



A Turning Point or Merely a Tactical Move? Kellogg's Visit to Belarus and What It Might Mean

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A TURNING POINT OR MERELY A TACTICAL MOVE? KELLOGG'S VISIT TO BELARUS AND WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

At the end of June 2025, U.S. Special Representative Keith Kellogg made a surprise visit to Belarus, marking the highest-level American contact with Minsk since 2020. The meeting with Alexander Lukashenko signaled a cautious thaw in U.S.–Belarus relations amid the ongoing war in Ukraine and a diplomatic deadlock with Russia. While officially framed as a dialogue on international and bilateral issues, the visit resulted in the release of 14 political prisoners, including foreign nationals, suggesting practical concessions and emerging backchannel diplomacy. Kellogg's mission may reflect a broader U.S. strategy to reduce Belarus's dependence on Moscow, explore new negotiation tracks on Ukraine, and test Lukashenko's potential as a mediator. The visit also highlights Hungary's growing role as a diplomatic conduit as Budapest strengthens ties with Minsk despite EU sanctions. Overall, the engagement signals a possible recalibration of Western approaches to Belarus, balancing sanctions with selective engagement to limit Russian leverage in the region.

A SURPRISE VISIT TO AN “OLD FRIEND”?

At the end of June 2025, against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine and a steady diplomatic impasse between Russia and Western allies, Minsk suddenly found itself in the spotlight of the world community—On June 21, Keith Kellogg, the U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine, [arrived](#) in Belarus on an official visit. It is not yet completely clear how serious this gesture of Washington is, whether the meeting marks a “turning point” in relations between Belarus and the United States or is simply a tactical move against

the backdrop of stagnation in the Ukraine peace process and sanctions wars, or whether this applies to Moscow and its own cooperation with Minsk.

It is noteworthy that for the first time since 2020, a high-ranking American diplomat found himself at the residence of the head of the Republic of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, who is officially “unrecognized” by EU and NATO countries, after a long period of [criticism](#) and condemnation of the nature of the [elections](#) in Belarus by the United States. The very fact of this meeting immediately gave rise to many questions and speculation about the true motives and consequences of the dialogue.

Belarusian authorities distributed a video of the conversation between Keitt Kellogg and Alexander Lukashenko in which Lukashenko [greeted the American delegation quite warmly](#): “What people have come to us! And even with such a mission.” He stressed, “I really hope that our conversation will be very sincere and open. Otherwise, what’s the point of dating? If we are clever and cunning in front of each other, we will not achieve results.” Regarding the international attention, he told Kellogg, “You made a lot of noise with your arrival. But I wonder why... Can’t we have a normal dialogue?” The official rhetoric looked deliberately friendly with obvious hope on the part of Belarus for the normalization of relations and meaningful dialogue.

It should also be noted that some key officials of the presidential administration of Belarus have long-standing ties with the Republican Party in the United States and the family of the president, which could have played a role. In particular, it is worth mentioning Natallia Pyatkevich, who was recently appointed Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Belarus. Pyatkevich lived in the United States of America for a number of years with her husband Andrei Dapkiunas, who at that time held the post of permanent representative of the Republic of Belarus to the United Nations in New York.

WHY NOW, AND WHY MINSK?

In total, the negotiations between the American delegation and the head of Belarus lasted about six hours. Officially, Kellogg and Lukashenko [discussed](#) relations between the United States and Belarus, as well as both international and regional issues. The United States stated that the issues of the Russian war against Ukraine, as well as the peace efforts of President Donald Trump, were discussed, although neither Kellogg nor the White House gave official comments. Minsk and Washington both positioned the

talks as purely diplomatic.

Following the visit, the media focused on the upcoming “grandiose deal” between the United States and Minsk, [providing for the release](#) of dozens of political prisoners—not only citizens of Belarus but also two Japanese citizens, three Polish citizens, two Latvians, an Estonian, a Swede, and an American—in exchange for the easing of American sanctions, primarily those on the banking sector and potash fertilizers. The move clearly demonstrated the readiness of Minsk for partial détente and flexibility in exchange for Washington’s diplomatic involvement. For the United States and its allies, the release of foreign citizens created a framework for further negotiations on the humanitarian and political agenda. For its part, Russia can certainly benefit from the easing of the sanctions regime, given its dominant influence on the Belarusian economy.

In an unofficial manner, some American sources even suggested that Kellogg [perceived the trip](#) as “a step that can contribute to the start of negotiations on the end of Russia’s war against Ukraine” and that he [discussed with Lukashenko](#) an “invisible role” as a mediator. Similarly, Adviser to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Mykhailo Podolyak bluntly stated [that the purpose of the visit](#) was to “expand the dialogue window with Russia,” hinting at alternative channels of communication in the context of frozen direct negotiations.

It is also possible that the United States and Russia are looking for new channels of communication and avenues for economic cooperation against the backdrop of European sanctions: Belarus may become an “offshore” or neutral platform for a number of deals and negotiations. Russia and the United States (and/or European Union) could use Belarus for economic cooperation, as well as for political dialogue.

[Military exercises](#) in the context of relations with the West were also among the topics of discussion. The Zapad-2025 series of military exercises planned by Russia and Belarus in the fall is assessed as a threat to the nearest NATO countries (the Baltic countries and Poland) or a new offensive against Ukraine from the north. The United States was probably interested in information about the scale and motives of these exercises: whether they threaten the Eastern allies or are merely demonstrative. This could also be a signal to Minsk from the United States about the need to exclude military escalation during the exercises.

Kellogg's visit to Belarus does not de jure lift the sanctions, but de facto changes show the [readiness](#) of the United States to engage with Minsk without seeking a change of leadership or a change in the country's political course. This may also mean the recognition of the de facto power of Alexander Lukashenko and a gradual end to the political isolation of Belarus after many years of non-recognition and ignorance. Against the backdrop of decisions on Afghanistan or Syria, such a shift no longer looks so radical and unrealistic.

Such a policy is in line with the broader strategy of the West: to provide Belarus with alternative vectors of influence in order to reduce its dependence on Moscow and Beijing. Ideally, this could give Lukashenko "room for maneuver" between Russia, the West and China and make it difficult for Russia to use Belarus to raise the stakes in the confrontation with NATO. In long term, the goal may be to [weaken Russian influence](#) and form a "democratic Belarus that has come out from under Russian domination."

But Minsk continues to cultivate an image of being a "neutral zone" between Russia and the West. Lukashenka is wary of getting ahead of himself in relations with the United States while the U.S.–Russia [negotiations are stuck](#). Sharp "zigzags" could arouse the anger of the Kremlin, which today has much more leverage over Belarus than before. Therefore, Minsk is cautiously balancing: demonstrating the readiness of Belarus to cooperate with the West while also not hurting Moscow's key interests.

THE ROLE OF BUDAPEST'S DIPLOMACY

In the context of Kellogg's visit, European—and specifically Hungarian—diplomacy is also worth mentioning. Over the past two years, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó visited Minsk at least three times: In February 2023, he became the first senior official from a European Union country to visit Minsk after the 2020 crackdown, and he later visited the country again in the fall of 2023 and on May 29, 2024. [According to Szijjártó](#), Hungary is looking to increase economic ties with Belarus in the areas in which EU sanctions do not apply. The current meeting between Kellogg and Lukashenka coincided with Szijjártó handing over to Lukashenka an agreement on cooperation in the [nuclear sphere](#).

Hungary's diplomacy also works at the European level: According to the Belarusian ambassador in Budapest, Hungary is lobbying for [the lifting of](#)

[some EU sanctions](#) on Minsk. The EU limits contact with the Belarusian regime. But the EU did not gain anything except the loss of any influence on Belarus, additional [migration crises](#) and [security risks](#).

Hungary's position in the European Union makes it an important factor Minsk hopes to reduce its international [isolation by improving ties with Hungary](#) and believes that Hungary will help ease EU sanctions against Belarus. This opens a "window" to Europe for Minsk: An informal dialogue with the EU can take place through Hungary. The Polish and Baltic partners, however, are skeptical about Hungary's efforts, fearing that any concessions to Minsk threaten to ease the pressure on Lukashenko and [mean risks to their security](#).

For the West, the Hungarian vector can become a channel for negotiations and demonstration of influence: Through Budapest, Washington can also pursue its new policy towards Minsk, bypassing the main anti-Russian camp. For Russia, the strengthening of relations between Belarus and Hungary is also beneficial: It gives Moscow a partner in the EU that opposes the tough approach of Brussels. Thus, the Hungarian track serves as a double game: diplomacy of détente and economic cooperation on the one hand and the promotion of the pragmatic interests of the United States and the EU in the region on the other, namely the reduction of security risks arising from the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West.

Kellogg's mission may reflect a broader U.S. strategy to reduce the dependence of Minsk on Moscow, explore new negotiation tracks on Ukraine, and test Lukashenko's potential. The visit also highlights Hungary's growing role as a diplomatic conduit. Overall, the engagement signals a possible recalibration of Western approaches to Belarus, balancing sanctions with selective engagement to limit Russian leverage in the region.