

U.S. Relations with Belarus and the Russia Effect

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. should demonstrate interest in Belarus, particularly its implications for European security, while remaining wary of Russia's influence and actions there.

Of all former Soviet states, Belarus maintains the closest ties with Russia. This closeness with Moscow is cause for concern for neighboring NATO members.

Belarus is an integral part of Europe, and the U.S. should work with European allies to limit Russian influence and achieve strategic goals in the region.

Belarus is a nation known for its human rights violations and its close relations with Russia. Moscow dictates many of Minsk's actions. The United States should remain wary of Russia's influence and actions in Belarus. The U.S. should also maintain its commitment to security in the region, considering that four North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members border Belarus: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. It is important for the United States to engage with Belarusian civil society in the future, to be aware of its limits in influencing Belarus, and to work with European allies, when possible, in the areas of human rights, democracy, and mitigating Russian influence.

Relations with the United States

Located in Eastern Europe, Belarus is often described as Europe's only remaining dictatorship.

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Even though it gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus maintains close economic, military, and political ties with Russia. Combined with the autocratic rule of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, these ties make good relations with Minsk a challenge for Washington.

In terms of press freedom, democracy, and economic freedom, Belarus scores quite low. In Reporters Without Borders' *2019 World Press Freedom Index*, Belarus scores 153rd of 180 countries surveyed; last year, the Lukashenko government imposed around 100 fines on journalists for working for exiled media outlets. The government has also arrested critical journalists and bloggers and blocked popular news sites.¹ In addition, Belarus scores 104th of 180 countries in The Heritage Foundation's *2019 Index of Economic Freedom*, designating it as a "mostly unfree nation."²

Because Belarus has a history of human rights violations, and because of its coziness with Moscow, it has an inconstant relationship with the United States. In 2006, the U.S. imposed travel restrictions and financial sanctions on several state-owned entities and 16 individuals, including Lukashenko, due to the undemocratic nature of the elections.³ In 2008, the U.S. tightened sanctions on Belarus for its perceived human rights abuses.⁴ In response, Belarus expelled the majority of America's diplomats, including the U.S. ambassador. Until this past January, Belarus had allowed only five U.S. diplomats to be stationed in Minsk.⁵

When Russia illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014, Belarus refused to recognize Russia's takeover. This led to a slight thawing of Belarusian relations with the U.S., and the West in general.⁶ In 2015, the U.S. allowed light sanctions relief when Belarus released all of its political prisoners and arranged cease-fire talks among Russia, Ukraine, and Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.⁷ The release of political prisoners signaled a brief improvement in human rights, but Belarus still has much to accomplish in this area. In January 2019, Belarus finally lifted the cap on U.S. diplomatic presence,⁸ leading to a slight improvement in relations.

Strategic Implications

Of all the former Soviet states, Belarus remains the closest with Russia. Unfortunately, it seems the two countries are only drifting closer.

In 1997, Belarus and Russia signed a framework treaty on creating a union to generate closer cooperation between the two countries on defense, economy, and security-related matters.⁹ Two years later, they signed a new

version of the document, which constituted their two nations' joining as a Union State, complete with a single currency, flag, and economy instituted in writing.¹⁰ After 20 years of deferment, the topic of further integrating this Union State has resurfaced. Russian President Vladimir Putin is pushing Lukashenko to tangibly integrate the two nations, likely as a ploy to remain in power. Putin's current term as president of Russia ends in 2024, but if a Union State were created, he could enact a new constitution allowing a change in presidential term limits. Currently, the talks are meant to generate a decision by December 8, when the anniversary of the Union State treaty will be recognized.¹¹

Belarus depends on Russia for cut-rate oil sales to keep its economy afloat,¹² and this past year took on a \$630 million loan from Russia.¹³ To help repay its debts to Russia, Belarus is looking to borrow \$600 million from China.¹⁴ This loan would further endanger the Belarusian economy. Belarus and Russia are also both members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which exists to allow capital, goods, and people to move freely throughout the Eurasian region. However, Russia uses the EAEU to extend its domineering economic arm to several more Eurasian nations—Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵

Belarus and Russia are also connected militarily. They are part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.¹⁶ The CSTO's aim is to counter transnational threats, and to allow arms sales, military training, and joint military exercises to occur among the member countries.¹⁷ Last December, the CSTO appointed Belarusian Security Council State Secretary Stanislav Zas as its new secretary general.¹⁸ However, Moscow dominates the organization and uses it for its own agenda. This past year, Russia declared its desire to build a military base in Belarus, which Lukashenko refused. Nonetheless, Russia likely still has at least a few thousand troops stationed in Belarus, left behind after the joint Zapad war games in September 2017.¹⁹

Overall, Minsk's closeness with Moscow is cause for concern for the neighboring NATO members. Lithuania's main concern is Belarus's Ostrovets (or Astravets) nuclear power plant. The plant is being built by Atomstroyexport, "Russia's main nuclear exporter," and is financed with a \$10 billion loan from Moscow.²⁰ Along with posing multiple environmental and safety concerns,²¹ Ostrovets threatens Lithuania's national security,²² given that it lies only about 14 miles from the Lithuanian border²³ and is located within a seismic-activity zone.²⁴ If an earthquake occurred, the plant could be damaged and leak radiation, threatening the safety of Lithuania and potentially surrounding nations. Belarus also jeopardizes the general

security of Estonia, Latvia, and Poland because of its close alignment with Russia. With tensions between NATO and Russia running high, it is natural for some members to be wary of Belarus and its close relationship with Russia.

Recommendations for the U.S.

Not only does Belarus have a close historical and cultural connection with Russia, the geographical fact that it is part of Europe cannot be ignored. Because of this, the U.S. should demonstrate interest in Belarus, and particularly its implications for European security. U.S. policymakers should realize that, under current circumstances, they are limited in what they can hope to accomplish there. Specifically, the U.S. should:

- **Remain wary of Russia's influence and actions in Belarus.** Russia will continue to remain involved in Belarus's economic, military, and political affairs. It would not be surprising if Russia convinced Belarus to more formally integrate their Union State in the near future.
- **Maintain its commitment to security in the region surrounding Belarus.** Russian influence in the region threatens the national security of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which are all NATO members. The U.S. should remain committed to NATO and its allies that neighbor Belarus.
- **Seek to engage with civil society in Belarus, but be realistic that this will not be possible in the near future.** When the timing is right, one way to cooperate more would be to reinstate a U.S. ambassador and increase the U.S. diplomatic presence in Minsk, especially since Belarus has lifted the restriction on the number of U.S. diplomats allowed.
- **Be aware of limits in influencing Belarus.** Historically, Lukashenko has straddled Russia and the West, but seems to be leaning closer to Russia at present. U.S. policymakers should be realistic about what they can achieve in Belarus, whether it be political issues or Belarus's relationship with Russia. U.S. policymakers should also refuse to give legitimacy to the Russian regime and its actions in Belarus.

- **Work with Europe allies regarding Belarus.** In order to help foster democracy and protection for human rights in Belarus, and to mitigate Russian influence in the region, the U.S. should work with European allies when possible. Since Belarus is an integral part of Europe, working with European allies is the natural course of action to take in accomplishing these goals.

Conclusion

If Belarus improves its record on democracy and human rights, the United States should seek out more opportunities for bilateral engagement. Until then, relations will remain unsteady. Russia will also continue to extend its reach into Belarus, and the U.S. should remain aware of Moscow's ambitions.

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