Commentary No. 40
February 2, 2020

Pompeo in Minsk: Prospects against a spicy background

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Summary

The visit of the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo to Minsk, as expected, caused a big wave of information both in Belarus and abroad. This is not surprising, because the third US official in the political hierarchy visited Belarus for the first time in 26 years. Both the visit itself and the process of normalising Belarusian-American relations are very important for Minsk and have significance that goes beyond the scope of media headlines.

A long process could be even longer

This is not the first event in the relations between Minsk and Washington that attracted wide attention in recent months. In August, John Bolton, who was then the National Security Advisor, visited Belarus. His talks with Alexander Lukashenko were followed by talks with the Secretary of State of the Security Council of Belarus in Warsaw in the multilateral format Belarus-Poland-USA-Ukraine. Later, Under Secretary of the Department of State David Hale arrived in Minsk, who announced the agreement in principle between the parties to return their ambassadors to each other's capitals after a long break.

These meetings were logical steps in the long process of normalising relations, which deteriorated in the spring of 2008. After the Belarusian presidential election in 2010, relations received another painful blow and began to enter a cautious trajectory of communication at the working level only in 2013. Then the parties agreed to bracket all the problematic issues and to discuss topics of mutual interest and the opportunity to move forward. One of the topics, as the Belarusian president said now, was security cooperation.

The political impetus to this communication was given by the events of 2014 in Ukraine and their consequences for regional security in Eastern Europe. Belarus's situational neutrality has become an important factor in the inhibition of military-political tension in the region against the backdrop of hostilities in the Donbass region. Minsk's position, albeit to a limited extent, has had a positive effect on the security of Ukraine and Eastern European NATO allies. Accordingly, it also somewhat reduced the pressure on the United States itself regarding the need to provide massive military assistance to the allies. This naturally began to strengthen Washington's interest in direct communication with the leadership of Belarus, that is, in continuing to normalise relations.

> Today, we can confirm substantial progress in this normalisation. Although, it will be possible to speak about its completion, not after the return of the ambassadors, but only after the complete lifting of all remaining sanctions.

And so, as Pompeo stated, the parties have not yet come around. Due to the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act and the 2011 Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act, it is especially difficult to lift the sanctions, as the decision should be made by legislators, even if advised by the White House. And for this, Belarus needs not only to demonstrate tangible progress in the field of democracy and human rights, but also to form a perception of the importance of lifting sanctions in American political circles.

The moment of the appointment of ambassadors is very close to completion. In Washington, the specific name of a senior career diplomat who has experience working in several executive bodies of the United States, as well as in US diplomatic missions in the region and in international organizations, has been discussed for some time. If her candidacy receives the agrément from Minsk and approval by the US Senate, then the appointment will look very interesting.

Thus, it took 12 years to return the ambassadors of Belarus and the United States. One can only imagine how much more difficult it would be to restore relations if in 2008 the parties completely closed their embassies. Namely, such a decision was made then by the then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Yes, a few minutes before this decision was to be officially transferred to the Belarusian side, the Secretary of State changed it. As a result, all these years the embassy worked in a limited form, but still survived.

The strategic importance on Belarus-US relations

Both earlier and now after Pompeo's visit, individual commentators have expressed exaggerated and even strange expectations from the normalisation of relations between Belarus and the United States. In Washington, some observers have the impression that Belarus could become a kind of "second Ukraine" and somehow change its geopolitical orientation. Incidentally, similar strange theses appeared in some Russian media. And in Minsk, albeit a few people, there are hopes that improving diplomatic relations with the United States will contribute to the explosive growth of the Belarusian economy.

However, on the face of the Earth, both Belarus and the United States remain in the same geography in which they were. Therefore, there are no objective prerequisites for this kind of revolutionary consequences. Nevertheless, the ongoing normalisation may indeed have some strategic significance.

Repeated US emphases on supporting the sovereignty of Belarus (coincidentally, similar emphases were also heard in other capitals included in the Pompeo tour) prompt many to speculate about the influence of the American vector of Belarusian foreign policy on relations between Minsk and Moscow. And this is natural, since the visit of the Secretary of State took place against a spicy background of deep contradictions between the allies. The main news of the entire visit was Pompeo stating that the United States is 100% ready to supply Belarus with oil and at competitive prices. And it is perceived, of course, also in the context of the Belarusian-Russian oil and gas crisis, although the Belarusian authorities started work on establishing cooperation with American oil companies several months ago.

This topic is expected to have received a very negative reaction in Russia. Everyone understands that in terms of price, American oil is unlikely to become more attractive to Belarus than Russian. Nevertheless, the Russian tax manoeuvre and the linking with all new conditions of obligations to achieve equal profitable energy pricing, which Russia had already undertaken, created a real incentive for Minsk to diversify supplies. And this causes natural strategic fears in Moscow.

If the United States begins to take up positions (and build the appropriate infrastructure) in the most traditional energy market for Russia, this could have very unpleasant consequences for them. And not even in terms of some general geopolitical consequences, but in terms of the specific losses of Russian companies and the budget. In this sense, Belarusian-American relations, in the first place, can have a strategic influence on Belarusian-Russian relations, as well as on the post-Soviet energy markets

as a whole. If Pompeo's words are followed by Minsk's practical negotiations with American oil companies, Russia will have to take this factor into account in its negotiations with Belarus.

For Minsk, another strategic dimension of relations with Washington is no less important: their impact on Belarus's cooperation with EU and NATO member states.

> The normalisation and some intensification of relations between Belarus and the USA will objectively push a number of European states to seek stable contacts and a bilateral agenda with Minsk. For Belarus, this effect can be even more practical than the bilateral track with the Americans.

In this sense, it looks very symbolic that a few days after Pompeo's visit, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius is planning to come to Belarus. Directly linking these visits may not be constructive. However, it is obvious that the normalisation of relations between Belarus and the United States (as well as with key EU member states) greatly weakens the approach previously used by Vilnius, when Lithuanian politicians went to talk about bilateral problems with Minsk in Brussels, Berlin, Washington, etc. Therefore, it becomes important for Vilnius to speak directly with Minsk, which is what they are starting to do even in the conditions of a not very favourable domestic political situation.

The publication is supported by the Belarus Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Germany). The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



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