

When Diplomacy Becomes Non Grata



"I think Senator Gramm would be in serious consideration for ambassador to Belarus, although I'm not sure the citizens of Minsk would welcome that."

John McCain

Minsk must be the worst place John McCain could think of off the top of his head when he was making fun of Senator Phil Gramm, a co-chairman of his campaign. The experiences of US diplomats serving in Belarus prove him right.

In March 2008, Belarus pulled its ambassador, Mikhail Khvostov, from Washington, DC giving US ambassador Karen Stewart 24 hours to leave before she would be declared persona non grata. Shortly afterward Belarusian authorities requested that the United States cut the staff of its 35-employee embassy in Minsk by half.

The American diplomats were accused of setting up a spying ring in the country. A state television report claimed the embassy had recruited 10 Belarusians to collect information for the FBI. The embassy was alleged to provide the informers with an apartment near the embassy as well as cameras and binoculars.

A month later ten more US diplomats were ordered to leave Belarus within 72 hours. In an immediate response, the US State Department ordered Belarus to close its embassy in Washington and its consulate in New York withdrawing its six diplomats within fifteen days. The State Department announced shutting down the US Embassy in Minsk. Washington retreated at the last minute, and the embassies remained open, although

barely functional.

Of course, it is not the protection of state secrets that explains the undiplomatic actions of the Belarusian government. On March 6, 2008, Washington issued a statement concerning the sanctions imposed in 2007 against Belarus' largest petrochemical company, Belnaftakhim over Minsk's deteriorating human rights record. The assets of the company's US subsidiary were frozen. The United States – along with the European Union – has also restricted the travel of Lukashenka and his ministers to urge the regime to free political prisoners, including Alyaksandr Kazulin, a runner-up in the 2006 presidential election, who was sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison for leading a protest rally after the vote.

Although Lukashenka's defied sanctions saying that "if the Americans introduce new sanctions and think we will collapse, that's rubbish," the restrictions turned to be a major annoyance to Minsk because the Belneftekhim accounted for nearly a third of the country's foreign currency earnings.

The economic impact was strong as in 2008 the USA ranked 11th among Belarus' non-CIS trade partners in terms of the foreign trade volume, 17th in terms of Belarus' export, and 6th in terms of Belarus' import. Moreover, the United States is second to Russia only in the number of joint ventures and foreign companies set up in Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the sanctions "radically undermine[d] US trustworthiness as a partner." The website of the Belarusian embassy in Washington, DC rhetorically asked its visitors: "Can anyone trust the US after all, all the more so, in such a strategic cause as non-proliferation of nuclear weapons?"

Who really suffered while the governments argued were the people, however. The U.S. Embassy stopped issuing visas for Belarusian citizens and closed several "American corners" in local libraries that provide information about the United

States.

Significantly, the row occurred when Lukashenka seemed to be edging closer to the West. In February 2008, Belarus freed six political prisoners and finally conceded to the European Commission's opening a branch in Minsk. In March 2008, with expelling America diplomats, the regime regained its anti-Western posture, however. Expelling the fiercest critics of his authoritarianism, Belarusian President proceeded to dispel street rallies and detain demonstrators. Interestingly, Belarus-US relations worsened at exactly the same time that Moscow's stance toward Washington hardened.

This year, the Belarusian leadership is again flirting with the West, and the relationship between the two countries is slowly improving. Visiting Minsk at the end of June, the US Congressional Delegation reminded Lukashenka that restoring the staffing of US embassy in Minsk is the first step toward improving relationship between the two countries. In the view of the Belarusian president, however, the first step is to lift sanctions, and only then may the restoration of diplomatic relations with the United States become possible.

Michael Scanlan, the newly-appointed Chargé d'Affaires of the United States has a very difficult task to accomplish in Minsk.

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