

Belarusian Foreign Policy: Between Tehran and Tel-Aviv

Belarusians have a special attitude towards Israel. In the only world's country where Yiddish was ever a state language, almost every family – even of non-Jewish origin – has either relatives, friends or acquaintances there. It is no wonder then that three out of nine Israeli presidents, including the current president Shimon Peres, are Belarusian Jews.

At the same time, Belarus for years has enjoyed quite dynamic relations with both Israel and Iran. Till 2003, Minsk maintained very close links with Saddam's Iraq, as well. These parallel links with the states hostile to each other demonstrate that the Belarusian government is not as primitive as it sometimes seems. It is able handle such dilemmas and pragmatically avoids ideology. Belarusian officials never treat Israel the way they treat the EU or US.

Scramble For Jewish Heritage

Ties to Israel and Jewish culture of Eastern Europe has become an important issue in the region. Its [Belarusian-Jewish historical heritage](#) is frequently claimed by its neighbours. Last week, the mayor of Lithuanian capital congratulated the Israeli president Shimon Peres with his 90th birthday. He added, "I want to say clearly and openly, you were born on the territory of what was formerly Lithuania."

The leading Polish daily Rzecz Pospolita corrected, "Shimon Peres was born in Poland," and remarked, "today it is the territory of Belarus." In all actuality, the Israeli president was born in the historical heartland of Belarus – the Vilna region. Moreover, he openly says so, and even briefly described his Belarusian childhood in one of his books.

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Belarusian authorities and society in recent times have demonstrated more awareness towards the importance of tending to the Jewish aspect of its national culture and Belarusian Jews. In July, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry symbolically handed Shimon Peres his Belarusian birth certificate.

Meanwhile, public activists held a special event in the birthplace of the father of modern Hebrew language, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, in the Viciebsk Voblast'. Even more symbolically, just before opening the Iranian trade centre in Brest, municipal officials there declared their intent to open in October a monument to Menachem Begin, a former Israeli Prime Minister from the Belarusian city of Brest.

And these symbolical gestures go beyond culture. When the former chief of the Israeli Mossad intelligence service, Meir Dagan, needed a liver transplant, he went to Minsk in October last year. The operation was successful and the Belarusian authorities acquired one more influential friend in Israel.

Belarusian embassies have little interest in their own fellow Belarusians (whatever their ethnic background) in most other countries. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry always emphasises that there are 120,000 former Belarusian citizens living now in Israel, and that there are about 30,000 Jews living in Belarus (the Jewish Agency for Israel says even about 50-60,000). That is more even in absolute numbers than in any of neighbouring country, except Russia.

Pragmatic Tel-Aviv

It should not come as a surprise, then, that one of the first visits of the de-facto ruler of newly independent Belarus, Prime Minister Kebich, in 1992 was to Israel. Lukashenka also visited Israel in 2000. Although official contact between Belarus and Israel remained at a rather low level – compared, to say, Belarus-Iranian contacts – they were nonetheless very

stable and less problematic than with any of the EU countries. Lukashenka regularly described bilateral relations in very positive terms. "Relations with Israel are actively developing in all directions," is a typical phrase in his rhetoric.

As the US and EU harshly criticised the violent treatment of 2010 presidential election day's protesters and issued travel ban against Belarusian officials, Israel simply had its ambassador not to attend the inauguration ceremony. Later, in an unrelated interview, Israeli ambassador Yosef Shagal explained the Israeli position towards Belarusian domestic politics, "it is very important to retain good relations with a country which has an excellent attitude towards us".

According to him, Israel, a close ally of the US in world politics, has never initiated sanctions against Belarus. As for Belarus working with opponents of Israel in Baghdad, Tehran or Damascus, Shagal explained the situation stating that Belarus "does not initiate any anti-Israeli processes but at the same time it is supporting Russia which frequently votes against Israel."

Finally, some radical quarters of the Belarusian opposition have accused Israel of collaborating with the current Belarusian government. "Why Is the New Israeli Ambassador Defending Lukashenka's Regime?" lamented last year the weekly Tut I Ciapier.

As Shimon Peres visited Riga and Vilnius last week, but not Minsk, a slew of new speculations arose on Belarusian radical sites. Charter'97 proclaimed, "The President of Israel refuses to visit Belarus." Yauhien Lipkovich on the Moscow-based Belarusian Partisan commented, "The President of Israel Did Not Forgive Lukashenka." Finally, the Israeli embassy had to react and officially relay the statement of Peres' press secretary on the matter. On Thursday, Peres let the embassy explain that he felt very sorry about not visiting his fatherland this time, the entire story had to do with his work

schedule, and regardless, he was going to visit Belarus next year.

Monetising Friendship

The most popular speculative explanation for Tel-Aviv's benevolent attitude towards Minsk are deals between Lukashenka and some figures of the Israeli establishment, in particular [Avigdor Lieberman](#), the former Foreign Minister of Israel. During Lukashenka's presidency, Lieberman visited Belarus at least five times and helped in to reopen the Israeli embassy in Minsk in 2004 in the aftermath of its closure one year earlier.

Economically, relations with Israel look not very impressive. In April, the Israeli ambassador to Belarus stated that in 2012 Israeli investments in Belarus – in the form of sites being built or still being projected – reached \$250-300m. According to the ambassador, in 2013 this number shall rise to about \$400m.

The volume of Iranian investment claimed by Iranian officials is to set at \$960m. This number is almost certainly exaggerated by Iranian officials, yet Iranians have in fact invested a fair amount. A similar picture can be found in trade between Belarus and Israel and between Belarus and Iran. Last year, trade between Belarus and Israel reached a record level of \$109m, while the trade volume with Iran – \$104m.

More Than Money

Given these circumstances, Minsk clearly has good reasons to remain friends with both Tel-Aviv and Tehran. For the Belarusian government it is a matter of principle – not to determine ideologically its priorities. Belarus has a lot to gain from its contacts with Tel-Aviv. And it is not only related to trade and investment but also political contacts between Minsk and the West which Israeli politicians can facilitate.

Indeed, Belarusian relations with Tehran are also not only about money and definitely not about ideology. It is about increasing the role of Belarus in international politics and in Belarusian relations with some countries – Western and Arab nations in particular. But also with Israel.

The case of this relationship triangle of Minsk demonstrates that the foreign policy of Belarus in recent two decades has achieved some flexibility. This flexibility may look cynical, yet in the end exactly this feature shall be considered central to all policies of the current Belarusian regime.

Avigdor Lieberman's Murky Dealings in Belarus Unveiled



A loud scandal involving the foreign Minister of Israel and money laundering via Belarusian banks is unfolding. Ze'ev Ben-Aryeh, the former Ambassador of Israel to Belarus, provided Avigdor Lieberman, the Foreign Minister of Israel, classified information when they met in Belarus in 2008.

That information suggested that Lieberman had accepted bribes and evaded taxes using Belarusian banks. Israeli authorities were hoping to cooperate secretly with the Belarusian authorities, but their ambassador kept a copy of the confidential files for himself, and later shared it with his

boss Liberman.

The Jerusalem Post reports:

According to the statement released by police, Israel's former ambassador to Belarus, Ze'ev Ben-Aryeh, allegedly showed Lieberman classified information regarding his investigation by police on allegations that he had accepted bribes and failed to report income to the tax authorities.

The documents had been sent to Ben-Aryeh by the Foreign Ministry to hand over to the Belarus government, whose help Israel required in tracing money transfers from a local bank.

According to the police statement, "the ambassador, who was supposed to pass the request on discretely and directly to the authorities in Belarus, kept one copy for himself. When Lieberman arrived in Belarus on a visit (during October 2008), [Ben-Aryeh] copied classified information from the request, [and] handed it over to Lieberman illegally when they met. The investigation also deals with Lieberman's involvement in the advancement and job appointments of Ben-Aryeh in the Foreign Ministry in recent months."

It is interesting that a few years ago the Israeli Embassy in Belarus was closed down completely, but later re-opened. According to Israeli Haaretz newspaper, Avigdor Lieberman became excessively interested in relations between Israel and Belarus long before he was appointed Foreign Minister. As a minister in Ariel Sharon's government, Lieberman actively lobbied for Israel to reopen its Minsk embassy, closed following budget cuts in 2003.

Although this scandal is an internal matter of Israel, Belarus is becoming internationally infamous for its dealings with all kinds of murky "investors". The countries of origin vary from Syria and other Arab countries, Russia, Israel, Iraq, Libya

and North Korea. It is often unclear what Belarus has to offer to such investors.

Take an example of [Emanuel Zeltser](#), a US lawyer involved in battle over the legacy of a Georgian-Russian businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili who died in London under mysterious circumstances in 2008. Zeltser spent more than a year in Belarusian KGB prison under bogus charges. It is still a mystery what the whole dispute has to do with Belarus.

Despite its ever changing pro-Russian or pro-Western rhetoric, the only aspiration of the Belarus regime is to remain in power for as long as possible. "Money does not smell" seems to be the prevailing ideology in Belarus today.

Read more about Liberman's story in [Jerusalem Post](#).

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