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BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN BELARUS AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: A HISTORY OF HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

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The history of the bilateral relations between Belarus and the United States from 1991 to 2020 was difficult and controversial. In 1991–1996 the relationship was positive and dynamic, extending to many areas from international security to humanitarian contacts and exchanges among people. After the 1996 referendum, the relationship soured. Washington adopted a policy of selective engagement, with limited dialogue with the government and more extensive support for humanitarian contacts, civil society and trade links. From 2013 to June 2020 Minsk and Washington took tentative steps towards normalcy, but in 2020 the dynamic reversed again.

Keywords: Republic of Belarus; United States of America; bilateral relations; diplomatic relations; economic ties; foreign policy; policy of selective engagement.

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РЕСПУБЛИКА БЕЛАРУСЬ И СОЕДИНЕННЫЕ ШТАТЫ АМЕРИКИ: ИСТОРИЯ НАДЕЖД И РАЗОЧАРОВАНИЙ

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Отношения Беларуси и Соединенных Штатов Америки в 1991–2020 гг. прошли сложный путь. В 1991–1996 гг. они развивались достаточно динамично в различных областях сотрудничества: от международной безопасности до гуманитарных контактов. После референдума 1996 г. ситуация ухудшилась. Вашингтон стал проводить политику избирательного вовлечения, сочетавшую ограниченный диалог на уровне министерств с поддержкой гуманитарных контактов и структур гражданского общества, а также с развитием торговых связей. В 2013 – первой половине 2020 г. Минск и Вашингтон прошли начальный этап нормализации отношений, который, однако, был прерван в 2020 г.

Ключевые слова: Республика Беларусь; Соединенные Штаты Америки; двусторонние отношения; дипломатические отношения; экономические связи; внешняя политика; политика избирательного вовлечения.

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Introduction

The relations between Belarus and the United States have evolved through roughly the same stages as Belarus' relations with the rest of the Western world. The period from 1991 to 1996 was highly productive, despite some isolated incidents in 1995–1996. The constitutional referendum in Belarus in November 1996 began an extended stage of abnormality, in which periods of escalation alternated with thaws. The period preceding August 2020 was one of positive expectations: both parties had agreed to exchange ambassadors for the first time since 2008 when the US recalled its last ambassador in Belarus. However, after the presidential elections, none of these expectations materialised.

In Belarus controversies in the Belarusian-American relations discouraged scholarship on this relations, despite the availability of documented material. The first Belarusian publications on the subject in the late 1990s were concerned with international security, disarmament, and Washington's reaction to the integration processes between Russia and Belarus [1–3]. Several papers on the topic were published in early 2000 by A. Tikhomirov [4–6] and A. Kosov [7].

In the US, R. Legvold from Columbia University is among the leading scholars in the subject. In his works, the scientist presents an argument for drawing parallels between the American-Belarusian rela-

tions in post-independence period with the American-Soviet relations during the Cold War, interprets America's objectives for the initial stage of its relationships with Belarus, explains the B. Clinton administration's expectations from this relationship, and outlines selective engagement policy of the United States towards Belarus. He defines the selective engagement as a two-track strategy, based on the simultaneous pursuit of two objectives, or tracks: strengthening security in Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR and promoting Belarus' progress along the path of democratic and market-based development. However, already in the late 1990s, R. Legvold concluded that the window of opportunity for such a policy had almost closed. Eventually, the two-track approach was succeeded by the wide-ranging boycott of Belarus, despite it being unrealistic to tie every aspect of the bilateral relationship to Belarusian domestic policy [8].

E. Cohen of the Heritage Foundation [9], D. Swartz, the first US ambassador to Belarus [10], S. Woehrel, an expert of the US Congress [11], and C. Wallander, senior fellow of the Centre of Strategic and International Studies [12] criticise the domestic and foreign policy of president A. Lukashenko, and recommend to the US Congress and government bodies to support the Belarus democracy act of 2004.

A promising start

Political contacts between Belarus and the United States began in autumn 1991 with a series of meetings of the then minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Belarus P. Kravchenko with several American politicians, including president G. W. Bush senior and secretary of state J. Baker during the minister's par-

ticipation in the UN General Assembly session in New York. P. Kravchenko briefed his American counterparts on the domestic situation and external affairs of Belarus and the faced challenges [13, p. 323–325].

The signing of the Belovezha accords strengthened the legal basis for Belarus' independence and facilita-

ted further contacts. On 18 December 1991 J. Baker arrived in Minsk to meet with the leaders of the newly independent Belarus: chairman of the Supreme Council S. Shushkevich, chairman of the Council of Ministers V. Kebich, and minister of foreign affairs P. Kravchenko. Much of the discussion revolved around the status of the nuclear weapons deployed on Belarusian territory as of 1991, including 72 SS-25 strategic missiles and multiple mobile installations. The Belarusian leaders expressed a readiness to renounce this nuclear arsenal¹.

Belarus became the second country of the former USSR after Ukraine to be recognised by the United States as an independent state. It happened on 25 December 1991 and established diplomatic relations between the countries on 28 December 1992. The USA opened its embassy in Minsk in January 1992, and the embassy of Belarus in Washington opened its doors in April 1993. S. Martynov, the first ambassador of Belarus to the United States, served from 1993 to 1997. The early recognition of Belarusian independence by the United States was driven by American concerns about the risk of destabilisation in the post-Soviet space, including the uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons from Belarusian territory. Destruction of the stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction was a central theme in the Belarusian-American relations in the first half of the 1990s.

The Belarusian-American relations were positive at the start and achieved a favourable dynamic. In July 1993, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus travelled to the United States on an official visit, the first in the history of the bilateral relationship. In January 1994, the US president B. Clinton arrived on an official visit to Belarus. Both visits took place in a warm atmosphere and concluded with the signing of several bilateral documents.

The Joint declaration on the relations between the United States of America and the Republic of Belarus, adopted after the visit of S. Shushkevich, declared the United States' support for the independence of Belarus and its efforts to create a just and stable society. It called for the broadening of trade contacts grounded on the principles of economic freedom, and pledged assistance to Belarus in carrying out economic reforms, overcoming the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, and extended cooperation in science, energy, culture, art, education, law, tourism, student exchange [14, p. 184–186].

During his visit to Minsk US president B. Clinton informed the Belarusian officials that the United States was ready to provide Belarus with an additional 25 mln

US dollars for the safe disposal of nuclear weapons, bringing the total amount of US assistance towards nuclear disarmament to 100 mln US dollars. Incidentally, the United States was the only bilateral Western donor to finance such activity. In addition, the US president acknowledged Belarus' entitlement to fair compensation for the cost of the highly enriched uranium from the nuclear warheads deployed in its territory [13, p. 342–343]. At the end of the visit, the US counterparts affirmed America's support for Belarusian independence and called on the Belarusian authorities to further democracy and market reforms².

The first meeting of the president of the Republic of Belarus A. Lukashenko with US president B. Clinton took place in December 1994 at the OSCE summit in Budapest. At the summit, the leaders of Belarus, Russia, the UK and the United States signed on 5 December a Memorandum on security guarantees (the Budapest memorandum) in connection with Belarus' accession to the Treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The three nuclear powers reaffirmed their commitment to Belarus to respect its independence, sovereignty and existing borders, promised to refrain from threatening or using force against its territorial integrity or political independence, including economic coercion, and undertook to consult in the event of a situation affecting these obligations, in the spirit of the OSCE final act. Subsequently, Belarus invoked the memorandum several times, alleging its violation by the United States and the United Kingdom (see, for example, the statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus on 1 February 2011, referred to below). In response, the US embassy in Belarus in 2013 stated that the memorandum was not "legally binding" and constituted only a political obligation³. In October 1995 A. Lukashenko visited several states of the USA while on an official visit to the UN for the celebration of its 50th anniversary.

American politicians and experts, unanimous in their support for the development of Belarus as an independent state, were not hiding their concern about the possibility of its incorporation into Russia. Z. Brzezinski believed that Belarus was "a state that is increasingly being reintegrated under the control of the Kremlin"⁴ with the power of Russian economic subsidies⁵. In his interview for the newspaper "Izvestiya" in July 1994 president B. Clinton commented on the prospect of the reintegration of the former Soviet republics into Russia. He noted that like the other states of the former USSR, Belarus had the right to determine its future independently, provided that

¹Дроздов В. Америка – Беларусь. Рекогносцировка Джеймса Бейкера // Нар. газ. 1991. 19 дек.

²Совместное заявление // Совет. Белоруссия. 1994. 18 янв.

³Belarus: Budapest memorandum [Electronic resource]. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20140419030507/http://minsk.usembassy.gov/budapest_memorandum.html (date of access: 18.04.2022).

⁴Hereinafter translated by us. – U. S.

⁵Кондрашов С. «Новый подход» Америки к России в свете выборов на Украине // Известия. 1994. 6 апр.

this was done democratically and did not threaten the interests of other states⁶.

In general, the Belarusian-American relations from 1991 to 1994 had a positive dynamic. The parties established diplomatic relations, opened full-fledged diplomatic missions, exchanged high-level visits, in-

creased contacts at the foreign policy and defence levels, and pursued trade and economic relations. However, for the United States, Belarus was not on the list of its foreign policy priorities, and there was a tendency to view the Belarusian situation in the context of US-Russian relations.

Selective engagement

The United States did not recognise the 1996 constitutional referendum in Belarus as legitimate or democratic, and a new chapter in the Belarusian-American relations began in its aftermath. Contacts with the Belarusian leadership were scaled down [3, p. 58–60; 8, p. 174–176, 180–181], and in February 1997, the B. Clinton administration announced the transition to a policy of selective engagement, whereby it would limit its cooperation with Belarus to areas of direct concern for the United States. In this new arrangement, it would give priority to “democratic forces, independent media and non-governmental organisations”⁷. Washington also suspended the access of the Belarusian side to assistance under the 40 mln US dollars programme for the destruction of nuclear weapons (Nunn – Lugar programme) until the situation with democracy and human rights improved⁸.

The diplomatic crisis over the government complex “Drozdy” in 1998 soured the relations further. In June 1998, the US ambassador left Minsk, and the Belarusian ambassador left Washington at the request of the American side. The United States refused entry to more than 130 Belarusian officials. The conflict was settled in September 1999.

Washington reduced its contacts with Belarusian officials to a minimum, after rejecting the proposal from Belarus to rebuild the bilateral relationship on the principles of equality and non-interference in domestic affairs. Since 1996, it has not recognised any presidential or parliamentary election in Belarus as free and fair, and in 2004 the US Congress adopted the Belarus democracy act, which translated into law the policy of minimum contacts with the official Minsk and imposed sanctions on Belarusian enterprises. The act restricted American investments in Belarus and US financial and technical assistance to Belarus. In particular, it mandated the US president to inform Congress

about all deliveries of “arms and weapons-related technologies from Belarus to the sponsoring countries of international terrorism”⁹. The stated objective of the act was to promote democratic development, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus, and to support the assertion and strengthening of its independence. The act provided for assistance to non-governmental organisations, and independent media, including radio and television broadcasting to Belarus, as well as the expansion of international exchanges¹⁰. The Belarusian authorities viewed the act as an interference in the internal affairs of Belarus and a violation of the generally recognised norms of international law. However, the subsequent administrations of presidents B. Obama and D. Trump extended it in 2011¹¹ and 2020¹².

In 2007 the US authorities imposed restrictions on the Belneftekhim concern, freezing its accounts and barring American companies from doing business with it. Later, the sanctions were extended to the companies associated with the concern. In protest, the leadership of Belarus recalled its ambassador from Washington in March 2008 and requested that the United States recall its ambassador from Minsk. Simultaneously, the Belarusian side demanded the reduction of embassy staff. As a result, the Belarusian embassy in the United States numbered 3 employees, the US embassy in the Republic of Belarus 5 employees, down from 35 before the diplomatic crisis. The United States responded by refusing to issue the US entry visas to Belarusian citizens in the territory of Belarus. Since ambassador K. Stewart was recalled to Washington, the US embassy in Belarus has been headed by diplomats in the rank of *chargé d'affaires*¹³ [11].

In 2009–2010 the political contacts intensified. At a meeting with a delegation from the US Congress on 30 June 2009, president A. Lukashenko called for the old practices and stereotypes to be overturned and

⁶Клинтон У. Народы бывшего СССР имеют право объединиться вновь, если они сами этого очень захотят // Известия. 1994. 5 июля.

⁷США меняют свое отношение к Беларуси, что отражает те перемены, которые произошли в нашей стране, и те пределы, в которых Америка сможет развивать потенциал двусторонних отношений // Белорус. газ. 1997. 17 февр.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Belarus democracy act will help cause of freedom, Bush says [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://usinfo.state.gov/eur/Archive/2004/Oct/22-783733.html> (date of access: 24.01.2017).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹H.R.515 - Belarus democracy and human rights act of 2011 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/515/text> (date of access: 24.01.2020).

¹²H.R.8438 - Belarus democracy, human rights, and sovereignty act of 2020 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8438/text> (date of access: 24.02.2021).

¹³A guide to the United States' history of diplomatic relations [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://history.state.gov/countries/belarus> (date of access: 12.02.2020).

the relations with the United States reviewed from a new perspective. He also underlined the need to base this relationship on the principles of sovereign equality of the parties, non-interference in the internal affairs, mutual respect and trust. He was confident that the United States would eventually accept the futility of speaking the language of sanctions and approaching Belarus from a position of strength. He said that Belarus was strongly interested in a constructive exchange of views with the United States in all the areas that have been frozen for over a decade through no fault of Belarus¹⁴. In December 2010, A. Lukashenko met representatives of leading US think tanks and declared a readiness for full normalisation of Belarus' relations with the United States on the principles of equal partnership¹⁵.

At the OSCE summit in Astana in December 2010, the minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Belarus S. Martynov met the US secretary of state H. Clinton. The meeting resulted in a joint statement on cooperation between Belarus and the United States in the field of nuclear safety and non-proliferation. Both parties confirmed their commitment to work together towards these goals. The secretary of state acknowledged the historic decision of Belarus to renounce its nuclear weapons in 1994. S. Martynov announced Belarus' decision to eliminate all its stocks of highly enriched uranium by the next summit on nuclear safety in 2012. The United States expressed its readiness to provide technical and financial assistance to implement these measures as soon as possible. It supported the intention of Belarus to diversify its energy supply by building a nuclear power plant operated in conformity with the IAEA safeguards. While welcoming the progress made on these global security issues, the United States and Belarus acknowledged that greater respect for democracy and human rights were essential for the advancement of the country and its citizens, and were still prerequisite to improving bilateral relations¹⁶.

Yet these contacts did not lead to a breakthrough in the political sphere. Again, the United States refused to recognise the 2010 presidential elections and

promised sanctions against select Belarusian officials for "suppressing democratic institutions or violating human rights through political repression". Simultaneously, Washington vowed to increase its support for "the Belarusian civil society, independent media and democratic political parties" [11].

In August 2011, the United States imposed further sanctions on Belarusian enterprises. In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus announced that it was suspending its cooperation with the United States on nuclear security and nuclear non-proliferation and the Belarusian-American programme for training specialists in business management¹⁷. That did not change the position of the United States. In January 2012 the adviser to the secretary of state F. Gordon stated that his country saw no future to its relations with Belarus until the Belarusian side began to respect democracy and human rights¹⁸.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus interpreted the unilateral restrictive measures of the US against Belarus as a violation of its international obligations. In a statement on 1 December 2011 the Belarusian side denounced this move as unreasonable and illegal. Specifically, it declared Washington to be in violation of its commitment under the Budapest memorandum not to use economic coercion against Belarus. The Belarusian side criticised the pressure and coercion as counterproductive and reserved the right to take proportionate reciprocal steps¹⁹.

Both parties maintained limited but effective cooperation in the field of international security and peacekeeping. In 2004, Belarus opened its airspace for NATO transit flights to Afghanistan. In 2010, Belarus concluded an agreement with NATO on rail transit and became a part of the Northern Distribution Network, for the transit of non-military goods to Afghanistan for the International Security Assistance Force. In 2013, a further agreement was concluded covering the transit of armoured vehicles from NATO countries. Belarus set its tariffs at a moderate level, contributing to a positive image of Belarus in the eyes of the US as safe territory for transit²⁰.

¹⁴Беларусь всегда выступала за более тесные отношения с США [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://president.gov.by/press73995.html> (дата обращения: 20.01.2019).

¹⁵14 декабря Александр Лукашенко встретился с представителями аналитических центров США [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://president.gov.by/press102690.html> (дата обращения: 10.01.2016).

¹⁶Беларусь и США выражают взаимное желание вывести двусторонние отношения на новый уровень [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/Belarus-i-SShA-vyrazhajut-vzaimnoe-zhelanie-vvesti-dvustoronnie-otnosheniya-na-novyy-uroven---Martynov_i_533946.html (дата обращения: 20.01.2019).

¹⁷Ответ начальника управления информации – пресс-секретаря МИД Андрея Савиных на вопрос журналистов об ответных мерах на введение санкций США [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/af49a9427b-6fb379.html (дата обращения: 20.01.2019).

¹⁸Филипп Гордон: США не видят будущего в отношениях с Беларусью [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://naviny.by/ru-brics/politic/2012/01/13/ic_news_112_384634/ (дата обращения: 20.01.2019).

¹⁹Заявление Министерства иностранных дел Республики Беларусь в связи с введением Соединенными Штатами Америки ограничительных мер в отношении Республики Беларусь [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://mfa.gov.by/press/statements/eefe7e77d6f3b16d.html> (дата обращения: 20.01.2020).

²⁰Morgulis M. Working at diplomacy. Oleg Kravchenko reflects on 25 years of Belarus – US diplomatic relations [Electronic resource]. URL: https://mfa.gov.by/upload/17.05.26_Kravchenko_interview.pdf (date of access: 18.04.2022) ; Отношения Беларуси и НАТО. Памятная записка №12 / 07.05.2020 [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://minskdialogue.by/Uploads/Files/research/backgrounders/pdf/2020-05-07_МД_Памятная_записка-12_Иванова.pdf (дата обращения: 18.04.2022).

The tensions in the political sphere affected bilateral trade and investment relations. In the beginning the United States showed an interest in expanding economic contacts, as evidenced by the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Development of American Business in Belarus. In the second half of the 1990s, this initial enthusiasm waned. The Agency for Trade and Development and the Committee for the Development of American Business suspended its work in Belarus, and loans to Belarusian state structures were discontinued. In 2000, the Republic of Belarus lost its privilege to export goods to the United States free from duty under the general system of preferences.

At first, the effect of these moves on bilateral trade was limited. Trade in goods grew from 194 mln US dollars in 2002 to 729 mln US dollars in 2006. From 2006, however, Belarusian export to the United States decreased substantially from 445 mln US dollars to

86 mln US dollars in 2011 [15, p. 148]. In March 2011 M. Skenlen, chargé d'affaires ad interim in Belarus, estimated that from 2007 to 2010, Belarusian exports to the United States dropped from 1.1 bln US dollars to 175 mln US dollars as a result of the sanctions²¹. After 2010, bilateral trade in goods was stable, with some signs of growth, amounting to 705 mln US dollars in 2010, 856 mln US dollars in 2019, and 734 mln US dollars in 2020. At its lowest point in 2015, Belarusian exports to the United States were 123 mln US dollars and imports were 446 mln US dollars. The figures for 2019 were 193 mln US dollars and 663 mln US dollars, and for 2020 199 mln US dollars and 535 mln US dollars, respectively²². Assistance to Belarus was directed mainly towards promoting democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, including support for independent media and capacity-building of civil society organisations. From 1992 overall US official assistance to Belarus has exceeded 1 bln US dollars²³.

Aborted return to normalcy

In 2013 Minsk and Washington took steps to bring their relations back to normalcy. Partnership with foreign policy institutions was upgraded. Belarusian and American law-enforcement deepened collaboration in the prevention and prosecution of high technology crimes, illegal trade in psychoactive substances, trafficking in people and distribution of child pornography on the Internet. Partnership in the health sector also strengthened. In 2012 USAID and World Learning launched the Community connections programme for Belarus. In 2018 the programme had an annual budget of 3.9 mln US dollars and was extended to 2022. The Informational and Educational Institute "Institutional development", working to enhance dialogue and partnership between both nations, became active in Belarus in 2014. Also in 2014, the 1st Belarusian-American investment forum took place. The Belarusian delegation was led by prime-minister M. Myasnikovich. A bilateral agreement on enhancing the enforcement of international tax regulations and the US law on tax control of accounts in foreign financial institutions were signed in 2015. In October 2015 the USA partially lifted sanctions against a range of Belarusian enterprises.

Throughout the years of anything but a smooth relationship with Belarusian authorities, the United

States has maintained its commitment to the Belarusian people whose lives in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident are still missing the advantages of a market economy and democratic values. The US assistance to Belarus pages showcase the actions that the US government does to alleviate the hardships of the Belarusian people; they also describe the invaluable contribution of some American charities and volunteer organisations²⁴.

The US provided a million-dollar mobile lab to collect samples and measure radioactive contamination in soil, water, air, secretions, surfaces, wounds and radionuclides. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, one of the outstanding scientific institutions in the country, provided a week-long training course for scientists of the Belarusian Hydrometeorological Centre in 1995. USAID helped improve and protect the health of families living in radiation-affected areas of Belarus by raising awareness of radiation safety behaviour among the residents of the Chernobyl zone and training medical personnel in areas with low levels of radiation exposure²⁵.

On a visit to Belarus for participation in the Plenary Assembly of OSCE in July 2017 the US congressional delegation met president A. Lukashenko. The US assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian

²¹Скенлэн: из-за санкций против «Белнефтехима» экспорт упал на миллиард долларов [Электронный ресурс]. URL: http://telegraf.by/2011/03/skenlen_ssha_ne_budut_torgovat_principami_radi_chislennosti_posol_stva_v_minske (дата обращения: 20.01.2020).

²²Беларусь и Соединенные Штаты Америки [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://mfa.gov.by/bilateral/america/usa_canada/usa/ (дата обращения: 20.02.2021).

²³US relations with Belarus [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-belarus/> (date of access: 24.02.2021).

²⁴Embassy of the United States [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150711034419/http://minsk.usembassy.gov/us-belarus.html> (date of access: 18.04.2022).

²⁵США по-русски [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/usaporuski/photos/a.1660709560883290.1073741828.1660706864216893/1702461496708096/?type=3&theater> (date of access: 18.04.2022).

affairs W. Mitchell conducted a meeting with the Belarusian president while visiting Minsk in January 2019. On the eve of the visit, the minister of foreign affairs of the Republic of Belarus V. Makei, notified Washington of the lifting of the restrictions on the number of American diplomats in Minsk. The United States welcomed this move and called it a diplomatic breakthrough [16]. The parties entered discussions on raising the level of diplomatic presence, including the exchange of ambassadors. In August 2019 J. Bolton, the national security adviser to the US president, visited Belarus and met A. Lukashenko. In August 2019 the secretaries of the security councils of Belarus, Poland, the USA and Ukraine held consultations in Warsaw²⁶.

In January 2020, the US secretary of state M. Pompeo arrived in Minsk on the first visit by a US official of his rank in 28 years. He met president A. Lukashenko and minister of foreign affairs V. Makei. The visit was an important step forward in addressing the long-standing and complex issues affecting US-Belarusian relations. Although the visit did not result in any specific agreements or decisions (which were not within the visit's scope), it signalled the shared intention to proceed with normalising their relationship, to the mutual satisfaction of both parties [17].

In October 2019 the US suspended its sanctions against "Belneftekhim" for six months. In May 2020, it announced the launch of its gasoline exports to Belarus. Cooperation in the oil sector served to strengthen the energy security of Belarus. While in Minsk, M. Pompeo promised to cover 100 % of the domestic demand for oil and gas in Belarus if the country's leaders requested it. Despite the higher cost of these imports compared to Russian oil, the political bene-

fits of importing energy resources from the US might prevail over economic considerations, especially in light of the ongoing difficult talks with Russia on the supply of oil and gas. In 2020, United States' official development assistance to Belarus was 19.2 mln US dollars, the highest among the other bilateral donors²⁷.

As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, the return to normalcy continued until August 2020. Confidence was restored progressively. The level and intensity of bilateral contacts increased. The parties agreed to resume full-fledged diplomatic presence at the level of ambassadors. The dialogue on international security, human rights, combating trafficking in people, organised crime, international terrorism and drugs deepened. However, the return to normalcy came to an abrupt halt in August 2020. The United States condemned the presidential elections in Belarus and reimposed sanctions against select natural and legal persons in Belarus. Belarus retaliated with sanctions against American officials. Yet it continues to be interested in a full-fledged and diverse relationship with the United States grounded in mutual respect and partnership²⁸. As stated in the working document of the Minsk dialogue platform, Minsk is interested in renewing its relations with the West, but not at the price concessions on domestic policy. Belarus has significant potential in the fields of security, energy, transport and communications, and economy. Relations between Belarus and the United States, and more broadly, with the West, call for a more strategic and long-term approach that could take many forms, including bilateral dialogue with the US and multilateral contacts with the EU²⁹.

Conclusion

The relations between Belarus and the USA from 1991 to 2020 had a complex history. The period of dynamism in 1991–1996 was characterised by a wide diversity of areas of collaboration, ranging from international security and ending to humanitarian areas and people-to-people contacts. The United States was the first state outside the former USSR and the first member of the UN Security Council that recognised the independence of the Republic of Belarus established diplomatic relations with it and opened its embassy in Minsk. The interest of Washington in Belarus as a newly independent state was initially motivated by its desire to maintain strategic stability and prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons from its territory.

Belarusian leaders took a constructive approach toward the American position while pursuing the needs and interests of Belarus considering its capabilities. Belarus became the first state in the world to renounce its nuclear arsenal voluntarily and unconditionally. Minsk's policy course was highly appreciated, and the United States extended tangible economic and financial assistance to Belarus. In 1993–1994 the bilateral relations reached their high point, as evidenced by the exchange of high-level visits.

After the referendum of 1996, the bilateral relations cooled. Washington adopted a policy of selective engagement, with limited dialogue at the governmental level and broad support for humanitarian contacts and

²⁶Беларусь и Соединенные Штаты Америки [Электронный ресурс]. URL: https://mfa.gov.by/bilateral/america/usa_canada/usa/ (дата обращения: 20.02.2021).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Белорусский кризис: контуры неопределенности в региональной безопасности [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://minskdialogue.by/events/conference/onlain-forum-minskogo-dialoga-belorusskii-krizis-kontury-neopredelennosti-v-regionalnoi-bezopasnosti> (дата обращения: 20.03.2021).

commercial relationships and the civil society. The diplomatic conflict in 1998 and the adoption Belarus democracy act added further tensions. At the lowest point in 2008, Minsk retaliated for the economic sanctions against “Belneftekhim” and other companies contributing more than two-thirds of its exports to the US. It also initiated the recall of the ambassadors, succeeded by chargés d'affaires ad interim, and substantial reductions of embassy staff, especially at the US embassy in Minsk. Washington's condemnation of the presidential elections in 2010 created additional controversy.

The next stage, of tentative normalisation, lasted from 2013 to July 2020, culminating in the visit of the state secretary to Belarus in February 2020. Its main result was perhaps the agreement to exchange ambassadors, almost twelve years after their recall. Trade and economic relations recovered dynamically up until that moment, and the overall climate of the bilateral relations in the Eastern Europe context was improving.

However, the return to normalcy came to an abrupt end in 2020.

In general, the 30-year history of the Belarusian-American relations can be divided into two macro-periods, uneven in duration and outcomes. The first period lasted five years and had a highly positive dynamic. The second period, lasting 25 years, began in November 1996 and was one of progressive decline that reached its lowest point in 2008–2012. In subsequent years, a tentative return to normalcy began, which remained unfinished and came to an abrupt halt in 2020. Belarus and the United States have entered the fourth decade of bilateral relations in an atmosphere of confrontation and in the middle of an acute international crisis involving Russia, the West and Eastern Europe. In future we may expect a renewal of the system of international relations, in which Minsk and Washington might find themselves in a better position to learn from their past mistakes and rebuild their relationship.

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