

Washington's symbolic support – US Secretary of State in Minsk

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The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo visited Minsk on 1 February. This was the first visit of a US Secretary of State to Belarus in 26 years. He had visited Ukraine one day earlier, and subsequently travelled to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. During his short visit, Pompeo met with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makey, whom he assured of Washington's support for Belarus's sovereignty. Referring to the crisis in Russian-Belarusian relations (including the major cuts of Russian oil supplies since the beginning of this year), he declared that US suppliers were ready to fully satisfy the needs of the Belarusian petrochemical sector. He also made it clear that the USA did not intend to urge Belarus to choose between close relations with Russia and a rapprochement with the West. He also mentioned human rights violations in Belarus, pointing out that this was one of the reasons why it would be premature to lift the US sanctions. In this context, the agenda of the visit included a brief meeting with representatives of Belarusian civil society, including human rights activists. In parallel to Pompeo's visit, information appeared that a working group for co-operation with the US congress was being formed in the Belarusian parliament.

Commentary

- Pompeo's visit to Minsk is another manifestation of the shift taking place in the US policy towards Belarus. Last year's visits of President Donald Trump's advisor John Bolton and the Under Secretary of State David Hale were signs of the US concern about the intensifying pressure which Moscow was applying in order to enhance integration as part of the Union State so as to further curb Belarus's sovereignty. The most recent visit, as with the preceding ones, is intended at manifesting US support for Belarus and personally for Lukashenka, who seems to be viewed in Washington as a defender of Belarusian sovereignty. It is also worth noting that Pompeo did not meet with politicians representing the Belarusian opposition; this can be recognised as informal US acceptance for maintaining the continuity of power in Belarus. This means at least the temporary legitimisation of Alyaksandr Lukashenka by a country which has backed Belarus's democratic forces for years. This is especially important in the context of the presidential election scheduled for this year which will result in a further re-election of Lukashenka by way of electoral fraud and which will be held in extremely unfavourable conditions (given the dispute with Moscow and the escalating economic problems).

- However, the US support is still limited, regardless of the increasing rank of the visits to Minsk and the declarations made at the time of these visits. The USA, on the level of both the Presidential Administration and the Congress still upholds its reservations regarding the Belarusian government's violations of human rights and democratic standards. Therefore, the economic sanctions imposed back in 2006, which have been conditionally suspended for several years, are unlikely to be completely lifted in the immediate future. Therefore, no rapid growth in trade volume or US investments should be expected regardless of Pompeo's declared wish to develop bilateral economic co-operation. The most likely sign of normalising bilateral relations in the coming year may be reinstating diplomatic contacts on the level of ambassadors; this has been discussed for many months and was promised once again by the US side during the visit.
- The US firms' readiness to ensure full crude oil supplies for both of Belarus's refineries (i.e. at least 18 million tonnes annually) declared by Pompeo fits in with Minsk's intensified efforts seen over the past few weeks to diversify oil supplies. However, challenges connected to logistics (limited capacity of the Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian ports accessible for Belarus) and technical issues (the Belarusian refineries are adjusted above all to processing the Russian Urals oil, which is rich in sulphur) raises serious doubts about the feasibility of these supplies. Furthermore, US oil will be more expensive than Russian oil, even if the implementation of the reform concerning oil sector taxation, which is currently underway in Russia, is finalised in 2024. For Belarusian recipients this will mean the liberalisation of the still preferential prices (the discount for Belarus in this year would be around 17%). For these reasons, it is hard to expect at present that regular US oil supplies will be launched on a massive scale, especially given the fact that the still existing sanctions impose the obligation to obtain the US administration's consent for each transaction. At the same time, contracts covering smaller oil supplies, like the transport of 80,000 tonnes of Norwegian oil supplied last January or the oil purchases several years ago (mainly in 2010–2011) directly from Venezuela or as part of swap transactions in which Azerbaijan participated, cannot be entirely ruled out. At that time, the Belarusian government admitted in public that this diversification was completely economically non-viable (the alternative supplies cost almost double the Russian price) and resumed full co-operation with its Russian suppliers.
- Regardless of the numerous restrictions of the declared US support, the Belarusian government appreciates the reputational significance of Pompeo's visit. There is much evidence suggesting that Alyaksandr Lukashenka postponed his meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi which, according to initial announcements, was scheduled for the beginning of February. The very fact that he decided to remain in Minsk and meet with Pompeo needs to be viewed as a clear demonstration of resistance towards the Kremlin and at the same time of his readiness to defend his interests in the face of increasing pressure from Russia. From the Belarusian government's perspective, the visit was an opportunity to improve Belarus's international position and to legitimise itself as a country which is accepted by the West regardless of its authoritarian model of government. Nevertheless, it in no way signifies a reorientation of Belarusian foreign policy, even though it will be used as an argument in negotiations with Russia concerning further integration and co-operation, also as regards oil and gas supplies (the two

presidents are due to meet on 7 February in Sochi). This is the case because Minsk assumes that Moscow will agree to make concessions favourable for Belarus purely out of the fear that its influence in Belarus might weaken, even if the likelihood of this scenario is very low.