



EU Response to the Crisis in Belarus

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The EU's actions in relation to the crisis in Belarus were rapid, but they remain limited. The Member States have little impact on the Belarusian regime and they are divided over the scope of common policy. Poland can sustain the EU's engagement in Belarus and demand ambitious actions to support Belarusian civil society. The EU should considerably expand the list of sanctioned officials, allocate more funds to the third sector, and coordinate international aid for Belarus.

The crisis in Ukraine in 2014 increased awareness within the EU of the security challenges in its Eastern Neighbourhood. Therefore, [EU leaders reacted swiftly](#) to the Belarusian regime's repression towards the opposition after [the presidential elections on 9 August](#). At the European Council and two meetings of foreign ministers in August, the EU made clear it would not recognise the election results and called for a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. The EU also supported the OSCE mediation efforts and declared sanctions against officials responsible for the violence and election fraud, as well as assistance to Belarusian society. In the end, the EU backed new presidential elections under international surveillance.

The EU's goal is to make Alexander Lukashenka undertake dialogue with the opposition, reduce tensions in relations with Russia over the Belarusian crisis, minimise the scale of force used against protesters, and support the repressed people and the Belarusian non-governmental sector. The main instruments are diplomatic actions, sanctions, and financial assistance. Member States have different approaches to EU involvement. The main dividing lines concern the perceptions of the crisis as a threat to the national security of individual EU countries, the importance of relations with Belarus, the vision of EU relations with Russia and various engagement in supporting opposition in third countries. The Baltic states and Poland advocate for the extension of the sanctions list and an increase in EU aid, with support for this position mainly from Denmark, Sweden, and Romania. [Germany](#) together with France, which play the main role in shaping the Union's approach to Belarus, prefer moderate EU actions in this regard. Most of the remaining

EU members support Germany's proposals. For instance, most of the Member States, led by Germany, France, and Italy, do not want to close the channels of communication with Lukashenka and did not agree to include him on the sanctions list, as advocated mainly by Lithuania and Estonia.

Diplomacy. The diplomatic activities undertaken by the EU so far have not brought the expected results. Lukashenka has not agreed to speak with EU leaders, including Chancellor Angela Merkel. Declarations by the French president regarding the Union's readiness to mediate the crisis in cooperation with the OSCE and Russia also remain unanswered. Therefore, Member States support the OSCE, which includes Belarus and Russia, in activities aimed at initiating a dialogue between the authorities and the [opposition](#).

The EU has started, however, talks with the Russian authorities, as Member States were afraid of repeating the Ukraine scenario and fear Russia's interference in Belarus. In the dialogue with the Russian side, EU leaders (Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and representatives of EU institutions—European Council President Charles Michel and High Representative Josep Borell) indicated that the solution to the crisis can be found only through dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. Moreover, the High Representative emphasised that Russia and the EU should not interfere in the Belarusian internal situation. He stressed that "the Union does not want a geostrategic fight with Russia, but it only promotes democracy and helps Belarusians in their search for freedom".

Sanctions. The EU plans to adopt sanctions (an entry ban and asset freeze) on just 40 high-ranking officials, but it will be

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possible to expand the list. According to the High Representative, the threat of sanctions is a better instrument of pressure than the restrictions themselves. However, some EU members, such as the Baltic states demand a significant extension of the list in order to strengthen the EU's credibility. Such restrictions act as a warning signal, and in the period 2011-2016, they were an instrument to bargain for the release of political prisoners.

The decision-making process on sanctions is lengthy as, according to Borell, EU institutions need to gather evidence against sanctioned persons to avoid appeals to the Court of Justice of the EU. All EU countries except Cyprus agree that sanctions should be adopted as soon as possible. Thirteen EU members (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Italy) asked the EU institutions to speed up the process. However, Cyprus is blocking the Belarusian sanctions list to gain support for EU sanctions against Turkey. The issue will therefore be discussed by EU leaders at the forthcoming meeting of the European Council.

EU Assistance. Member States have agreed to provide additional financial aid (€53 million) to the Belarusian society. Most of it (€50 million) is politically neutral and focused on the fight against COVID-19, including support for healthcare, social services, as well as businesses and vulnerable groups (e.g., purchases of medical devices, tests, protective clothing). The EU institutions did not specify how the aid will be spent. The EU experience shows, however, that funds can be spent out of the authorities' channels, for example, through international organisations or grants to NGOs, schools, and companies.

The adopted aid package supports the Belarusian third sector to a small extent. The EU has allocated only €2 million to support victims of regime violence, and €1 million for the development of civil society and independent media. In comparison, the EU additionally allocated €10 million to the non-governmental sector in Ukraine due to the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and €7.5 million in Armenia in 2018 after the Velvet Revolution. Some EU members, such as Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden, demand an increase in EU funding for repressed people, free media, and NGOs. Importantly,

several Member States, including Poland, Sweden and Latvia, increased their support for Belarusian civil society at the national level.

Conclusions. The EU has limited room for manoeuvre in resolving the crisis, mainly because of Belarus's great dependence on Russia in its economy and security, and Lukashenka's lack of readiness to engage in dialogue with the [opposition](#). Unlike Russia, the EU has little sway with Lukashenka. So far, neither the EU sanctions nor proposals of significant financial aid conditional on reforms have influenced him. The decisions on rapprochement with the EU were undertaken as a derivative of Belarus' relations with Russia. EU Member States remain united when it comes to the instrument to respond to the crisis in Belarus, although they are divided over the scope of EU engagement.

Bearing in mind those limitations, Poland could sustain the EU's involvement in Belarus in the long term through a coalition with the Baltic States or others. Poland should continue its efforts to demand from the EU ambitious actions [to support Belarusian civil society](#), for example, the proposal to prepare an EU financial package for Belarus modelled on the post-war Marshall Plan. The priority for the Union, given the increasing repression by the regime, is to significantly expand the list of people subjected to sanctions, including militsiya (police) and prison staff responsible for the use of violence, and business people financially supporting the regime. Second, the EU can significantly increase its financial aid to independent media, repressed persons, NGOs, religious groups, and trade unions through existing instruments (such as the European Endowment for Democracy, European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, Erasmus+) or new, dedicated lines of support. It could also coordinate the international financial assistance to Belarus following the practises exercised in relation the Ukraine crisis (e.g., Ukraine support group). Last but not least, the EU should signal its readiness to provide Belarus with economic aid if it embarks on the path of democratic changes, such as additional funds from the European Investment Bank or returning Belarus to the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) for tariffs.