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Dependent independence: what is the scope of the foreign policy of Belarus?

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Summary

Media and expert discussions often offer an argument about the limited sovereignty of Belarus. Or even about the absence of an independent foreign policy in Minsk. For some, this argument has become an axiom by default, which require neither proof, nor reflection. And some deliberately try to use it for their own purposes, whatever those may be. Therefore, the very discussion about Belarusian independence and the limits of the sovereign foreign policy of Minsk is not purely theoretical.

On the contrary, as geopolitical tension in Europe grows and new security challenges arise, it becomes a practical necessity. Without understanding the real (rather than desirable and illusory) foreign policy dilemmas of Belarus and the international conditions in which the sovereignty of the state is realized, it is difficult to interpret the logic of government actions, evaluate the effectiveness of these actions and suggest alternatives.

> Moreover, in Belarus, the discussion about the prerequisites, opportunities and limitations of its own sovereignty is often refracted through the traditional black and white perception of reality, which is caused by internal political contradictions.

Regulatory assessments and barricade thinking are dominant. In most public debates about foreign policy, analysis is substituted, at best, by exchange of wishes, predominantly generalized. As a result, society (which by definition cannot be a collective specialist in international relations) and the authorities (which daily implements foreign policy in real, not ideal conditions) often live in different worlds and operate with different categories.

Dependence ≠no sovereignty

The popular argument of Belarus not having an independent foreign policy is based on a very simple logic: mainly at the level of dependence of the Belarusian economy on the Russian economy. And indeed, such dependence does not just exist - it is huge. This also applies to the criticality of the Russian market for large Belarusian producers, and access at preferential prices to Russian commodities, as well as borrowing opportunities. The share of Russia in all these indicators is incomparably greater than the share of other external partners of Belarus (usually, even combined). It is a fact of life.

However, what does this fact tell us about the Belarusian sovereignty and independence of foreign policy? Almost nothing. Because dependence on some foreign country and independence (sovereignty) of the state's own foreign policy are fundamentally different concepts. And they differ not only in the "in" prefix.

> Speaking quite simply, state's independence is either there or not.

Independence cannot be measured in percentages, degrees, meters or something else. It can only be ascertained on the basis of one key criterion: where and by whom state decisions (including foreign policy) are taken. That is, if Belarusian state decisions are made in Minsk, then Belarus is an independent state. Which, by the way, not only makes its own decisions, but also bears full responsibility for these decisions. And the fact that Belarusian foreign policy decisions are made precisely in Minsk hardly causes doubt. If there are such doubts, then we can turn to the most noticeable and "epoch-making" events of the last decade: non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it's own take on the Crimea and Donbas, refusal to deploy a Russian air base, non-alignment with Russian sanctions against Ukraine and Moldova, and so on.

On the other hand, one can measure not the fact of independence or its absence, but rather the field for the state's foreign policy maneuver. In other words, how wide is the range of alternative tactical and strategic actions that a state can take in the international arena without damaging its national interests. And the basic national interest is the preservation and strengthening of one's own capacity. That is, own independence.

And this field for the foreign policy maneuver of Belarus is not really quite wide. This is due to a number of factors, including the degree of dependence on specific foreign policy partners.

Why there is not much headroom

First, the field for the foreign policy maneuver of any state is determined by structural factors. That is, the state's position in the system of international relations, which inevitably “programs” the special needs, possibilities and limitations of this state in cooperation with other states and non-state actors.

From a structural point of view, Belarus is a small country, which is located on a conflict-prone geopolitical frontier. “Smallness” of a state in system categories means that it’s *a priori*unable, independently or even in alliance with other small states, to form its own security environment. And our geopolitical frontier is a region of Eastern Europe, which is located at the junction of competing zones of influence and integration projects. As a result, geopolitical contradictions in this region are particularly sensitive and explosive.

The structure of international relations constantly reminds the small states of the words of Thucydides: "The strong do what they can, and the weak tolerate what they have to." That is, small states are especially vulnerable in terms of the structure in which they find themselves by the will of fate and history. Of course, small states are not doomed in the world of today - they have many opportunities not only to survive, but also to expand their own room for maneuver. Often they can even do it actively. But only when foreign policy does not ignore structural factors, but finds ways to use them to its own maximum benefit.

Secondly, the breadth of the field for maneuver is determined by the history and specificity of relations with key foreign policy partners. Here, subjective factors are added to the structural factors, including at the level of specific governmental decision-makers. In particular, such categories as trust, communication channels, interpenetration of interests, political and economic compatibility, etc. are of great importance.

If one were to briefly describe the last decade of Belarus’s relations with key players in the region from this standpoint, one would get a well-known picture:

- **with Russia**, despite all the natural difficulties and contradictions, the relations have been systemic and deep, which, in particular, is reflected in joint integration projects;
- **relations with the EU and the USA**were mostly in a frozen conflict state, which is why they still lack critical trust (on both sides);
- **with China**, only in recent years, qualitative changes emerge that can make relations truly strategic (although this will largely depend on the development of Chinese infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road initiative);

- bilateral relations **with Ukraine**are traditionally effective, but their possibilities are limited by many factors, including geopolitical ones.

How and why such a foreign policy picture turned out to be is a separate and interesting question. In some ways, this is the result of the decisions Minsk made, in some ways — of those of our partners, and in some ways a natural result of structural factors. But in any case, the fact is that this very picture today is the baseline, which sets the framework for what is possible and necessary for the foreign policy of Belarus.

Thirdly, the breadth of the field of foreign policy maneuver of any state is determined by its *own power*. In other words, its economic, military, diplomatic capacity, innovation, the quality of human capital, as well as the efficiency and coherence of the work of the public administration system. Unlike purely structural factors, the state has all the opportunities to build up its own power. At the same time, there is a bilateral relationship between foreign policy and own power: both foreign policy opportunities depend on state power, and the latter varies depending on what is happening in foreign policy. And according to this indicator, Belarus has both strengths and many problems requiring elimination.

Foreign policy interests

Another key concept for an independent foreign policy discussion is interest. When analyzing international relations, it is important not to confuse interest with desire or vision. Interest is always a real category, which is sourced from the specific conditions prevailing here and now. To some extent, we can agree with the opinion that interest is objective. At least, the basic national interest — strengthening state sovereignty — really has an objective basis and creates objective prerequisites for foreign policy actions.

The interest of the state is formed on the basis of its own goals and capabilities, correlated with the goals and capabilities of other states. Even if we are talking about long-term interest, then it cannot be constructed (and declared) without taking into account international realities and the interests of other actors simply because politicians or scientists alike want it. Or rather, maybe this sometimes even happens. But the result of this is either zero, or, more often, negative (and sometimes tragic).

There are frequent statements in the media and even during expert discussions that go like this: “this would be in the interests of Belarus, but it’s not being done because of fear of a reaction from someone among external partners.” For example, Moscow. Such statement is devoid of logic and common sense.

> If the assessment of the situation leads to the conclusion that the consequences of an action or decision are most favorable for the country compared to other alternatives, then such an action or decision corresponds to its interests.

And if the expected response from other states to one's own action "outweighs" the benefits of this action, then it is not the best alternative. Accordingly, it is in the interest of the state not to take such action.

At the same time, the analysis of benefits and possible consequences for the state of its own actions manifests its sovereignty, as do such consequences themselves. States that are deprived of foreign policy independence do not have the ability and need to carry out such analysis.

Thus, this is a very brief and schematic description of the main factors determining the sovereignty and possibilities of the state's foreign policy maneuvering. Some criteria and their interpretation warrant a separate discussion. But of fundamental importance is the fact that a review of these factors points to a multidimensional reality in which Belarusian diplomacy works and which differs from interpretations often simplified in the media. It also sets the coordinate system for those who want to help Belarus expand the field of foreign policy maneuver and thereby strengthen its sovereignty and independence.

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