

German-Belarusian Relations at an All-Time Low

German-Belarusian relations are currently at an all-time low. The tension is rising, and it is still uncertain when the German ambassador will return to Minsk. In the meantime, the Belarusian authorities are doing everything possible to further deteriorate relations. As a result, all major German parties now support new sanctions against Belarus.

When Polish and EU ambassadors were asked to leave Belarus, German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle declared that “an act against Poland or the EU was an act against Germany at the same time”, so the German ambassador to Belarus, Dr Christof Weil, was called to return to Berlin for consultations.

A further deterioration in relations between the two countries was caused by the execution of Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitry Konovalov, the alleged criminals responsible for the explosion in the Minsk metro on 11 April 2011. Westerwelle, in the name of the federal government, deplored the executions and voiced doubts about the correctness of the verdict.

Germany Deplores the Execution of the Alleged Minsk Bombers

Steffen Seibert, spokesman of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said that the executions added further tensions to the difficult relations between the two countries. Indeed, all major German parties are in favour of new sanctions against Belarus. On 23 March the Council of the European Union adopted a new list of people who are not allowed to enter the EU and agreed to further economic sanctions against Belarusian enterprises.

Moreover, politicians and human rights activists propose to withdraw the [ice-hockey world championship](#) from Belarus. It

was planned that Belarus should host the sporting event in 2014. For Lukashenka, this is an important project, not only because ice-hockey is his favourite sport. The championship is meant to attract supporters and guests (and before that, investors) from abroad and show to the world that Belarus is a well-liked member of the international community.

Now, high-ranking German politicians like the Chief of Staff of the German Chancellery, Roland Pofalla, are vocally considering boycotting the competition in Belarus. "From my point of view", he said, "it is an unbearable thought that this unjust regime will be rewarded by hosting the ice-hockey championship, which is a personal wish of Lukashenka."

The discussion on the human rights situation in Belarus comes at a time when the German public is debating freedom and personal rights. The new German president, Joachim Gauck, was the head of the authorities dealing with the archives of the Eastern-German secret service. In his public speeches, he often refers to the German past and the time of Germany as a dictatorship, a fact that makes Germans even more sensitive regarding what is going on on the doorstep of the EU.

No Ice-hockey World Championship for Belarus?

This is indeed a month of bad PR for Belarus. Ice-hockey is a popular sport in Germany, so now even those newspaper readers who usually stick to the sports section will learn about Belarus and the disastrous human rights situation in the country. Sports journalists are writing political comments, like *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* Evi Simeoni, who has asked the functionaries of international sports federations to take responsibility for their decisions.

Another event featuring Belarus has backfired on the regime: the Leipzig book fair, one of the biggest book fairs in Germany with more than 160,000 visitors, hosted Belarus, Ukraine and Poland as special guest countries this year. Instead of reporting on Belarusian contemporary literature, bloggers and journalists presented Belarus as the country that it is in the moment: a white stain in the middle of Europe with the last dictator at its helm who still carries out death penalties.



The last serious indicator of how bad Belarusian-Germans relations are at the moment was Belarus' refusal to let Dr Astrid Sahm enter Belarus. Dr Sahm, a German political scientist, was the German director of the International Educational Centre Johannes Rau (IBB) in Minsk for six years until December 2011. Ms. Sahm has a multi-entry visa that is valid until June 2012. Nevertheless, she was denied entry to Belarus and sent back to Riga after landing at Minsk airport last Sunday.

German Director of IBB Denied Entry to Belarus

The international centre IBB is a German-Belarusian joint venture, co-owned by the Minsk city administration. Since its opening in 1994, it has been a place of dialogue and meeting, even in times of the worst crises between Belarus and the EU. The Minsk Forum taking place in IBB, of whose organisation committee Dr. Sahm is a chair, has always been a reliable indicator for the state of German-Belarusian relations.

In 2008, when there was an improvement in relations, the head of the presidential administration, Vladimir Makej, was present at the opening of the Minsk Forum. Last year, when relations were already deteriorating, Minsk Forum was cancelled, a rare occurrence since its kick-off in 1997.

The refusal to let Ms Sahn enter the country has shocked the German-Belarusian community and shown to those working with Belarus how bad relations actually are. The German-Belarusian Society (DGB), an NGO whose members are in key positions in bilateral cooperation, has voiced concern about the treatment of one of its chairs.

It is striking to see that the regime is willingly risking losing its most reliable partners and becoming even more isolated. Lukashenka risks a total break with the EU; a Polish member of the European Parliament even proposed reducing official EU-Belarus relations to consular level. Minsk is however used to ups and downs in diplomatic relations.

What is worse, the regime deliberately seems to be accepting a rupture with Belarus' most reliable partners. IBB is responsible for the implementation of the Belarus support programme of the German federal government, a programme that has brought in more than €13m for different projects to Belarus since 2002.

Even if the authorities are annoyed by the sanctions adopted in Brussels today, they should think twice before reacting over-hastily. Otherwise, it might not only be ambassadors who stay away from Belarus, but also tourists, partners and investors.

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