoners.

In order to strengthen the impact, following Donald Trump's inauguration, US citizen Anastasia Nufer, who had been detained in December 2024, was released. Lukashenko clearly wanted to play ball with Washington by allowing Secretary of State Marco Rubio to say that it had only taken a strong President Trump to come to power for the problems under Joe Biden to already start being resolved.

Releasing the three political prisoners and handing them over to Smith was an even bigger gesture. Meanwhile, Minsk is keeping another American, the above-mentioned Zenkovich, along with two former employees of Radio Liberty – Ihar Karney and Ihar Losik – behind bars, apparently so that Belarus will be rewarded for its next concessions with something more than a grateful 'tweet'.

New York Times sources have shed light on the specifics of the situation. According to the newspaper, Smith and Lukashenko agreed that the next step would be to release a large number (probably hundreds) of political prisoners, including some of the most well-known, and even to scale back repression. In exchange, the US will allegedly lift sanctions on Belarusian banks and on trade in potash — one of the country's main exports.

A window of opportunity

That said, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting such insider information. The NYT received the details about the meeting in Minsk from diplomats in Vilnius with whom Smith had shared his impressions at a closed briefing after arriving from Belarus. When information is not received first hand, wishes or requests can and have been interpreted as final agreements. Moreover, it is not clear how the disclosure of this 'deal' will affect its prospects.

But Washington does seem more prepared to engage in such an exchange with Lukashenko now, given Trump's abrupt departure from the old taboos when it comes to relations with Russia and Ukraine.

The impetus for a deal with Minsk does not necessarily come from the very top of the US administration, where there is very little understanding of or particular interest in Belarus. What is more likely is that lower-ranking diplomats have noticed a window of opportunity, with old US policy dogmas no longer working and the opinion of allies in the EU being less important than they were.

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Consequently, some very attractive and high-profile exchanges can be achieved that solve several problems at once. First, some genuine political prisoners could actually be saved — potentially in large numbers. Second, deals like this make excellent media headlines and also look good on diplomats' CVs. Third, they give Trump or his Secretary of State the opportunity to post a triumphant tweet about something else they managed to do better than the Biden administration.

For Lukashenko, there are several potential advantages here. First, with the Russian economy stagnating and exports to Russia plummeting in recent months, there is a prospect of 'thawing' at least some Western markets and making them accessible to important sectors of the Belarusian economy. Lukashenko has easily released more than 200 political prisoners since last July, in waves of several dozen. There is nothing to stop him from doing the same thing in a single stroke, so that US politicians can record it in their list of achievements. There are enough bargaining chips – in Belarus, more than 1 200 well-known human rights defenders are political prisoners – and this 'reserve' can always be replenished.

Second, if they are incorporated into this phase of improved relations between the US and Russia, Washington's concessions might go below Moscow's radar and avoid incurring its wrath.

Third, a separate thawing of relations between Minsk and Washington shatters the cohesion of Lukashenko's isolation from the West. This, in turn, may prompt Trump's allies in Europe, such as Victor Orbán or Robert Fico, to torpedo new sanctions against Minsk. In the case of Slovakia, this might even prompt it to return its ambassador back to Minsk after a five-year break, which would be in violation of the European diplomatic non-recognition of Lukashenko.

Moreover, the main problem with the potential deal between Lukashenko and the US is also Europe-related. Lifting the US sanctions on potash exports or banks would solve a number of problems, but on its own would neither ensure free operation of these banks in the West nor the transit of potash fertilizer through the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda, which is the main obstacle to the free export of this product by Belarus. It is the European trade and financial sanctions that have had, and continue to have, the biggest impact on Minsk. Even the decision to exclude certain Belarusian banks from SWIFT was a European and not an American one.

How long will Lukashenko's willingness to compromise last when he sees that the EU remains impenetrable?

And here the question arises: For the sake of closing a deal with Lukashenko, is the US administration able, and indeed willing, to twist the arm of the EU as a whole and of the proud Lithuania separately? This question is becoming increasingly difficult to answer given the divergent paths of EU and US foreign policy on the Russian issue. And if Washington fails to do this, how long will Lukashenko's willingness to compromise last when he sees that the EU remains impenetrable?

This is why the more ambitious parts of a potential deal, such as scaling back repression, seem unlikely, and indeed not really necessary, to get limited concessions on sanctions from Washington. The current US administration, bent as it is on quick headline-grabbing, is unlikely to keep track of the number of monthly arrests in Belarus and fine tune its sanctions policy based on these dynamics.

If the relationship between Russia and the US reaches the point where the Trump administration decides to lift the war sanctions imposed on Moscow, it would be logical to do the same for Belarus. And then the

human rights agenda in US relations with Lukashenko may lose its importance entirely. After all, the main restrictions on the Belarusian president, including those on potash along with numerous financial sanctions, were imposed not for political prisoners, but, as with Russia, due to Minsk's complicity in the war.

This concurrence of the two 'thaws' – with Minsk and Moscow – may, following the intensification of US-Russian diplomatic relations, also see Washington return its embassy to the Belarusian capital. It would be easy for the Trump administration to explain this move: there is a war going on nearby, exchanges of prisoners are taking place with Belarus, the country's role in the postwar region may grow, and it is therefore important for the US to have a presence 'on the ground'.

And here the rare art of diplomacy for the members of the State Department, who do actually care about the fate of Belarusian political prisoners, will consist in trying to extract as much as possible from Belarus as long as there appears to be mutual interest. If Minsk sees that the EU is not going to follow the US and lift its sanctions, and that, much like Russia, they can rid themselves of US sanctions without any kind of counter-concessions, the desire to engage in deals on repression and political prisoners may come to naught.



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Minsk

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