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Middle Eastern problems of Ukraine

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Although the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not significantly inhibit Western, especially American, military aid to Ukraine, it is in a difficult position. By supporting Israel, it will become the object of criticism from the Arab world – which Russia will use for propaganda purposes. By not supporting Israel, it risks deterioration of relations with Western allies on which it is militarily and financially dependent. It can also be expected that the West, focusing on stabilizing the situation in the Middle East, will at least partially limit its involvement in Ukraine.

Western reactions to the Hamas terrorist attack. Western countries reacted quickly to the events in Israel. The fastest and most decisive reaction was that of the United States, Israel's traditional ally. The US unequivocally condemned the actions of Hamas and declared full support for the Israeli authorities. Just a few days after the attack (October 11-13), both Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Tel Aviv. A week later, President Joe Biden visited Israel. He emphasized that the United States is able to support both Ukraine and Israel without harming its own defence.

Reactions in Europe were more mixed. Ursula von der Leyen strongly supported Israel, noting that it "has the right to defend itself and the EU will help in this. Josep Borrell, on the other hand, who for years has been emphasizing the brutality of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians and at the same time striving to normalize EU relations with Iran (and hence unpopular in Israel for both reasons), blamed primarily the Israeli side for the escalation of the conflict and violations of humanitarian law. The EU's image and credibility were also negatively affected by suggestions that the EU would suspend all development aid for the Palestinians – which were then denied two days later.

Most European countries expressed solidarity with Israel, as evidenced by the visits to Tel Aviv of the leaders of Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and Greece. However, all of them took place only after Joe Biden's visit. Ultimately, the president of France also announced his trip to Israel, which was widely commented on as merely an image-building gesture. Public opinion in Europe, divided for years on the issue of attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has become even more polarized – both anti-Palestinian (more broadly: anti-Islamic) and anti-Israel sentiments have strengthened. As the situation develops, there are more and more voices, both from Western politicians, the media and public opinion, that Israel cannot apply collective responsibility and should fight Hamas, not Palestine.

Russia's reactions. The attack on Israel quickly became known in the West as "Hamas' gift to Putin." Similar voices dominate in Russia. It is believed that the West will be much less interested in Ukraine (which will make it easier for Russia to wage war), and a large part of the so-called Global South, already ambivalent about the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, will take an openly anti-Western, and, therefore, anti-Ukrainian course.

Russian propaganda and politicians (including Sergei Lavrov, Dmitry Peskov, and Dmitry Medvedev) immediately reacted to the events in Israel, blaming the West, and especially the United States, for it. The West is to be blamed for the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, and thus for the destabilization of international security. Vladimir Putin also spoke in the context of Israel, emphasizing the "great injustice" caused by Israel's policy which affects "all those who profess Islam."

In response to these voices, Hamas expressed gratitude for Russia's "tireless efforts to deter Israeli aggression." Russia is certainly aware that this means the end of the previously good Russian-Israeli relations, but the Kremlin probably believed that the political gains would be greater than the losses.

Dilemmas for Ukraine. Hamas' attack on Israel occurred at a time when Ukraine was concerned about the unstable internal political situation in the US and its potential consequences for US support for Ukraine. Events in Israel have further complicated the situation for Ukraine, especially given the complexity of its relations with Israel. The main axis of tension was the issue of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and respect for international law. Ukraine supported UN resolutions condemning Israel's actions against Palestine (most recently in November 2022), while Israel, unlike its Western allies, neither supported Ukraine militarily nor joined the sanctions imposed on Russia.

However, Ukraine could not help but react to the attack on Israel, which attracted the attention of the entire world. Also because of fears that events in the Middle East will push the issue of Russia's aggression into the background. The Ukrainian authorities, therefore, behaved similarly to the West and sided with Israel, while consistently trying to remind the world of the Russian attack: after October 7, Volodymyr Zelensky repeatedly and firmly equated the actions of Hamas and Russia, describing them as terrorist and criminal.

Kyiv reacted so strongly knowing that Hamas is described in Israel as the "new Nazis" - similar to how Russia refers to Ukrainians. It was clear that Russian propaganda would take advantage of this situation, e.g., by referring to Ukrainian participation in the Holocaust, in order to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the West, which supports Israel, and so Ukraine chose the pro-Israel option, combining it with anti-Russian and anti-Iranian rhetoric. Ukrainian intelligence accused Russia of giving weapons acquired on the Ukrainian front to Hamas and then accusing Ukraine of selling weapons received from the West to terrorists. The Ukrainian ambassador to Israel expressed confidence that the Israeli government and society will become more pro-Ukrainian, given Russia's cooperation with Hamas. It was also emphasized that the patron of Hamas is Iran, with which Ukraine also has its own scores to settle.

President Zelensky called on world leaders to visit Israel to demonstrate their support. There were also rumours about Zelensky's planned visit to Tel Aviv. However, they were quickly denied and replaced with diplomatic declarations that such a visit would possibly be "part of a broader journey around Europe." The fact that full commitment to support Israel may be problematic for Ukraine is also demonstrated by Zelensky's conversation with Recep Erdoğan – tense Turkish-Israeli relations will probably worsen, and Turkey is too important a partner for Ukraine to risk worsening relations with it. Moreover, strong support for Israel would have a very negative impact on Ukraine's image in the non-Western world, especially the Arab world.

Ukraine has, therefore, toned down its rhetoric, declaring support for Israel's fight against "acts of terrorism", but at the same time supporting the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict "through political and diplomatic means" (statement of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of October 17). On the other hand, the Ukrainian authorities are aware that they must support the policy of Western countries, especially the US because they depend on their help and on their decisions regarding Ukrainian aspirations to join the EU and NATO.

Double standards. The Arab world does not show significant interest in the Russian-Ukrainian war, but it gravitates towards the Russian narrative, which is influenced by the presence of Russian media, such as RT or Sputnik, which broadcast in Arabic and are not subject to sanctions, as in the case of Western countries.

However, the Global South is not so much pro-Russian as anti-Western. This resentment is deeply rooted and only strengthened by Russian propaganda. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the West is accused of hypocrisy and double standards: it condemns Russia and imposes sanctions on it, while it considers Israel an

ally. Meanwhile, in the perception of a significant part of non-Western societies, Israel treats Palestinians the same way Russia treats Ukrainians – but only Russia is called by the West as a terrorist state.

The escalation of the conflict is accompanied by intensified disinformation and propaganda activities, fuelling emotions and extreme attitudes. As a result, accusations against the West have intensified in the Middle East as well as in other regions of the world. It is mainly the United States that is criticized, but also the European Union, which is accused of being submissive to the Americans.

There were also sharp reactions from the Palestinians and the Arab world to President Zelensky's words that Israel has the right to self-defence and that the world should support it just as it supports Ukraine. As Israel intensifies its military actions against the Gaza Strip, voices are increasingly heard that Ukraine should rather support the Palestinians, who are in a similar situation to the Ukrainians.

Conclusions

Military support for Ukraine, especially from the US, is not expected to change significantly. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a different specificity than the Russian-Ukrainian war, Israel and Ukraine need different forms of military assistance – Israel, moreover, completely dominates its opponent militarily.

However, a problem for Ukraine will be the growing involvement of Western states in activities aimed at stopping Israel from starting a war that will destabilize the region, affect Europe, and harm US interests. Furthermore, the Middle East conflict has always caused strong emotions and divisions, also in Western societies. This may lead, at least partially, to diverting the West's attention from Ukraine and reducing Western public opinion's support for Ukraine.

Russia will use the events in Israel to continue its campaign aimed at discrediting Ukraine, rebuilding its influence in the non-Western world, strengthening hostility towards the West there, and causing socio-political tensions in the West.

Under such conditions, Ukraine has very limited room for manoeuvre and little ability to influence the course of events. It will probably wait for the situation to stabilize while maintaining and developing relations with its allies.