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The United States and Belarus: New Departures under Trump 2.0

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Changes in United States (US) policy towards Belarus and the Belarusian exile community were likely once Donald Trump took office as president for the second time in mid-January 2025. However, few observers anticipated the scale and rapidity of those changes.

Cuts in USAID Funding

One of the biggest foreign policy earthquakes generated by the second Trump administration thus far has been the “suspension”, then definitive cut, of around 82% of all United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding, which has reverberated across the world.ⁱ The US had been the largest funder of development assistance in the world, providing up to 40% of all humanitarian aid tracked by the United Nations in 2024.

In general, the Belarusian exile community – including independent media, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the political leadership of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team – gets the lion’s share of its funding from European Union (EU) member states and other European governments, the EU itself, and the European Endowment for Democracy. However, certain actors have been highly dependent on US funding.

Many groups have held out hope that their funding would only be suspended for a time, then renewed. Others have scrambled and sought to replace US funding with other sources – a challenging task, given aid cuts by other donors, harsh competition, and the ongoing diversion of much European foreign aid towards defence needs. Much data has been conveyed to the author in confidence, but the evidence in the public domain is clear enough.

Exile media have been hit hardest. According to one news report, six of the largest 30 media groups in exile have lost their funding and had to shutter immediately; the overall shortfall is around EUR 1.6 million – more than half of all foreign aid to independent Belarusian media.ⁱⁱ However, two of the largest exile media outlets – BELSAT, a television broadcaster, and NEXTA, a popular Telegram and YouTube broadcaster – have survived intact, as the former receives support from the Polish government and the latter operates at least partly on commercial foundations.

Some NGOs have been very hard-hit. RADA, a Belarusian umbrella organisation of youth groups, has claimed a “catastrophic” impact, with around half of the NGO’s 2025 budget being funded by USAID grants.ⁱⁱⁱ Another NGO hit hard has been Ecohome, a Vilnius-based environmental NGO, with about half of its budget coming from USAID funding.^{iv} Both organisations have had to severely curtail educational

projects. While some human rights NGOs have been negatively affected, others have escaped unscathed, as they rely heavily on European sources of funding.

The impact of USAID cuts on the operations of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the leader of the democratic forces in exile, and her United Transitional Cabinet, is unclear. The decision to locate her headquarters in Vilnius was linked not only to support from the Lithuanian government, but also to the presence and support of a field office of Freedom House, an American foundation and think tank which is highly dependent on US government funding. Although the Freedom House organisation as a whole has been existentially threatened by the USAID cuts, which it is still challenging in US courts, the Vilnius branch is operational for now.

Belarusian President Aliaksandr Lukashenka welcomed the dismantling of USAID and the cut in its funding as a response to his calls for a “reset” in bilateral relations.^v The USAID cuts will clearly leave exile media, exile NGOs and democratic political forces in exile weakened, distracted and thinned out. Rather than devoting their full energy to countering the Belarusian government’s narratives and monitoring its human rights violations, important actors in the exile community must rapidly engage in cost-cutting measures and seek alternative sources of funding for activities and, sometimes, basic operations.

Shutting down RFE/RL?

The previous Trump administration took aim at the American-funded international broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), a key source of news and analysis for many Belarusians inside and outside the country. In addition to a 2019 request for cuts to RFE/RL’s 2020 budget, the previous Trump administration engineered significant leadership changes in 2020 to the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the organisation that oversees RFE/RL and other media outlets. The new leadership instituted a spending freeze, dismissed the heads of RFE/RL and every member of the bipartisan board, replacing them with political appointees.^{vi} While these measures were quickly reversed by the Biden administration, Trump’s dislike of RFE/RL and similar outlets was clear.

Project 2025, a policy roadmap prepared by many former Trump officials, is also scathing in its criticism of RFE/RL and its parent organisation, the USAGM. According to the author of the chapter on the USAGM, RFE/RL allegedly “favours political trends as opposed to operations that support and represent America abroad”. Moreover, RFE/RL is portrayed as having “redundant programming with certain VOA [Voice of America] language services, often with competing, counterproductive, or dissimilar messaging”.^{vii}

While the new Trump administration has sought to shutter RFE/RL and other international broadcasters, there are ongoing legal battles in US courts. For now,



RFE/RL continues to broadcast and regularly update its website, www.rferl.org. However, the exile Belarusian Association of Journalists website reports that, as of 1 April 2025, some editorial staff of the Belarus operations of RFE/RL have been sent on leave and that content will be curtailed. In particular, it noted that several projects – including *Pik Svabody* on the Svaboda Premium YouTube channel, *Explained with Hurnevich* on the Radyjo Svaboda YouTube channel, as well as the video podcasts *History* on Svaboda and *Where the World is Heading* – are being put on hold.^{viii}

Sanctioning the International Criminal Court

Many Belarusians in exile and their allies view the International Criminal Court (ICC) as one of the most promising venues for seeking international justice and securing accountability for the Belarusian government’s many violations of international law. While Belarus is not a party to the Rome Statute, some of its alleged violations, including political persecution and deportation, have directly affected other countries, such as Lithuania. In September 2024, Lithuania referred Belarus to the ICC,^{ix} relying on the Myanmar/Bangladesh precedent. At the time of this writing, the ICC had not yet rendered a decision on whether it will pursue the case.

The United States is not a party to the Rome Statute either. On 6 February 2025, President Trump signed an executive order “Imposing Sanctions on the International Criminal Court”. The justification for the sanctions is the alleged “illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our closest ally Israel”, which “set a dangerous precedent, directly endangering current and former United States personnel”. The executive order threatens “tangible and significant consequences on those responsible for the ICC’s transgressions, some of which may include the blocking of property and assets, as well as the suspension of entry into the United States”.^x For now, the executive order targets only ICC chief prosecutor Karim Khan.

As it is currently formulated, the executive order should not have a direct impact on the ICC’s examination of the Lithuanian referral of Belarus or on Lithuanian officials involved therein. However, there is a risk that the US could expand the sanctions to include additional ICC officials or other forms of cooperation with the ICC. Moreover, the US sanctions probably create a chilling effect on other states, which have thus far not supported Lithuania’s referral. One reason for this reluctance is probably the desire to avoid complicating relations with the US.

Other new policy steps

Recent US administrations, including the previous Trump administration, had implemented a consistent policy of isolating Belarus and imposing sanctions on the country and its leadership. In early-February 2025, less than a month into the new Trump administration, the headline of an article in the *New York Times* announced

“A Quick, Quiet Trip to Belarus Signals a Turn in U.S. Policy”.^{xi} The piece describes a mission by Christopher W. Smith, a deputy assistant secretary of state, and two others to meet with Lukashenka and his head of the KGB. Smith returned to Vilnius with three people who had been jailed – an American and two Belarusian political prisoners. The next step ostensibly could be a “grand bargain” in which many political prisoners would be released in exchange for the easing of US sanctions on Belarusian banks and exports of potash.

At the time of writing, no subsequent moves towards a grand bargain have taken place. One possible reason is that the lifting of US sanctions alone may be an insufficient incentive for Lukashenka to budge; there has been no indication that the EU and its member states are considering lifting their sanctions. Another is that the machinery of repression in Belarus continues to hum away, generating new political prisoners every week, even as small-scale releases and pardons have taken place since the summer of 2024. Any large-scale release of political prisoners, including prominent activists, journalists and opposition figures, would likely be part of a broader liberalisation, of which there are no signs at the moment. Indeed, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio welcomed the prisoner release but called for “the release of nearly 1,300 political prisoners who remain in jail across Belarus”.^{xii}

Another new departure in US policy is in the realm of trade. While levying significant tariffs on imports from most countries in the world in April 2025, the US exempted several countries, including Russia and Belarus.^{xiii} While official explanations point to existing sanctions as precluding “meaningful trade”, other countries under US sanctions, such as Venezuela, are still subject to the new tariffs. The absence of Belarus from the tariff list may indicate a desire on the part of the Trump administration to keep open the possibility of a “grand bargain”.

Conclusion

USAID cuts and the curtailment of RFE/RL have weakened the Belarusian exile community and its ability to reach Belarusians in the country, monitor human rights violations, and advocate before the international community. The government of Aliaksandr Lukashenka will likely face less resistance to spreading its own narratives and concealing its repression.

In their current form, US sanctions are unlikely to impact Lithuania’s referral of Belarus to the ICC, though they have probably heightened the existing reluctance of other states to support that referral. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the exile leadership have continued their political dialogue with US officials in the new Trump administration,^{xiv} but cuts to Freedom House, if and when they reach the Vilnius office, will leave the exile political leadership with less support.

A “grand bargain” whereby sanctions relief is implemented in exchange for the release of a significant number of political prisoners remains possible. However, a halt to the wave of pardons and releases since the beginning of the Trump administration suggests that unilateral good will gestures from Lukashenka are unlikely.

Recommendations

Given the fact that USAID cuts have hit Belarusian exile media particularly hard, and that the future of RFE/RL is in doubt, the immediate priority for bilateral and multilateral donors should be the media sector.

Sanctions relief by the US and European countries should only be considered with the release of the vast majority of political prisoners in Belarus, including the most prominent figures. Since the machinery of repression continues to operate and create new political prisoners, European governments should make it clear that sanctions could be quickly reimposed in the event of continued repression. Otherwise, there is a risk that the Belarusian government sees an incentive to take new “hostages”.



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ENDNOTES

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