

Phillip Gordon to visit Belarus on Friday



As the proverb goes, guests bring joy twice: when they come and when they go. The increasing frequency of Western visitors to the Belarusian capital is a positive sign that its isolation is coming to an end, but Alyaksandr Lukashenka surely sighs with relief when the outsiders leave. Luckily, Western officials never stay for long; they drop by Minsk on their way to states with larger arsenals and oil resources. Of course, some were forced to prolong their visit – like Emanuel Zeltser, a US lawyer charged with industrial espionage. Those are important because their fellow countrymen usually come to the rescue. Others were impelled to depart sooner than they expected, like the staff of the US embassy in Minsk.

This Friday, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon plans to meet top government officials as well as the opposition leaders during his one-day trip to the Belarusian capital. He will be the highest US official to visit Minsk since US Ambassador Karen Stewart's forced departure in March 2008. The way for Gordon was paved by the earlier visits of EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana (February 2009) and a US congressional delegation (June 2009). A Senior Fellow for US Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, DC, Gordon was appointed to replace Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried.

The first move of the Obama administration toward Belarus was

a one-year extension of the US national emergency act on June 12, 2009, which blocks the property of certain “persons undermining democratic processes.” This time, however, the Belarusian government didn’t do anything drastic to protest. Perhaps Minsk realized that another hostile act would effectively end the relationship between the two countries, or maybe the need for loans during the global economic crisis taught it a lesson in diplomacy.