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Ukraine under Zelenskyy: Domestic, Foreign and Security Policy in Flux

Edited by
Marta Drabczuk and Tomasz Stępniewski

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Executive summary

Naïveté as a beginning: Ze Ukrainian foreign policy

- The Strategy of Foreign Policy of Ukraine is as an undisputed achievement of the Ze foreign policy making (since it is the first document of its kind Ukraine's post-1991 history), and leaving the USA-focused policy segment outside of this brief, there could still be a couple of the most 'articulated' lines for any strategic document on/of Ukraine to 'go along', such as NATO, EU, and neighbours.
- The spontaneous Ze 'revolution of governance', while making plenty of global socio-political trends, was destined to start comprehending its own grand-region from a more holistic perspective. It is still possible to suggest that the President of Ukraine has to face and deal with an ever-increasing range of emerging security (as well as structural and operational) challenges that are of Ukraine's direct concern.

- Gradually, the Ze foreign policy managed to establish a distinctive strategic narrative that has a chance to get turned into a ‘thread’ of historic understandings of Ukraine on the true nature of its interrelations with Russia. In addition, the apparent revival of the Crimean theme in the international grand-debate functions as a nearly forgotten initial basis for the myriad of international sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, preventing the Kremlin from engaging Crimea into any of international trade-associated deals, let alone international commuting routes. In an unexpected way, considering the already mentioned factor of both real and perceived *naïveté*, the Ze period can be evidently observed as a time-frame when generic objectives of foreign policy started being transformed into a number of more nuanced direction-specific ideas and projects. This current approach does not symbolise a predetermined success or a recipe to avoid making rookie’s mistakes, but it is still a conceptually different one, if compared with the country’s classic (and notoriously infamous) multi-vectoral foreign policy, which, eventually, led to February 2014.

The “Dreamland” of President Zelenskyy: implementation or imitation of economic changes

- Ukraine began developing the legal framework for economic development by approving the National Economic Strategy until 2030 and the Economic Security Strategy until 2025. Both Strategies define the main challenges, targets, as well as tasks and measures for their implementation. They should result

in the creation of a stable, competitive, socially responsible market economy and the conditions for the advanced goals of the sustainable development of Ukraine.

- Among the main principles on which the strategic approach for Ukrainian economic development is based are European integration under an Association Agreement (AA) including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The need for further liberalization of trade relations with EU members was reported by the Ukrainian business community. After the AA performance review in 2021, Ukraine is planning to implement 5 common markets with the EU in the coming years: “industrial free market”, “common airspace”, “common digital market”, “energy network”, and “customs procedures”.
- The Ukrainian economy has seemed to be more resistant to the current coronavirus crisis than to the previous financial one. The Business has already acquired “covid immunity”. The economy is struggling with the challenges of internal structural reforms (as well as with the external influences from the Russia, China, EU), such as decentralization, privatization, digitization, judicial reform, deoligarchization, the opening of the agricultural market, etc., which will not be implemented within a short term by President Zelensky. The building of “Dreamland” announced by the president during the presidency remains somewhat impossible.

The European Union's Eastern Partnership after the Brussels summit: what's next?

- In 2021, twelve years have passed since the launch of the Eastern Partnership project, and a new perspective on this project, its achievements, goals and opportunities are needed. Not only the approach must change, but also the narrative, as regards the Eastern Partnership project and the countries covered by it.
- One of the important elements hindering EU cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries is corruption, which damages the political systems of these countries and makes it difficult (or impossible) to change the situation.
- From the Eastern Partnership countries' point of view, it is important to look at Russia's tactical goals, but also strategic goals towards the Eastern Partnership countries, and more broadly towards the post-Soviet states. Over the last two decades, Russia has shown enormous determination in reintegrating the post-Soviet area to strengthen its status as a regional and global power.

Continuity in Ukraine-US relations in the Biden-Zelenskyy era

- In the community of Americans concerned with Ukraine, there is disagreement about how constrained Zelenskyy is in pursuing reform, and whether he is unable or unwilling to do more. Either way, there is lagging confidence in Ukraine's ability to hold up its end of the bargain. A common in-joke among those in Washington who support Ukraine is that Ukraine

“never misses a chance to miss a chance”, but as long as this frustration does not affect U.S. policy, a cut-off of aid seems unlikely.

- Ukraine’s relations with the US have changed much less than the changing administrations in Kiev and Washington might lead one to believe. Under Biden, the diplomatic relationship is much calmer, but the substance of the relationship has not changed dramatically. Ukraine continues to have bipartisan support in the foreign policy elite (while being mostly invisible to the average American).
- Improvement in the relationship is constrained by Ukraine’s inability to reform, by the United States’ wariness of becoming engaged in an escalated conflict with Russia, and by the US desire to work effectively with its European partners, who are not united in supporting Ukraine. Serious deterioration in the relationship is limited by the mutual interests of the two countries. Neither wants Russia to extend further territorial or political control over Ukraine, and both benefit from a fruitful relationship.

Security issues of Ukraine in the context of Russian-Ukrainian conflict

- The scenario of developing a constant threat of conflict escalation and pushing Ukraine into endless internal confrontation will remain the basic formula for the Russian model of “controlled chaos” in the neighbouring country in the foreseeable future.
- In the perception of Kremlin, Russia continues to be at war with the “West”, and this is a multi-domain war.

This war is not a frozen conflict but a multi-theatre conflict that is highly dynamic and can be activated by Moscow in any domain that it wants, e.g., conventional escalation in Ukraine, Belarus, or any other place.

- The attempts of some European countries to cooperate with Moscow in consensus mode or to “normalize” relations are perceived by the Kremlin as a weakness and will only provoke more aggressive actions.
- The EU must invest in both hard security as well as in soft security and governance to counteract the Russian threat and strengthen its members. This also means blocking Russia’s energy strategies of isolating Ukraine and corrupting European states with its energy and forcing it to sell oil and gas on a purely commercial basis, not as an instrument of political warfare.



Foreword

The presidency of Volodymyr Zelenskyy is at halfway. The sixth president of Ukraine, who was a professional actor, not a politician, won the presidential elections 2019 with a substantial 73.22% votes. Today, Zelenskyy's ratings are falling, which is undoubtedly due to the internal and external policies made by him and the Servant of the People Party, but also the growing social disappointment on the pursuing reforms and the unfulfilled election promises. The priorities and costs of the internal changes are shaped by plenty factors and relations affecting security in the European region, where the interests of the global great powers clash. Ukraine remains the subject of its games. Fears of a possible Russian offensive that could extend beyond the Crime and the territories in eastern Ukraine currently controlled by the Kremlin and lead to an attempt to get international support and increase sanctions on the Russian Federation.

The priority principles of state policy in the sphere of the state and foreign policy and national security are based on development of strategic relations with key foreign part-

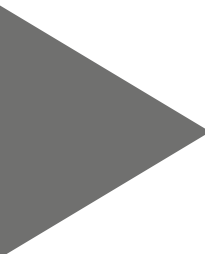
ners, primarily with the European Union, NATO, and US, and pragmatic cooperation with other states and international organizations on the basis of the national interests of Ukraine formed by The Strategy of Foreign Policy, The National Security Strategy of Ukraine, the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine, The National Economic Strategy 2030, Economic Security Strategy 2025, The Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine.

This publication of the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin is devoted to the situation of Ukraine under Zelenskyy in flux from the point of view of the internal political processes (endless confrontation with the opposition, decentralization, deoligarchization, judicial reform), economic transition (privatization, digitization, opening of the agricultural market, integration with EU markets) and the security (multi-vectoral approach to counteract Russian threats).

In the article compiled by Victoria Vdovychenko and Vlad Vernygora the *naïveté* of Zelenskyy the Ze team on the multi-dimensional process of foreign policy making is emphasised. The article presents the recent comprehensive academic study on strategic narratives and perceptions of the strategic line on Ukraine relationships with NATO/EU and neighbourhoods. Marta Drabczuk focuses on Zelenskyy's unfulfilled promises in the socio-economic sphere and building of "Dreamland". The economic processes ongoing in Ukraine imitate real changes and the president has no real tools to stop the economic drift of Ukraine towards the "third world" and to encourage qualitative changes in economic structure based on economic growth, innovation, accelerated investment, and increased business competitiveness. Oleksii Polegkyi underlines that the conflict between Russia

and Ukraine has a strategic and even existential influence on security issues. The scenario of developing a constant threat of conflict escalation and pushing Ukraine into endless internal confrontation will remain the basic formula for the Russian model of “controlled chaos” in the neighbouring country in the foreseeable future. In next article, Tomasz Stępniewski, notes the importance of the EU hard and soft security and governance to counteract the Russian threat. In this context, a new perspective and a new approach to the EU’s Eastern Partnership project, its achievements, goals and opportunities are needed. More strident in opposing Russia’s aggression and supporting Ukraine, were the US under the Joe Biden administration. As Paul D’Anieri concludes in the last article of the volume, the improvement in the US – Ukraine relationship is constrained by Ukraine’s inability to reform, by the United States’ wariness of becoming engaged in an escalated conflict, and by the US desire to work effectively with its European partners, who are not united in supporting Ukraine.

Marta Drabczuk
Tomasz Stępniewski



Victoria Vdovychenko
Vlad Vernygora

***Naïveté* as a beginning: Ze Ukrainian foreign policy**

Having assumed his presidential office in May 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy had to go through a distinct period of cowboyish *naïveté* before his foreign policy-associated moves started featuring some sort of logic and, to an extent, sophistication. Most definitely, from September the same year, the Trump – Ukraine scandal pushed the Ukrainian President-neophyte on the quest to realise how serious and multi-dimensional the process of foreign policy making is in its brutal actuality. Arguably, in January 2021, Zelensky's interview to the Axios program on the HBO US television channel evidently showed that the 6th President of Ukraine had just completed the 'foundational studies' on being in charge of Europe's largest country. The moment when he was replying to the host's particular question ("I can see you're angry with President Trump. Maybe a little bit?")¹ became one of the Trump era's most recognizable memes.

¹ Zelensky admits he is 'little bit angry' with Trump, 112 UA, 31 January 2021, <https://112.international/politics/zelensky-admits-he-is-a-little-bit-angry-with-trump-58560.html> [12.11.2021].

Some experts can also argue that the so-called ‘Wagner Affair’ in July – August 2020, when a multi-national special operation to capture a platoon of mercenaries from the egregiously ubiquitous Russian private military company Wagner Group was allegedly sabotaged by a known but still unnamed high-profile personality from the Ze team and, possibly, President Zelenskyy himself², was yet another learning curve for the Ukrainian leader in the process of studying a life-time lesson on statecraft. Provided that there was no treason during the ‘Wagner Affair’ on the President’s personal side, where to from there and where Zelenskyy is currently at with his foreign policy – these are the two major questions, which require some sort of serious elaborations on.

It can be suggested that, from July 2021, the National Security and Defence Council dotted the i’s and crossed t’s after it had approved the ‘Strategy of Foreign Policy of Ukraine’ (further – Strategy). Dmytro Kuleba, the country’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, speaks on the context about “a very voluminous document”, which is framed by the declaration that “Ukraine is an active participant in international politics”, the *fait constaté* that “Ukraine is forming a security architecture for itself, the region and the world”, and, finally, the dream about Ukraine as “a country of new economic oppor-

² S. Sukhankin, *The ‘Wagner Affair’ in Belarus and Its Implications for Ukraine*, The Jamestown Foundation, 9 February 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-wagner-affair-in-belarus-and-its-implications-for-ukraine/> [2.11.2021]; V. Kravchenko, *Jak Zelenskij pro “vagnerivciw” iz Łukaszenkom howoryw* (Як Зеленський про «вагнерівців» із Лукашенком зоворує), ZN.UA, 4 October 2021, <https://zn.ua/ukr/international/jak-zelenskij-pro-vahnerivciw-iz-lukashenkom-hovoriv.html> [12.11.2021].

tunities”³. Nevertheless, keeping in mind this important ministerial summary, recognising the Strategy as an undisputed achievement of the Ze foreign policy making (since it is the first document of its kind Ukraine’s post-1991 history), and leaving the USA-focused policy segment outside of this brief, there could still be a couple of the most ‘articulated’ lines for any strategic document on/of Ukraine to ‘go along’, and they are as follows.

Strategic line 1: Ukraine and NATO/EU

If this world is still willing to think that the current UN-bound international system is the system for the global communing of nations to operate in, then Ukraine is in limbo. On the one hand, since the 1945 San Francisco Conference, the country’s both nominal and real representatives had been rarely missing a chance to specify that Ukraine was among the inaugural members of the UN⁴. On the other hand, from 2018, the Constitution of Ukraine makes four references about the country’s EU- and NATO-focused intentions⁵, but

³ At the NSDC meeting chaired by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Strategy of Foreign Policy of Ukraine was approved, President of Ukraine, 30 July 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/na-zasidanni-rnbo-pid-golovuvannyam-volodimira-zelenskogo-za-69873> [10.11.2021].

⁴ V. Vernygora, *A Place for Ukraine in a more cohesive European Union: Synergising the two different integrations* in L. Akulenko, D. Naumenko (eds.), *NGO Ukrainian Centre for European Policy*, 2019, p. 19, http://ucep.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/web_place_for_Ukraine_in_a_more_cohesive_EU_WEB.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2JoHg-44W1h2W8H-3ZjqBK3amTX3W9lgTSF5ty9j5bHcYjTNHC4EIOnkg [10.11.2021].

⁵ *Pro wnesennia zmin do Konstytuciji Ukrajiny (szczodostratehicznoho kursu derzawy na nabuttia pownoprawnoho czlenstwa Ukrajiny w Jewropejs'komu Sojuzi ta w Orhanizaciji Pivnichnoatlantycznoho dohoworu)* (Про внесення змін до Конституції України [щодо стратегічного курсу держави на набуття повноправного членства України в Європейському Союзі та в Організації Північноатлантичного договору]), Відомості Верховної Ради, 2019, no. 9, p. 50, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2680-VIII#Text> [21.11.2021].

the latter two are distinctly non-conventional for the Yalta international system.

In the early 2000s, Ukraine had about forty countries as its 'strategic partners' and couldn't manage them properly due to the obvious lack of normative documents of strategic nature that would be describing the main notions and outlining the main conditions. It was only after the Foreign Policy Strategy was signed by President Zelenskyy in summer 2021⁶ Ukraine could really commence strategising, working with a certain amplitude and understanding its own key foreign policy benchmarks. Having prioritised the processes of ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and counteracting the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation, the Strategy underlines the course for the EU and NATO membership, stipulates on the importance of the rights and interests of Ukrainian citizens abroad, support of Ukrainian exports and attraction of foreign investments, and technological and ecological transformation of the country.

In the particular case of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area's (DCFTA) framework, a general progress in 2019 was recorded on the level of 59%⁷, with the figure decreasing to 39% next year 39%⁸ to be estimated for 'arrival' at 49.2% by

⁶ *Hława derżawy zatwierdyw Stratehiju zowniszn'opolitycznoji dijal'nosti Ukrajiny* (Глава держави затвердив Стратегію зовнішньополітичної діяльності України), President of Ukraine, 27 August 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-strategiyu-zovnishnopolitichnoyi-di-70413> [22.11.2021].

⁷ *Zahal'nyj prohres za 2019 rik* (Загальний прогрес за 2019 рік), EU.UA, <https://pulse.kmu.gov.ua/ua/a/year/2019> [19.11.2021].

⁸ *Zahal'nyj prohres za 2020 rik* (Загальний прогрес за 2020 рік), EU.UA, <https://pulse.kmu.gov.ua/ua/a/year/2020> [21.11.2021].

the second half of 2021⁹. In the context of the AA, the leading segments of cooperation are reported to be ‘technical trading barriers elimination’, ‘public procurement’, and ‘foreign, security, and defence policy’, which enjoy correspondingly 100%, 68.6%, and 44.2% of perfect execution (such areas as ‘public health’ and ‘transport’ are lagging behind with 7.8% and 7.1%)¹⁰.

With that, as argued, there is a distinctively negative tendency that the process of legal approximation in Ukraine is featured by – it can be described as ‘Ukrainisation of EU legislation’ when some of the EU-issued normative documents, which can not be legally ‘absorbed’ by and in Ukraine, started being interpreted by a number of Ukrainian entities “at their own discretion, whilst attempting to apply these regulations in a selective manner”¹¹. This became a major topic in the context of discussion between Ukraine and the EU on the comprehensive review of the country’s achievements regarding the AA’s objectives, which both sides decided to do after the 22nd Ukraine-EU summit in October 2020¹².

If compared to the EU-associated dimension, the NATO-Ukraine ‘story’ is even more dynamic and complex. The fact of recognising Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities

⁹ O. Bułana, S. Diaczenko, D. Naumenko, *Jewrointehracija popry COVID: prohres u vykonanni Uhody pro asociaciiu u 2020 – perszu polowynu 2021 rr.* (Євроінтеграція попри COVID: прогрес у виконанні Угоди про асоціацію у 2020 – першу половину 2021 рр.), NGO Ukrainian Centre for European Policy, 2021, <https://ucep.org.ua/doslidzhennya/yev-rointehracziya-popry-covid-progres-u-vykonanni-ugody-pro-asocziaczuyu-u-2020-per-shu-polowynu-2021-rr-2.html> [19.11.2021].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ V. Vernygora, op.cit., pp. 16-17.

¹² *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement*, Mission of Ukraine to the European Union, 15 April 2021, <https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/2633-relations/ugoda-pro-asociaciyu-mizh-ukrayinoyu-ta-yes> [12.11.2021].

Partner of NATO is a colossal step ahead in establishing a higher level of interoperability between the two sides. In June 2020, the North Atlantic Council decided to add Ukraine to the list of the alliance's enhanced partners (Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden), so a more nuanced tailor-made platform for cooperation could be established¹³. Of course, such a level of recognition is not to assist the Ukrainian side in solving the 'Hungarian puzzle' by default – from 2018, Hungary has been making global headlines with its blockage of myriads of NATO-Ukraine activities, from statements to meetings, because of the country's widely publicised disagreement with Ukraine about the latter's language law¹⁴ – but, as declared, it will allow Ukraine to take part in the planning of NATO operations and gain access to all NATO exercises¹⁵.

In 2019-2021, Volodymyr Zelenskyy met NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg several times. Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration has been a major theme for Oleksiy Honcharuk and Denys Shmyhal, as Prime Ministers. More than 70 Ukrainian institutions took part in implementing Ukraine-NATO Annual National Programs, which were even updated to the RBM methodology as per NATO standards¹⁶.

¹³ *NATO recognises Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner*, NATO, 12 June 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm [19.11.2021].

¹⁴ *Hungary to block Ukraine's NATO membership over language law*, Reuters, 4 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-nato-hungary-idUSKBN1Y823N> [19.11.2021].

¹⁵ *NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Program for Ukraine*, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 24 July 2020, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/en/news/2020/07/24/natos-enhanced-opportunities-program-for-ukraine/> [15.11.2021].

¹⁶ *Pro riczni nacional'ni prohramy pid ehidoju Komisijiukrajina – NATO (Прорічні національні програми під егідою Комісії Україна – НАТО)*, President of Ukraine, 24 February 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/722021-36825> [19.11.2021].

Moreover, the Communication Strategy on Euro-Atlantic Integration was also signed by the President of Ukraine in order to raise awareness about the importance of this strategic vector of Ukraine as per its Constitution¹⁷. In September 2021, President Zelensky “very directly” asked US President Joe Biden about Ukraine’s NATO accession prospects¹⁸. At the end of the day, “you have not because you ask not”...

Strategic line 2: Ukraine and its Neighbourhood

Ukraine’s multi-dimensional importance for Europe’s central and eastern parts as well as the Black Sea basin can hardly be underestimated. Together with the Black Sea-connected environs, Ukraine’s neighbouring proximity with ten countries¹⁹ makes it one of the most inter-regional in the world. Objectively, however, the President’s initial *naïveté* did not prevent him from establishing highly effective as well as pragmatically positive channels of communication with Turkey and Poland; it is something that no Zelensky’s predecessors had ever been able (or wanted) to accomplish. In a significant addition, the obvious inefficacy of the GU[U]AM and the disastrous historic flop of the Community of Democratic Choice were good lessons to learn from, especially given the relatively peaceful, for Ukraine, circumstances then. Therefore, the Crimea Platform, having grown up

¹⁷ *Pro Stratehiju komunikaciji z pytan’ jewroatlanticznoji integraciji Ukrajiny na period do 2025 roku (Про Стратежію комунікації з питань євроатлантичної інтеграції України на період до 2025 року)*, President of Ukraine, 11 August 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3482021-39617> [17.11.2021].

¹⁸ *Zelensky tells of Biden’s stance on Ukraine’s NATO membership issue*, Ukrinform, 13 September 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3314456-zelensky-tells-of-bidens-stance-on-ukraines-nato-membership-issue.html> [19.11.2021].

¹⁹ Let us count Georgia into this number, even though its territorial waters do not get directly interlinked with those of Ukraine.

into noticeable being from within the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in April 2021, can be described as the Ukrainian foreign policy's ultimate success achieved in the process of crafting a conceptually new version of neo-regionalism, which has apparently drifted far away from boring premises of political economy, corny quasi-regional interrelations, and opportunism of Henry Kissinger's old-fashioned 'triangles'.

Arguably, having secured the attendance of high-level representatives from all member states of NATO, the EU, G7 as well as Australia and New Zealand, the Platform's inaugural event on 23 August 2021 managed to formulate and project that should lead to "de-occupation of Crimea and its peaceful return to Ukraine"²⁰. In a geo-strategically innovative and bold way, this move brings the Crimean issues (being intentionally blurred by the Kremlin and its global partners) back on the table, underlining the fact that the Russian Federation is not enjoying even the *de facto* full control over the peninsula. Thus, there is a likelihood that the Crimea Platform is to stay for as long as Ukraine and the signatories of the Platform-issued declaration remain focused (for both the common and their own reasons) on putting pressure on the Russian Federation to end its "temporary occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol"²¹.

Geography-wise, the immediate east means 'war' for Ukraine, and Kravchuk-Kuchma-Yushchenko-Yanukovych's

²⁰ *Crimea Platform*, Crimea Platform, <https://crimea-platform.org/en/about> [21.11.2021].

²¹ *Joint Declaration of the International Crimea Platform Participants*, Crimea Platform, <https://crimea-platform.org/en/samit/deklaraciya> [19.11.2021].

style of flirting with Russia does not look like a possibility any longer. In his interview with *The Washington Post*, Volodymyr Zelenskyy described Russian President Vladimir Putin as being “irrational” and “emotional, sometimes even highly emotional”, adding that Putin “is too emotional when it comes to Ukraine”²². This level of the caustic use of irony can be treated as a position of moral strength vis-à-vis Russia, an undetected communicational phenomenon among all foregoers of the current Ukrainian President. Across the Ukrainian border with Russia, 400 odd kilometers of which are controlled by the latter, another style of communication prevails. In April 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, making a reference about the Minsk-2 Protocol, noted that Russia “mustn’t let Mr. Zelensky and his team get off the hook, even though they are trying hard to wriggle out”²³. Arguably, the “war” vs. “hook” situation is to determine the next steps for the two sides, but if any new agreement is to be signed, it is unlikely to be done in Minsk. Things have changed since 2015 when the latest package of measures to stop hostilities (essentially – yet another Russian occupation) in the Ukrainian east was signed off in the Belarusian capital. These days, it is a different Belarus.

Even though it is not going precisely with geography, the northern dimension for Ukraine is reverberated in the

²² I. Khurshudyan, *Ahead of White House meeting, Ukraine's Zelensky expresses frustration with Western allies*, *The Washington Post*, 19 August 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-zelensky-interview-russia/2021/08/19/93b475e6-fabe-11eb-911c-524bc8b68f17_story.html [19.11.2021].

²³ V. Isachenkov, *Russia's foreign minister warns Ukraine that Moscow would not accept push to revise 2015 peace deal*, *The Globe and Mail*, 28 April 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-russias-foreign-minister-warns-ukraine-that-moscow-would-not-accept> [20.11.2021].

images of Belarus and the Baltic trio (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Historically, the Principality of Polatsk (the ‘cradle’ of Belarusian statehood) and its interlinkage with Kyivan Rus as well as Livonians and Latgalians made it possible for Belarus to become an essential element of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and, later on, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These formations and historic connections allow Ukraine to enhance its understanding about the country’s immediate and not so immediate northern neighbourhood. As once noted, Belarus was among those eleven countries, which voted against the UN General Assembly’s Resolution that was calling upon states not to recognise changes in status of Crimea region (adopted on 27 March 2014), and, considering the fact that Belarus and Ukraine share a 1,000 km borderline, “[a]ny Russian military pressure from the north would totally redefine the current conflict and would force Ukraine to radically rethink the country’s entire defence posture”²⁴.

Nevertheless, during the Ze period, a prospective Russian invasion from the northern flank started being tightly bound with the outcome (and revolutionary consequences) of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, the ‘Wagner Affair’, and the 2021 Belarus–EU border crisis – all these factors taken together, with necessity, can determine the fate of Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s political regime sooner rather than later. There is a likelihood that the situation’s further escalation is not to bring any positive news for Ukraine,

²⁴ V. Davidzon, *Difficult neighbors: How the Belarus crisis has strained ties between Minsk and Kyiv*, Atlantic Council, 3 March 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/difficult-neighbors-how-the-belarus-crisis-has-strained-ties-between-minsk-and-kyiv/> [19.11.2021].

since the rising geo-strategic stakes may push the Russian Federation to establish its full military control over Belarus, in the light of a series of documents on integrating the two countries' economies, energy sector, and taxation systems, which were signed Putin and Lukashenka in the beginning of November 2021²⁵.

Elaborating on the Baltics, a recent comprehensive academic study on strategic narratives and perceptions of the Baltic trio vis-à-vis Ukraine detected a multi-dimensional level of understanding of the status quo. This is where sincere partnerships, honest concerns, socio-historic 'closeness', self-reflections, and friendly advice can be found in their widest variations²⁶. Yet Ukraine cannot treat, for example, Estonia's support of its Euro-Atlantic aspirations as a forever given – any of the Baltics is never shy in expressing its dissatisfaction with how Ukraine does things. For example, in August 2021, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid noted that the country would need 20 years of work to get to the EU's full membership, underlining her concerns about Ukrainian courts²⁷.

On the western side, there is plenty of strategy for Ukraine. To an extent, the Belarusian crisis together with the Nord Stream-2 saga made this particular vector of Ukrainian

²⁵ *Russia's Putin backs 'brotherly' Belarus amid EU pressure*, DW, 4 November 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-putin-backs-brotherly-belarus-amid-pressure/a-59726101> [19.11.2021].

²⁶ *Special issue 30 years after the breakup of the USSR: Russia and post-Soviet Europe, narratives and perceptions*, N. Chaban, E. Pavlov, H. Mondry (eds.), "New Zealand Slavonic Journal", vol. 53-54, 2021, <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/arts/schools-and-departments/russian/nz-slavonic-journal/accordion/latest-issue/nzsj53-54.pdf> [21.11.2021].

²⁷ K. Kaljulaid as cited in *Estonian president: Ukraine needs 20 years of work to join EU*, The Baltic Times, 25 August 2021, https://www.baltictimes.com/estonian_president__ukraine_needs_20_years_of_work_to_join_eu/ [19.11.2021].

foreign policy as important as it can ever be. There has been a lot of different and difficult history behind, thus Poland does not need an intermediary in communication with Kyiv, and President Zelenskyy seems to have found a good comfort zone in exchanging thoughts with Polish President Andrzej Duda – they met in May and August 2021, while having had a number of phone conversations in the meantime²⁸. As reported, on 9 November 2021, when Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki advised his country's parliament that the closure of Poland's border with the Belarusian side "could result in migrants being redirected to Ukraine in order to make their way to the EU from there"²⁹, thus the two countries' authorities began cooperating to be in a preemptive mode. On the top of everything, as a 'geo-strategic message in a bottle' from Józef Piłsudski, Poland is the heart of the Three Seas Initiative to counterbalance the Chinese 16/17+1 framework – this is something serious that Ukraine is required to monitor for its own benefit and in a framework of establishing yet another point of contact with the other EU's Member States on its western flank.

Slovakia, Hungary and Romania – for different reasons – are instrumental for Ukrainian foreign policy-linked initiatives and moves. Bratislava is gradually becoming gigan-

²⁸ Poland always supports Ukraine and the Ukrainian people – Volodymyr Zelenskyy following the meeting with Andrzej Duda in Warsaw, President of Ukraine, 3 May 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/polsha-zavzhdi-pidtrimuye-ukrayinu-ta-ukrayinskiy-narod-volo-68253> and Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with President of Poland Andrzej Duda, President of Ukraine, 23 August 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsya-z-prezidentom-polshi-andzheye-70305> [19.11.2021].

²⁹ M. Morawiecki as cited in Bohdan Nahaylo, *Escalating Belarus border crisis could pose a security threat to Ukraine*, Atlantic Council, 15 November 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/escalating-belarus-border-crisis-could-pose-a-security-threat-to-ukraine> [22.11.2021].

tically important for Kyiv in the process of solving many energy ‘equations’ – especially, when the physical connection of the Slovak and Polish GTS will be established via the interconnector PL-SK, so the Slovakian side will be expecting to “get the opportunity to enter the market of Norwegian natural gas with a proposal to transport it to the south in the interests of the CEE countries by the end of 2022”³⁰. Objectively, President Zelenskyy’s visit to Slovakia in September 2020³¹ was a smart move by all means. As for Ukraine’s policy on Hungary, it could be suggested that the dispute between the two countries could be ‘replaced’ onto a common EU-Ukraine platform – a positive solution on the problem that has plenty of populist ‘flavour’ clearly asks for a much broader perspective, since the bilateralism does not work and Zelenskyy’s greetings of his country’s Hungarian community in their mother tongue do not work either³².

To the south is Turkey, the world’s most sophisticated geo-strategic actor in the first two decades of the new millennium. In less than twenty years, Ukraine’s southern neighbour across the Black Sea has ‘grown’ up into a multi-regional power, entering the segments of international politics where it had never been from the beginning of the XX century. Moving away from the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a new Turkish Republic is slowly but surely broad-

³⁰ *The first ever connection of gas transmission systems of Slovakia and Poland*, CEP Consult, 5 August 2021, <https://cepconsult.com/publications/the-first-connection-of-gas-transmission-systems-of-slovakia-and-poland/> [22.11.2021].

³¹ V. Zelenskyy, *Slovak PM discuss cooperation in trade, transport, energy*, Ukrinform, 19 November 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-economy/3105888-zelensky-slovak-pm-discuss-cooperation-in-trade-transport-energy.html> [19.11.2021].

³² *FM Szijjártó: Actions Would Hopefully Follow Zelensky’s Gesture*, Hungary Today, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/fm-szijarto-actions-would-hopefully-follow-zelenskys-gesture/> [19.11.2021].

ening the horizons in all directions, including the Ukrainian one. Evidently, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is member of another 'league' for the Ukrainian President to match him any time soon, but Zelenskyy's amateurishness is objectively likable, even amusing, for the Turkish strategist – their talks are frequent and effective for both sides³³. In this difficult period, Turkey is a guarantee for the Crimea Platform to survive and a reinforcer for Ukraine's global initiatives like, for instance, a call on UNESCO to support protection of the Crimean cultural heritage³⁴. Certainly, on a bad day, Ukraine can be told off by Ankara (in October 2021, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was furious about Ukraine that was making constant references about Bayraktar TB2 drone, deployed by the Ukrainian Army, as it would be 'Turkish' one)³⁵, but *naïveté* helps to get a problem off the table. Finally, the Turkey-Azerbaijan effective interlinkage has already become an example of establishing a regional 'powerhouse' that delivers big time – the 2020 Karabakh War as well as Azerbaijan's undisputed success in it made a number of notable amendments to dozens of textbooks in the field of security studies.

³³ Zelenskyy, Erdoğan, discuss the situation of Crimean Political Prisoners, Ukrinform, 21 September 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3319797-zelensky-erdogan-discuss-situation-of-crimean-political-prisoners-fta.html> [24.11.2021].

³⁴ Emine Dzhaparova calls on UNESCO to support protection of the Crimean cultural heritage from Russian occupants, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 10 November 2021, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/emine-dzhaparova-zaklikala-yunesko-spriyati-zahistu-kulturnoyi-spadshchini-krimu-vid-dij-rosijskih-okupantiv> [24.11.2021].

³⁵ Don't blame us for Ukraine's use of Turkish drones – Turkish FM, Reuters, 31 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/dont-blame-us-ukraines-use-turkish-drones-turkish-fm-2021-10-31> [24.11.2021].

Conclusion

In the 1980s, New Kids on the Block made a revolution in the world's entertainment industry. The spontaneous Ze 'revolution of governance', while making plenty of global socio-political trends, was destined to start comprehending its own grand-region from a more holistic perspective. In an unexpected way, considering the already mentioned factor of both real and perceived *naïveté*, the Ze period can be evidently observed as a time-frame when generic objectives of foreign policy started being transformed into a number of more nuanced direction-specific ideas and projects. This current approach does not symbolise a predetermined success or a recipe to avoid making rookie's mistakes, but it is still a conceptually different one, if compared with the country's classic (and notoriously infamous) multi-vectoral foreign policy, which, eventually, led to February 2014.



Marta Drabczuk

The “Dreamland” of President Zelenskyy: implementation or imitation of economic changes

Election program of Zelenskyy: economic plans of the presidency

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's 2019 presidential election program and the program of his Servant of the People Party in the elections to the Verkhovna Rada in 2019 contained a number of policies related to the economy. The main slogan of Zelenskyy's presidential campaign was “The end of the era of poverty in Ukraine”. The main program provisions concerning economic policy were declarative, populist, and rather impossible to achieve in one presidential term. The priorities of economic development include reducing the shadow economy, promotion and freedom of competition, development of domestic production, protection of foreign investments, and long-term lending at affordable prices, which should be the key to significant economic growth and prosperity. According to the Ukrainian legislative system, the prerog-

ative to define and implement economic policy belongs to the government. However, the President of Ukraine is also the leader of the Servant of the People Party, which received a parliamentary majority (the party obtained more than 43% of the votes in the 2019 parliamentary election and took 254 out of 450 seats in the Ukrainian parliament), therefore he took responsibility for economic policy.

The steps the presidential candidate promised to implement, as a priority, to boost economic development (in the part “A wealthy citizen is a wealthy state”) were: to conduct a national economic audit of the country with the involvement of domestic and international companies; to set a “zero declaration” for business, i.e. the ability to declare and legalize income for 5% of its value (so – called “economic purgatory”); to create a National Economic Strategy; to demonopolize key industries; the de-shadowing of the economy; long-term inexpensive lending; to set up a state program to support innovation; targeted transparent support for industries that can become the engine of economic development; to introduce a program to provide coverage to 100% of the country’s territory with broadband Internet; simplification of the tax system to afford more freedom to businesses and reduce administrative pressure; to form a transparent agricultural land market.

Undoubtedly, the Ukrainian economy required changes, but it had no signs of being in a crisis in 2019 (especially considering that the economy has suffered permanent losses due to the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014 and due to changes in the global economic condition – weakening of industrial production potential and deterioration of export opportunities for Ukraine), and the dynamics of GDP growth

was positive. In March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic interrupted this trend and the consequent introduction of quarantine regimes and the suspension of normal economic activity in many sectors of the economy influenced its condition.

The attempt to composite the government of Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk (from August 29, 2019 to March 4, 2020) proved one more weakness of the Ukrainian political scene – the lack of experienced managers among political candidates for the main positions responsible for economic development. The next prime minister, Denys Shmyhal (from March 4, 2020), changed not only the staff in the positions linked to economic issues but also the ministries and departments, e.g., the Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Agriculture became the Ministry of the Economy and the Ministry of Digital Transformation appeared; the Ministry of Energy and Environmental Protection was divided into the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Furthermore, the two changes of prime minister and the almost complete change of the government within one year of the presidency of Zelenskyy were not conducive to the pro-development tendency. The primary task of government was to prepare the economic development strategy – a framework document for systemic reforms in response to ongoing challenges in different sectors of the economy. Oleksiy Honcharuk's government approved the document "Economic Strategy: Growth through Investments until 2024" in March 2020 but it was not implemented because of the change of prime minister. The newly established government headed by Denys Shmyhal approved a long-term economic strategy for Ukraine.

The economic development framework

Ukraine started developing a legal framework for economic development, improving state administration, and the opening of new markets or reforming of old ones. On April 8, 2020 the National Economic Strategy until 2030 (NES-2030) was approved by the government of Denys Shmyhal. According to the prime minister, “NES-2030 is a document that should lead Ukraine to the club of developed and successful countries. This will be a significant contribution to the development of a prosperous European Ukraine and is the most comprehensive planning document in the history of Ukraine”¹. NES-2030 is 20 areas (both sectoral priorities: industry, agriculture, mining, infrastructure, transport, energy, information and communication technologies, creative industries and services; and cross-cutting areas: digitalization, the green deal, business development, and balanced regional development) with concrete initiatives designed to ensure economic growth and to increase the welfare of Ukrainians, planned measures, and expected results. NES-2030 is a fundamental roadmap for implementing the changes that Ukraine and society have long needed to embark on the path of economic growth and institutional change in Ukraine, but it’s necessary to approve the priorities for the Government Action Program for 2021-2023 and a list of priority laws for the next two years. Despite the long-term goals, a number of documents have already been developed, and the top 30 challenges of economic development

¹ Denys Shmyhal: *Government has approved the National Economic Strategy until 2030*, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/denis-shmigal-uryad-zatverdiv-nacionalnu-ekonomichnu-strategiyu-do-2030-roku> [5.11.2021].

have been determined. An audit of the state was initiated by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the results of which were presented on November 6, 2020. According to the results, the country does not know what path to follow when there are elements of misunderstanding of the strategy.

The second important document signed by the president on August 12, 2021 was Economic Security Strategy until 2025, adopted earlier by the National Security and Defense Council². The Strategy sets a base for the formation of a state policy in the field of economic security and contains a detailed assessment of its key areas: financial, production, foreign economic, macroeconomic, investment, and innovation security. In each of these areas, the Strategy defines the main challenges and targets, as well as tasks and measures for their implementation. The strategy should result in creation of a stable, competitive, socially responsible market economy and conditions for advanced development of the scientific and technological potential of the country, and sustainable growth of national wealth and factors of production, thereby achieving the goals of sustainable development of Ukraine for the period up to 2030, including a standard of living on par with economically developed countries. Among the key tasks defined by the Strategy are: prioritizing industrial development by expanding domestic and export markets for Ukrainian products (special

² *Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy № 347/2021 Pro riszennia Rady nacional'noji bezpeky i oborony Ukrainy vid 11 serpnia 2021 roku "Pro Stratehiju ekonomicznoji bezpeky Ukrainy na period do 2025 roku"* (Указ Президента України № 347/2021 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 11 серпня 2021 року «Про Стратегію економічної безпеки України на період до 2025 року»), <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3472021-39613> [5.11.2021].

emphasis is made on advanced technology products like air- and spacecraft); improving trade investigations procedures; introducing competitive environmental monitoring on the Ukrainian markets; harmonizing national energy and ecology standards with the relevant EU directives in these fields; improving the sanctions policy in order to increase its efficiency and reduce potential risks for national interests; reducing regulatory burden; extending international trade and economic relations (free trade agreements); introducing a separate system of management and organization of economic processes in the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions; etc.

The EU – Ukraine Association Agreement

Among the main principles on which the strategic view of the Ukrainian economic is based are European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), entered into force on September 1, 2017, although parts of the agreement have been provisionally applied since November 1, 2014 and the DCFTA since January 1, 2016. The DCFTA is a major milestone in bilateral trade relations offering new economic opportunities to both sides. During the last days of Petro Poroshenko's presidency, the Verkhovna Rada adopted an amendment to the constitution concerning the strategic course of the state to obtain full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and NATO. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy assured that the strategic course of Ukraine's economic integration with the European community remains unchanged.

The need for further liberalization of trade relations with EU members was reported by the Ukrainian business com-

munity. Trade turnover between the EU and Ukraine has grown since 2016 (with the entry into force of the partial DCFTA), and in 2020 EU countries accounted for 41% of the Ukraine’s foreign trade. On February 11, 2021, the EU-Ukraine Association Council (during its seventh meeting) defined the priorities for economic cooperation, integration, and regulatory approximation with the EU in sectors such as the digital economy, the energy system, the banking system, climate and environment protection (in line with the Paris Agreement), trade facilitation, customs cooperation, and justice and home affairs³. Following the AA performance review in 2021, Ukraine is planning to implement five common markets with the EU in the coming years: “industrial free market” (Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products, ACAA); “common sky” (agreement on a common airspace); “common digital market” (roadmap for integration with the EU digital single market implemented from 2020); “energy network” (accession to ENTSO-E in 2023); and “customs procedure” (exchange of customs data between Ukraine and the EU and simplification of the customs procedure, as well as accession to the Convention on a Common Transit Procedure in a few years).

The key focus of the last (23rd) Ukraine-EU Summit, which took place in Kyiv on October 12, 2021, was the ongoing comprehensive review of the achievement of AA ob-

³ *Joint press release following the 7th Association Council meeting between the EU and Ukraine*, Council of the EU Press, 11 February 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/11/joint-press-statement-following-the-7th-association-council-meeting-between-the-eu-and-ukraine/> [10.11.2021].

jectives and renegotiation of the agreement on the DCFTA⁴. The EU and Ukraine agreed the exchange of the respective assessments, with a view to a joint assessment to be presented, and the evaluation of the compliance of Ukrainian legal regulations with the DCFTA requirements in order to sign the visa-free industrial regime at the 2022 EU-Ukraine summit in Brussels. The two parties have agreed that during the summit in Brussels in 2022, a joint assessment of the agreement will be presented, and the next year will be devoted to the evaluation of the compliance of Ukrainian legal regulations with the DCFTA requirements in order to sign the Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products of Ukrainian Producers on the EU market.

An example of integration into the EU economic area is the recently signed agreement on a common airspace within the framework of the Ukraine-EU summit. The process of forming a common EU aviation space began in 1999. On December 12, 2006, the EU Council authorized the Commission to start relevant negotiations with Ukraine, but only in October 2013 was the text of an agreement on a common airspace agreed upon by the parties. It is expected that the agreement will facilitate the inclusion of Ukraine in the common aviation market, lift the restrictions on flights between Ukraine and EU Member States, and enable the contribution of low-cost airline operators on the Ukrainian market. A common airspace will provide increased trade, development of business and people-to-people contacts,

⁴ *Joint statement following the 23rd EU-Ukraine Summit Kyiv, 12 October 2021*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52383/20211012-joint-statement-final.pdf> [10.11.2021].

and improvement of the investment climate in Ukraine. The Ukrainian authorities expect that by 2025, the domestic air transport market will grow to 4 million passengers (from 0.5 million in 2020) and to 5,000 tons of cargo (from 700 in 2020) per year⁵.

Cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

The weak condition of the Ukrainian economy determines the involvement of capital from external sources. Ukraine's long-standing financial partner is the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ukraine makes use of the IMF's financial and technical resources to achieve macroeconomic stability and to build up the necessary conditions for economic reforms. In 1994-2020, under the framework of nine macroeconomic support programs (the systemic transformation facility (STF); a "Stand-By" stabilization loan; the EFF arrangement – a loan to support development; and precautionary "Stand-By"), the IMF transferred 23.9 billion SDR (35 billion USD equivalent) to Ukraine. Ukraine's relations with the IMF had been tested since the election of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. After difficult negotiations (and the fulfillment of two conditions: the adoption of the banking law and the land law) on June 9, 2020, the IMF and Ukraine resumed cooperation by signing an agreement on an 18-month stand-by program to the amount of 5.04 billion USD to help counter the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, restore the

⁵ M. Drabczuk, *Szczyt UE – Ukraina: pogłębianie współpracy w ramach układu o stowarzyszeniu*, "Komentarze IEŚ", no. 463/2021, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ies-komentarze-463-160-2021.pdf> [15.11.2021].

balance of payments, and further structural reforms⁶. The terms of cooperation set by the IMF are increasingly criticized by the government and society for excessive interference in the management of the state and the failure to translate into a real improvement in the conditions for the country's economic development.

Despite the difficulties in the relationship, the IMF is Ukraine's most important financial partner. Firstly, the IMF's requirements are in line with the planned economic reforms – the differences are that in their pace. Secondly, capital from the IMF (the interest rate in 2020 was 2.63%) is cheaper than commercial loans or money obtained from the issue of eu-bonds (7.2%). Thirdly, referring to the IMF's requirements, the government managed to carry out socially unpopular reforms that had been blocked for many years by groups controlled by oligarchs. Fourthly, cooperation with the IMF opens up the possibility for Ukraine to obtain financing from other international institutions (such as the World Bank, EBRD, EIB) as well as countries and organizations (USA, EU, Germany, Canada, China).

What economic changes are ongoing in Ukraine during the presidency of Zelenskyy?

The Ukrainian parliament has passed a number of acts required for economic development; some of these, despite a fast-track regime of parliament's work ("turbo regime"), require further development. The Ukrainian authorities deal

⁶ M. Drabczuk, *Współpraca Ukrainy z MFW: w drodze do stabilności czy stabilnej zależności*, "Komentarze IES", no. 439/2021, <https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ies-komentarze-439-136-2021.pdf> [15.11.2021].

with institutional reforms: comprehensive reform of the tax and customs system (liquidation of the tax policy; launch of the Bureau of Economic Security of Ukraine); judicial reform (creation of the High Qualification Commission of Judges with a commission for selection of staff to the High Qualification Commission of Judges Court and updating the Supreme Court of Ukraine); the policy of deoffshorization of the economy; the policy of reducing the budget deficit to 3.5% of GDP in 2022, to 3% of GDP in 2023, and to 2.7% of GDP in 2024; recovery of the financial sector to ensure the independence of the banking sector regulator and the relative stability of the national currency; and reform of the energy sector⁷.

One of the conditions necessary to continue cooperation with the IMF was the adoption of the most important laws – the act on the land market and the banking law. It should be emphasized that both of these projects can be counted as a success of President Zelenskyy. On May 21, 2020, Zelenskyy signed the “the anti-Kolomoisky act”⁸, the law prohibiting the return of insolvent banks (which were closed as part of a clean-up of the sector, including one that was nationalized: market leader PrivatBank owned by Ihor Kolomoisky and Gennadiy Bogolyubov) to their former shareholders and directing courts to respect the conclusions of the national regulator in this respect, the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU). It allows for the payment of compensation

⁷ *Ukraine 2020-2021: Inflated Expectations, Unexpected Challenges (Assessments)*, Razumkov Centre, <https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/other/2021-PIDSUMKI-PROGNOZI-UKR-ENG.pdf> [15.11.2021].

⁸ M. Minakov, *The Anti-Kolomoisky Law: Pro et Contra*, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilson-center.org/blog-post/anti-kolomoisky-law-pro-et-contra> [15.11.2021].

to former owners but only on the basis of an assessment by international auditors.

This coincided with Zelenskyy's promise to reduce the oligarchs' role in Ukraine. In fact, the president failed to get rid of the decisive influence of oligarchic clans on the formation of economic policy. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the adoption of the law on prevention and counteraction to legalization (laundering) of proceeds of crime, financing of terrorism and financing of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on December 6, 2019 and the law on deoligarchization relating to the prevention of threats to national security associated with the excessive influence of persons with significant economic or political weight in public life (oligarchs) on November 5, 2021.

The second important and controversial resolution of President Zelenskyy and his team was the opening of the land market from July 1, 2021. Ukraine has undertaken the obligation both in the Association Agreement with EU, and in the Memorandum of Cooperation with the IMF. Until the end of 2023, only individuals will be able to acquire land (no more than 100 ha per capita), while from The Ukrainian parliament has passed a number of acts required for economic development; some of these, despite a fast-track regime of parliament's work ("turbo regime"), require further development. The Ukrainian authorities deal with institutional reforms: comprehensive reform of the tax and customs system (liquidation of the tax policy; launch of the Bureau of Economic Security of Ukraine); judicial reform (creation of the High Qualification Commission of Judges with a commission for selection of staff to the High Qualification Commission of Judges Court and updating the Supreme Court

of Ukraine); the policy of deoffshorization of the economy; the policy of reducing the budget deficit to 3.5% of GDP in 2022, to 3% of GDP in 2023, and to 2.7% of GDP in 2024; recovery of the financial sector to ensure the independence of the banking sector regulator and the relative stability of the national currency; and reform of the energy sector⁹.

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⁹ *Ukraine 2020-2021: Inflated Expectations, Unexpected Challenges (Assessments)*, Razumkov Centre, <https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/other/2021-PIDSUMKI-PROGNOZI-UKR-ENG.pdf> [15.11.2021].

¹⁰ M. Minakov, op.cit.

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2024, legal entities registered in the country will also be granted this right (up to 10,000 ha). The right for foreigners and companies in which they are shareholders to buy land by has to be approved by a nationwide referendum. The market will include 27 mln ha of land owned by the public. The sale of state and municipal land will remain prohibited. According to the World Bank, the lifting of the moratorium on the sale of land would bring the economy some \$0.7-1.5 billion annually.

One of the foremost tasks in Zelenskyy's program was that Ukraine will carry out large-scale privatization under his presidency. "We will carry out a large privatization and sell hundreds of interesting properties for efficient investors", Zelenskyy said¹¹. In the privatization process, the president saw the possibility of both increasing the efficiency of the management strategically important companies and limiting corruption. The sale of state-owned property in Ukraine was not only an internal problem (depletion of the state budget), but also an obstacle in Ukraine's relations with the IMF and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. According to the law on the privatization of

¹¹ *Power of people in "Dreamland": Election program of Volodymyr Zelensky*, <https://112.international/article/power-of-people-in-land-of-dreams-election-program-of-volodymyr-zelensky-38402.html> [15.11.2021].

state and municipal property (from March 7, 2018), privatized entities were divided into two categories: small-scale privatization objects (the value of which does not exceed 250 mln UAH and which can be sold exclusively through the government’s electronic trading system ProZorro.Sale) and large ones (over 250 mln UAH, the sale process of such enterprises involves investment advisers). From 2019 to the end of 2021, the sale of 23 objects was planned. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 30, 2020, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law on suspending large-scale privatization for fear of a decline in value due to instability and negative forecasts for the Ukrainian economy during the pandemic till March 31, 2021. It’s expected that in 2021, the planned revenues from the privatization of state property will be four times higher than in 2020, i.e., 12 billion UAH. The Finance Ministry and the Fund of State Property have to prepare a list of objects for privatization for 2022-2023. A large privatization campaign that is going on in Ukraine should add \$1 billion UAH to the state budget of Ukraine in the coming years.

To attract the foreign capital investment, parliament adopted the “investment nanny” law on state assistance to investment projects with significant investments in Ukraine (state assistance to a qualifying investment project may amount to up to 30% of the planned investment value) in December 2020. The law aims to stimulate large investments exceeding 20 million EUR into selected sectors: processing industry with some exceptions; extraction for further processing and/or enrichment of minerals (except coal and lignite, crude oil and natural gas); waste management; transport, logistics and warehousing; postal and courier activi-

ties; scientific and technical activities; etc. The law does not apply to PPP (public-private partnerships) or concession projects and privatizations.

The flagship motto of Zelenskyy's presidency was "state in a smartphone". Work on the development of the digital economy and society began in January 2018 with the approval of the digital concept for 2018-2020 and of the Action Plan for its implementation. The "Digital Agenda 2020" defines the main goals of digitization in Ukraine as: stimulating the economy and attracting investments; laying the foundations for the transformation of sectors of the economy to be competitive and efficient ("digitization" of business); availability of digital technologies; creating new opportunities for the realization of human capital, development of innovative, creative and "digital" industries and businesses; development and world leadership in the export of digital products and services. The document also identifies the necessary steps for the digitization of Ukraine (a unique and complex project – DIJA) in the fields of health, infrastructure, ecology, e-commerce, e-government, etc. Today, Ukraine is an important player in the global digital market, but only as an exporter of IT services and qualified personnel. The ongoing digital transformation of the economy and society of Ukraine is a crucial factor not only for the success of the reforms, but also for of the Ukrainian economy, which is getting ready for the "digital leap".

One of the tasks that President Zelenskyy set for himself and the government was to return economic migrants to the state. This task has almost been realized, but not due to the employment policy, but to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of the borders of most countries. By the

end of April 2020, up to 500,000 Ukrainians had returned to Ukraine, but there has been no significant progress in creating new jobs or the conditions for reintegration of migrant workers into Ukrainian society. According to the estimates of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Ukraine, the unemployment rate in 2020 was 13.7-15.4%, although according to government forecasts it was 9.4%. There was the need for at least 4 million potential well-paid vacancies instead of 500,000 new jobs with a salary of 6000-8000 UAH promised by the government. This level of wages offers “labor poverty”, therefore, a significant part of workers has already begun to return abroad.

Conclusion

The president and the Servant of People Party was determined to implement changes in almost all areas of the functioning of the state. His main achievement is not the completion of reforms, but the acceleration of their pace. However, most of the economic changes announced by the president are impossible to achieve in the short to medium term. Therefore, economic processes ongoing in Ukraine often imitate real economic changes, as they are not consecutive and not based on a diagnosis of economic needs. In general, the president has no real tools (apart from the financial support and resources of international institutions) to stop the economic drift towards the “third world” and to encourage qualitative economic changes based on innovation, accelerated investment, structural changes, and increased business competitiveness. In addition to the long-term problems (the ongoing hybrid war and Russia’s economic aggression, the institutional weakness of the state,

instability of the political scene, economic slowdown, and corruption in the authorities), there are also new challenges related to crises resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the balance of power in the region, Chinese economic expansion, etc. The president's unfulfilled promises in the socio-economic sphere lead to a decline in support for Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and the building of "Dreamland" announced by the president during his presidency is rather impossible.



Oleksii Polegkyi

Security issues of Ukraine in the context of Russian-Ukrainian conflict

Russian-Ukrainian tensions at the end of 2021

At the beginning of March 2021, under the pretext of preparing military exercises, Russia sent troops and equipment to the border with Ukraine and to the occupied Crimea. In November 2021, the Russian Federation is again concentrating military forces on the border with Ukraine, raising fears of a new round of armed clashes¹. Although this is not the first time Russia has dramatically increased the concentration of troops on its border with Ukraine, an important marker of the seriousness of the current situation was the sudden visit to Moscow by CIA head William Burns². The military build-

¹ *Russia-Ukraine border: NATO warning over military build-up*, BBC, 16 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59288181> [16.11.2021].

² *CIA director dispatched to Moscow to warn Russia over troop buildup near Ukraine*, CNN, 5 November 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/05/politics/bill-burns-moscow-ukraine/index.html> [5.11.2021].

up has raised fears of a possible Russian offensive that could extend beyond the territories in eastern Ukraine currently controlled by the Kremlin and lead to a dramatic escalation of the simmering conflict between the two countries.

Political tensions have been steadily escalating between Kyiv and Moscow. In February, Ukraine imposed sanctions on Viktor Medvedchuk connected directly to Putin and banned broadcasts by the three pro-Russian television channels owned by Medvedchuk's ally, Taras Kozak. Vladimir Putin has hinted broadly that his patience with Kyiv is running out. Most recently, in summer 2021, Putin questioned the legitimacy of Ukraine's borders and laid bare his own imperial ambitions in his epic article³. Former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev also published an article⁴ where he outlined five reasons why he believes it is "meaningless" to engage in talks with the current Ukrainian authorities. His style and the vulgar language used to show the degree of the Kremlin's anger and dissatisfaction with Ukraine.

There are two main "hot" areas where Russian-Ukrainian conflict is most visible: Donbas and the Black-Azov Seas area. Belarus has also become another point of potential threat for Ukraine.

Situation in Donbas under Zelenskyy's presidency

Despite some achievements in 2019-2020 (mainly in humanitarian aspects), a solution to the conflict in Donbas remains

³ V. Putin, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, 7 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [7.12.2021].

⁴ D. Medvedev, *Pochemu bessmyslenny kontakty s nyneshnim ukrainskim rukovodstvom* (Почему бессмысленны контакты с нынешним украинским руководством), "Коммерсант", 10 November 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5028300> [10.11.2021].

remote. There are no changes in Russia's attitude towards Ukraine and conflict resolution. The main goal of Russia is pushing the Ukrainian government to direct negotiations with representatives of the occupational administrations of DNR/LNR. Ukraine's position remains firm: elections in the occupied part of Donbas should only take place in a secure environment, which means the prior withdrawal of Russian troops and the return of the eastern border to Ukrainian control. Furthermore, contrary to the Kremlin's demands, the topic of Crimea is not off the agenda. At the same time, Ukraine cannot present a realistic vision of a resolution of the conflict and a strategy for the reintegration of occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine without a readiness to resolve the conflict on the part of the Kremlin⁵.

The obstacles to ending the conflict in Donbas are not only the different approaches towards the negotiations, but mainly the different aims of Russia and Ukraine. For Ukraine, the end of the conflict means restoration of its sovereignty; for Russia, keeping Ukraine in its "sphere of privileged interests" and influencing Ukrainian internal affairs.

British analyst Duncan Allan summarized the dilemma of the Minsk Agreements: "Ukraine views the Minsk Process as a chance to restore its sovereignty, whereas Russia sees it as an opportunity to curtail this sovereignty"⁶. Domestic policy obviously plays an important role in both cases. Zelenskyy, even if he could accept Moscow's deal, is limited

⁵ O. Polegkiy, T. Stępniewski (eds.), *Conflict in Donbas: (Im)possible solutions and endless negotiation process*, "IES Policy Papers" 2020, no. 5.

⁶ A. Duncan, *The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine*, Chatham House, 22 May 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/minsk-conundrum-allan> [10.11.2021].

because Ukrainian society would not accept “peace under any condition”.

The cease-fire in Donbas introduced on July 27, 2020 is in effect, though with systematic violations by Russian-backed fighters. But since the beginning of 2021, the situation has significantly deteriorated. Russian mercenaries and snipers have become active in the region again, killing more than 40 Ukrainian soldiers since the beginning of 2021. Russia continues the practice of handing out Russian passports to residents of Donbas, and already more than 650 000 passports were distributed.

In essence, the negotiations in the Minsk format have reached a dead-end, as Russia did not manage to achieve its aim to implement Minsk agreement on its own conditions. The main requirement of the Russian Federation for the continuation of negotiations on Donbas is that representatives of the so-called “republics” (LNR and DNR) should be recognized as the only party with which the Ukrainian military command must conduct a dialogue on the ceasefire regime and further resolve issues of a peaceful settlement.

The Normandy format also seems will not be a platform for negotiations. As was stated by Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba⁷, with their latest actions, including the leak of confidential diplomatic correspondence, Russia is “finishing” the Normandy format of talks on a Donbas settlement and undermines what’s left of international trust.

⁷ *With its actions, Russia seeks to ‘finish’ Normandy format*, Ukrinform, 18 November 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3353167-with-its-actions-russia-seeks-to-finish-normandy-format-kuleba.html> [18.11.2021].

Together with the growing military exercises of the Russian Federation, failure in the negotiation process makes the escalation of active fighting in Donbas more possible in the next few months. Moscow can again try to use its favourite tactics to increase tensions and blackmail Ukraine, and as a result, gain a better position for negotiations. As was summed up in the British House of Commons Report⁸: “Russia has several probable motives for escalating tensions on the border with Ukraine, driven by regional insecurities and President Putin’s willingness to engage in power politics. Russia is using its military for coercive diplomacy, to pressure the Ukrainian Government to make concessions in the political settlements for Donbas, and to test Western allies’ resolve to come to Ukraine’s aid”.

According to the Ukrainian security services (as presented in the media⁹), this spring the DNR leadership was working on three versions of an appeal to Vladimir Putin. The first was a request to provide military assistance to the DPR. The second was to admit the DPR to Russia. The third was to recognize the independence of the DNR and conclude a treaty of friendship and cooperation between the DNR and the Russian Federation. If the Kremlin decided to opt for one of these scenarios (most probably the first one), it would be easy to organize provocation and, under the pretext of “defending its own citizens and population of Donbas”, launch military action.

⁸ *Russia and Ukraine border tensions*, Report, House of Commons, 29 June 2021, p. 12, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6567/documents/71219/default/> [11.11.2021].

⁹ “Glava DNR” gotovit tri varianta obrashcheniya k Putinu, ZN, 10 April 2021, <https://zn.ua/POLITICS/hlava-dnr-hotovit-tri-varianta-obrashcheniya-k-putinu.html> [11.11.2021].

Russia's goals in the potential escalation

Russia has reached the limits of the possibilities to “pressure” Ukraine, but cannot accept real peace in Donbas under Ukrainian control as it will be perceived as weakness on the part of the Kremlin and personally of Vladimir Putin.

Russia's military manoeuvres have primarily political objectives

First, Russia seeks to “reset” negotiations with the West (not only with regard to Ukraine) through its traditional military-political blackmail. Second, the Kremlin, demonstrating force, is trying to force Kyiv to be more accommodating and compliant. In this context, Moscow will again insist on “direct dialogue” with the occupation administrations of DNR and LNR, changes to the Ukrainian Constitution, and elections in the occupied territories without control of the border (which de facto means legitimizing the existing occupation administrations). Third, to prevent Ukraine's rapprochement and deeper cooperation with NATO. According to Moscow's viewpoint, a settlement in Donbas cannot proceed without at least a tacit agreement between the West and Ukraine to fix its non-aligned status.

The Black-Azov Seas area

After the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia in 2014, the Black Sea area has gradually turned into a hotbed of mutual NATO-Russia tensions. In this context, Russia's supremacy in the Black Sea becomes critical for restoring its domination in the Black Sea region. Such a situation indicates the clear intentions of Moscow to turn the Black Sea into its anti-access/area of denial (A2/AD) zone where

annexation of Crimea is presented as a *fait accompli*¹⁰. As claims Steven Blank¹¹, the Russian arms build-up in the Black Sea area is clearly not just a defensive formation but an offensive one against all the other littoral states. This combined arms build-up has generated a formidable force to deny NATO access to the Black Sea or to sympathetic partners like Georgia and Ukraine.

Most often, Moscow explains its aggressive behaviour together with the intensive military build-up by the threats coming from the hostile moves of NATO, where the European missile defence occupies a special role. Russia employs a variety of tools to influence countries that border the Black Sea besides solely military threats – economic, political, diplomatic, media influence, etc. As Bugajski and Doran indicate¹², Russia is using the Black Sea as a more advantageous method of revisionism than extensive land conquests. Moscow could also utilize its power and influence in the Black Sea to challenge and disrupt energy supplies via the pipeline from the Caspian Basin to Europe. The Nord Stream2 and TurkStream pipeline project is a good example of how Russia is using energy ties to further its political and security interests in Europe.

The gradual increase of the NATO military infrastructure, as well as routine operations and exercises with Ukraine, shows an understanding of the Black Sea's importance for the security of the West. NATO exercises Steadfast Defender

¹⁰ O. Polegkyi, T. Stepniowski (eds.), *Security dilemma in the Black Sea region in the light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict*, "IES Policy Papers" 2021, no. 4.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 19-57.

¹² J. Bugajski, P. Doran, *Black Sea Rising: Russia's Strategy in Southeast Europe*, "Centre for European Analysis – Black Sea Strategic Report" 2016, no. 1, pp. 1-16.

2021 and Sea Breeze 2021 show NATO's readiness and military mobility to counter Russian dominance in the Black Sea.

One of the main challenges for countering Russian activities is that Black Sea allies and partners have a diverse range of interests and threat perceptions with respect to Russia, making it difficult to achieve consensus on a multi-lateral response to Russian military posturing in the absence of overt aggression¹³. The Turkish position is critical to any NATO response, because of Turkish naval capabilities and responsibility for the straits.

After the annexation of Crimea, the losses of the Ukrainian navy amounted to 75% of personnel, 70% of ships and key infrastructure¹⁴. Russia has militarized Crimea, maintains de facto control over 75% of Ukrainian maritime space, and routinely prevents free navigation in the Black Sea (including the open use of conventional force when Russian warships seized three small Ukrainian military vessels on their way from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov in November 2018).

According to the Strategy of the Naval Forces 2035¹⁵, Ukraine's "mosquito fleet" – to be created by 2025 – will be based on three types of warship: patrol, amphibious, and missile boats. *Mark VI* and *Island*-class patrol boats supplied by the US already constitute the backbone of the future fleet. In June 2020, the US Government notified Congress of a pos-

¹³ A. Binnendijk, *Understanding Russian Black Sea Power Dynamics Through National Security Gaming*, RAND Corporation 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR3000/RR3094/RAND_RR3094.pdf [11.11.2021].

¹⁴ *Strategy of the Naval Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2035*, <https://navy.mil.gov.ua/en/strategiya-vijskovo-morskyh-syl-zbrojnyh-syl-ukrayiny-2035/> [12.11.2021].

¹⁵ Ibid.

sible Foreign Military Sale to Ukraine of up to sixteen Mark VI patrol boats worth an estimated \$600 million¹⁶. Projects with the UK should cover the needs of the Ukrainian navy in terms of missile craft. The fleet is also to be equipped with *Ada*-class corvettes, to be jointly produced by Ukraine and Turkey.

Ukraine's attempts to increase its security

Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed the National Security Strategy of Ukraine on March 25, 2021. This strategy is based on three basic principles of state policy in the sphere of national security:

- Restraint: development of defence and security capabilities to inhibit military aggression against Ukraine;
- Steadiness: the ability of society and the state to adapt quickly to changes in the security-free environment and to maintain its proper functioning;
- Interaction: development of strategic relations with key foreign partners, primarily with the European Union, NATO, and the US, and pragmatic cooperation with other states and international organizations on the basis of the national interests of Ukraine.

It is important that the Strategy envisages a scenario in which the Russian Federation could invade the territory of Ukraine. At the same time, the document explicitly names Russia as an enemy.

Ukraine's military strategy has been focused on comprehensive defence, with deterrence and countering threats as

¹⁶ *US Security Cooperation with Ukraine*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/> [12.11.2021].

the main pillars. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy approved the new Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine (which replaces the 2015 Military Doctrine) on September 17, 2021¹⁷. The Strategic Defence Bulletin was developed on the basis of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine and the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine.

The Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine sets out the goal and vision of the defence force of 2030, according to which the defence force is united under a single leadership and consist of professionally trained personnel, equipped with modern weapons, capable of protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, being proactive and integrated into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

The 2018 Law on National Security required that at least 5% of GDP should be spent on security, with 3% of the total going to defence. Economic realities, however, often mean defence spending in real terms is lower (around 2.5% of GDP). Ukraine's 2021 defence budget is 117.6 billion hryvnia (\$4.2 billion), 127 million hryvnia (\$4.6 million) less than the 2020 budget.

The main directions of Ukrainian military-political co-operation activities to ensure its security include:

- Continuation of military and diplomatic efforts aimed at preserving the sanctions regime against the Russian Federation and putting pressure on the Kremlin leadership to restore the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine;

¹⁷ *Head of State approves Strategic Defense Bulletin of Ukraine*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-zatverdiv-strategichnij-oboronnij-byuleten-uk-70713> [18.11.2021].

- Further reformation of the Ukrainian defence sector and cooperation with international partners and NATO based on the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partner received in 2020.

Ensuring the presence of NATO forces and equipment in the Black Sea to maintain stability and security in the Black-Azov Seas region.

In 2020 the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine¹⁸ signed five international acts that broaden the range of international cooperation for the development of the capabilities of Ukraine's Armed Forces, namely:

- a memorandum of understanding between Ukraine and the UK on cooperation on the development and enhancement of capabilities of the Military and Maritime Forces of the Ukrainian Army;
- a framework military agreement between Ukraine and the Republic of Turkey;
- implementation of the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Institutional Defence Reform between Ukraine and Canada;
- the treaty between Ukraine and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on cooperation in the defence sphere;
- a memorandum of understanding between Ukraine and the Republic of Iraq concerning military cooperation.

¹⁸ *Analiz stanu mizhnarodnoho spivrobitnytstva v Ministerstvi oborony Ukrainy ta Zbroynykh Sylakh Ukrainy za 2020 rik (Аналіз стану міжнародного співробітництва у Міністерстві оборони України та Збройних Силах України за 2020 рік)*, Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 11 June 2021, <https://www.mil.gov.ua/diyalnist/mizhnarodne-spivrobitnicztvo/analiz-stanu-mizhnarodnogo-spivrobitnicztva-u-ministerstvi-oboroni-ukraini-ta-zbrojnihi-silakh-ukraini-za-2020-rik.html> [18.11.2021].

One of the main pillars of Ukrainian efforts to neutralize the Russian threat is an attempt to get international support and increase sanctions on the Russian Federation.

For instance, the Crimea Platform was established by President Zelenskyy in February 2021 to build a coordinated international effort to pressure Russia to de-occupy the Crimean Peninsula. The inaugural Summit of the Crimea Platform was held in Kyiv on August 23 with representatives of forty-six countries¹⁹. Ukraine hopes to consolidate international efforts and the initiative will focus on areas such as enforcing sanctions and countering Russia's militarization of Crimea, as well as monitoring human rights and environmental threats.

US and NATO

It seems that the Biden administration prefers to maintain the current status quo in relations with Russia, which in practice means a refusal by the US to take steps that could fundamentally challenge the Kremlin and cross Russia's red lines.

Ukraine received the status of NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner on June 12, 2020²⁰. But the question of Ukraine's membership in the Alliance seems unrealistic from today's perspective. During the June 2021 NATO sum-

¹⁹ *Deoccupation of Crimea begins in Kyiv: Overview of Crimea Platform's inaugural summit*, Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 24 August 2021, <https://uacrisis.org/en/deoccupation-of-crimea-begins-in-kyiv-overview-of-crimea-platform-s-inaugural-summit> [19.11.2021].

²⁰ *NATO recognizes Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner*, NATO, 12 June 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm [18.11.2021].

mit²¹, the 2008 Bucharest summit decision that NATO's door could potentially open for Ukraine was formally repeated. But there is no chance of that happening in the near future. At the same time, US support for Ukraine is firm and consistent. US military assistance to Ukraine has totalled \$2.5 billion since 2014, including more than \$400 million in 2021. The Pentagon and Ukraine's Ministry of Defence signed a Strategic Defence Framework for defence and security cooperation in 2021.

United Kingdom

The UK has a crucial role to play in building up Ukraine's military capacity, developing NATO coordination in the area and helping to deter Russian aggression. The UK and Ukraine have built a strong defence relationship in recent years²². The UK and Ukraine recently signed a Political, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership Agreement²³ that also formalizes UK-Ukraine strategic partnership in the security and defence sphere.

British strategic documents updated in March 2021 define support to Ukraine as the basis of the UK's policy in the region²⁴. The UK's naval presence in the Black Sea has

²¹ *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, NATO, 14 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm [19.11.2021].

²² M. Vorotnyuk, *UK-Ukraine Security Cooperation*, RUSI, 10 November 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-ukraine-security-cooperation> [19.11.2021].

²³ *UK-Ukraine political, free trade and strategic partnership agreement*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-ukraine-political-free-trade-and-strategic-partnership-agreement> [19.11.2021].

²⁴ *Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age.pdf

also been on the rise since 2014. Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the UK and Ukraine established a UK training mission in 2015, called Operation Orbital. Since then, the MoD says, British troops have trained over 20,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel²⁵. In June 2021, British destroyer *HMS Defender* conducted a freedom of navigation operation in the Black Sea, which was a signal of solidarity to Ukraine and has put a spotlight on the UK's involvement in the Black Sea and the emerging UK-Ukraine strategic defence partnership.

Ukraine and the UK have agreed to implement the Ukrainian Naval Capabilities Enhancement Programme²⁶. The program includes several projects. It envisages the development and joint production of eight fast missile warships, two of them to be built in British shipyards and the rest in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government will also purchase two refurbished British *Sandown*-class mine countermeasure vessels. Finally, the UK will help Ukraine build two new naval bases on the Black Sea (Ochakiv) and the Sea of Azov (Berdyansk).

Conclusion

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has a strategic and even existential character. Russia has no interest in a real

itive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf [19.11.2021].

²⁵ Operation ORBITAL explained: Training Ukrainian Armed Forces, Ministry of Defense, 21 December 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hundreds-of-uk-troops-parachute-into-ukraine-for-joint-exercises> [19.11.2021].

²⁶ UK signs agreement to support enhancement of Ukrainian naval capabilities, 23 June 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-signs-agreement-to-support-enhancement-of-ukrainian-naval-capabilities> [19.11.2021].

peace for Ukraine and wants to keep the country as destabilized as possible. Putin's speeches on many occasions highlight the continuity of his perception of the Ukrainian state as impermanent and that its existence is not justified by any reason. Because the Russian elite can't accept the existence of an independent Ukraine (constant emphasizing of Ukraine's full dependency, "failed state" status, disintegration, etc.), it will inevitably lead either to Ukraine being incorporated (in one form or another) into the sphere of "exclusive" Russian influence, or to Putin's model of an authoritarian regime based on ideas of revanshism and "getting up from its knees" after being destroyed. In other words, the existence of an independent Ukraine is possible only if the Russian Federation undergoes a profound transformation. As at the moment, there is no chance of such changes (at least in the short term), the conflict between the two countries will continue, although its intensity may increase or decrease depending on the internal situation in the Russian Federation, the situation in the world, and the ability of Ukraine to counteract Russian aggression.

Moreover, the Kremlin, having made Ukraine part of Russia's domestic political agenda, cannot accept the "loss" of Ukraine or its successful reform. The Kremlin cannot allow Ukraine to develop successfully (especially after 2014), because this would mean the failure of Russian efforts and could become an example for opposition-minded citizens and inspire them to protest in Russia and in the whole post-Soviet space. That is why Ukraine as a "failed state" or an unsuccessful case is a condition for the survival of the current Kremlin elites.



Tomasz Stępniewski

The European Union's Eastern Partnership after the Brussels summit: what's next?

On 15 December 2021, the Eastern Partnership Summit was held in Brussels, where representatives of the European Union met with the leaders of the countries covered by the partnership: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Belarus, which suspended its participation in this project, did not participate in the summit. The aim of the summit was to endorse the long-term goals of the Eastern Partnership after 2020. Importantly, the crucial goal for the EU is to protect the Eastern Partnership countries (which were part of the Soviet Union for almost 70 years) from falling completely dependent on Russia once again. It is worth emphasizing here that the Eastern Partnership project is not part of the EU enlargement policy, but only part of the EU's neighbourhood policy. Thus, was not expected that the specific dates of EU enlargement with the Eastern Partnership countries would be announced at the summit in Brussels. In the statement adopted after the Brussels summit the par-

ticipants committed to cooperation in five sectors which include economic cooperation, rule of law and security, digital transformation and an open society. The document also highlights support for the territorial integrity of all Eastern Partnership countries (this should be understood as support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, which has been in an armed conflict with Russia in the Donbas since 2014, and with regard to the annexation of the Ukrainian Crimea).

What is the Eastern Partnership and what has been achieved?

In 2009, the European Union launched the Eastern Partnership project aimed at the six European states of the former Soviet Union (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The initiative was aimed at strengthening political relations between the European Union and the six Eastern Partnership countries and also encouraging economic integration by promoting reforms in these countries. Since the introduction of this policy by the EU, some objectives have been achieved, but a lot has changed in the eastern neighbourhood of the Community. On the one hand, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have concluded association agreements with the EU, and the citizens of these countries have been granted the right to enter the EU without visas. These countries have ambitions and opportunities for further integration with the EU structures in the form of the four unions - digital, energy, Schengen and customs. Armenia has concluded an Extended Partnership Agreement with the EU. On the other hand, we have witnessed the war in the Donbas region since 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan

and the withdrawal of Belarus from the Eastern Partnership project (in June 2021, Belarus suspended its participation in the project in an act of protest against EU sanctions).

What are the weaknesses of the Eastern Partnership?

Over 10 years of operation of the Eastern Partnership, some weaknesses and omissions on the side of the EU can be identified. First of all, there is no vision of the Eastern Partnership countries and strategic goals, and besides formal statements about involvement in a peaceful resolution, there is no explicit reference to unresolved separatist conflicts. Importantly, despite the application of the 'more for more' principle, no operational guidelines have been defined as to what 'more' the EU can bring to the table in exchange for 'more' political reforms that it expects from the Eastern Partnership countries. Moreover, disinformation campaigns are the contemporary reality of the Eastern Partnership countries. This requires the addition of a security aspect to the Eastern Partnership programme. Closer cooperation on digital security is also needed. Finally, while the joint communiqué draws on many of the topics that were included in the 'structured consultations' with the Eastern Partnership countries in 2019, the impression is that the joint conclusions of the three associated countries have been ignored. These countries lobbied for the so-called Strategy of the Associated Trio (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), which would allow them to obtain new instruments for the implementation of reforms and dialogue with the EU on issues directly affecting them, which, however, are neither significant nor credible in relation to other Eastern Partnership countries.

The neo-imperial policy of the Russian Federation in the eastern neighbourhood of the European Union

The Eastern Partnership countries do not function in a vacuum, they are dependent on internal and external conditions. Among the external conditions, the stance not only of the EU but also of Russia is important. Therefore, from the point of view of the Eastern Partnership countries, it is important to look at Russia's goals (actual goals, not those that are declared) towards these countries. This includes identifying tactical goals, but also strategic goals towards the Eastern Partnership countries, and more broadly towards the post-Soviet states. It can be said that from the very start of the war between Russia and Ukraine (hybrid war or a "subliminal" war), Russia has strived to destabilize the situation in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine in order to detach them or lead to the circumstances of "occupied territories" or to create a quasi-state (casus Transnistria). This situation is plying out in the immediate vicinity of the V4 countries, and thus indirectly affects the security of the Visegrad Group countries. Preventive actions at the forum of the EU and the OSCE are necessary to stabilize the situation in Ukraine¹.

The rapid process of democratic transformation in Ukraine – in the opinion of Russian politicians – poses an enormous threat to the interests of Russia and its political decision-makers. It is well known that Ukraine can only be democratised with the help of western structures and close

¹ T. Stępniewski, *The European Union and Eastern Partnership: Crises and Strategic Assessment*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2016, vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 337-344.

cooperation with them. Russia is aware of this, which is why it reacts so strongly to the prospect of Ukrainian membership of the EU and NATO. One may even dare say that Russia's strategic aim with regard to Ukraine is to prevent it from democratising and integrating with the West².

Sergei Karaganov, a well-known Russian analyst who often comments in Western media, has frequently stated that Russia will never be a global power until it becomes a regional power. Therefore, according to many researchers, Ukraine is of key importance for Russia's superpower projects. Of course, Russia could become a regional power and, in the future, play a key role in world politics. The war with Ukraine calls into question Russia's achievement of these goals.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that over the last two decades, Russia has shown enormous determination in re-integrating the post-Soviet area. Guaranteeing itself hegemonic influence in the post-Soviet space and ejecting the West serves – in Russian eyes – to strengthen its status as a regional and global power, and to realise a range of more minor interests of a socio-economic nature. In addition, in order to defend its sphere of influence, Russia has not hesitated to follow a confrontational policy towards the West. It should also be stressed that the dependence of Ukraine

² For more details see: T. Stępniewski, *The Eastern Policy of the European Union. The Role of Poland*, "POLITEJA. Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego" 2016, no. 41, pp. 181-193; E. Korosteleva, *EU–Russia relations in the context of the eastern neighbourhood*, Policy Brief, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh, May 2016, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/eu-russia-relations-in-the-context-of-the-eastern-neighbourhood?tx_rsmbstpublications_piz2%5BfilterSprache%5D%5B2%5D=1&tx_rsmbstpublications_piz2%5Bpage%5D=52&cHash=3252e02dc4a769ab04aced45381981e8 [10.12.2021].

and other Eastern Partnership states on Russia (in many aspects) is significant and clear. In other words, Russia has at its disposal many instruments to influence the internal situations of those countries³.

What are the prospects?

In 2021, twelve years have passed since the launch of the Eastern Partnership project, and a new perspective on this project, its achievements, goals and opportunities are needed. Not only the approach must change, but also the narrative, as regards the Eastern Partnership project and the countries covered by it. The EU's approach to the Eastern Partnership countries must change, as the geopolitical circumstances in the Eastern neighbourhood have changed. The armed conflict in Ukraine and Russia's increasingly assertive attitude towards its eastern neighbours force the EU to react. Moreover, not all Eastern Partnership countries are willing to tighten their cooperation. Belarus even withdrew from the project. Therefore, the question arises: how can the EU cooperate effectively with the Eastern Partnership countries, since some of them do not express interest in this? How can EU policy be effective when there is little mutual cooperation and understanding? It should also be noted that one of the important elements hindering EU cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries is corruption, which damages the political systems of these countries and makes it difficult (or impossible) to change the situation.

³ T. Stępniewski, *The EU's Eastern Partnership and the Way Forward After Riga*, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs" 2015, vol. XXIV, no. 1-2, pp. 17-27; E. Korosteleva, *Evaluating the role of partnership in the European Neighbourhood Policy: The Eastern neighbourhood*, "Eastern Journal of European Studies" 2013, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 11-36.



Paul D'Anieri

Continuity in Ukraine-US relations in the Biden-Zelenskyy era

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's relationship with the United States began problematically, but has stabilized under the Biden administration. The two states perceive a common interest in contesting Russian aggression against Ukraine, but disagree on how and how much the US should support Ukraine. Moreover, US confidence in Ukraine as a partner continues to be undermined by the slow pace of reform in Ukraine and by the government's inability or unwillingness to tackle corruption.

Ukraine counts heavily on political, economic, and military support from the United States. The US became deeply involved in Ukraine after 1991, focusing first on securing Ukrainian denuclearization and then on supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russian encroachment. In the 1990s, the US supported extensive Ukrainian involvement in the NATO Partnership for Peace. The US has been more strident in opposing Russia's aggression against Ukraine than much of the EU, and more intent on maintaining sanctions enacted

after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Despite hopes for a dramatic increase in support for Ukraine, President Biden's policy toward Ukraine fits within a durable pattern that was only partially disrupted by the tumultuous presidency of Donald Trump.

A central point in understanding US – Ukraine relations is that support for Ukraine among the US foreign policy elite and in the US congress is bipartisan. While a few scholars advocate acceding to a Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine, no one in a position of power does. Support for Ukraine, and opposition to Russia, is one of the few things that an increasingly bitterly-divided US elite agree on. The bipartisan congressional support extended as far as passage of a law preventing the president from removing sanctions against Russia. At the same time, in terms of US public opinion, and hence electoral politics, Ukraine is largely irrelevant. Because the public does not know or care much about Ukraine, elites in Congress and the executive branch are relatively unconstrained in their dealings with the eastern European nation. That would likely change if the prospect of war with Russia were to escalate.

When Volodymyr Zelenskyy swept to power in the 2019 elections, his lack of a prior political career led analysts in the US and elsewhere to wonder what kind of leader he would be. He said all the right things regarding corruption and reform, and early parliamentary elections provided him the basis to implement a decisive program. At the same time, his past connections with the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky led to worries that he might hesitate to tackle corruption, or that he might even foster it to the benefit of Kolomoisky. Many also wondered whether this comedian-turned-politician

would have the savvy and nerve to go head-to-head with the ex-KGB agent Vladimir Putin.

Surprisingly, it turned out to be American President Donald Trump, not Russia's Vladimir Putin, who put pressure on the new leader. In the fall of 2019, the Trump administration withheld aid to Ukraine that had been approved by the US Congress, and refused to host Zelenskyy in Washington for a meeting that Zelenskyy coveted. Trump insisted that before the aid would be delivered or the visit scheduled, Ukraine needed to begin an investigation of the role of Hunter Biden, the son of former American Vice-President Joe Biden, on the board of the Ukrainian firm Burisma. The goal was to embarrass Biden, who was a leading candidate for the Democratic nomination to challenge Trump.

The consequences for US politics played out spectacularly in the subsequent months, with the American president impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives and unsuccessfully tried in the Senate. The consequences for Ukraine received less attention, but were potentially consequential. The aid was important for Ukraine's efforts to hold Russia at bay in the Donbas War, as well as being symbolically important. The visit to Washington was less significant substantively, but important to Zelenskyy in terms of optics. A much bigger danger loomed, however. If Ukraine were forced to take sides in a partisan squabble, the bipartisan support it depended on might be shattered. In the end, for all the damage the Trump – Ukraine fiasco inflicted on US politics, Zelenskyy and Ukraine avoided the worst.

The succession of Trump by Joe Biden in 2021 was greeted with relief in Ukraine. Biden had served as a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee prior to becom-

ing Vice President. As Vice President Biden pressed Barack Obama to make Russia pay a high price for invading Ukraine and annexing Crimea in 2014, but Obama resisted, instead making Biden his representative to Ukraine, which Biden visited six times. In opposite to Trump, who had expressed his admiration of Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden responded affirmatively when asked by a journalist whether Putin is a murderer. His Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, had been among those voicing support for supplying Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles. Under Biden, however, the relationship has had downs as well as ups.

Zelenskyy finally got his visit to Washington in September 2021, and again (similar to visit in 2019) there was drama. The visit was delayed for two days as Biden and his team tried to manage the shambolic withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Besides pushing the Zelenskyy visit off the front pages, the Afghanistan mess caused many to raise uncomfortable questions about the reliability of the US as an ally. Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council, made the point: "Did the fact that Afghanistan has the status of a main US ally outside of NATO save the ousted pro-American regime in Kabul? A similar situation awaits those who are banking on America in Ukraine". In his meeting with Zelenskyy, Biden reassured his Ukrainian counterpart that withdrawing from Afghanistan would allow the US to focus on more current threats, including Russia.

Beneath the drama of impeachment hearings and the photo-ops of summit meetings, Ukrainian and US officials continued to work on a series of enduring topics on which the two states' interests partially overlap. Above all, these concern US security support for Ukraine and the question

of economic reform. On the former, Ukraine wants more from the US than the US is willing to deliver. On the latter, the situation is reversed.

Like his predecessor Poroshenko, Zelenskyy supports Ukraine's accession to NATO. Polling consistently shows a plurality, but not a majority, of Ukrainians voicing support. While many outside Ukraine argue that a Membership Action Plan would dangerously provoke Russia, Zelenskyy seems unworried. And while NATO membership may be seen as impossible while the country is at war, Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian leaders seem to believe that gaining NATO membership would immediately garner increased support against Russia.

Ukraine's potential NATO membership is the source of profound, and at times wilful, misunderstanding between the US and Ukraine. While the US supported a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine under the George W. Bush administration, most notably at the 2008 Bucharest summit, it recognized that key allies were opposed, and has not tried to push the issue since. The declaration issued at Bucharest that Ukraine and Georgia would someday join the alliance was a diplomatic way of saying almost the exact opposite. Subsequent administrations have not echoed Bush's support, and US professions of support are as much symbolic as substantive. Ukrainian leaders, perhaps overestimating the extent to which US leaders will be bound by their words, continue to advocate for early membership despite the fact that it clearly is not going to happen. Perhaps continually pressing this issue is intended to embarrass the alliance into providing other benefits in compensation, and perhaps it provides domestic benefits. In Washington and

other capitals, leaders seem to wish Zelenskyy would stop talking about it.

In general, the US has been more supportive of Ukraine and more willing to stand up to Russia than many EU members. This made the Biden administration's decision in the summer of 2021 not to sanction corporate participants in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project especially galling to Ukraine and to Zelenskyy personally. The gas pipeline from Russia to Germany threatens Ukraine both by depriving it of billions of dollars in transit revenues for its own pipelines, and by making it possible for Russia to cut off Ukraine and other states without disrupting the supply to its most lucrative customers, chief of which is Germany. Biden's decision surprised many, as sanctions had bipartisan support in Congress. Moreover, even in Germany, opposition to the pipeline was growing. However, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, presumably with her own domestic political motivations as a general election approached, supported completion of the pipeline. It appeared that Biden was trying to rebuild some of the Euro-Atlantic trust that had ebbed under Trump by making a concession to Germany and Merkel. In the long run, a strong relationship between Germany and the US is beneficial to Ukraine, but Ukrainian leaders clearly resented that Biden sought to accomplish this at Ukraine's expense.

If Ukraine is frustrated that diplomatic niceties concerning NATO don't relate to reality, the US has felt the same way about Ukrainian professions concerning reform. The difference is that the US (along with the EU and the IMF) have some leverage over Ukraine, so Ukraine is more compelled to appear to be doing something about reform.

Zelenskyy's connections to Ihor Kolomoisky caused immediate concern. Kolomoisky had fled the country to avoid prosecution under Poroshenko, and his immediate return after Zelenskyy's election signalled his confidence in his relationship with the new administration. The appointment of Zelenskyy's original team appeared to show the considerable influence of Kolomoisky. An early test of this influence was the case of PrivatBank, which was part owned by Kolomoisky and had been nationalized after it was determined that the bank had a \$5.65 billion gap in its balance sheet due to what were determined to be fraudulent loans to bank insiders. Kolomoisky later sought to regain control of the bank through the courts, and the state's ability to resist this became a major test, in US eyes, of Ukraine's commitment to reform. Under pressure from the US and other donors, Zelenskyy's party passed a new law in May 2020, known as the "anti-Kolomoisky law", because it was so clearly aimed at him, that prohibited the return of banks to owners from whom they had been nationalized. This decision was seen as a sign of western influence and as a sign that Zelenskyy might be serious about reducing the role of oligarchs in the economy. Under Biden, the support for pressing Kolomoisky continued, and the US sanctioned Kolomoisky personally saying: "In his official capacity as a Governor of Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk Oblast from 2014 to 2015, Kolomoisky was involved in corrupt acts that undermined rule of law and the Ukrainian public's faith in their government's democratic institutions". On the matter of Kolomoisky, we see clearly that for all the turmoil under the Trump administration, there has actually been considerable continuity in the substance of US policy across multiple administrations.

Ukraine's adoption of other measures supported by the donor community, including the United States, was also reassuring, most notably the passage of a land reform law allowing for the sale of farmland, which western governments had been advocating for years. While these specific measures were consistent with US hopes, the US has continued to be disappointed with Ukraine's battle against corruption. Zelenskyy retained Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, whom many blamed for the failure of a crucial reform of the police, until 2021. In October 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that the power that had been given to Ukraine's National Agency for Preventing Corruption was unconstitutional. This effectively undid the asset declaration requirements for public officials that was a key aspect of post-Maidan anti-corruption reforms. As well as gutting the declaration system, the Constitutional Court's action demonstrated the extent to which judicial reform had also failed. Several of the judges had themselves been charged with violating asset declaration rules, so their votes were obviously compromised by conflicts of interest.

In May 2021, shortly after a meeting between Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Ukrainian Security Service agents raided the home of pro-Russian parliamentarian and oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk. The timing of the raid created the impression that US leaders were at least informed of the raid before it took place, and they subsequently said nothing to contradict that notion. Whether Medvedchuk was targeted for corruption, for his support for Russia, or for leading the major opposition party was unclear. Similarly, the closure of a number of newspapers funded by Medvedchuk and aligned

with the Opposition Platform – For Life political party can be seen either as pushback against Russian information operations in Ukraine or as the silencing of a prominent government critic.

Other moves by Zelenskyy were clearly unwelcome in Washington, including some that took place before Biden became president, contributed to scepticism about him, in part because they seemed to signal continuity of previous regime. The firing of Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk and Prosecutor General Ruslan Ryaboshapka in March 2020 was widely seen as setting back the process of reform in Ukraine. The US foreign policy community was especially alarmed at the dismissal of Ryaboshapka, who was viewed as tackling a desperately needed reform of the Prosecutor General's office, an agency which had been perceived as obstructing legal reform and as politicizing the judicial process. Kolo-myshchuk's influence was suspected as being behind the firing; and to move the dismissal through parliament, the votes of Medvedchuk's Opposition Platform – For Life party were needed. These strange bedfellows raised serious questions about Zelenskyy's devotion to reform.

In November 2021, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law establishing an Ethics Council to evaluate the integrity of members of the High Judicial Council, the body responsible for administering Ukraine's judicial system, and in particular for appointing and evaluating judges. The US government released a joint statement with the EU, the EBRD, and the UN praising the move. This development aptly illustrates Ukraine's relationship with the US and other donors. An earlier reform, also insisted upon by donors, was ostensibly intended to reduce corruption and clean up the judiciary sys-

tem by reviewing the qualifications for all Ukraine's judges. However, the High Judicial Council undermined the reform by reappointing many of the same people that advocates of the law had hoped to remove. So now a new body has been created, with the hope that it will change the membership, or at least the behaviour, of the previous body that was intended to carry out the needed reform. While each step is welcomed by western donors, the overall pattern leads to frustration, new demands, new "reforms", and new statements welcoming the reforms.

As this brief summary indicates, in the area of reform, progress was mixed with regression. In the community of Americans concerned with Ukraine, there is disagreement about how constrained Zelenskyy is in pursuing reform, and whether he is unable or unwilling to do more. Either way, there is lagging confidence in Ukraine's ability to hold up its end of the bargain. This problem of confidence stretches back through the chaotic Yushchenko administration (2005-10) to the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004). One has the distinct impression that Ukrainian leaders do just enough to maintain the flow of aid from the West, but no more, betting that the West's own interests will prevent a cutoff. In this, they are probably right. A common in-joke among those in Washington who support Ukraine is that Ukraine "never misses a chance to miss a chance", but as long as this frustration does not affect U.S. policy, a cut-off of aid seems unlikely.

Ukraine's relations with the US have changed much less than the changing administrations in Kiev and Washington might lead one to believe. Under Biden, the diplomatic relationship is much calmer, but the substance of the rela-

tionship has not changed dramatically. Ukraine continues to have bipartisan support in the foreign policy elite (while being mostly invisible to the average American). Improvement in the relationship is constrained by Ukraine's inability to reform, by the United States' wariness of becoming engaged in an escalated conflict with Russia, and by the US desire to work effectively with its European partners, who are not united in supporting Ukraine. Serious deterioration in the relationship is limited by the mutual interests of the two countries. Neither wants Russia to extend further territorial or political control over Ukraine, and both benefit from a fruitful relationship.

The biggest uncertainty in the relationship concerns neither Ukraine nor the US, but Russia. Russia can escalate the conflict in Donbas at any time. When it once again built up its troop numbers along Ukraine's borders in November 2021, Secretary of State Blinken said "We're very concerned about some of the irregular movements of forces that we see on Ukraine's borders". The question in the minds of Ukrainian leaders that American leaders cannot answer is what the US would actually do in the event of an escalation that might deter Russian aggression. Blinken earlier called the US commitment to Ukraine "ironclad", but it remains unclear what this means.



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The presidency of Volodymyr Zelenskyy is at the halfway point. The sixth president of Ukraine, who was a professional actor, not a politician, won the presidential elections 2019 with a substantial 73.22% votes. Today, Zelenskyy's ratings are falling, that is undoubtedly due to the internal and external policies made by him and the Servant of the People Party, and the growing social disappointment on the pursuing reforms and the unfulfilled election promises. The priorities and costs of the internal changes are shaped by plenty factors and relations affecting security in the European region, where the interests of the global great powers clash. Ukraine remains the subject of its games. Fears of a possible Russian offensive that could extend beyond the Crime and the territories in eastern Ukraine currently controlled by the Kremlin and lead to an attempt to get the international support and increase sanctions on the Russian Federation.

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