



# WORKING AT DIPLOMACY

## OLEG KRAVCHENKO REFLECTS ON 25 YEARS OF BELARUS-US DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Interview by Mikhail Morgulis

**O**leg Kravchenko is the Belarusian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. He is responsible for the development of relations between Belarus and the United States, as well as with Canada, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other European countries.

He has served in the diplomatic corps since 1994. From 1994 to 2007, he held various positions within the Belarusian Foreign Ministry; he was responsible for

protocol and legal issues, as well as international humanitarian cooperation. From 1999 to 2003, he was an advisor to the Embassy of Belarus in Sweden. From 2007 to 2014, he worked at the Belarusian Embassy in Washington DC, including in the capacity of interim Charge d'Affaires, a.i. of Belarus in the U.S. from 2008 to 2014. From 2014 to 2016, whilst working for the Foreign Ministry, Mr. Kravchenko was responsible for the development of relations with the countries of North America and Latin America.

**“Mr. Kravchenko, 25 years ago, diplomatic relations were established between Belarus and the United States. In historical terms, 25 years is a short period, yet in this fast, technological age, it doesn't seem so brief. What would you personally note as the most significant events in relations between our countries during this time?”**

“Indeed, in the life of an individual or the lives of a generation, this is a significant period of time, but for a state, and relations between foreign states – it is but

a moment in history. Over the last 25 years, our countries have achieved a lot in the development of Belarus-American relations, but there is still much left to achieve. However, a quarter of a century is not only the time that has passed since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belarus and the United States; 25 years also represents the age of the Republic of Belarus itself. We are a very young country by historical standards, but the first years of the independence of any state are the most important, since they largely determine the developmental path of the country, if not for centuries, then at least for decades ahead. Our first 25 years were full of important events characterizing the historic choice of the Belarusian people and the internal policies of our government, and also making a significant contribution towards defining the external political direction of Belarus. In the context of our relations with the United States, I would note, above all, the recognition of the Republic of Belarus as a sovereign state by the United States. I note that the US became the second country in the world, after Ukraine, to establish diplomatic relations with Belarus. This happened on December 28th, 1991, and embassies were opened in the capitals of our countries in 1992. In less than a year, Belarus and the US had very quickly established the diplomatic alliance necessary for the development of interstate relations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States remained the de facto sole superpower, to use the terminology of that era. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the US was an important event for the young independent state, Belarus, which was just beginning to look for a worthwhile place in the world.

I consider the voluntary refusal by Belarus to possess nuclear weapons another key event that determined the trajectory of Belarusian-American relations. It is no secret that for the US, a priority issue in dealing with the newly independent states, as the countries of the former Soviet Union were called in Washington at that time, was the fate of the nuclear arsenal they inherited from their Soviet past.

We understood the importance of this issue, first of all, for guaranteeing the global and regional security; that is why we made this long-term strategic decision which, in our opinion, would have a positive influence on the stability and security now and in the future.



Presently, one of the important elements of Belarusian-American interactions is cooperation in the fight against the illegal transit of nuclear materials. This cooperation, mainly directed at preventing the nuclear materials from getting into the US via Belarus, is a joint contribution of our states to the prevention of nuclear terrorism.

Interaction in the field of international security is one of the foundations of the Belarusian-American relations. In 2011 Belarus provided its territory for rail transportation of cargo for US forces in Afghanistan, which were members of the International Security Assistance Force. The Northern Distribution Network has become a reliable, safe and relatively inexpensive method of delivering cargo for the US military.

Also very important is the ongoing interaction of law enforcement agencies of Belarus and the United States in the cessation and prevention of crimes against personal property of the citizens of the United States, Belarus, and other countries. International organized crime finds ways to act across borders and uses barriers between countries to try to evade prosecution. Therefore, law enforcement cooperation, which continues despite possible political disagreements should, in my opinion, be a permanent principle of cooperation between the two nations. This is how we act in our relations with the United States.

Of course, these are just a few examples of constructive and mutually beneficial cooperation between Belarus and the United States. The achievements of cooperation in the humanitarian sphere are very significant. We are deeply grateful to the Americans for their help in the rehabilitation of children from areas affected

by the Chernobyl disaster. Cooperation is also actively developing in the areas of science, education, culture, and sports.

In 2016, for the first time in the history of our bilateral relations, the Belarusian State Chamber Orchestra gave a performance, directed by Yevgeny Bushkov, at a prestigious music festival in Naples, Florida. More recently, two Belarusian films – the feature film “Vera's Sweet Farewell” and the documentary “Songs of Old Europe – Old Belorussian Songs” won major prizes at the Worldfest festival in Houston.

Cooperation is developing between the regions of Belarus and states within the US; sister cities are being created. Since 2014, there has been a partnership between Mogilev and Houston, and in 2016, a partnership agreement was signed between Gomel and Fort Myers, Florida. The infrastructure supporting our ties is being strengthened and honorary consuls are appointed: the famous writer, political scientist, public and religious figure, and humanist Mikhail Morgulis in Florida, and businessman Geert Visser in Texas. Their active work really contributes to the development of various types of cooperation. For example, it was Mikhail Morgulis who provided special assistance in organizing the US tours by the Belarusian State Chamber Orchestra. Geert Visser helped establish ties with the economically developed state of Texas, and Arkansas and Oklahoma, and he also organized contacts between Belarus producers and the world's largest retail store Walmart.

Businessmen of both countries have interest in joint projects. Belarusian enterprises are interested in an extensive and solvent American market; American corporations – in the advantages of doing business in Belarus, especially taking into account its membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, its proximity to the European Union, the availability of a highly skilled workforce and developed infrastructure. As an example, I would like to mention the production of the Cadillac Escalade and Chevrolet Tahoe in Belarus.

The inclusion of services rather than just goods in the exports from Belarus to the US serves as an indicator of a high level of business interaction. Both the success of Belarusian programmers, and the demand for Belarusian software in the United States, are well documented.

I consider it important to always remember that the foundation of mutual



understanding between the Belarusian and American people is the heroic struggle and victory over Nazism. Our societies are yet to fully recognize the involvement and contribution of all the participants in the overall victory of the Allies. The recognition of both this contribution and the inseparability of the triumph of common values over an unprecedented evil will strengthen the necessary sense of inadmissibility of repeating such tragedies. I am pleased to note that for the first time in the history of our relations, the American military band marched alongside Belarusian and Russian troops in the 70th anniversary Great Victory parade. The band arrived in Belarus as a tribute to the memory and eternal gratitude for the heroic deeds of all countries that together defeated Nazism."

**"Diplomatic relations are sometimes similar to family relations; there are tides of love, then there is disappointment, then irritation, then reproach, then misunderstanding. What, in your opinion, was the ebb and flow of relations between Belarus and the United States over the past 25 years?"**

"This is an interesting comparison and a fascinating point of view. I think that international relationships are at the same time simpler and more complex than family relationships. Yes, there are common foundations – historical, ethical, spiritual, cultural, or religious, but there are also the national interests of each country, the promotion and protection of which are some of the most important functions of diplomacy. Additionally, it seems essential to remember that one of the principal diplomatic tasks is the improvement of relations between states. This task cannot be achieved at the expense of the national interests of your

country or through agreeing concessions, so it is extremely important to find the balance that ensures that the interests of all the parties are met against the background of a gradual improvement in relations. I consider the concept of "common interests" rather effective; even in the most difficult situations, it enables the identification of a basis for constructive interaction and to strengthen this basis without detriment to the positions of the parties, while continuing an extremely complex dialogue on existing disagreements.

Belarusian-American relations could not avoid complex periods of disagreement, misunderstanding, limited communication, and barriers to the development of cooperation and business.

Following those difficult periods, our relations have since become more mature and effective. We have managed to establish closer positions on the main points of disagreement, restore a certain level of trust, and get rid of the most significant obstacles in our interactions.

It seems unrealistic to expect a complete consensus on our views. Our different approaches, including those that affect our relations, will continue to exist in the future. It is important to continue discussing those differences, and to try to understand the position of the other side. To understand does not mean to agree, but a detailed understanding of all the factors affecting the position of the other party facilitates the identification of common ground, occasionally revealing that the differences in our approaches are not as significant as they might at first seem; the opposing perspectives are mostly caused by negative inertia, emotions, and limited interactions. It is important that both sides are interested in further improving relations and are ready to work

together to overcome issues of disagreement."

**"My article "America Needs New Friends," was published in the American press and, as an example of a true friend, I presented Belarus. Do you have examples confirming this loyalty? Do you think our countries need new friends? And is Belarus ready to be an Eastern European friend of the American people?"**

"I have already cited a number of similar examples, although I tend to refer to partnerships based on common interests, rather than on 'loyalty', which also implies the possibility of 'disloyalty'. Unfortunately, such a destructive and counterproductive choice is increasingly forced upon by the situation in the European region. We strongly object to this imposed dilemma – are we with the East or the West? Our place in Europe presupposes the preservation and further development of special, strategic relations with Russia and the gradual improvement of relations with the European Union and the United States. We categorically reject the alleged conflict between these foreign policy objectives. On the contrary, we believe that facilitating an early settlement of tension in Europe – improving relations between Russia and the West, is much more in keeping with the interests of all European states than a false choice that leads to further escalation of tension and potential destabilization of the situation.

Returning to your question, I am sure your thesis about the need for new friends is valid. It completely coincides with one of the most important functions of diplomacy – to create new friends for one's country. I am also convinced that the acquisition of new friends should not mean abandoning old and proven friends.

I think that the Belarusian and American peoples are already friends, which is confirmed by numerous examples of interaction at various levels. Whilst it is sometimes difficult for official authorities, including foreign ministries, to quickly resolve all the problems and start cooperation that is beneficial for both sides; direct interactions between people, businessmen, scientists, and artists develop very quickly and bring tangible benefits to both sides."

**"For seven years, you have worked in the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, six of them as the chargé d'affaires for Belarus in the United States. What do you see and notice in the life of Americans, in their characters, habits, and thoughts?"**

"I have great respect for the American people and the United States, a country that obviously occupies one of the leading places in the modern world. Americans are wonderful, hardworking and hospitable people. Thanks to their perseverance, diligence, discipline, faith in their own abilities, and also in luck, Americans achieved impressive success in many areas, including science, industry, technology, and medicine. America is a large country, with a diverse population that includes representatives of various ethnic groups, cultures, religions, beliefs, and points of view. The policy of the US administration, which many in the world mistakenly perceive as the manifestation of the supposedly monolithic position of the American people, is subjected to much harsher criticism in the Congress, and by the media, think tanks and US society, than outside the borders of America. Therefore, I always oppose a simplified one-dimensional evaluation of American society and the American nation.

Americans strive to achieve excellence in the field of knowledge in which they specialize. The United States is undoubtedly a nation of individuals, but it is also a nation of patriots and like-minded people united by a love for their homeland, a desire to ensure its prosperity, security and respect for it, and they make their own contribution. Along with patriotism, respect is also given to the special place that the family occupies in the American value system.

This mindset is very similar to our attitude towards our country and Belarusian families, so I'm sure this is another of the commonalities that unite us."

**"Once, in a conversation with the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Vladimir Makei, he used the phrase, 'The world becomes better when we become better; that is, more flexible and more patient.' Could you state your opinion on whether something is changing in the world of diplomacy, in diplomats' relations with one another? Are traditional methods of diplomacy disappearing, and are new methods and opportunities emerging? We do remember history, and we know that where diplomacy ends, war begins."**

"Each era has its own challenges, its own characteristics, and its own rhythm. Of course, diplomats should be able to adapt to the realities that surround them.

It seems to me that the main distinguishing feature of our era is the speed with which, due to technical progress, in-

formation is generated and disseminated. In earlier times, one could complain about a lack of information, but nowadays the main problem is the need to select the relevant information from an endless stream of news.

Of course, this fact is reflected in the diplomats' work. First, classical methods of diplomacy are supplemented with new ones as the arsenal of materials that help the diplomat in his work increases. In this context, diplomatic work has become much more dynamic.

Of course, in modern conditions, diplomats should be able to use technical innovations for the collection of information, but they must also be able to assess the quality of the information collected. The ability to work with information has always been an indicator of the professionalism of the diplomat. At the same time, the essence of the diplomatic work has not fundamentally changed, and I think it will never change, because diplomacy has always been based on the ability to establish contacts, conduct dialogue, persuade a colleague, and seek compromise.

It is often alleged that diplomats say not what they think, or that they deliberately distort the meaning of their messages. In my personal opinion, one of the main tasks of modern diplomacy is not to distort information and certainly not to lie; these practices will surely discredit the diplomat, and could damage the interests of the country he represents. It is critical to accurately and clearly explain your position, to ensure that it can be understood by the other party. It is just as important to correctly understand the position of the other side and, putting aside any emotions that might distort the meaning, to relay the essence of the diplomatic dialogue to your government.

Recently, I heard an interesting statement: 'a diplomat who is willing to talk about confrontation is a poor diplomat.' I completely agree, yet the main task of our profession is to find solutions to all difficult and potentially dangerous situations. Of course, this must be without prejudice to the interests of the state; this is both the complexity and the unique nature of diplomacy."

**"What do you think our world can expect in the future? And in the context of the peace process, will relations between our countries, the US and Belarus, become closer, more trusting, and based more on wisdom?"**

"Let me answer this question with a quote from the statement from the

Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of Belarusian-American diplomatic relations,

"Belarus and the United States have much more in common than they do in opposition. Diplomatic relations between our countries are only 25 years old, but the historical and cultural ties between our people go back centuries. With this in mind, we are firmly confident that through the support of honest, benevolent, and equitable relations, Belarus and the United States will be able to bring bilateral relations to a smooth road of sustainable development."

Forecasting is a thankless task, especially for diplomats who deal with the existing reality. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that Belarus would like to maintain good relations with the United States. I am sure that the United States is also interested in developing relations with Belarus. Under these conditions, if both sides make efforts to better understand each other and find opportunities for the progressive development of bilateral cooperation, the relations between Belarus and the United States will inevitably become more mature and more stable. Personally, I am sure of the appropriateness of this scenario in the development of our relations as well as its possibility."

**"Our magazine is sent to all members of the US Congress and the Senate, to large companies, and to libraries. We are trying to open Belarus to Americans, many of whom know little or nothing about your country. We want to justify the name that some Europeans call Belarus, 'The Switzerland of Eastern Europe.' What wishes would you like to convey to American politicians, businessmen, and the wider American population?"**

"Unfortunately, I note that in the United States, many people still perceive Belarus through generalizations created by politicians and the press from ten or even twenty years ago. I would like for Americans and, above all, readers of your magazine, to show more interest in Belarus, to seek to better understand it, and to get to know its people.

I encourage your audience to communicate more directly with Belarusians. I invite everyone who is interested in my country professionally, or even out of pure curiosity, to visit Belarus. Fortunately, there are now many opportunities available. If they travel by plane, US citizens can stay in Belarus without a visa for up to five days.

Welcome to Belarus! ■

