John Bolton in Minsk: How to avoid the trap of misunderstanding in Belarus-Russia relations

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Summary

In the vocabulary of diplomacy, it is customary to divide interstate relations into bilateral and multilateral ties. However, this is a conditional separation, since the two-way track is not isolated from multilateral arrangements. This is especially true during periods of structural adjustment in international relations, when, as today, uncertainty and the associated risks increase significantly.

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This is of particular importance for Belarus-Russia relations, which were and remain the deepest bilateral relations in the post-Soviet space. Inevitably, they are increasingly contextualized within wider regional and global arrangements. This is becoming a source of challenges for Minsk and Moscow.

> When states have serious mutual obligations (for example, in the field of defence), a significant change in the international state of affairs often becomes a problem.

This isn't because it negates these obligations or reduces the desire to fulfil them, but because it requires states to adapt their behaviour to new conditions in order to remain as safe as possible from the unpredictable development of events. This inevitably causes questions and elicits doubts from the allies. Will our allies fulfil their obligations if something extraordinary happens? Is there a hidden agenda in the actions of an ally?

We are now observing something similar in NATO. Amid growing unpredictability in the world, some members of the alliance perceive the actions of others with more suspicions and worries. In some ways, it even resembles the phenomenon of the "Thucydides trap", when the growing rivalry between the existing hegemon and its growing rival leads to a

war to which neither of them aspired. Moreover, as the author of the term, Professor Graham Allison emphasised, the problem is not rivalry as such, but a distorted perception of the intentions and actions of the other side. Accordingly, in order to avoid war, it is critical to understand each other's motivations and goals.

The analogy may seem strange, because we are talking about allies, not about rivals. But it is obvious that in our case, an incorrect interpretation of the ally's logic can also lead to misperceptions. That is, dragging the allies into the trap of misunderstanding. And this is a direct road to serious conflicts, from which both sides will suffer.

The context for this is the visit to Minsk of the US National Security Adviser John Bolton. As soon as information about the visit leaked to the media, numerous commentators began to speculate about the reasons and agenda.

> If you read these speculations, you might get the impression that Minsk had almost joined NATO (while remaining a member of the CSTO).

At the level of the leadership of Russia and Belarus, there seems to be a common understanding of the essence of the visit and its significance for Belarusian-Russian relations. It is significant, that the very next day after the visit, Alexander Lukashenko had telephone conversations with Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. However, it is obvious that the mass media form not only a public opinion, but also the views of the elites. Media narratives about the “reversal of Belarus” ultimately push Minsk and Moscow into the same “trap of misunderstanding”, even if there is an understanding between the leaders of the countries. Therefore, it’s important to explain events like Bolton’s visit.

The detailed agenda of the meeting is known only to its participants, but we can assume that it included a wide range of issues. How could it be otherwise, if this was the highest-level visit of an American official in a quarter century? If there was no normal communication between the countries for two decades?

There is no doubt that they talked about the new realities in the field of security after the United States buried the INF Treaty. Of course, they talked about China and Iran. It would be strange if Bolton missed these topics. It is also obvious, that they talked about Russia. There is nothing surprising here either: in recent months, the Western media have almost declared the Anschluss of Belarus by Moscow as a fait accompli.

> Incidentally, their excited imagination is also the result of two decades of Minsk remaining isolated. In most Western countries, they simply do not know anything about Belarus, or about Belarusian-Russian relations.

It is clear that such a situation does not correspond to the interests of Belarus. Minsk is trying to correct it. Here is an interesting question: is it profitable for Moscow if Belarus remains terra incognita? It seems not to be the case. Such a situation negatively affects the actions of the West, not only in relation to Belarus, but also to Russia.

There are many examples. One of them is the EAEU. The attitude towards it in the West is still based on the perception that this is "an attempt to recreate the USSR". As a result, for example, the EU refuses to start substantive negotiations on cooperation with the EAEU. Brussels considers it to be a Russian project that threatens the sovereignty of other countries.

But if the EU representatives meet with colleagues from Belarus (and Armenia) more often and at a higher level, they will hear the opposite argument more: if you really care about our sovereignty, then let's develop relations between the EU and the EAEU. After all, the more successful the EAEU is, the stronger our economies will be and the better it is for our sovereignty.

The opposite example is the “Eastern Partnership”, where the participation of Minsk (and Yerevan) in is perceived by many in Russia negatively. But it is precisely thanks to the positions of Belarus and Armenia that the Eastern Partnership did not become anti-Russian. Minsk and Yerevan have repeatedly blocked anti-Russian resolutions at the EaP summits and generally advance the argument about the need to evade geopolitical discussions. Does this correspond to the interests of Moscow? It seems to be that the answer is yes.

The same goes for Bolton's visit. His communication with the leader of Belarus is unlikely to fundamentally change the US vision of Eastern European security. But in Minsk, Bolton clearly heard theses that were not very familiar to the American establishment, which in recent years got its information about the region from the team of Petro Poroshenko. Therefore, the added value of Bolton’s talks in Belarus is a more realistic picture of the region than that which he received while visiting Ukraine and Moldova.

> At the same time, the main goal of Minsk is to convey to the Western capitals that Belarus is not Ukraine. Unlike Kiev, which has been playing for the last five years to raise stakes in regional security, Minsk is vitally interested in the opposite – in reducing tensions.

Because if the escalation leads to a military standoff, then it is Belarusian territory which will become the first victim. If not in the sense of real hostilities, then in terms of turning the whole of Belarus into a permanent state of emergency zone.

The extremely negative reaction of Belarus to the offer of Poland to host a “Fort Trump” is connected with this. But to explain this position to all stakeholders, it is not enough just to repeat it in public. You need direct communication at the highest level, and you also need to build confidence so that the Belarusian position does not sound like a threat, but like a mutually beneficial proposal.

It is very important that Russia understands these motivations of Belarus. This will allow the allies to escape the trap of misunderstanding. Indeed, in the final analysis, the reduction of regional tensions is in the common interest of Minsk and Moscow.

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