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## 100 days of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency: foreign affairs

**27 August marked 100 days of Volodymyr Zelensky's term as the president of Ukraine. In this time, he succeeded in acquiring control over the executive government and legislature. The initial foreign visits of the president manifested that the general direction of Ukrainian foreign affairs will not be altered. The issue of Donbas and relations with the Russian Federation remain the most pressing challenges.**

**General picture.** The initial 100 days of Volodymyr Zelensky's term offered no clarification as to the strategic course of the new president's domestic policy. At the same time, during his opening visit to Brussels, and subsequent ones to Paris and Berlin, Zelensky openly confirmed the steadiness of Ukraine's plans regarding the country's NATO and EU membership. Fears of a significant part of the Ukrainian public regarding the change of the political vector towards Russia did not materialize. In international relations, Zelensky is also attempting to follow in the steps of Petro Poroshenko, the former president. However, the lack of political experience of the new president, along with the shortage of qualified diplomats, are clearly visible. A decisive break away from the cadres of the former government resulted in the heads of key embassies in Europe and the USA being recalled. In addition, the conflict with Pavlo Klimkin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, paralyzed the operations of the ministry. In the course of the initial 100 days of the presidency, Zelensky made five official visits: to Belgium, France, Germany, Canada and Turkey. In Kiev, the president met with the prime ministers of Moldova and Israel.

**Initial foreign trips.** Volodymyr Zelensky made his opening visit to Brussels. On 4 and 5 June, he met with Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, and Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General. Zelensky's statements concerning Ukraine's foreign affairs did not differ considerably from the pre-election ones. However, they became more specific. The president highlighted he strongly supported the pro-European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country. Brussels was also the location of the meeting between Zelensky and Andrzej Duda, the President of Poland. Both politicians stated they were open to an active cooperation in Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Between 17 and 18 June, Volodymyr Zelensky made one-day trips to Paris and Berlin. He met with Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, Gérard Larcher, the President of the Senate of France, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the leader of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, and the representatives of German and French businesses. The main objectives of these visits were the following: establishment of a personal relationship with strategic partners (Zelensky has already had a meeting with Macron in April but sought to strengthen the relationship), consolidation of hitherto Ukrainian foreign affairs, and delineation of directions for cooperation. The need for sanctions against Russia being enforced and the Minsk agreements executed was also acknowledged. In addition, the restart of talks in the Normandy format was announced. However, the issue of the format's expansion was not raised. Macron expressed France's readiness to organize the meeting of the Normandy Four leaders. Moreover, the exchange of prisoners and Ukraine's negative attitude towards Nord Stream 2 were also discussed. One of the main outcomes of Zelensky's visits was the green light to hold a meeting of foreign policy advisers to the leaders of Ukraine, France, Germany and Russia (states involved in the Normandy format).

**The trip to Turkey.** The visit of the new president of Ukraine to Ankara took place on 7 and 8 August. Zelensky and Recep Erdoğan discussed the boost of commercial exchange from 4 to 10 billion dollars (which was not a novelty considering the agreement developed by the former three presidents of Ukraine) and the development of a long overdue free trade zone. In addition, stronger opportunities for cooperation in terms of investments, development of roads and ports, as well as in IT, military, technological, and tourist sectors were debated on. Whether the two presidents succeed in signing the free trade agreement will only become known in October this year at the session

of the Ukraine-Turkey High-Level Strategic Council. According to initial information, the session will take place in Kiev and will be chaired by the presidents of Ukraine and Turkey. Apart from these issues, the official trip to Ankara offered the field for the discussion of the situation of Crimean Tatars and the release of political prisoners by Russian Federation. Volodymyr Zelensky mentioned these matters during his meeting with the diaspora of Crimean Tatars in Turkey. Ukrainian president is expecting Recep Erdoğan's support in negotiations with Russia.

Zelensky's meeting with Turkish entrepreneurs during a business forum in Istanbul pertained primarily to image-related matters. The president highlighted that Ukraine will seek to improve the business climate, that the land market will be opened shortly, and that gambling will be legalized in five-star hotels on the Black Sea coast. Apart from that, he discussed the issues of privatization, combating corruption and smuggling, promised the development of telecommunications sector and 5G technologies, and the introduction of principles for competition on energy markets. The president is seeking to boost the GDP to 5-7%. These statements by Zelensky were practically the first specifics regarding his domestic policy. They stimulated lively discussions in Ukraine. However, the matters mentioned by the president hardly offer a general economic strategy.

**Relations with Israel.** Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, was one of the first foreign leaders to pay Zelensky a visit in Kiev. The visit took place on 19 and 20 August. The visit was notable due to the fact that it has been twenty years since an Israeli politician of such a high rank visited the country. The meeting offered space for the discussion pertaining to the free trade zone between the countries and to the development of an agreement concerning pensions. In addition, four documents were signed, e.g. "The agreement on the teaching of the Hebrew language at universities in Ukraine, and the teaching of Ukrainian language at universities in Israel", and "A program for the cooperation in education, culture, the youth, and sports between the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and the government of Israel for 2019-2022". In the future, similar initiatives are to encompass agriculture and IT. During the visit, Netanyahu paid homage to Jews murdered in Babi Yar during WWII.

**Relations with USA.** Relations with the United States are among the priorities of Zelensky's foreign affairs. According to information from Vadym Prystaiko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the president will visit the United States on 23 September. He will take part in a session of the UN General Assembly where he will meet with Donald Trump.

It is noteworthy that the administration of the American president is cautious as far as contacts with Zelensky are concerned due to his relations with an oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi, who is being prosecuted in American courts for money laundering. The existence of a relationship between the president and the oligarch seems to be corroborated by the fact that the administration of the Ukrainian president is headed by Kolomoyskyi's lawyer – Andriy Bohdan. Shortly after Bohdan took the position, USA observed he was an objectionable person in the orbit of the Ukrainian president. This, however, had no impact upon Zelensky's decision. Apart from the above, the Servant of the People party includes at least thirty delegates with ties to Kolomoyskyi.

**Relations with the Russian Federation and the conflict in Donbas.** The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has become troubled since 2014. However, the character of the relation has changed recently. At present, a tangible effort to renew the dialogue between the countries can be observed on the part of Zelensky. His appeal to Vladimir Putin to undertake talks resulted in the wait-and-see strategy applied by the Russian president being lifted. Zelensky has already had two telephone conversations with Putin. At the same time, a ceasefire agreement was reached. Moreover, Ukrainian authorities withdrew their military forces from Stanytsia Luhanska and introduced personal changes in the military command and the trilateral contact group. President Zelensky seeks to end the conflict in Donbas. The results of negotiations and an exchange of prisoners which took place on 7 September may be perceived as certain achievements in the field.

**Conclusions.** Volodymyr Zelensky's initial steps in the international arena suggest that, in the priority matters, he continues the politics of Petro Poroshenko. His foreign affairs are pro-West. However, there is no way to be sure whether he becomes pro-European or Pro-American. His visits to strategic international partners prove the interest in the consolidation of ties with the EU. Zelensky proved to be the most active in contacts with the representatives of Germany and the European Commission. The establishment of personal relations between the



new president and key foreign leaders can be perceived as an accomplishment of the 100 days' period. At the same time, Zelensky pursues the development of good relations with neighbors. This can be proved by his visit to Poland on 31 August – 1 September. During a meeting with President Duda, he made concessions concerning the deeply rooted, history-related conflict. The concessions were well received in Poland. He also supported the restart of the workgroup tasked with developing a clean slate in the relations. Ukrainian president characterized the talks as a breakthrough in the relations between the two countries. Zelensky's visit to Poland, which took place right after the 100 days' period, became a *de facto* beginning of his independent foreign relations instead of them being a mere continuation of the politics of his predecessor.

*Trans. Tomasz Kuraś*