

EU Considers Bringing Lukashenko in From the Cold After Minsk Peace Talks

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko speaks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko after peace talks on resolving the Ukrainian crisis in Minsk, Feb. 12, 2015.

BRUSSELS — Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's hosting of Ukraine peace talks may have a side effect at home — helping thaw relations between the EU and a man the West calls "Europe's last dictator."

A meeting in Minsk on Friday with the foreign minister of neighboring Latvia, traveling in his capacity as chair of the EU ministerial council, will mark another step in what diplomats say is an accelerating process that could see some easing of sanctions on Lukashenko and even an invitation to a May summit.

"I believe we have window of opportunity," Latvia's Edgars Rinkevics said Thursday as he headed off for what he said would be discussions on EU-Belarus relations.

Unlike Ukraine and other ex-Soviet republics tempted by free trade with the EU, Lukashenko has remained broadly aligned with Russia, signing up for President Vladimir Putin's Eurasian Union but also criticizing Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

He has shown no haste to address complaints over electoral and human rights abuses at home that have seen him and some 200 of his supporters banned from traveling to the EU since 2011.

But EU diplomats said discussions were under way on how to improve relations. An internal document setting out possible steps was agreed by EU member states last month. They said Lukashenko will have to reform. However, Brussels is in no rush to repeat the kind of embrace of Ukraine which led to its president being ousted a year ago and Russia seizing Crimea.

Nonetheless, Lukashenko's efforts to help in resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine, including hosting peace talks last week involving French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, have raised a possibility of detente.

"There are growing signs that Belarus is opening up to Europe. Lukashenko has been very helpful during the Minsk negotiations," one EU source said. "Member states are discussing whether the EU should unfreeze relations with Belarus."

Summit Invite?

Lukashenko, 60, has let it be known he would like to attend a summit between EU countries and six ex-Soviet states planned for Riga in May, EU sources say. To go, he would need a waiver of the EU travel ban that was renewed only three months ago.

Latvia, which will host the Eastern Partnership Summit on May 21-22, has said it is willing to invite Lukashenko. But some EU states are opposed and no decision has been taken.

EU officials are well aware, after his 21 years in power in Minsk, of Lukashenko's reputation as a wily operator adept at playing off the EU and Russia for his own advantage. And it still bears scars from the last such summit, in Vilnius in 2013, which was a crucial moment in Ukraine's descent into crisis.

Nonetheless, year-old negotiations to ease short-stay visas for Belarussians may be wrapped up by the Riga summit, one EU diplomat said. The EU says the release of political prisoners is essential for any significant improvement in relations.

Some Belarus opposition figures would welcome closer EU ties. Former presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich said: "Human rights need to be kept in mind — but it's also necessary to do all we can to integrate Belarus more into Europe."

Lukashenko appears keen to explore ways to boost an economy that is exposed to problems in Russia. His foreign minister, Vladimir Makei, made clear after talks with Rinkevics on Thursday that Belarus would keep its distance from the EU.

"Some want to join the EU tomorrow," he said of ex-Soviet states. "Some want to have a prospect of doing so. And some just want to normalize relations with it."

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