

The Wheel May Be About to Turn (Again) in U.S.-Belarus Relations

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As the presidential election nears in Belarus—marked by strong countrywide opposition to President Alexander Lukashenka and a corresponding crackdown—the United States faces a choice. If the latest bout of repression continues or intensifies up to and after polling day, it will have to decide whether to once more take a tough line against Lukashenka, after a few years of tentative rapprochement, or to turn a blind eye because of geopolitical calculations. Ever since the Belarusian autocrat consolidated his grip on power in the 1990s, relations between the two countries have gone through a by-now familiar cycle of estrangement and engagement; today the wheel may be about to take its next turn.

The latest crackdown shows that Lukashenka is nervous about the election as an economic crisis and his mishandling of (or denialism about) the coronavirus pandemic has turned more people against the regime. His main challengers, including two from within the country's elite, have been arrested or stopped from running and left the country. By all appearances, Lukashenka is ready for fuller repression as the election approaches. At the same time as moves against his opponents were starting, the latest annual report of the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus noted that a dire situation had deteriorated further.

The turns in the cycle in U.S.-Belarus relations have long been influenced by a combination of the regime's degree of repression and the regional geopolitical environment, which for the United States means the degree of concern about Russia.

Reacting to Lukashenka's heightened authoritarianism, Washington imposed sanctions on state-owned entities and individuals, including the president, under the Belarus Democracy Act 2004, which was expanded in 2006 and 2011. In 2008, diplomatic relations were curtailed over sanctions, with ambassadors recalled and embassy staff reduced. Some sanctions were lifted or suspended in 2015 after marginally less unfree parliamentary elections and the release of political prisoners.

At the same time, shifts to improvement in relations also clearly coincided with major developments in the security situation in Eastern Europe, especially the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and Russia's military aggression against Ukraine since 2014.

Relations were never completely broken off, though, and U.S. policy has been a mix of diplomatic engagement with the regime and assistance focused on democracy, strengthening NGOs and independent media, and

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building a market-oriented economy. The United States has provided small but consistent aid to partners in Belarus, including to civil society, for business and technology-sector development, and to vulnerable groups.

The latest rapprochement phase in the cycle has been principally the result of the conflict in Ukraine. Seeking a counterweight to Russia, with which Belarus' relations have become more tense in recent years, and concerned about his ability to stay in power, Lukashenka made overtures that the United States, also concerned about Russian intentions in the region, reciprocated.

As a result, U.S. officials have increasingly visited Belarus, the most senior and recent being National Security Advisor John Bolton and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale last year, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February. During his visit, Pompeo announced a deal for a U.S. supply of oil to Belarus, at the height of the later oil dispute between Minsk and Moscow. An agreement has also been reached to exchange ambassadors again, with President Donald Trump in May nominating career diplomat Julie Fisher as candidate to be approved by the Senate.

The visit by Pompeo—the highest-ranking U.S. official to travel to Belarus since President Bill Clinton in 1994—at a moment of particular tension between Minsk and Moscow, was seen by many as a potential turning point. Ahead of his trip, a senior U.S. official put it in the context of the great-power competition framework that the Trump administration has adopted, speaking of “an opportunity to compete for influence.” And Washington is not only looking at Belarus through a Russia lens but also eyeing Minsk's growing relations with Beijing.

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From this perspective, Belarus—an insignificant economic partner of the United States (though the Trump administration would like business ties to grow)—is seen by some in Washington as a potentially useful European swing state, with which cooperation is an important piece in the puzzle of checking Russia's potential or actual threat to European security. Enabling Lukashenka to assert independence from Moscow and bolstering Belarusian sovereignty have been at the heart of the latest rapprochement.

The unexpected contestation around this year's presidential election, and Lukashenka's predictable reaction, now puts U.S. policy in a bind. The Trump administration has mostly kept to a traditional line of talking about the importance of democracy and human rights for relations and of seizing on evidence of small progress. Speaking in Minsk, Pompeo reiterated this was “the only way towards lifting American sanctions.” Last month, the State Department expressed its concern about the detention of opposition activists and the moves against presidential candidates. The administration has also tried to sell to Lukashenka the idea that a more open political system and less repression would also reinforce Belarusian sovereignty and independence as well as improve bilateral ties.

What happens on the ground in the coming days could turn into a diplomatic conundrum for the United States. An escalation of protests and repression ahead of the vote, or a strong turnout by voters in favor of Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya (the wife of the detained aspiring candidate Syarhey Tsikhanouski), which would require a blatant manipulation of the result, would leave policymakers in a quandary.

By any measure, this would warrant—as on previous occasions—a strong condemnation by the U.S. government and Congress of Lukashenka and the reintroduction of sanctions, against individuals belonging to the regime (the president is still under sanctions) or state entities. The administration could also walk back diplomatic engagement, including the decision to exchange ambassadors. What is more, with the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act adopted in 2016, the United States has an additional instrument to sanction senior Belarusian officials.

But whether this is what would happen is not certain. The Trump administration, while not indifferent to the situation, is heavily invested in its great-power competition framework and in a tough line against Russia (even if the U.S. president himself may not be, just as he is not concerned with pressuring authoritarian regimes in general). Much may hinge on Pompeo. For the United States, there is a clear tradeoff looming between backing its talk about democracy and human rights in Belarus with actions against Lukashenka if he continues on his crackdown path, and tolerating it out of concern about driving him back into a closer embrace of Russia. The latter is no doubt what Lukashenka is banking on.

Right now, it is anyone's guess as to which path the United States will take if things in Belarus get worse when and after its citizens have voted. And, with new developments on the ground occurring ever more quickly and the question of what actions Russia might be taking or prepared to take still on everyone's mind, an already delicate situation could become even more so in a matter of days. If there is no descent into a major political or security crisis, the Trump administration might well limit itself to issuing a critical statement, a modest re-tightening of the sanctions screw, and leaving the next administration to deal with the long-term relationship with Belarus.

This article originally appeared in the Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale. Click [here](#) for the original piece.

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