

Belarus-Israel Secret Affairs

Last month lawyers for Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman had to defend their client in court against graft charges. The charges included promotion of the former Israeli ambassador to Belarus who leaked privileged information about a police investigation against Lieberman dating back to the 1990s.

In the meantime, the new Israeli ambassador began working in Belarus. Since March 2011, the Israeli diplomatic mission in Minsk had been working without its head. Minsk-Tel Aviv affairs are often murky and sometimes difficult to understand. This is not only because of close connections between the nations and cultures – many in the [Israeli elite](#) were born in Belarus – but also because private interests of top politicians often set trends in bilateral relations.

New Soviet-born Ambassador

The new Israeli ambassador Yosef Shagal was born in Baku in Soviet Azerbaijan. He is a professional journalist whose political career is connected with an Israeli nationalist party founded by another USSR-born Israeli – Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman. Shagal's appointment to Minsk marked the continuation of Lieberman's policy to promote Russian-speaking Israelis to ambassador positions in key post-Soviet countries.

The previous Israeli envoy to Belarus Eddie Shapira left Minsk in 2011 to lead his country's consulate in St Petersburg. During the two years of Shapira's work in Minsk, he achieved a breakthrough in relations between the two countries. Three Israeli ministers visited Belarus and their Belarusian counterparts paid visits to the Holy Land three times.

It was Shapira who initiated long-term collaboration between experts in tourism and agriculture. He repeatedly voiced the readiness of his state to abolish the visa regime with Belarus. When Israel introduced a visa-free regime for Russia and Ukraine, the number of travelers between the countries doubled.

However, words and political moves failed to transform into concrete offers. The process of abolishing the visa regime, Israeli sources admit, is made more difficult by Belarusian authorities hampering the process. According to Belstat, in 2010 the trade turnover between Belarus and Israel was merely \$78m, although officials speak about a \$1bn potential.

An 'Anti-Semitic' Scandal

Ironically, the intensity of political and economic cooperation between the two countries increased a year after a big scandal. During a press-conference on 12 October 2007 Alexander Lukashenka made the following remarks about Babruysk, a city in the central part of the country: "This is a Jewish city, and the Jews are not concerned for the place they live in. They have turned Babruysk into a pig sty. Look at Israel – I have been there."

This statement was regarded as anti-Semitic all over the world. To deal with the scandal, the Belarusian ruler sent to Tel Aviv Pavel Yakubovich, the Jewish editor-in-chief of his main propaganda newspaper, *Sovetskaya Belorussia*. The following year the Belarusian authorities sent a very large delegation to take part in celebrations for Israel's 60 years of independence.

Why Does Lukashenka Need Israel?

Belarus tries to balance itself not only [between Russia and the West](#), but also between Israel and the Muslim world. For example, during a mysterious visit of Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich to Tel Aviv, Lukashenka had a

telephone conversation with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had previously called for the destruction of the state of Israel.

It is obvious that the Belarusian regime is very interested in both Israeli money and in the US-Jewish lobby stepping up Belarus-US dialogue. During the last visit of Avigdor Lieberman to Belarus in 2009, both Lukashenka and the head of his administration Uladzimir Makei publicly admitted so.

Belarus' authorities also appreciate the fact that Israel does not try to influence Belarusian politics through its minority as Poland does. Belarusian Jewish expert Wolf Rubinchyk points out that Israel has no interest in building a well-organized Jewish community in Belarus in the hope that Belarusian Jews will eventually immigrate to Israel. As a result, the numbers of the Jewish population in Belarus has been declining. In the 2009 census, only 12,900 Belarusian citizens identified themselves as Jewish.

Moreover, Israel is always extremely cautious in political statements concerning the situation with human rights and democracy in Belarus. "It is important to maintain good relations with a country which treats us perfectly" said Yosef Shagal in his recent interview with Israeli ITON TV. The Israeli diplomat particularly liked that "when not voting for [Israel] in the UN, Belarus many times did not vote against [Israel], abstaining instead."

The Belarus Secret of Mr Lieberman

New ambassador Yosef Shagal, who served in the Soviet army in Minsk in the late 1960s, has already complimented Alexander Lukashenka on being 'a strong leader'. "He has his minuses, but this is something for which he should get credit and the Belarusian people, who vote normally despite some allegations of ballot tampering, will confirm this," said Yosef Shagal who is a protégé of Avigdor Lieberman.

Experts have noted a longstanding 'political sympathy' between Lukashenka and Lieberman. Since 1995, the Israeli politician has visited Belarus at least five times in different roles and on various occasions. He also played a key role in the restoration of the Israeli embassy in Minsk in 2004 which had been closed the year before for economic reasons. Some believe that Lieberman still has personal financial interests in Belarus.

The 'big friend of Belarus' is now under investigation for graft, money laundering, and witness tampering. He is also accused by the Israeli police of having unauthorized access to classified documents related to criminal inquiries into his activities. Lieberman is believed to have received copies of the documents from Zeev Ben-Arieh, Israeli Ambassador to Belarus in 2005-2008.

The documents sent by Israel's Justice Ministry to the Belarusian authorities contained a request to question banks and prominent figures in Belarus that could be involved in [Lieberman's suspected illegal dealings](#). The former ambassador Ben Aryeh, who used to be a great fan and translator of Belarusian literature into Hebrew, had to resign from the Israeli Foreign Ministry because of this. Lieberman denies all the charges.

Bilateral relations between Belarus and Israel are unlikely to see any significant changes. At least, as long as both Alexander Lukashenka and Lieberman remain in their positions.

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