Commentary
October 3, 2024

Belarus Offers Reset of Bilateral Relations to Lithuania

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

Belarusian Foreign Affairs Minister Maxim Ryzhenkov published an op-ed outlining Minsk's assessment of the current and prospective bilateral relations between Belarus and Lithuania, signalling a desire from Minsk to further engage with Vilnius in the future. Ryzhenkov's intended audience was likely the future Lithuanian government. If the incumbent centre-right coalition government does not win the upcoming parliamentary elections, a small window of opportunity to de-escalate tensions between Minsk and Vilnius might surface.

On 26 September, Belarus's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxim Ryzhenkov, published an op-ed outlining Minsk's assessment of the current state and prospects in bilateral relations with Lithuania. The article appeared in the main government-affiliated daily news outlet, *Belarus Segodnya* (Belarus Today), and was quickly picked up by other media and social networks. The op-ed also received prompt reactions from the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry and several members of its parliament. Belarus's offer to reset bilateral relations with Lithuania might signal a strategic move on its part to engage a future government in Vilnius that is more open to dialogue, potentially easing tensions and restoring cooperation if political winds shift away from their "pressure-only" course vis-a-vis Belarus in Lithuania.

Ryzhenkov's article contains both harsh criticism of the incumbent Lithuanian government's policy toward Belarus and an offer to start resuming bilateral dialogue and cooperation. On the one hand, the Belarusian minister accuses Vilnius of a "short-sighted hybrid war against the Belarusian state and people" following the "coup d'état attempt of 2020". On the other hand, he stresses that the two peoples have a long history of peaceful and friendly co-existence, including within the same states, such as the

Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rzeczpospolita, and Soviet Union. He points out that even after 1991, when the countries embarked on geopolitically diverging development paths, they managed to advance mutually beneficial cooperation.

> The op-ed's title summarizes the key message that Ryzhenkov seems to be sending to Vilnius: "An Equal Dialogue is in Our Shared Interest."

The author emphasizes the financial losses that Lithuania itself incurs due to the sanctions against Belarus and the overall break-up in relations with Minsk. According to him, those losses reach up to $1 billion annually. Lithuanian providers of transport and logistical services, primarily the seaport of Klaipeda and the Lithuanian Railways, suffer the most damage. Since 2020, the volume of freight transport by rail has decreased by over 50 percent, and about 2,000 employees from the Lithuanian Railways have lost their jobs. The seaport in Klaipeda saw a 9 percent reduction in the volume of cargo handling compared to 2022. Arguably, the termination of cooperation with Belarus does not explain the above losses entirely, but it could account for the lion's share.

Belarus's top diplomat stresses that the multiple restrictions Lithuania keeps on its border with Belarus—including the closure of four of the six border crossings—have discontinued cultural, scientific, educational, and athletic cooperation and severely limited people-to-people contact. Ryzhenkov argues that popular demand for such contacts, cooperation, and shopping tours to Belarus exists among everyday Lithuanians. He corroborates the argument by citing statistical data from the State Border Committee of Belarus. Since Minsk established the visa-free regime through all land checkpoints for the citizens of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in mid-2022, Lithuanians have made up almost 60 percent of the nearly 970,000 visitors to Belarus.

The Belarusian minister suggests that Minsk and Vilnius start a bilateral dialogue and return to neighbourly cooperation "before it is too late." He asserts that Minsk is ready to discuss a roadmap for reviving the relations. As for priority measures to be included in the roadmap, Ryzhenkov names resolving the migration crisis on the border; de-escalating military tensions; restoring consultations between foreign ministries, border guards, and law enforcement agencies; and resuming cooperation on health and social security issues. He also calls on Vilnius to restore normal passenger and cargo traffic and the transit of goods, especially items of humanitarian value such as food, medicines, and fertilizers.

> In Vilnius, Ryzhenkov's suggestions were received coldly.

Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, the speaker of the Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament, stated that she does not trust the words of the Lukashenka government and that Vilnius continues to stand by the Belarusian opposition. The chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Emanuelis Zingeris, said that Minsk must prove it remains independent of Moscow before any prospect of renewing bilateral dialogue can be discussed.

Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented similarly. It emphasized that Minsk must meet specific conditions for resuming bilateral relations. Belarus needs "to release all political prisoners, compensate them and all Belarusians who suffered from repression, and bring to justice those responsible for violence." Until then, the Lithuanian government intends to continue to seek international isolation of Minsk and calls on other countries to further expand sanctions and increase political pressure on Belarusian authorities. In line with these comments, on 30 September, the Ministry of Justice of Lithuania referred President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and members of his government to the International Criminal Court, accusing them of crimes against humanity.

Neither Belarusian offers of dialogue without any preconditions nor Lithuanian insistence that Minsk should first comply with Western demands are new. Similar public and behind-the-scenes exchanges have already taken place. Minister Ryzhenkov's op-ed, however, is noteworthy because it appeared just two weeks before Lithuania's parliamentary elections. On these grounds, representatives of the governing coalition in the Seimas even accused him of provocation and attempted influence on the outcome of the upcoming vote.

> Yet, it appears more plausible that the intended audience of the op-ed was the future government of Lithuania and not so much the general public, as it is hard to believe that many Lithuanian voters read the *Belarus Segodnya* daily.

According to the latest polls, the incumbent centre-right coalition government seems likely to lose the forthcoming vote. If it is replaced by a new coalition government led by the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, a small window of opportunity to de-escalate tensions between Minsk and Vilnius might surface.

In the words of a former high-level Lithuanian official, "There is a growing understanding that the uncompromising position of the incumbent coalition has failed to achieve any of the intended results vis-à-vis Belarus and, therefore, the next

government might try some less confrontational ideas". Thus, with his op-ed, the Belarusian foreign minister seems to be preparing the ground in case the next Lithuanian government coalition starts looking for a new way forward.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations