Belarus – US Relations: Lukashenka No Longer Viewed as a Russian Puppet

Following “peaceful” elections in Belarus, the United States sent two medium-level diplomats to Minsk on 4-5 November. Bridget Brink and Robert Berschinski came to reiterate America’s willingness to uphold the “virtuous cycle” in bilateral relations when one’s positive steps are responded to in kind.

Continuing this trend, the two countries may agree on expanding their embassies’ staff and increasing US economic assistance in exchange for some symbolic liberalisation steps by the Belarusian authorities. However, a major breakthrough is nowhere to be seen.

The Ukraine Crisis Jump-starts a Thaw in Relations

The US and Belarus communicated at a working level even during the most difficult times of their bilateral relationship. However, after the brutal crackdown on the opposition in the aftermath of the 2010 presidential elections, the contacts were reduced to once-a-year visits by minor State Department officials.

Minsk's position on Ukraine helps dialogue with the US

Things began to change in mid-2014. Minsk then asserted its displeasure with Moscow's new 'Russian world' policy, crafting a carefully expressed solidarity with Ukraine. Washington
responded by an increased frequency of contacts. Nevertheless, the intensity of the dialogue with America remained far inferior to the one Belarus began to maintain with Europe.

Among the frequent bilateral consultations, one stood out. An interagency US team, which included officials from the State Department, the Agency for International Development and the Department of Defence, visited Minsk on 8-10 September 2014.

During this meeting Belarus and the United States reviewed the potential for cooperation if and when bilateral relations begin to normalise. A US official even described the visit as a "restoration of bilateral relations".

The next decisive event for US–Belarus ties happened on 27 February 2015. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka received Eric Rubin, a medium-ranking US diplomat. Lukashenka may have desired to keep up to date on the ongoing negotiations. This may explain the baffling disregard for protocol.

Two other important US appearances in Belarus took place on the eve of the presidential elections. On 2–4 August, a three-person US congressional delegation led by Dana Rohrabacher, the chairman of the subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and emerging threats met with Alexander Lukashenka and the heads of several government agencies. On 11 September, Under Secretary of State for Management Patrick Kennedy became the highest-ranking State Department official to visit Belarus during Lukashenka’s era.

Release of Political
Prisoners Provides Major Impetus

The Under Secretary of State’s visit became possible only after Lukashenka pardoned all remaining political prisoners in Belarus on 22 August. Patrick Kennedy, whose primary sphere of responsibility includes human resources, budget and foreign missions, came to Minsk to discuss the modalities of the gradual resumption of the US embassy in Minsk's normal functions.

As the two countries agreed in their bilateral step-by-step understanding, the United States waited until after the 11 October presidential elections to respond to Belarus’ releasing of political prisoners. While, according to the State Department, “the elections fell significantly short of Belarus’ international obligations and commitments for free and fair elections”, the Belarusian regime managed to abstain from a violent backlash against rare street protesters.

The US: "Suspension of sanctions is focused on supporting the Belarusian economy"

On 29 October, the US suspended sanctions on nine Belarusian companies for six months. Announcing this decision at a meeting with leaders of the Belarusian opposition, a US embassy official Monica Bland pointed out that the sanctions reprieve failed to include Belarusian officials.

Indeed, sixteen Belarusians have remained on the US assets freeze list. The United States refused to go as far as their European partners did, even if they insisted that they coordinated their decisions on sanctions.
In her media statement made a week later, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Bridget Brink stressed that the suspension of sanctions was “limited, and future-oriented, and focused on supporting the Belarusian economy”. Indeed, all companies concerned are petrochemical enterprises. They represent the backbone of Belarusian industry and are a steady source of hard-currency revenue for the Belarusian economy.

“Complex Issues” Discussed, Not Cushioned

Bridget Brink and her colleague, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Robert Berschinski, visited Minsk on 4–5 November. There, they met with Belarusian officials as well as members of the opposition, civil society, human rights activists, and the business community.

Unlike Brink’s predecessor Eric Rubin, the diplomats failed to get the privilege of a personal audience with Alexander Lukashenka. However, Bridget Brink and Robert Berschinski discussed “complex issues and ways to address them” at a meeting with foreign minister Vladimir Makei.

At their meeting with leaders of all opposition parties and movements, the US diplomats confined themselves to short introductory statements and preferred to listen to opposition activists rather than divulge information about their plans towards the Belarusian regime.

The US no longer regards Lukashenka as a Russian puppet

Some participants in the meeting noted ongoing changes in the
US approach towards the Belarusian authorities. They described the American diplomats’ mood as “cautiously optimistic” about future positive developments. At the same time, the US officials reassured the opposition that the United States had no intention in reducing their contacts with civil society despite the authorities’ attitude towards such contacts.

A participant in the meeting told Belarus Digest that the United States no longer regarded Lukashenka as a Russian puppet but rather as a leader who is heavily dependent on Moscow but makes his own decisions.

In order to contain Russia’s growing assertiveness in the region and beyond, the United States is willing to exploit Lukashenka’s aversion to the “Russian world” doctrine. To do so, it may help him reduce the economic dependence on Russia by assisting with securing an IMF loan and facilitating trade and investments.

As payback, Belarus offers its self-appointed role as a "donor of stability" in the region. The regime proposes cooperation on a wide range of issues affecting global and regional security, including the non-proliferation of WMDs, export controls and disarmament.

For the moment, the United States appears to be unwilling to satisfy itself with this offer. If Belarus seeks further improvement of its relations with the world’s superpower, a gradual political liberalisation should be in order.