

The European Offer for Democratic Belarus: A Strategic Agenda for the EU

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Executive Summary

The democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people, most vividly expressed during the 2020 protests, remain alive despite continued repression by the Lukashenko regime and deepening dependence on Russia. The European Union has a historic opportunity to offer a credible, strategic, and long-term policy framework that supports a democratic transition in Belarus. As reaffirmed in the 2024 EU Council Conclusions, a future democratic Belarus has a place in the European family. To make this vision credible and actionable, the EU can advance a comprehensive European offer built on three pillars: (1) increased and institutionalised cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces; (2) sustained support to civil society and other actors of the Belarusian democratic movement; (3) a tangible and reinforced promise of European future.

Institutionalised cooperation through a range of European and international platforms can provide structured and consistent engagement with various institutions of Belarusian democratic forces, such as the United Transitional Cabinet, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Coordination Council. Long-term support to civil society— NGOs, media, and grassroots initiatives— remains vital for preserving civic space and building democratic resilience. A tangible promise of European future can be developed through policy dialogues, capacity-building, and reform planning in key sectors, while a long-term and robust EU communication strategy can help counter disinformation and promote the benefits of European integration. Together, these actions form the foundation of a comprehensive European offer— one that supports the Belarusian people's democratic aspirations and strengthens the EU's principled engagement in Eastern Europe.

1. Introduction: Main Phases and Strategic Rationale for EU Engagement with Belarus

Main Phases and Cyclical Nature of Belarus-EU relations

The evolution of Belarus–EU relations since the early 1990s has been marked by a cyclical pattern of rapprochement and isolation. This dynamic has largely been shaped by two key factors: internally, by the authoritarian trajectory of the Lukashenka regime—manifested through repression, electoral manipulation, and human rights violations—and externally, by shifts in the regional geopolitical landscape, particularly Belarus's dependence on and tensions with Russia. Periods of strained relations with Moscow have often prompted Minsk to seek closer ties with the EU and vice versa in an attempt to balance its foreign policy.

Phase 1: The Early Years of Cooperation (1991–1996)

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Belarus under Stanislau Shushkevich adopted a pro-European orientation, aspiring to “return to Europe” and build constructive relations with the EU. This culminated in the signing of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in 1995, aimed at fostering political dialogue and economic cooperation grounded in democratic values. However, the election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka and his increasingly authoritarian policies led to a rapid freezing of Belarus-EU relations.

Phase 2: The EU's Policy of Critical Engagement with Belarus (1996–2013)

The second phase of Belarus-EU relations, spanning from 1996 to 2015, can be further divided into three sub-phases, reflecting the EU's shifting strategies from isolation to pragmatic engagement, and ultimately back to isolation of the Lukashenka regime. From 1996 onwards, relations deteriorated significantly due to Lukashenka's consolidation of power, including constitutional changes and suppression of dissent. The EU responded by suspending the PCA and introducing sanctions. This phase, however, included periods of limited pragmatic engagement, particularly during 2007–2010 when tensions with Russia and energy security concerns prompted the EU to reopen dialogue with Minsk. Belarus joined the Eastern Partnership in 2009 but failed to implement democratic reforms. A renewed crackdown following the 2010 elections led to another round of EU sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

Phase 3: Rapprochement (2014–2020)

A significant thaw in Belarus-EU relations occurred between 2014 and 2020, driven by Belarus's mediation role in the Ukraine crisis and a temporary easing of domestic repression. The EU responded by lifting most of its sanctions in 2016, expanding financial assistance, and deepening cooperation in trade and mobility. High-level political dialogue resumed, and visa facilitation agreements were signed. Nonetheless, the rapprochement was cautious, as the Belarusian regime maintained its authoritarian character and remained economically reliant on Russia.

Phase 4: Breakdown and Strategic Reassessment (2020–present)

The fraudulent 2020 presidential elections and brutal crackdown on peaceful protests marked a turning point, leading to a sharp deterioration in Belarus–EU relations. Subsequent developments—including the forced landing of a Ryanair flight, the weaponization of migration at EU borders, and Belarus' support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine—further isolated the Belarusian regime internationally. The EU imposed comprehensive sanctions targeting key sectors and individuals, while simultaneously ramping up support for Belarusian civil society and democratic forces in exile. These measures aim to hold the Lukashenka regime accountable while maintaining a long-term commitment to a democratic future for Belarus.

Strategic Rationale for engagement with Belarus

Belarus is currently undergoing a dramatic political transformation which started in 2020. While the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has consolidated power through brutal repression, the Belarusian democratic movement in exile led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has remained remarkably resilient. Civil society, independent media, and democratic institutions continue to function outside Belarus, largely thanks to external support, especially from the European Union.

At the same time, Belarus has become increasingly subordinated to the Kremlin's strategic agenda, undermining its sovereignty and further distancing the country from Europe. In this context, a renewed, comprehensive, and credible European offer is urgently needed. This offer should focus on enabling a democratic future for Belarus and integrating it more closely with the European community of values and institutions.

The EU's engagement with Belarus is not merely a question of values—it is a strategic imperative. A democratic Belarus would enhance regional stability, contribute to long-term European security architecture, and counter Russian imperialism.

Conversely, continued authoritarian rule under Lukashenka, combined with de facto Russian control, poses a significant threat to the EU. It enables repression at home, aggression abroad, and destabilization of neighbouring EU countries. Inaction or fragmented support risks losing the momentum and legitimacy of the democratic movement.

2. Components of the European Offer

A clear, credible, and forward-looking vision for Belarus's democratic future requires moving beyond ad hoc measures towards a comprehensive strategy that empowers democratic actors, strengthens civil society, and offers a tangible path towards European integration. The European offer should rest on three interconnected pillars— institutionalising cooperation with democratic forces, supporting Belarusian democratic resilience, and reinforcing the promise of a European future.

2.1 Institutionalised Engagement with Belarusian democratic forces

The European Union, together with key multilateral bodies and forums such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and the European Political Community (EPC), should continue formalising and expanding their cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces, including the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the United Transitional Cabinet, and the Coordination Council in exile. This engagement should move beyond symbolic gestures, offering structured and sustained channels of participation in pan-European dialogue and decision-making processes.

Some important progress has already been made in this direction. Notable examples include the establishment of the Consultative Group between the European Union and Belarusian democratic forces and civil society, the creation of the Contact Group on Cooperation with Belarusian democratic Forces and Civil Society at the Council of Europe, the formation of the Informal Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus within the OSCE, as well as the signing of a Letter of Intent on Cooperation between the European Parliament and the Belarusian Democratic Forces and creation of interparliamentary alliance in support of democratic Belarus. These steps demonstrate growing recognition and support for democratic forces and should now be further strengthened, deepened, and replicated across other institutions and platforms. Expanding and strengthening such initiatives will help ensure that Belarusian democratic actors are fully integrated into the European political landscape and equipped with the tools and legitimacy needed to advance democratic change.

Further opportunities for engagement can include:

- **European Parliament:** Building on the signed letter of intent and created interparliamentary alliance, the European Parliament can expand regular hearings and informal consultations, and consider formalising a Belarus Contact Group to support democratic dialogue and amplify Belarusian voices within EU institutions.
- **Council of Europe:** Following the creation of the Contact Group, the CoE can consider advancing this cooperation by granting observer or consultative status to democratic representatives in relevant bodies, especially those focused on human rights and the rule of law.
- **OSCE:** The recently formed Group of Friends of Democratic Belarus provides a valuable foundation for increased engagement. This should be complemented by deeper interaction with OSCE institutions, such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), to maintain international oversight and facilitate support for democratic reforms.
- **European Political Community:** Belarusian democratic forces have already been invited to participate in EPC summits, marking an important step towards their inclusion in broader European political and security discussions. This engagement should now be sustained and expanded, ensuring that Belarus remains part of Europe's strategic future and that democratic voices are consistently represented.
- **Reformed Eastern Partnership (EaP):** A Belarus-specific EaP+ track can be considered to help institutionalise structured cooperation with democratic stakeholders in areas such as good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies.

- Appointment of Special Representatives by EU MS: Several individual EU Member States (for example, Sweden, France, Poland, Estonia) have already appointed special representatives for cooperation with the Belarusian democratic forces, signaling their commitment to structured, long-term engagement with democratic Belarus. This is a positive development that should be encouraged and replicated by other EU Member States. At the same time, the European Union itself should consider appointing a dedicated EU Special Representative for Democratic Belarus. Such a role would help coordinate engagement across EU institutions and Member States, ensure consistency in policy implementation, and provide a high-level political channel for regular dialogue with democratic actors. It would also send a strong signal of the EU's strategic commitment to Belarus's democratic future.

Regional Exchange and Triangular Cooperation

The EU can promote and facilitate horizontal cooperation between Belarusian democratic forces and reform-oriented states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia. These countries offer valuable lessons in transition, institution-building, and EU engagement. Structured exchanges, training programmes, and peer consultations—supported and coordinated by the EU—can help Belarusian actors prepare for future democratic transition.

Operational Support and Dedicated Resources

A credible institutionalisation effort requires dedicated financial and technical support. The EU can consider establishing a long-term, flexible funding instrument exclusively for Belarusian democratic stakeholders, prioritising core support, simplified procedures, and partnerships with European counterparts. Technical assistance, digital infrastructure, and capacity-building support can be tailored to meet the specific needs of exiled institutions and grassroots initiatives.

A Strategic Realignment for Lasting Engagement

Institutionalising multi-platform cooperation with Belarusian democratic forces is not simply a symbolic gesture—it is a strategic necessity. It enables the EU and its partners to remain constructively engaged with Belarus's democratic future, support the development of credible alternative institutions, and avoid any form of legitimisation of authoritarian rule by the Lukashenka regime. By integrating Belarusian democratic actors into European political frameworks, the EU affirms its values, reinforces democratic capacity, and keeps the vision of a democratic, European Belarus alive and actionable.

2.2 Support to Civil Society, Business, and Other Actors

Sustaining Civil Society Under Repression and in Exile

The Lukashenka regime has dismantled nearly all independent civil society organisations operating inside Belarus. NGOs, human rights defenders, environmental groups, women's initiatives, and cultural associations have been liquidated or forced to operate underground. Simultaneously hundreds of new organisations have emerged in exile, forming what is now one of the most vibrant and resilient diasporic civil societies in Europe.

EU policy must recognise this evolving ecosystem and provide comprehensive support across three dimensions:

1. Exiled Civil Society

Support should focus on institutional sustainability beyond existing tracks of cooperation within EaP Civil Society Forum. It should envisage long-term strategic planning, and capacity development. Many groups face precarious financial conditions, and legal barriers in host countries. The EU should offer core funding, office infrastructure and legal advice, to those in need.

2. Supporting Democratic Business and Independent Media

The economic crackdown on politically active entrepreneurs and the near-total destruction of independent media have created two additional priority groups for EU support. First the EU should assist Belarusian democratic business initiatives that have relocated to EU countries. These include IT start-ups, social enterprises, and professional associations that not only generate employment but also form part of the broader democratic ecosystem. The Belarusian IT sector, in particular, was one of the key drivers of the 2020 protests, with many tech professionals actively supporting pro-democracy mobilisation. Tailored support programs—such as seed funding, access to the EU markets, tax incentives, and match making with EU investors— can help these businesses survive and thrive while maintaining their Belarusian identity and civic commitment. Second, independent media remains one of the most effective tools for countering the Belarusian regime propaganda and informing the public inside Belarus. Despite being banned, many Belarusian outlets continue to operate from abroad and maintain substantial digital audiences. The EU should ensure predictable, multiannual funding for exile media platforms, alongside technical assistance for cybersecurity and audience analytics.

3. Investing in the Next Generation – Engaging with the Belarusian Youth

Youth engagement is vital for the sustainability of Belarus's democratic movement. Many young Belarusians, particularly those who took part in the 2020 protests, have fled the country and now study or work in EU member states. The EU should expand its educational and mobility programs for Belarusian youth, including Erasmus Horizon Europe, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. In parallel, support should be extended to exile educational institutions, Belarus language schools, civic education programs, and scholarship funds. Moreover, youth should be given a stronger voice in the Belarus-EU dialogue. Establishing a Belarusian Youth Forum would provide a platform for civic engagement, policy input, and networking between young Belarusians and their European peers.

Avoiding Fragmentation and Building Synergies

While the Belarusian democratic ecosystem is rich and various, it is also fragmented. Multiple competing initiatives, overlapping donor programs, and short-term project funding often creates confusion and duplication in work. The EU and its Members States should take the lead in coordinating support through a strategic partnership framework, bringing together major European donors, Belarusian democratic actors, and implementing organisations. A joint monitoring and evaluation mechanism would increase transparency, ensure better resource allocation and promote learning across different sectors.

Support to Belarusian civil society, business, and independent media is not only a moral imperative but also a geopolitical investment in the country's democratic future. The EU should adopt a long-term, holistic approach that prioritizes sustainability, and empowerment. By treating these actors as future stakeholders in a democratic Belarus, the European Union can build the foundations of a free and European-oriented state.

2.3 European Future for a Democratic Belarus

A Shift in EU Rhetoric: From Ambiguity to Recognition

For many years, the EU's approach to Belarus was marked by caution and ambiguity. While it supported civil society and condemned human rights violations, it stopped short of offering a clear promise of European membership perspective, largely due to the country's entrenched authoritarianism and deep entanglement with Russia. However, this position began to shift in the aftermath of the 2020 democratic uprising and more dramatically, following Belarus complicity in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

A milestone in this evolving approach came with the adoption of the EU Council Conclusions on Belarus on 19 February 2024. These Conclusions not only condemned the unprecedented scale of repression inside the country and the Lukashenka regime's support for Russian aggression, but crucially, they also acknowledged the aspirations of the Belarusian democratic movement. In a significant and unprecedented statement, the EU declared that "a future democratic Belarus has a place in the European family". This language marks a qualitative shift in EU policy, signalling a moral solidarity with democratic Belarus.

This new rhetorical stance elevates Belarus on the EU's foreign policy agenda and introduces a more proactive tone to EU engagement. However, the promise of a European future—while important—remains largely symbolic at this stage. What matters now is how the EU will implement this vision in practice. The challenge lies in translating the Council's political recognition into convincing and coordinated actions that help Belarusian democratic actors prepare for integration and communicate this vision to society at large.

From Promise to Policy: Implementation Requirements

A promise of European future for Belarus should not be understood as an immediate pathway to EU membership, but rather as a long-term vision that can guide democratic transition and reform. As with other countries in the EU's neighbourhood, the European perspective is conditional on major political and institutional transformations: free and fair elections, the release of all political prisoners, and the restoration of Belarus's sovereignty.

To make this vision meaningful the EU must embed it in a strategy that combines clarity of purpose with long-term investment. This includes:

- 1) Helping democratic actors develop reform blueprints: The EU should support the United Transitional Cabinet, the Coordination Council, and associated expert groups in drafting sector-specific reform plans aligned with the EU acquis. These roadmaps—under the rule of law, education, public administration, digital governance, environmental policy—will be essential to demonstrate readiness and credibility for future democratic

transformation.

- 2) Investing in the next generation of Belarusian leaders: The EU must expand scholarships, leadership fellowships, and training programs for Belarusian civil servants in exile and professionals committed to democratic transformation. These individuals will form the core of a future reform-oriented Belarusian elite.
- 3) Strategic communication — connecting with Belarusians inside the country: one of the most urgent tasks is strategic communication so that the promise of a European future reaches the Belarusian population, especially those inside the country who are exposed to state propaganda and Russian disinformation. The EU can consider launching a high-visibility “Europe for Belarus” campaign in cooperation with the Belarusian democratic actors, tailored to the needs and realities of different segments of Belarusian society. This campaign should clearly explain what the EU stands for and how it differs from the autocratic status quo; offer a vision of what life could look like in a European Belarus; highlight the concrete benefits of integration, as seen in other Eastern Partnership countries like Ukraine or Moldova. Moreover, efforts can be made to support informal education, digital civic engagement, and cultural diplomacy tailored to Belarusian realities, helping to develop and strengthen a sense of connection to Europe.

3. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Belarus today is a frontline of the broader struggle between authoritarianism and democracy. While the Lukashenka regime remains to hold onto power in Belarus, a resilient, pro-European democratic movement continues to advocate for democratic change. The European Union has made a historic offer to Belarus: a future within the European family. To make that offer real, the EU must act decisively — supporting democratic actors, preparing for transition, and investing in the vision of a democratic, European Belarus.

Through strategic engagement, sustained support, and credible long-term vision, the EU can help shape the conditions for a democratic transformation that brings Belarus closer to Europe—politically, economically, and societally.

The EU's evolving stance on Belarus signals a principled, long-term commitment to supporting democratic change and resisting authoritarian entrenchment. The European offer—anchored in increased support for Belarusian democratic forces and other actors of the Belarusian democratic movement as well as the promise of a European future—must now be operationalised through a coherent and forward-looking strategy.

Policy Recommendations

1. Anchor democratic Belarus within European institutions

- Strengthen a structured cooperation track with democratic Belarus across key platforms and institutions—including the European Parliament, Council of Europe, OSCE, EPC, and a reformed Eastern Partnership—ensuring regular dialogue, tailored technical assistance, and access to EU programmes for exiled institutions like the United Transitional Cabinet and Coordination Council, ensuring they are treated as legitimate interlocutors of the EU.

2. Scale up support to Belarusian civil society, media and business in exile

- Introduce multi-year, predictable, and flexible funding mechanisms for democratic actors, independent media, and grassroots initiatives to strengthen institutional resilience and enable long- term strategic planning.
- Broaden relocation and legal assistance programs for Belarusians facing repression — including activists, journalists, academics, and business — by simplifying asylum and visa procedures and providing sustainable legal and psychological support.

3. Make the European offer more concrete and actionable

- Support bottom-up reform preparedness by offering policy dialogues, technical expertise, and capacity- building to democratic actors and exiled experts in areas such as public administration, the rule of law, digital governance, and economic transition.
- Expand access to EU educational, professional, and mobility programs (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) for Belarusian civil servants and professionals in exile to foster a democratic elite aligned with EU values.

4. Launch a long- term strategic communication campaign targeting Belarusian society

- Develop a comprehensive communication strategy that clearly presents the EU's vision for a democratic Belarus, counters regime propaganda, and resonates with the everyday concerns of Belarusians— particularly youth workers, and regional communities.
- Invest in digital media, storytelling, and independent journalism to broaden the reach of EU narratives and highlight tangible benefits of European integration through personal stories, visual media, and trusted messengers.

5. Strengthen high-level political engagement with democratic Belarus

- Appoint an EU Special Representative for Democratic Belarus to coordinate European engagement, strengthen political dialogue with exiled democratic institutions, and represent Belarus in EU-level diplomacy.
- Ensure Belarus remains a strategic priority in EU foreign policy by maintaining regular high-level discussions, integrating Belarus into relevant EU initiatives, and reinforcing its place in the EU's broader approach to Eastern Europe.



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