

Is the United Kingdom finally interested in Belarus?

The United Kingdom has virtually overlooked Belarus since the latter regained its independence over twenty five years ago. London largely remained a strong proponent of a hard-line approach towards Lukashenka's regime. The UK has avoided talking to the authorities in Minsk. Only two years after the normalisation of relations between Belarus and the EU began, the first high-level British official has set foot in Minsk.

Sir Alan Duncan, a junior minister in the UK Government, came primarily to understand and encourage Belarus's neutrality stance towards regional conflict. In addition, Duncan sought to formulate proposals for the UK's post-Brexit policy towards Belarus. Will this visit give impetus to major changes in Belarus – UK relations?

Is the era of estrangement over?

Sir Alan Duncan, who serves as the Minister of State for Europe and the Americas at the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, visited Minsk on 25-26 September. He met Belarusian President [Alexander Lukashenka](#) and Foreign Minister [Vladimir Makei](#). The British diplomat also talked to opposition leaders, civil society activists and UK citizens.

Alan Duncan became the first UK Minister to visit Belarus in 25 years of the two countries' diplomatic relations. A few high-level Belarusian officials, including the then Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir and Speaker of the Parliament Miechylau Hryb, visited London during the short-lived pre-Lukashenka era of Belarus's independence.

Prime Minister [Siarhiej Sidorski](#), who came to London in November 2008 to attend the Belarus Investment Forum, failed to hold meetings at the level appropriate for his status. The only political consultations at the deputy foreign minister level between Belarus and the UK took place four years ago in the British capital.

Niceties and clichés to please guests

Greeting the UK junior minister in his residence, Alexander Lukashenka voiced his regret over the UK leaving the European Union. The reason: Belarus will miss “a reliable partner and friend in the EU who would be able to tell the truth about Belarus.”

This is quite a startling assessment of the UK position. Over many years, London has promoted a hard-line approach towards Belarus. Reacting to the violent crackdown on opposition in Belarus in December 2010, the UK government [lobbied hard for economic sanctions](#) against Lukashenka’s regime. British media and public figures often expressed solidarity with Belarusian civil society and political opposition; [Belarus Free Theatre](#) and [Andrei Sannikov](#) are the best-known examples.

Minister [@AlanDuncanMP](#) speaks about his historical visit to [#Belarus](#), delighted to be here. Very productive meetings. Looking fwd to future! pic.twitter.com/0lm1YPoBdM

– UK in Belarus (@UKinBelarus) [September 26, 2017](#)

It seems Lukashenka merely remained faithful to his habit of saying nice things to foreign visitors, notwithstanding how close these things fitted reality. Keeping with tradition, the Belarusian president welcomed his honoured guest “to determine

three to four substantial pilot economic projects” for joint implementation, promising “the most favourable and preferential conditions for [the UK-financed] business.”

The UK government remains unlikely to involve itself in the discussion of specific joint projects with Belarus, leaving this to private business entities. Also a preferential treatment is hardly a sustainable solution. British diplomats [have advocated a more dynamic economy](#), less bureaucracy and more space for private business as the best way to lure British business to Belarus.

Top export destination dependent on a single product

Despite last year’s dramatic drop (by 63 per cent) in Belarusian exports to the UK, the latter remained the third-largest destination for Belarusian goods (the second-largest in 2015) and the top export market outside of the CIS. In terms of turnover, the UK remains Belarus’s sixth-largest trade partner.

Meanwhile, the downfall trend saw a no less dramatic reversal in 2017. In January-July, Belarusian exports to the United Kingdom more than doubled compared to the same period last year, attaining \$1.38bn. Imports also increased by 66 per cent.

However, Belarusian exports to the UK rely heavily on a single product – oil and mineral tar products. Over the past few years, their share in Belarusian exports to the country varied between 95 and 98 per cent. The remainder of supplied goods has included fertilisers, steel bars, lead, women’s overcoats and lasers. Belarus imports from the UK mostly engines, machinery and spirits.

The United Kingdom also counts among the top-6 investors to Belarusian economy. As of 1 January 2015, British direct investments amounted to \$279.2m, \$144.9m of them being equity positions and \$134.3m—debt instruments positions. However, a significant share of these investments may be related to settlement payments between BelOil—Belarus’s major exporter of oil products—and its British subsidiary, BNK (UK) Limited.

Regional defence and security in focus

In Minsk, Alan Duncan indeed mentioned trade and financial cooperation among the topics he discussed with President Lukashenka and Foreign Minister Makei, without going into details. The junior minister signed, on behalf of the United Kingdom, a double taxation agreement with Belarus.

Education and regional defence and security became the other two cooperation areas Alan Duncan referred to specifically. In fact, regional defence and security seems to be the main topic of interest for the United Kingdom at the current stage of its relationship with Belarus.

Ahead of his visit to Minsk, the British diplomat spoke about the “important role [Belarus has] to play in the region and more widely.” The UK appreciates Belarus’s contribution to reducing tensions in the region and helping to maintain the ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia. Alan Duncan came to Minsk to learn what leeway Belarus has in this area, taking into account its significant economic dependence on Russia.

Belarusians unwelcome to the

UK?

Belarus and UK officials made no mention of visa issues during the visit. Belarusians can easily reach London and other UK cities via frequent Belavia flights from Minsk or numerous low-budget options from nearby foreign cities. However, the [current visa procedure discourages](#) many potential tourists and business visitors from Belarus from visiting the UK.



UK Visa Application Centre in Minsk. Photo: naviny.by

The United Kingdom changed its straightforward and quite quick visa procedure three years ago by including a commercial company in the visa application process. Now, the standard British visa is two to seven times costlier than its Schengen equivalents, which happen to give access not just to one, but to about forty countries.

A British visa also takes two to three times longer to obtain. At that, the exact treatment time remains unknown during the application process. The visa fee and the new application procedure dissuade many from applying; many visits have had to be cancelled because of the treatment delays.

Is a change in policy likely?

At his meeting with leaders of Belarusian opposition parties, the British minister stressed that the UK would like to receive a clear signal that Belarusian youth are choosing the democratic standards of Western countries, and that this choice is not imposed from outside.

The British elite seem to doubt the pro-European aspirations of Belarusian society. While prospects for democratic change in Belarus remain bleak, British diplomats may maintain a

dialogue Lukashenka for the sake of “positive gradualism”—a term Alan Duncan coined in Minsk.

Answering a journalist’s question on the impact Brexit may have on British policy towards the countries in the region, Alan Duncan admitted that the new status would give the United Kingdom ‘more flexibility’ in its policy-making. However, he immediately reminded that the UK would “still be the part of the European family working together on areas of common interest.”

Belarus has long remained on the margins of the British foreign policy agenda. The UK’s post-Brexit needs and Belarus’s increased role in stabilising security in the region made the junior minister’s visit to Minsk finally possible. However, a major increase in bilateral cooperation or the UK’s substantial departure from today’s common EU policy towards Belarus remain unlikely under current circumstances.