Belarus and the United States: Stepping Stones to Nowhere

On June 10, US President Barack Obama extended sanctions against Belarusian leaders for one more year. Responding to the news, press secretary of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dzmitry Mironchyk observed a “clear improvement” in Belarus-US relations in recent years. In his view the decision is result of the sluggish US bureaucracy and lack of sensitivity to events in the region.

Recently there has been much conjecture about changes in the foreign policy of Belarus. It took part in the Eastern Partnership summit at Riga (21-22 May) and there have been some low level discussions between US and Belarusian personnel.

But there is little sign of any serious breakthrough in the longstanding American-Belarusian impasse. It culminated with the virtual emptying of the respective embassies in 2008 when US Ambassador Karen Stewart was asked to leave Belarus or risk being declared persona non grata. The US Embassy’s position is that that the overall relationship is “anything but smooth.”

The logic of the converse argument is that given the crisis in Ukraine it no longer makes sense to treat Belarus as an international pariah. As Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka put it, he is no longer "the last dictator in Europe". Moreover, he has presided over two summits in Minsk attended by the French and German leaders in what have thus far been failed efforts to stop the fighting in Ukraine.
Belarusian Initiatives

Analyst Grigory Ioffe in Eurasian Daily Monitor refers to the recent initiatives from Minsk as a “diplomatic offensive”. He notes that Lukashenka has made three public appeals for the United States to take part in the negotiations over Ukraine. The last at the Victory Day parade in Minsk on May 9, which was followed, but not necessarily linked with US Secretary of State John Kerry’s surprising visit to Russia.

If Lukashenka is hoping to improve relations with the United States, however, thus far the results have been notably meager. A meeting on human rights took place in Washington, DC on May 14 involving two officials from the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Yuri Ambrasevich, Director-General for Multilateral Diplomacy and Aleh Krauchenka, Director for the Americas.

But the meeting was relatively low level, and attended on the US side by a deputy assistant administrator for USAID, Jonathan Katz, and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric Rubin. Conversations focused on the forthcoming presidential elections, shared OSCE commitments to free assembly and association, and political prisoners in Belarus.

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On 27 May, in an interview with The Washington Post, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei refused to rule out the possibility that the two countries might reappoint ambassadors. He talked about the need first for “small steps” and foresaw a very gradual progression to the level of ambassadors. In other words the two sides are at the bottom of a high staircase with no immediate prospects of ascending it.
On 28 May, the US Congressman from New Mexico Steve Pearce visited Minsk and spoke to a press conference before a basketball game between former players in the NBA and the Belarusian team. Pearce praised Belarus for its mediation in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and emphasised its “incredibly important position” between East and West. Yet one can hardly consider this visit as evidence of restored relations.

**Foreign Policy Priorities**

Even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ official priorities list the United States in fifth place after Russia, the CIS, the European Union, and “countries of the South,” noting only that Belarus stands for a “constructive and equal dialogue” and “full-scale bilateral cooperation” that includes cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking.

More recently, Belarusian foreign policy priorities have been reiterated. On 7-8 June, Makei met with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov, in an encounter that elaborated the deep ties between the two countries and appeared to push Belarus decisively in the Russian direction. The two ministers noted, for example that the strategic partnership between the two neighbours had to be strengthened “in the face of common challenges.” They talked about deepening integration in the Eurasian Economic Union and bilateral cooperation between the two foreign ministries.

Perhaps most notable was an agreement to coordinate their foreign policies in 2016 and 2017 within the framework of the Russia-Belarus Union. This entity that has been largely dormant throughout most of its existence but will move into focus of the forthcoming session of the two foreign ministries in October. Coordinating foreign policies appears to undermine fundamentally the new image of Belarus as a mediator. It exposes Lukashenka’s limited freedom of maneuver within the
Russia First

Belarus needs to be wary not only of Russian military threats. It has also become even more dependent on Russian largesse because of a currency collapse of over one third against the US dollar over the past eighteen months, along with the loss of once valuable oil revenues.

the United States, concerned with abuses of human rights and the continuing detention of political prisoners, has little motivation to move closer to the Minsk regime.

As cited by Michael Birnbaum in The Washington Post on May 25, Makei declared that: “Let’s be sincere. Europe cannot replace Russia for us, at least not today.” The statement encapsulates Belarus’ current position. It also explains why there are no short or intermediate term prospects for rapprochement with the United States.

In turn the United States, concerned with abuses of human rights and the continuing detention of political prisoners, has little motivation to move closer to the Minsk regime. There are no major trading links and unlike in Ukraine, there is no significant opposition that is promoting a movement westward.

Lukashenka has helped with Ukraine, but thus far his intervention hardly offsets past transgressions (in US eyes) and moreover, it has hardly been decisive. A Minsk-3 might change opinions but few in Washington would be convinced that it would achieve much.

Ultimately, Moscow is demanding that the leadership in Minsk makes its position clear. It appears to be complying, however reluctantly.
David Marples

David is a Distinguished University Professor at the University of Alberta in Canada.