



## Current State of U.S. - Belarus Relationship

**David Kramer , Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs**

Interview by Belapan, Belarusian Information Company  
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**Belapan:** Belarus has reported suspending consultations, and strongly recommends that the U.S. Ambassador should leave as well. And there are a lot of speculations what might have caused the unexpected suspension. And in your understanding, what might have caused this time the worsening of the Belarus relations?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** I think unfortunately the simple answer is the unwillingness of the Belarusian government to release Alyaksandr Kazulin. Kazulin, as you know, was released for three days to attend Iryna Kazulin's funeral, and that would have been a great opportunity to let Kazulin stand appeal. That would have marked the completion of the release of all political prisoners. Unfortunately, the government sent him back to prison and we once again pressed to secure his unconditional release.

**Belapan:** When was that?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** When did we press them to do that?

**Belapan:** Yes, the last time.

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** Well, we had discussions with them right up until Wednesday of last week, so whatever day that was. That was I guess the 5<sup>th</sup> of March. And so as late as March 5 we were urging the government to release Kazulin. This, as you know, is something we have been doing together with the European Union, with whom we've worked very closely, working for the release of all the political prisoners so that we would have the basis to go forward with a real discussion about a way to improve relations with Belarus.

Unfortunately our hope that he would be released first in February, as we were told, and then soon after it did not materialize. As a result, the U.S. Department of Treasury posted on its web site on Thursday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, a further clarification of the sanctions we imposed on Belneftekhim and it was based on that posting by the Treasury Department, a decision that was fully supported and coordinated by the State Department, the National Security Council, that Belarus responded the way it has so far.

**Belapan:** Was it just a clarification of the sanction that was in place before? Was there anything new?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** The Treasury Department is really the best source to explain what it is they posted. I think, suffice it to say, it was an elaboration of what we have in place but it clarifies for companies certain steps they need to take and it seems that it was based on that that the government in Minsk responded.

**Belapan:** Was the government trying to postpone or prevent the sanctions against this company Belneftekhim?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** As you know, we imposed the sanctions last November 13<sup>th</sup>, and we did that --

**Belapan:** And it went into force right away.

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** Exactly. That's exactly right. And we took the step, I will admit, with regret. We do not enjoy imposing these kinds of sanctions but we feel we have been left with no choice.

Last year there was no movement on release of political prisoners and we saw many signs of a deteriorating political situation. So we expanded the visa ban list last summer, then the Belneftekhim sanction November 13<sup>th</sup>. Then we had discussions with the government in January of this year about the possibility of release of political prisoners. We had explained, both before those discussions as well as during them, that we were looking into the possibility of further sanctions. Both Ambassador Karen Stewart late last year and I said publicly we would take such a step if we did not see progress.

If you remember, Mr. Lukashenko responded toward the end of last year with comments threatening to expel her. So certainly it should not come as a surprise to the government in Belarus that the United States is prepared to take additional steps if we feel we have no choice.

**Belapan:** Do you mean there could be other sanctions used against Belarus?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** We certainly have not ruled that out. What we want to see --

**Belapan:** -- the political side?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** We're not describing what they would be nor when we would do them. The way to avoid further sanctions from the United States is for Belarus to release Alyaksandr Kazulin. He is the last name on the list of internationally recognized political prisoners in Belarus. With his release Belarus would lead the way, would open the path for discussion about improved relations between Belarus and the West. Not just with the United States, but with the European Union. We work very closely with the European Union on these matters. So the way you avoid further sanctions is to provide the release of Kazulin, and we hope that happens very soon.

Meanwhile we will consider what further steps we might have to take if we don't see progress on Kazulin.

**Belapan:** Is it possible that as soon as Kazulin is released to have a dialogue, but it's also possible to cancel the sanctions that have already been put in place?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** No, we would not lift all sanctions that have been imposed in the past. What we would do is begin a dialogue with the government in Belarus about further steps we would want to take as well as steps we would take. We would respond very positively to the release of Kazulin because his release would represent the release of all the political prisoners. So the United States and the European Union for that matter would respond positively, but we would not look to

lift all sanctions either on the visa ban side or on the asset freeze side based on the release of all political prisoners.

We have explained to the government in Belarus what we would do if the political prisoners were released. We thought we had an understanding with them that would pave the way for the release of all of them by February. Unfortunately, the government of Belarus has not lived up to its side of the bargain.

**Belapan:** Are there any signs that Belarus is willing to improve relations with the United States?

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** I would say the release of five prisoners before, as well as Zdvizhkov who was not on the original list but whose case we certainly raised with authorities in Minsk was a positive step. We welcome the release of those prisoners, there's no question about it. But we have made clear to the government in Minsk -- and by we I mean not just the United States but the European Union -- that in order to begin the process of improvement in relations we had to see the release of all political prisoners, not simply five out of six.

So while we welcome that step of the release of five, there was no confusion. We were clear that that was not sufficient to turn the page. But we also want to make clear it's not too late. The government can still release him, and we still are ready and prepared to begin a dialogue with the government, but we're not going to do that as long as Alyaksandr Kazulin sits in jail.

**Belapan:** Mr. Kramer, thank you so much for your time.

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Kramer:** Thank you. I appreciate it very much. It's always good to talk to you. Keep up the good work.

**Belapan:** Thank you.

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