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Belarus-U.S. Relations in the Wake of the Ryanair Incident

Dzianis Melyantsou

Summary

The Ryanair flight incident in May 2021 became a new starting point for Belarus's international relations. The escalation of tensions between Minsk and Western capitals, specifically, the latter's unprecedented restrictive measures began to modify the structural foundations of Belarus's foreign policy and security in Eastern Europe. The trend was accelerated by the migration crisis on the Belarus–EU border and the start of the Russian–Ukrainian war. In a special series of policy papers, Minsk Dialogue experts continue to assess the impact of these processes on Belarus's relations with its key partners.

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Key trends in Belarus-U.S. relations after May 2021

- Following the forced Ryanair landing, the relations between Belarus and the United States markedly deteriorated, the pressure of sanctions started growing and caused retaliation from official Minsk.
- Russia's use of the Belarusian territory for its military purposes against Ukraine provoked another round of escalation.
- The U.S. Department of State suspended operations at its Embassy in Minsk, thereby minimizing diplomatic communication between the two countries.
- In Washington, Belarus is perceived increasingly as a state that is completely dependent on Russia and has no foreign policy of its own.

Main developments and processes in relations after May 2021

The incident with the Ryanair aircraft became another milestone in the escalation of bilateral relations, which had already faced a crisis after the Belarusian presidential election of 2020. On 25 May 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden delivered a special statement on the matter. It reads "Belarus's forced diversion of a commercial Ryanair flight, traveling between two member states of the European Union, and subsequent removal and arrest of Raman Pratasevich, a Belarusian journalist traveling abroad, are a direct affront to international norms." According to Biden, the incident was a "shameful assault on both political dissent and the freedom of the press."

A few days later, on 27 May, the U.S. Department of State recommended U.S. citizens not to visit Belarus "due to the arbitrary enforcement of laws and the risk of detention." On 29 May, the spokesperson for the White House said that the United States would suspend its air services agreement with Belarus after the incident with the Ryanair plane and prepare new sanctions against "the Lukashenka regime." She also reported that the U.S. would re-impose full blocking sanctions against nine Belarusian state-owned enterprises on 3 June 2021 (previous reports referred to Belneftekhim, Belarusian Oil Trading House, Belneftekhim USA Inc., Belshina, Grodno Azot, Grodno Khimvolokno, Lakokraska, Naftan and Polotsk-Steklovolokno). As a result of this measure, U.S. persons will be prohibited from engaging in transactions with these entities, their property, or their interests in property. Furthermore, the United States, in coordination with the EU and other partners and allies, was developing a list of targeted sanctions against key members of the Belarusian government, she said.

In response, Belarus announced its own restrictions against the U.S. A message of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry slams the U.S. sanctions as illegal, imposed contrary to international law and designed to put pressure on a sovereign state. The Belarusian counter-sanctions included: the reduction of diplomatic and administrative and technical personnel of the U.S. diplomatic mission, tightening the visa requirements and restricting the work of U.S. specialists in Belarus on a temporary basis. Minsk also rescinded the authorization for the U.S. Agency for International Development to work in Belarus.

> At the same time, the Foreign Ministry emphasized in its statement that Minsk "does not want to escalate the situation and is ready to continue contacts with the United States on the principles of equality and mutual respect."

On 9 June 2021, a new episode of the sanctions epic followed as Joe Biden extended for another year, until 16 June 2022, the U.S. sanctions against Lukashenka and a number of Belarusian officials. According to a statement by the White House, the actions of "certain members of the Government of Belarus and other persons" are still considered by the U.S. to be an "extraordinary threat to the national security" of the country.

On 21 June 2021, the U.S. imposed sanctions on five more Belarusian legal entities and 16 individuals. According to the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the U.S. Treasury Department, sanctions were imposed on the chief of the Department of Internal Affairs of the Minsk Region Alyaksandr Astreika; spokesperson for Aliaksandr Lukashenka Natallia Eismant; chief of the Department of Internal Affairs of Minsk Mikhail Hryb; speaker of the Council of the Republic, the upper house of parliament, Natallia Kachanava; Deputy Interior Minister Mikalai Karpiankou; Prosecutor General Andrei Shved; KGB Chief Ivan Tsertsel; commander of the Alfa police unit Sergei Zubkov, as well as members of the Central Election Commission Volha Darashenka, Andrei Gurzhy, Sviatlana Katsuba, Siarhei Kalinouski, Aliaksandr Lasiakin, Ihar Plyshewski, Maryna Rakhmanava and Iryna Tselikaviets. The legal entities subject to sanctions included the isolation center for offenders (TsIP) of the Minsk City Executive Committee, Department of Internal Affairs of the Brest Region Executive Committee, interior troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Main Department for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and KGB of Belarus. The restrictions were introduced simultaneously with the fourth package of the EU sanctions.

At the same time, the U.S. Department of State introduced visa sanctions against 46 Belarusian officials. The names on the list traditionally remain undisclosed. According to a statement by U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, the decision to impose new sanctions was a response to the forced diversion of the Ryanair flight. On 29 2021, Belarusian Justice Minister Aleh Slizheuski was added to the OFAC list of personal sanctions.

In July 2021, former presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya made a two-week tour of the United States. She met with all of the key U.S. foreign policy makers. She had talks with Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and Department of State adviser Derek Chollet. Tsikhanouskaya also met with members of the U.S. Congress and Jake Sullivan, the national security advisor to President Biden. On 28 July, she had a 10-minute meeting with President Biden, which had not been originally scheduled. The main topics included new sanctions against

Belarusian government officials and Lukashenka's proponents, as well as public sector companies and private firms; financing of NGOs and the media; blocking of the IMF assistance to Belarus to combat the aftermath of COVID-19.

> The fact that Tsikhanouskaya was received in the U.S. at the top level irritated the Belarusian authorities and further exacerbated the already negative rhetoric towards Washington.

The comment of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry describes Tsikhanouskaya's visit as "a two-week holiday trip financed by American taxpayers" and her meetings in the U.S. government as "part of a certain American domestic political show that occurs in virtual reality and is intended for the American audience." The MFA habitually emphasized that Belarus is ready to continue its dialogue with the U.S.

On 9 August 2021, on the anniversary of the presidential election in Belarus, the U.S. appreciably strengthened its sanctions against the country. President Biden signed an executive order authorizing the imposition of blocking sanctions on persons operating in certain identified sectors of the Belarusian economy, including the defense and related materiel sector, security sector, energy sector, potassium chloride (potash) sector, tobacco products sector, construction sector, transportation sector, or any other sector of the Belarusian economy as may be determined by the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State.

Guided by the order, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed the then largest series of sanctions against Belarusian individuals and corporate entities. Belaruskali, the Belarusian National Olympic Committee, a number of prominent businessmen, as well as 15 companies with which they are associated (including Absolutbank), and additional organizations operating in the tobacco, construction, energy and transport sectors of Belarus, became targets of the sanctions.

The Belarusian MFA condemned the sanctions in harsh terms: "Hiding behind the hypocritical slogans of human rights protection and democracy, in fact, our Western opponents are guided by cold geopolitical calculations. Their actions are directly aimed at undermining the sovereignty and independence of Belarus, the well-being and prosperity of the Belarusian people." Belarus noted that the unilateral measures were contrary to the UN Charter and the norms of international law, as well as the OSCE obligations. In addition, the U.S., a signatory of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, undertook to refrain from economic coercion.

In response, the Belarusian side also introduced a number of restrictive measures: it reduced to five persons the number of U.S. diplomats allowed to work at the Embassy in Minsk, suspended registration of projects and grants of U.S. government funds, and withdrew its agrément or U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Julie Fisher.

A press briefing at the U.S. Department of State that followed on 11 August places the responsibility for the deterioration in U.S.–Belarus relations on the Belarusian authorities, which never stopped "relentless repression against their citizens." It was added that Fischer would continue to "support the democratic aspirations of the people of Belarus", including leaders of the Belarusian opposition.

Later, in October, official contacts were further reduced — it was announced that Belarus's Consulate General in New York would close down from 21 October at the request of the U.S. side. On 20 October 2021, the Belarusian government informed the U.S. that it would force the closure of the Embassy's Public Diplomacy and USAID offices in Minsk. Previously, on 17 October, Presidential Decree No. 345, which regulates the procedure for visa-free entry for foreigners, came into effect. The U.S. had been excluded from the list of the "visa-free" countries.

In the fall of 2021, the U.S. appeared to be less interested in the Belarusian issue. Following the short-lived media focus on the sanctions and counter-sanctions, Belarus no longer made headlines in the U.S. or elsewhere in the world. October also became the first month when Belarus was not covered in the press briefings of the U.S. Department of State.

> Minsk reappeared on the U.S. foreign policy agenda as late as in January 2022 due to the increased presence of Russian troops at the Belarus–Russia military exercises.

Most of the weekly press briefings of the Department of State in the second half of January and throughout February referred to Belarus in the context of the likelihood of Russian troops invading Ukraine from its territory. The formula "what should be a sovereign, independent country" was repeatedly used to describe Belarus, probably referring to the concept that it was unacceptable for a sovereign state to have foreign troops deployed in its territory.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and specifically the use of the Belarusian territory as a jumping board for its assault was another turning point in Belarus–U.S. relations. It was on the day the Russian military operation began that the U.S. adopted sanctions against Belarus for assisting Russia. They affected several legal entities and individuals who,

according to Washington, could facilitate Moscow's invasion. Specifically, the sanctions were imposed on Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT), State Military Industrial Committee, 558th aircraft repair plant, Belinvestbank, Integral; the list of personal sanctions includes Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin, Secretary of State Security Council Aleksandr Volfovich, businessman Aliaksandr Zaitsau and others.

On 26 February, the U.S. Department of State urged American citizens in Belarus to immediately leave the country. On 28 February, it suspended operations at its Embassy in Minsk. Subsequently, U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus Julie Fischer attributed this decision to the hostile restrictive actions of the Belarusian authorities.

The U.S. official interpretation of the actions of Belarus in the Russia–Ukraine war was given during the U.S. Department of State press-briefing with U.S. Ambassador to OSCE Michael Carpenter (who, incidentally, is accused by Minsk of plotting an attempt on Lukashenka's life) on 28 April 2022. Carpenter said that "Belarus was used as a launching pad for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and to this day we see missile strikes taking place from the territory of Belarus. So, Belarus is a co-aggressor in this war, and it has to be held to account just as Russia [...]. These claims [by Belarus] that, somehow, they are under threat are just fantastical."

Washington was skeptical of the idea of having peace talks between Russia and Ukraine in Belarus. The proposal was called "not a serious offer", while the idea of negotiations in Belarus was described as "diplomacy at gunpoint."

> Against this political backdrop, in 2021, two-way economic relations were notably an unexpected success for Belarus.

Compared to 2020, Belarusian export deliveries to the United States rose from USD 199.3 million to USD 490.8 million, an all-time high over the past decade. The increase came primarily on the back of the growing prices of potash fertilizers and an increase in timber sales. Commodity import from the United States edged down, from USD 535.5 million in 2020 to USD 529.4 million in 2021. Despite the economic sanctions, Belstat statistics show that this trend continued in 2022. In January–May, export supplies remained virtually unchanged from the same period last year (down by 0.6% from January–May 2021), while imports dropped by 64.4% from the same period last year. Belarus benefited from a trade surplus amounting to USD 58.5 million.

Belarus, U.S. stances in bilateral relations

Belarus. Since the protests of August 2020, the Belarusian leadership has declared the United States the mastermind and inspirer of the coup attempt, a move that channeled the logic of the Minsk–Washington relationship. Guided by the new foreign policy approach of symmetrical and asymmetrical responses to any external pressures, Minsk was forced to introduce counter-sanctions after several waves of restrictive measures imposed by the United States. This further aggravated the already troubled relations.

The toxic anti-U.S. rhetoric and willingness to apply countermeasures even before the start of the Russia–Ukraine war were reinforced by increasing integration with Russia and the need to secure even more support from the Kremlin by demonstrating readiness to respond to shared external threats. In this sense, the destruction of the balancing act, which had been manifested, among other things, in the "situational neutrality" of Belarus, led to a reversion to the situation of the second half of the 1990s, when anti-Western rhetoric and demonstrative alliance were the tools for the Belarusian leadership to influence the Kremlin.

Minsk perceives the relatively small volume of two-way trade as a valuelessness factor in Belarus–U.S. relations.

> At the same time, Belarus views the United States as a global superpower, on which the conduct of many of its allies around the world (including the European Union) depends, and with which it can and should make arrangements as long as they meet the nation's interests.

Even during the most difficult times, Minsk invariably emphasized its striving for pragmatism in conditions of equal and mutually beneficial relations.

U.S. Washington views its engagement with Belarus in the context of at least two broader foreign policy objectives: global promotion of democracy and containment of Russia. Belarus is of significant interest to the United States in neither case. Nor is it on the priority list of the U.S. foreign policy-makers. Hence the low level of country expertise and lack of any long-term involvement strategy. Before the Belarus presidential election of 2020, Washington had reacted to Minsk's policy of situational neutrality by seeking to contribute to the expansion of the room for foreign policy maneuver of the Belarusian authorities with a view to weakening the Belarusian–Russian cooperation. This U.S. approach was formulated in the Mitchell Doctrine of 2018, which viewed Belarus as part of a "bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism."

Following the rapid approximation between Minsk and Moscow subsequent to the 2020 protests, and even more so after the onset of the Russia–Ukraine war, Washington stopped regarding Belarus as a subject of international policy that is separate from Russia. This notwithstanding the U.S. has not completely unified its sanctions policies towards Minsk and Moscow, which leaves some potential room for improvement in US-Belarus relations in the future.

Forecast for the development of relations

Unless there is a more dramatic escalation in the near future (such as Belarus entering the war), the situation will gradually stabilize at approximately the current level. The U.S. has already hit the ceiling with its sanctions, political contacts are virtually nonexistent, and diplomatic engagement has for the most part been put on pause. Economic sanctions and general hostility will further alienate the two states and eliminate the number of meeting points (especially in business).

Against the backdrop of the regional war and Russia's likely approximation with China, the democratization of Belarus and involvement of Minsk in the Western political orbit have lost their relevance for Washington. Under these circumstances, it is a lot easier for American politicians to disregard the nuances of local political life and perceive Belarus entirely as an element of Russia's foreign policy and military strategy. Therefore, the significance of the U.S. relations with official Minsk will probably decrease even further.

At the same time, in terms of geography and proximity to the theatre of the war, Belarus retains its importance as a source of additional information from the scene. For this reason, it can be assumed that the U.S. will seek to restore its diplomatic presence in the country.

Moreover, as the history of bilateral relations shows, even during colder spells, the United States and Belarus were ready to pursue joint projects, as long as they suited their common interests. One outstanding example of such cooperation was observed in 2014, when the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) bought 700 anti-tank guided missiles for the Konkurs system from the Belarusian government. The missiles were intended for Syrian rebels and could be used to blast the heavy armor that ISIS had acquired by conquering U.S.-equipped units of the Iraqi army. Sporadic instances of cooperation of this sort should not be ruled out in the future.

For its part, Minsk will continue to emphasize its interest in restoring mutually beneficial relations of equals and seek to avoid greater confrontation. However, the Belarusian authorities will not make any unilateral concessions to Washington or meet

any of the U.S. preconditions for dialogue, or show good will hoping that sanctions will be eased.

Dzianis Melyantsou
Coordinator of Belarus's Foreign Policy Programme, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations