

# Secretary Pompeo's Visits to Belarus and Ukraine Offer an Opportunity to Advance U.S. Interests

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will travel to Belarus and Ukraine in early February.

Secretary Pompeo should use this visit to build on the slowly improving relationship with Belarus to promote closer U.S. economic ties to the region.

Additionally, he should make a clear commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will travel to Belarus and Ukraine from January 30–February 1, 2020. In Minsk, the Secretary will meet with President Alexander Lukashenko and Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei. This visit follows former National Security Advisor John Bolton's trip to Belarus in August 2019.

In Ukraine, Secretary Pompeo will meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky, Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko, and Defense Minister Andriy Zahorodnyuk. This trip will be overshadowed by the impeachment hearing taking place in the U.S. Senate. Secretary Pompeo should use this visit to build on the slowly improving relationship with Belarus, promote closer U.S. economic ties to the region, and make a clear commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5029>

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## Ukraine

When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster in early 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, sending troops to occupy the Crimean Peninsula under the pretext of "protecting Russian people." This led to Russia's eventual annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine is now in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation—the West or Moscow. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass and more than half of its coastline have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea.

In eastern Ukraine, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 13,000 lives lost, 25,000 wounded, and an internally displaced population of almost 2 million people. It has inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy and slowed down Ukraine's progress toward deepening ties in the transatlantic community.

Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations, how, and by whom it is governed. No outside actor (in this case, Russia) should have a veto on membership or closer relations with organizations like the European Union or NATO. In many ways, the future viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in the Donbas, the region in eastern Ukraine where the fighting has been taking place.

## Belarus

Located in Eastern Europe, Belarus is often described as Europe's only remaining dictatorship. Although 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 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In recent months, Russia and Belarus revisited the idea of further integrating their union state, but no progress has been made.<sup>3</sup>

Secretary Pompeo's visit to Minsk comes at an interesting time. U.S. relations with Belarus have been steadily, albeit slowly, improving in recent months, after the two nations exchanged ambassadors last September after an 11-year hiatus. Additionally, Belarus finally lifted the cap on the number of U.S. diplomats allowed in Minsk in 2019, previously allowing only five at a time.<sup>4</sup>

U.S. interest in Belarus is also important because four NATO members border it or are located nearby: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. In order to maintain its security commitment to those nations, the U.S. needs to keep in mind Russia's influence in Belarus.

It is important for the United States to pursue improved relations with Belarus when possible. If the West ostracizes Belarus more than necessary, Minsk could be driven even closer to Russia. While the U.S. and its European allies should try to avoid this, American and European policymakers should also be aware of how limited they are to pull Belarus out of Russia's orbit.

## Recommendations

Ukraine and Belarus present different opportunities and challenges for the U.S. in the region.

During his visit to Ukraine, Secretary Pompeo should:

- **Make it clear that the U.S. stands with Ukraine.** The U.S. and Europe must continue to present a united voice against Russia's aggression against Ukraine, reiterating the need for a complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.
- **Make a clear commitment to continue Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia.** Russia continues to occupy Crimea, as well as to violate daily the terms of the cease-fire agreement, fanning the flames of a conflict that continues to engulf Ukraine. As long as Russia violates Ukraine sovereignty, the U.S. should continue economic sanctions against those who are responsible.
- **Focus on Ukraine's achievements in fighting corruption and not on unrealistic expectations.** Social, economic, and political reforms in Ukraine will take time. Reform is a process, not a single event.

Western policymakers need to support Ukraine on the path to reform, even if change takes a whole generation.

- **Encourage more targeted economic and institutional reform in Ukraine.** Overall progress has lagged on many much-needed but contentious structural reforms. The U.S. and Europe should cooperate to enhance governance in Ukraine and the country's institutional competitiveness. As The Heritage Foundation's data-driven annual *Index of Economic Freedom* has pointed out, advancing the rule of law, regulatory efficiency, and market openness to generate greater economic dynamism will go a long way toward securing Ukraine's future.<sup>5</sup>
- **Improve the quality of non-lethal support to Ukraine.** While the sale of Javelin missiles is welcome, the U.S. needs to improve the quality of non-lethal equipment, especially in terms of secure communications, more capable unmanned aerial vehicles, and maritime domain awareness capability. As the war continues in the eastern part of the country, these capabilities remain important.

During his visit to Belarus, Secretary Pompeo should:

- **Reaffirm the United States' commitment to security in the region surrounding Belarus.** Russian influence in the region threatens the national security of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, all of which are NATO members. The U.S. should remain committed to NATO and its allies that neighbor Belarus.
- **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.
- **Be aware of limits in influencing Belarus.** Historically, President 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' relationship with Russia. U.S. policymakers should also refuse to give legitimacy to the Russian regime and its actions in Belarus.

- **Work with European 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.
- **Consider incentivizing measured economic engagement with the U.S. while encouraging Belarus to pursue greater economic freedom.** It is notable that economic freedom has risen in Belarus during the past five years, gradually moving away from the status of economically “repressed” in The Heritage Foundation’s *Index of Economic Freedom*.<sup>6</sup> The Belarusian government has improved the country’s macroeconomic fundamentals, particularly by stabilizing the exchange rate and inflation. The government has an opportunity to enact additional reform measures to modernize and upgrade its economic system, particularly as Belarus seeks to build trade relationships with other countries, such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Georgia.

## Conclusion

While the future success of Ukraine will rest in large part on the shoulders of Ukrainians themselves, U.S. support is essential to counteract Russian aggression and support reform. 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 Ukraine—and the U.S. should remain aware of Moscow’s ambitions.

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## Endnotes

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