Belarus-Sweden Relations: Between Trade and Human Rights

Belarus and Sweden are steadily improving their relations, harshly damaged by a diplomatic row in 2012. Sweden has patiently worked on reestablishing its diplomatic presence in Minsk. Belarus is in no hurry to reciprocate.

Earlier this year a delegation of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) had talks in Belarus' Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Should this visit be interpreted as a sign of a gradual shift in Sweden’s assistance policy towards Belarus?

Bilateral ties: quick start, delayed development

On 19 December 1991, Sweden became one of the first countries to recognise the independence of Belarus after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The two countries established diplomatic relations on 14 January 1992.

Despite the initial fast pace in developing relations, Belarus and Sweden took their time in establishing a diplomatic presence in each other’s capitals. Belarus opened its embassy in Stockholm only in November 1999. By that time, Belarus had an embassy in over a dozen other EU countries.

Sweden first opened in Minsk a section office of its embassy in Russia, in November 2003. In September 2008, Sweden finally established a fully-fledged embassy in Minsk when Ambassador Stefan Eriksson presented his credentials to Belarusian
Belarus prioritises trade

Belarusian diplomats in Stockholm initially focused mostly on promoting trade and investment relations with the host country. The trade turnover between Belarus and Sweden grew tenfold from $48.2m in 2000 to $480.5m in 2006.

However, after the peak year of 2006, trade results became much less impressive. The downward spiral has become very steady and more pronounced since 2012, when Sweden had to close its embassy in Minsk.

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<th>2011</th>
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<th>2015</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarus’ exports to Sweden, $ m</td>
<td>91,5</td>
<td>88,4</td>
<td>49,9</td>
<td>51,8</td>
<td>45,6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belarus’ imports from Sweden, $ m</td>
<td>217,5</td>
<td>205,0</td>
<td>195,6</td>
<td>125,1</td>
<td>81,0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turnover, $ m</td>
<td>309,0</td>
<td>293,4</td>
<td>245,5</td>
<td>176,9</td>
<td>126,6</td>
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<td>Change in turnover to previous year</td>
<td>-5,0%</td>
<td>-16,3%</td>
<td>-27,9%</td>
<td>-28,4%</td>
<td></td>
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Belarus has mostly imported machinery, appliances and telecoms equipment from Sweden. Its principal exports have included lignite and peat, timber, iron and steel and chemical products.

According to Sweden’s embassy in Minsk, about two dozen Swedish companies have established their branches or joint ventures in Belarus, with Ericsson, IKEA, Scania, Schenker and Volvo among them.

Sweden prioritises democracy

Unlike their Belarusian colleagues, Swedish diplomats in Minsk paid most of their attention to promoting human rights,
democracy and the rule of law in the host country.

In October 2002, the Swedish government adopted a country strategy for development of cooperation with Belarus for 2002-2004, which was later extended for 2005 and 2006. A new strategy was adopted for 2007–2010.

Swedish cooperation efforts focused mainly on “deeper democratisation, economic change and social security”. Priority has been given to democratic political forces, students and academics, business people, journalists, youth, and NGOs.

Stefan Eriksson was a pillar of Sweden’s presence in Belarus. The ambassador, who spoke better Belarusian than most of the country’s government officials, became a darling of independent Belarusian media and established good contacts with Belarusian civil society.

Sweden’s strong and consistent position on human rights violations in Belarus and its advocacy of sanctions against the Belarusian regime became a powerful irritant for the Belarusian authorities.

Teddy bear airdrop and diplomatic row

The Teddy Bear Airdrop incident, which happened on 4 July 2012, inadvertently dealt a major blow to Belarus-Sweden relations. After an initial denial of the incident, the Belarusian authorities called it a “provocation of foreign intelligence agencies”.

A major diplomatic row between Belarus and Sweden ensued. On 3 August, the Belarusian government expelled Stefan Eriksson.
The ambassador was on vacation in Sweden when he was informed that he would not be allowed back to Belarus.

The Belarusian government tried to present the situation as a “non-renewal” of Eriksson’s accreditation. In fact, diplomatic law and practice do not provide for any time limits or renewals on diplomatic accreditation.

Belarus' MFA claimed that the Swedish ambassador's "activities were aimed not at the strengthening of relations between Belarus and Sweden, but on their erosion.”

The subsequent exchange of retaliatory steps led to the closure of both embassies by the end of August that year. However, diplomatic relations between the two countries were not severed.

**Mending the ties**

As the heat of the moment passed, Stockholm began quietly exploring ways of restoring its diplomatic presence in Minsk. “The Swedes dislike open conflicts. Besides, they needed an embassy to support Swedish agencies, which were spending public money to assist civil society in Belarus”, says Yury Kazhura, a former Belarusian diplomat who has been living in Stockholm for the last 12 years.

The Swedish embassy reopened in Minsk in July 2013 when Belarus accepted a Swedish chargé d’affaires. However, for a long time the Belarusian government restricted the embassy’s staff to this single person, the only exception being made for the 2014 world hockey championship in Minsk.

It took another two years for Belarus to accept a new Swedish ambassador. On 25 June 2015, Martin Åberg presented his credentials to Lukashenka. As of now, the embassy is staffed with two junior diplomats. It is still unable to issue visas.
However, Belarus is in no hurry to reciprocate by reopening an embassy in Stockholm. Since Belarus opened an embassy in Finland in September 2013, Helsinki has become the country’s new foothold in the Nordic countries.

Since Belarus – Sweden relations began warming up in 2013, the two countries have been holding regular diplomatic contact at different levels. Belarus’ foreign minister Vladimir Makei has met his Swedish counterpart on the outskirts of several UN and OSCE meetings.

In September 2015, Alena Kupchyna, Makei’s deputy in charge of relations with Europe, visited Sweden to discuss bilateral ties as well as the forthcoming presidential elections in Belarus. Delegations of the Swedish foreign ministry came to Minsk in 2014 and 2015.

**Shift in assistance strategy?**

On 28 January, a high-level delegation of SIDA met deputy foreign minister Kupchyna in Minsk.

SIDA administers Sweden’s aid to foreign countries. In 2014, it spend SEK 69 m (about $10m) on assistance to Belarus. The bulk of this (over 60 per cent) went to supporting projects in the field of democracy, human rights and gender equality.

SIDA used to have democratic activists and NGOs as its preferred partners in Belarus. Direct cooperation with the Belarusian authorities has so far been restricted in scope.

The contacts of SIDA with Belarusian officials may be an indication that this policy is about to be adjusted. The situation has changed since Eriksson was ousted. The
Belarusian government has been stressing its greater openness to cooperation with Europe. The opposition, meanwhile, has become weaker. Sweden may try to see whether greater involvement of government actors in cooperation can be more effective in triggering a policy change in Belarus.

SIDA left without answer Belarus Digest’s repeated requests for comment.

Belarus still has a symbolic value for Sweden, which played an important role in securing the independence of Belarus’ immediate neighbours, the Baltic countries. However, while Lukashenka’s regime remains in power, the two countries will have few common interests and little high level cooperation.