

What Washington and Minsk Have to Talk About



On Friday, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Gordon listened more than he talked. Perhaps because he was not graced with the presence of the chief Belarusian orator, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Most likely, however, because Washington doesn't have much to talk about until Minsk lifts restrictions on the political opposition, allows independent media and NGOs to develop and takes other measures to improve its human rights record.

Gordon first talked with the representatives of the Belarusian opposition. Alyaksandr Kazulin, Siargei Kaliakin, Anatol Liukovich, Anatol Liabedzka, Vincuk Viachorka, Viktor Karniaenka, Vital Rymasheuski, Valiancin Stefanovich, and Mihail Pashkevich briefed Gordon on the political situation in the country prior to his meeting with the presidential chief of staff and foreign minister.

According to the Foreign Ministry's terse account, "The sides discussed the development of Belarus-US relations, in particular taking advantage of the existing opportunities to expand the trade and economic cooperation and interaction in international security sphere."

According to the US Embassy, "During discussions with Belarusian government officials, he (Gordon) stressed the U.S. desire to continue to engage Belarus in a mutual effort to

improve bilateral relations.”

Gordon emphasized that the United States will not lift its sanctions on Belarus in exchange for the enlargement of its staff at the US embassy in Minsk. Sanctions will be lifted if there are actual improvements in political situation in the country, he said.

Gordon remarked that his visit to Belarus was made possible by the improvements like the release of the political prisoners. The Belarusian government needs to put a little more effort to have the sanctions lifted, however. Washington is ready to send an ambassador to Minsk, but it is up to Belarus to make it happen, stressed Gordon.

Read more about Gordon’s visit in [The Washington Post](#).

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.