What's Behind the Refreeze in U.S.-Belarus Relations?

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Summary

There are tough times ahead for U.S.-Belarusian relations. Reimposing sanctions will lead to a new stage of the diplomatic crisis and a further toughening of rhetoric.

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In recent days, Minsk has departed from its traditionally restrained rhetoric with regard to the United States. In response to a congratulatory message from the U.S. embassy on Freedom Day—an unofficial holiday liked by the Belarusian opposition, but not by the authorities—the Belarusian Foreign Ministry published a bitterly sarcastic tirade of the kind even their Moscow colleagues rarely permit themselves. This abrupt change has sparked a new wave of interest in U.S.-Belarusian relations, which have seen everything from an unprecedented thaw to sharp deterioration in the last year. Even now, threats of renewed sanctions are being made at the same time as plans by both sides to redeploy their ambassadors. So just where are relations between Minsk and Washington headed?

Little had changed for many years in U.S.-Belarusian relations until October 2018, when then U.S. assistant secretary of state Wess Mitchell said at the Atlantic Council that it was the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of frontier states like Belarus "that offer the surest bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism." Mitchell's speech was a historic moment: for the first time, Belarus got a mention in U.S. foreign policy strategy.

It was Minsk's position on Ukraine and its more transparent and open security policy that elicited Washington's interest and forced it to consider for the first time that Belarusian interests may differ from Russia's.

> Amid its growing confrontation with Moscow, Washington began to see normalizing relations with Minsk as a potential element of its containment policy.

The Belarusian leadership, for its part, saw an opportunity to rein in Russia's overly insistent attempts to strengthen integration between the two countries. In contrast with its opinion of the European Union, Minsk views the United States as a superpower with interests all around the world and the ability to protect them, so it can and must reach an agreement with Washington.

But with the arrival of a new administration in the White House, Washington has increased its criticism of the Belarusian government's domestic policy and become more vocal in its support for the protesters and human rights. Back during his election campaign, Joe Biden was critical of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and chastised the Donald Trump administration for its failure to act.

This contrast with the recent normalization of relations, which had been built on realpolitik and geopolitical calculations, could not fail to irritate Minsk—especially since Lukashenko had spoken repeatedly about the country's interest in developing the relationship.

Still, the ensuing disappointment was not the main reason for the outraged press release. A far bigger factor was Washington's statement on March 31 that it would not extend a license authorizing transactions with nine state-owned Belarusian petrochemical enterprises. The current extension of the license expires on April 26.

In 2008, when sanctions were first introduced against those companies, they prompted a large-scale diplomatic crisis, in which both ambassadors were recalled. The U.S. State Department even resolved to close the embassy in Minsk, but then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice changed her mind, preferring to keep at least some kind of communications channel.

The uneventful Belarusian presidential election of 2015, the overall improvement of relations with the United States, and—most importantly—the Belarusian position on Crimea and the Donbas helped Minsk to secure the freezing of economic sanctions in 2015. The practical mechanism for this was that the U.S. Treasury issued and then extended on an annual basis a special license permitting transactions to be carried out with those nine Belarusian enterprises.

Limitations on trade with the United States aren't a particular threat to the Belarusian economy per se: Belarus exported a modest $200 million of goods to the United States in 2020.

> What worries Minsk is the extraterritorial nature of U.S. sanctions: the restrictions don't just affect the petrochemical companies on the list, but also put their partners around the world at risk, and that is a far more serious problem for the Belarusian leadership.

This is why up until recently, Minsk had tried not to rock the boat in its relationship with Washington, and reacted with restraint to the State Department and U.S. embassy's numerous statements regarding the political situation in Belarus. But if the sanctions against Belarusian companies are to be enforced once again, there is no longer any point in exercising restraint.

The fact that the two countries have not abandoned their plans to redeploy their ambassadors amid all of this changes little.

> The United States has updated its approach to a diplomatic presence: previously, it was considered something of a reward; now it is seen as essential for a more complete picture of what is happening on the ground and more effective communication with the authorities of that country.

This is why the process of redeploying the ambassadors wasn't scrapped even after the massive street protests across Belarus were brutally crushed last summer and fall. On the contrary, at the end of last year, Julie Fisher, a career diplomat who has previously served in Tbilisi, Kyiv, and Moscow, was sworn in as the new ambassador to Belarus.

Admittedly, Fisher is yet to arrive in Minsk, but the delay is on the Belarusian side. At the end of December, Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Kravchenko, who had been appointed the Belarusian ambassador to the United States, died. No replacement has yet been found.

Washington was prepared for Fisher to start work in Minsk back in February, but first she embarked on a fact-finding tour of European capitals, where she met with members of the Belarusian opposition. The Belarusian authorities reacted to these meetings with considerable restraint, but were in no rush to issue the U.S. ambassador a visa.

The State Department still insists that it plans to have an ambassador in Minsk once again, but unfreezing sanctions could throw a spanner in the works. So far, neither Minsk nor Washington has said anything on that aspect of the matter, and government agencies are sticking to their previous positions. The bureaucratic logic is likely that until sanctions have been introduced, individual agencies should keep to their original plans.

> Nevertheless, there are tough times ahead for U.S.-Belarusian relations. Unfreezing sanctions will lead to a new stage of the diplomatic crisis and a further toughening of rhetoric.

It doesn't look like Belarus has a particular role in the Biden administration's strategy, and Washington will likely return to the practice of expressing support for democracy and human rights, but without committing to any concrete obligations, resources, or actions.

It goes without saying that U.S. sanctions won't achieve their intended goals. They will only drive the wedge deeper between Washington and Minsk, and push the latter closer to Moscow.

Much depends on how the situation in the broader region develops. The security of U.S. allies in Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states) cannot be guaranteed without factoring in Belarus. Renewed hostilities in the Donbas and the return of Russia to being a priority for U.S. policy could reignite Washington's strategic interest in Minsk and put the issue of more pragmatic cooperation with Lukashenko back on the table.

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