

The U.S. Should Use Rapprochement with Belarus to Push for Democratic Reforms

Veranika Laputskaja

This has been an eventful month for Belarus's foreign policy. While it clashed with Russia over energy supplies and integration processes, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the highest-ranking U.S. official since 1994 to visit Minsk, where he met with President Alexander Lukashenko. Amid the Belarusian-Russian tensions, the United States is taking a friendlier stance toward the regime in Minsk. It should also use this to opportunity to encourage Lukashenko to undertake domestic political reforms.

A week after meeting with Pompeo, the Belarusian leader traveled to Russia for another round of bilateral negotiations with President Vladimir Putin over the development of the Belarusian-Russian Union State and Russia oil exports to Belarus, which proved to be hardly a success for Belarus. Shortly afterward, one poll showing a drastic drop in public support for integration with Russia caused a media stir.

Pompeo's trip received exceptional attention in Belarus and abroad. The geopolitical circumstances surrounding it, coupled with growing pressure from Russia to deepen integration between the two countries over the last several months, gave the appearance of a significant Belarusian-U.S. rapprochement.

In Minsk, the secretary of state insisted that the United States does not want Belarus to pick between it and Russia but that U.S. oil firms could step in to supply the country after the suspension of Russian oil exports since the beginning of the year. Belarus has had to look for alternative sources and had already received a first delivery of Norwegian oil in January.

Pompeo also stated that the United States aims to send a new ambassador to Minsk "before too long." This would mark the most significant improvement in relations in two decades. In 2008 the U.S. Ambassador was asked by the authorities to leave the country following a long-standing disagreement on human rights and the imposition of sanctions by the United States in the aftermath of the 2006 presidential election in Belarus.

Furthermore, Pompeo's visit coincided with the anniversary of the birth of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, a national hero in Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and the United States. While in Minsk, the Secretary of State released a message praising Kosciuszko as a "a great champion of independence and sovereignty." Later the heads of the diplomatic missions of Lithuania, Poland, and the United States were joined at a celebration by Foreign

24 February 2020

Minister Vladimir Makei. This year saw one of the largest celebrations of Kosciuszko's birth in years in Belarus. Considering that he fought against tsarist Russia in Lithuania and Poland, this and Pompeo's message will not have been welcomed by Russia.

Porridge with Water

Russia clearly took notice of the signs of a Belarusian-U.S. rapprochement. Its response came at the negotiations with Belarus in Sochi six days after Pompeo's visit to Minsk. During their working breakfast, Putin suggested that Lukashenko should try porridge made with water, not with milk. This was interpreted as a warning that Belarus might consider starting to economize because Russia is reducing its economic support to its neighbor.

The discussions in Sochi omitted the question of integration and focused instead on oil and gas deals. Neither side got all it wanted. Russia will keep charging Belarus for its oil exports at the market price, thus not satisfying the Belarusian leadership which had wanted lower oil prices. Belarusian leadership had also wanted compensation for a recent export tax imposed to their refineries for using Russian oil for resale with additional compensation for the contaminated oil exported to Belarus last year that caused enormous losses to the economy. However, Russia made their own concession by agreeing to export gas to Belarus at the 2019 price of \$127 instead of the \$152 sought by Gazprom.

The integration and oil tensions between the two countries will continue for at least two reasons. First, Putin tends to use Russia's economic leverage on Lukashenko when Belarus's presidential elections approach, and he will not miss another opportunity this year with another election due on August 30. Second, Lukashenko needs economic stability to remain in power for another term. He equates his interests with those of the country and will not agree on integration if this will not make his power even more secure through economic or any other advantages, especially when it comes to oil and gas prices, which are crucial for the economy. Thus, Lukashenko will be more vulnerable to external economic pressure from Putin.

A Window of Opportunity

Lukashenko clearly remains reluctant about Belarus's deeper integration with Russia. The official media have recently followed the party line in portraying the latter negatively. This was most likely one of the reasons why a recent public opinion poll showed a drop of 20 percentage points in the number of supporters of union with Russia. This trend will most likely continue as long as Lukashenko does not see any benefit for him and his regime in proceeding with integration.

At the same time, while Putin continues to insist on deeper integration, he is also constrained by his domestic political situation as he seeks to amend the constitution because he cannot run in the 2024 presidential election. Hence, Belarusian-Russian relations will remain unstable due to the problems both leaders face.

The United States, along with the European Union, should pay special attention to Belarus in light of the current deterioration of its relations with Russia. Some Western observers are calling for supporting Lukashenko in order to defend the country's independence. While the EU is currently focused on agreeing its next multiyear budget and the repercussions of Brexit, and thus less likely to have the bandwidth to deal with Belarus, the

United States can engage more to champion democratic reforms in the country while remaining critical of human rights and political freedom violations.

Washington can do this in particular by continuing to support Belarus with its peacekeeping initiatives related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, by implementing humanitarian and economic projects in the country, and by asking the government in return to respect political freedoms and end pressure on civil society and independent media. The United States now has a unique window of opportunity to take the lead in promoting democratic values in Belarus and perhaps even in convincing Lukashenko to reform his regime.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



**Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC**

www.gmfus.org