

Jakub Olchowski

Joe Biden, the 46th President of the USA – Ukraine's Hopes

Joe Biden's election victory was welcomed in Ukraine. Donald Trump was treated with distrust resulting from the conviction that he was self-interested and did not understand the problems of Eastern Europe, and he was also accused of treating Ukraine instrumentally. Biden knows Ukraine, his administration will support Ukrainian reforms, and will probably put more pressure on Russia. However, support for Ukraine will not be a priority of US foreign policy, nor will it be unconditional.

Attitude towards Donald Trump. The Ukrainian authorities were rather reserved about the presidential elections in the United States, ensuring that they were ready to cooperate with either Donald Trump or Joe Biden. This restraint resulted from concerns about President Trump, whose presidency was viewed very sceptically in Ukraine. In the context of Ukraine's confrontation with Russia, there were vivid fears that, given his transactional approach to foreign policy, Trump might be willing to "trade" Ukraine in some kind of exchange, especially since Ukraine, unlike Russia, would have little to offer.

There were also concerns about a possible repetition of a situation in which Trump would try to use Ukraine for his personal goals and gains (as was the case in 2019), a consequence of which could be a deterioration (once again) of not only the image of Ukraine, but also Ukrainian-American relations. In Ukraine, it is well remembered that in 2019 Trump removed from the administration many people who had knowledge of Ukrainian issues – primarily Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch. It was quite commonly believed that Trump did not understand Ukraine and that his words and actions contributed to the deterioration of the nation's international image.

It was also believed that in foreign policy Trump was guided mainly by his own particular interests, which were often beneficial for Russia. At the same time, such a policy was also a signal that the USA was no more guided by the existing values and principles in international politics, and that Ukrainian-American relations would remain unpredictable as long as Donald Trump were the president.

Expectations for Joe Biden. Although he dedicated little attention to foreign policy in his election campaign, Ukraine expected Joe Biden's potential election victory would result in the professionalization and depoliticization of American foreign policy.

It was emphasized that in Ukrainian media that Biden knows Ukraine and its problems well; as Vice-President in the Barack Obama Administration he was responsible for shaping the US policy towards Ukraine and visited it many times.

As the elections approached, Ukraine noted Biden's statements on the "aggression and occupation of Ukraine" and the "illegal occupation of Crimea" (by Russia), on needing to force "the Kremlin to pay the price for constant attacks on the international order", on "supporting the evolution of a democratic, united and sovereign Ukraine", as well as his words about the "wonderful and brave Ukrainian people".

However, less enthusiastic opinions, recalling the passivity of President Obama and Vice President Biden to the annexation of Crimea, believe that Ukraine, and more broadly Eastern Europe, may be a serious test for Biden. This passivity has been criticized by Biden's opponents in the USA, who liken it to the Obama Administration's indecision toward and concessions to Bashar al-Assad.

In this context it is important to note that during intense fighting in the Donbas, the US under Barack Obama consistently refused to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons – it was only the Trump Administration that decided to provide Javelin guided anti-tank missiles, which significantly influenced the course of the conflict.

Nevertheless, President Volodymyr Zelensky, despite his restraint, congratulated Biden on his victory on November 7. On January 20, 2021, the day of Biden's swearing-in, Zelensky publicly announced that President Biden would be invited to Kyiv. The last US president to visit Ukraine was George W. Bush in 2008.

The Ukrainian authorities have many hopes for the 46th President of the USA:

- they hope that the Biden administration will look at Ukraine through the prism of US interests, not the interests of a particular president;
- expect an unequivocal position of the new president towards Russia, including opposition to the idea of federalizing Ukraine, advocated by Russia (especially since Russia has announced "direct cooperation" and intensification of support for the separatist "republics" in eastern Ukraine);
- expect the reconstruction of US ties with NATO and the European Union, and at the same time the revival of the strategic Ukrainian-American partnership, which will be helpful from the point of view of Ukraine's efforts to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures. Such an objective is envisaged in Ukraine's national security strategy adopted in September 2020; the document describes the US as one of its priority partners;
- expect the US ambassador to return to Kyiv;
- expect clear US support for the democratic changes taking place in Ukraine's neighbourhood, i.e. in Belarus and Moldova, with which Ukraine would like to tighten its relations, provided they unequivocally choose the path of reforms (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 310](#)).

Ukraine would also like the US to maintain or strengthen sanctions against Russia, to increase involvement in the peace process, and at the same time to deepen military cooperation, especially in the field of Ukraine sourcing US weapons. As regards the internal situation in Ukraine, President Biden is expected to support the fight against corruption and the dysfunctional influence of the oligarchy.

Joe Biden's attitude towards Eastern Europe. It is likely that the new American administration will toughen its stance towards Russia. Biden's attitude to Russia began taking shape during the Cold War, in the 1970s and 1980s, when he actively participated in US foreign policy, including visiting Moscow. Biden believes that the most important competitor of the US is China, but it is Russia that poses a threat, as it seeks to weaken and split the West and to revise the international order. Moreover, contrary to many American politicians and experts, Biden believes that the NATO enlargement to the east, which he supported, was not a mistake, which is an important signal for Ukraine and its aspirations to join the alliance.

Biden's surroundings also formulate similar opinions. Antony Blinken, a close, long-term and experienced associate of Biden, nominated for the post of Secretary of State, is perceived in Kyiv as familiar with the Eastern European reality and opposed to Russian aggression. In 2014 he contributed to the imposition of sanctions on Russia. Blinken also considers Russia a threat, and it should also be expected that he will pay special attention to pro-Russian politicians such as Viktor Medvedchuk and to oligarchs, especially Ihor Kolomoysky and Dmytro Fyrtash.

Another long time Biden associate, his security and foreign policy advisor (and an expert on Central and Eastern Europe), Michael Carpenter, is in favour of strengthening NATO as well as tightening sanctions against Russia, especially in the context of Nord Stream 2. He also criticizes some European countries, especially Germany and France, for their ambivalent policy towards Russia. While this attitude of the new American administration is received with satisfaction in Ukraine, neither Biden nor his advisors arouse enthusiasm in Russia.

Especially since the United States will probably also support the Three Seas Initiative – not only does it limit Russian influence in the Central European region, but it is also beneficial from the point of view of US interests, as it may allow for closer US-Ukrainian energy cooperation. Ukraine may also play a role in the process of rehabilitating the US international reputation (for example by rebuilding diplomatic relations between the two

countries), but it should be expected that in Europe America's priority will probably be to rebuild relations with "old" allies.

Conclusions. While Ukraine has reasons to be optimistic, it should understand that in the near future the United States will focus on internal problems: the health and economic crisis, racial and cultural tensions and the deep polarization of American society. In foreign policy, the US priority will be transatlantic relations, relations with China, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and North Korea, and the issue of withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is also difficult to estimate how much pressure will be exerted on President Biden by his political base and various interest groups – for example, Jake Sullivan, the president's national security advisor, unequivocally supports the priority treatment of internal problems. Moreover, despite changes in US policy, some of its elements will be continued, and not only with regard to energy – NATO members should not, for example, expect that Americans will forget about disparities in defence spending among Alliance nations.

This continuation of the policy will also apply to Ukraine in terms of supporting reforms, military cooperation, or emphasizing territorial integrity. The United States will also continue to closely monitor Ukraine in terms of corruption and its links with Russia. The new administration will want to support Ukraine, but it recognizes the scale of Kyiv's internal problems and, consequently, will link the support to greater emphasis on the rule of law and the implementation of reforms and principles of good governance. Ukraine should not expect unconditional support from the US.

Most likely, Biden's Administration will also increase pressure on Russia on many levels, which will probably translate into greater American activity in Eastern Europe. Biden will be a difficult opponent for Vladimir Putin; nevertheless, the US relations with Ukraine (but also with Poland) are not considered in Washington as a priority and will rather be a consequence of internal American politics as well as US-Chinese and US-Russian relations.