



UKRAINE-POLAND RELATIONS



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INTRODUCTION

Bilateral Polish-Ukrainian relations fully reflect geopolitical complexities, social interconnection, and cultural context of the recent century in the history of Eastern Europe. Driven by security considerations and mutual desire for closer partnership – or even alliance – these relations haven't escaped series of conflicts and misunderstandings. A neighborhood with a tremendous potential remains vulnerable, this time not so much due to big powers' games, but because of modified regional context and internal political developments.

Poland was the first state to recognize Ukraine's independence in 1991. Both states perceive each other as strategic partners, and such a perception survived almost thirty years of ups-and-downs in international environment and internal political transformations in both countries. The stance of bilateral relations between them continues to be one of the key factors to overall regional stability.

HISTORY

When one thinks of Polish-Ukrainian relations, history immediately comes to mind. It is a long record which impacts current policies of both countries in numerous ways.

On the one hand, turbulent and complicated history of both nations in the XX century is a part of collective memory in both countries, something witnessed by people at the distance of two-three generations.

Epochal events at the end of World War I have been interconnected with struggle for independence of both Poland and Ukraine on the remnants of former large European empires.

The results were different, for a number of reasons, but along the way several dramatic episodes – like clashes over Lviv or joint struggle against Soviet Russia, ended with the Riga Agreement in 1921 - took place, and they continue to shape mutual perception of Poles and Ukrainians. Events of the interwar period and especially during the Second World War II gave rise to a new round of complications, involving deep emotional reactions over tragedies that happened along the way.

This history is close. It still brings back memories and thus is a part of political processes in both countries and a factor of policies of them towards each other.

A more distant history normally dated back to times of Kievan Rus' and Polish Kingdom under Piast dynasty, is also affecting the way both states perceive each other.

History generates myths and symbols, creates narratives, and after all impacts identities. Over this long period Poles and Ukrainians went through joint fighting against external threats, situational alliances, and wars between each other. They have been united and divided by issues of religion, language, rights, and borders. Problems like those are typical for neighboring

countries in Europe, however for Poland and Ukraine the situation has been complicated further due to closeness to big powers – Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Quarrels and division lines between Poles and Ukrainians were utilized or created/enforced by powerful neighbors.

Recent history provided a new chance for constructing trustful and mutually beneficial bilateral relations, and the countries have taken it. They share common vision of Eastern European security concerns, enjoy mutual support on a number of issues, and consider each other strategic partners.

Already in 1992 Poland and Ukraine signed a Treaty on good neighborhood, friendship and cooperation. Two years later declaration on the principles of mutual relations has also been signed, underlining strategic importance of the countries for each other. Focus of bilateral relations in the 1990-ies has mostly been on economy, trade, and history.

Sides managed to reach considerable degree of reconciliation, driven by the formula “remember the past, but think about the future”. Due to concentration of both Warsaw and Kyiv on issues other than history, it even seemed to work for some time.

Ukraine was concerned about reforms and state building, while Poland set agenda for joining NATO and the EU. It seemed like problematic issues of history have been finally overcome.

Poland played an important role in events of the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004. Polish and Ukrainian Presidents usually enjoyed good interpersonal communication. The case of Alexander Kwasniewski and Leonid Kuchma was especially important given the political crisis in Ukraine in 2004-2005. “Orange Revolution” brought pro-Western political forces to power in Ukraine, and being more pro-Western in

that case implied closer friendship with Poland, which was considered as one of Ukraine's best friends in Europe. The image of Poland advocating for Ukraine in the EU was extremely popular among Ukrainians at that time.

This advocacy survived even when Ukraine took a more pro-Russian turn in its foreign policy under President Yanukovych. Warsaw has been very active in promoting EU's Eastern Partnership in general and Association Agreement between EU and Ukraine in particular. The Cox-Kwasniewski mission has been established

in 2012 to handle consequences of "selective justice", an issue which has been damaging Ukrainian-European dialogue since jailing of Yulia Tymoshenko. After events of Euromaidan relations between Poland and Ukraine regained some optimism. However optimism has been significantly undermined by consequences of the occupation of Crimea by Russia. Long-term implications of Kremlin's steps in Ukraine have been clearly felt both in Kyiv and Warsaw. A strategic partnership required modification of the agenda.

CURRENT AGENDA

Durability of current strategic partnership between Poland and Ukraine rests on shared understanding of security challenges in Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that Poland and Ukraine find themselves in quite different strategic settings – Poland is a member to EU and NATO, while Ukraine is not – they both perceive Russian revisionism as a considerable threat. Common history of being victims to powerful neighbors contributes into this.

Thus, security issues play the most important role in bilateral agenda. Already before 2014 both countries were aware of significance of reliable, stable, and predictable cooperation. Poland was the key initiator of the Eastern Partnership project in 2008, aimed at securing EU's eastern neighborhood and bringing six target countries closer to European standards. Much has changed since then: in 2008 soft security issues seemed dominant, and normative power of the EU was designed to handle them best. Today hard power and military force play bigger role in regional security arrangements and EU's normative power is not enough to tackle new risks.

While continuing to advocate EU's deeper involvement into Eastern Europe's security concerns, Poland is also relying on a more active role of NATO. Warsaw hosted NATO summit in 2016, which agreed a Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine as well as deployment of NATO multinational battalions in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – both steps were welcome by Kyiv. Poland consistently claims that doors of NATO should be open for Ukraine. Along with that Poland remains one of the key providers of military assistance to Ukraine, taking part in joint exercises and trainings. A Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian brigade – LITPOLUKR-BRIG – has been operational since 2016.

Poland is Ukraine's second biggest trading partner, while Ukraine ranks 14th in the list of major trading partners of Poland. There is a huge potential for mutual trade, and this can be

a basis of a deepened interdependence. Association Agreement signed between Ukraine and EU has provided additional boost and space for bilateral trade.

Recently the issue of Ukrainian migrants to Poland has become especially vibrant. In 2017 Ukrainians received about 81% of all Polish working visas, while the total number of Ukrainians working in Poland is estimated at about 2 million. Polish dynamic economy profits from supplies of Ukrainian labor, while Ukrainians get an access to higher salaries in Poland. Over 3 billion USD was the total value of Ukrainians' remittances in Poland. Due to not only linguistic, cultural, and social closeness, but also liberal legislature, Poland has become the leading destination for Ukrainian labor force.

At the same time, this issue requires careful management in order to minimize risks of negative perception of Ukrainians in Poland and demonstrations of xenophobia. Increased migration flow between Ukraine and Poland, partly due to liberalization of the visa regime with the EU, also raises the issue of border control and trans-border cooperation.

Positions of Poland and Ukraine are close regarding energy security in Europe. Diversification of natural gas supplies, securing transit of Russian gas through Ukraine's territory, opening of European markets for LNG from the US seem to be in both countries' interests. In 2016 Poland has completed an LNG terminal and by 2022 it is planning to set the Baltic Pipe, opening access to Norwegian gas, operational. This would enable Poland to discontinue natural gas supplies from Russia, which currently comprise about two thirds of overall natural gas supplies. Poland and Ukraine are strongly against the Nord Stream-2 project due to its negative impact on Ukraine's security. Polish energy company PGNiG has also arranged natural gas supplies to Ukraine at a level of 200 million cubic meters in 2018-2019.

POINTS FOR REFERENCE IN THE FUTURE

In a mid-term perspective history will most likely remain the main issue of concern in bilateral relations. Gradually it moved from academic into political sphere once again and is likely to remain there for some time. Appeals to history are not just short-term and related to specific political parties or leaders. It is a part of broad and deep process with a high level of interdependence.

Nation building, inspired in Ukraine by Russia's aggression, concentrates on ethno-symbolic elements, including language, religion, symbols, and historical narratives. By putting more emphasis on history, it triggers similar processes in neighboring countries, including Poland. Moreover, there are other factors, contributing into another wave of nationalism in Eastern Europe, including rise of xenophobia, securitization of refugees issue, and alike. Rise popularity of right-wing parties and increased attention to history on the part of political forces are going to become key features of political landscape in the countries of the region. That gives additional impetus to long-lasting Polish-Ukrainian quarrels over history.

Several steps have been taken by both Poland and Ukraine to make situation worse. In April, 2015 the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the so-called "decommunization laws", which envisage responsibility of those who deny heroic nature of fighters for Ukraine. This step has been perceived negatively by Warsaw, the effect multiplied given the laws have been adopted the same day when the President of Poland gave a speech in the Ukrainian Parliament, stressing that Poland wants good relations with Ukraine. In 2016 the Polish Parliament unanimously adopted the resolution which qualifies Volhynia killings as genocide of the Poles. In 2017 Ukraine banned Poland's exhumation works on its territory in response to deconstruction of a monument to UPA (Ukraynska Povstanska Armiya) in Hruszowice, Poland. In 2018 the Polish Parliament adopted amendments to the Bill on

the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, enabling criminal responsibility for denial of "crimes of Ukrainian nationalists" in 1925-1950.

Political dimension of historical clashes is going to remain or even get stronger in bilateral relations. So far it doesn't look like any side is ready for another reconciliation. Moreover, it might be even politically profitable for both elites to engage into quarrels over narratives and national symbols. But in the long run a certain level of trust and readiness to accept different views on history would let both states be better off. Focusing on more pragmatic issues and making concessions over history whenever possible can be a good starting point.

Security should be kept in focus. Poland and Ukraine should realistically assess interests of each other, and Ukrainians must understand the differences in perceiving challenges. Poland is in a much better position than Ukraine, and has a different security agenda. Ukraine should seek for pragmatic partnership rather than ideologically driven friendship. There's a huge space for that: both countries readily accept each other as strategic partners and friends and have no reasons for major confrontations. Ukraine may help Poland increase the importance of Eastern neighborhood in EU's common policies, while Poland may further support Ukraine on its way to EU and NATO membership.

Regional security initiatives may also become platforms for bilateral cooperation. Putting Ukraine higher on the agenda of Visegrad Group and Three Seas Initiative might be mutually beneficial.

Same can be said about joint efforts aimed at enhancing energy security in the region. Diversification of natural gas supplies, expanding opportunities for liquefied natural gas deliveries, and improving energy efficiency are priorities for both countries.

CONCLUSION

Poland and Ukraine have enough potential combined to impact regional political developments and put forward a new security agenda. This agenda should be realistic and take into account current political and geopolitical realities. Effective containment of the Russian threat, more attention from the EU and NATO to Eastern Europe, more infrastructural capabilities, and less mistrust or historical speculations could bring about a more secure neighborhood.

At the same time, issues connected to national identities, including conflicts over history, are not likely to disappear. Rising nationalism will be a political trend in Eastern Europe for several years to come, and Poland and Ukraine should learn to live with it. Counterweighing identity

issues with mutually beneficial cooperation in various spheres, introducing regional projects which would enhance joint efforts, concentrating on multilateral regional formats would help minimize risks of another wave of nationalism in the Eastern Europe.

Attention should also be paid to improving democratic institutions. The task is crucial for Ukraine, which continuously falls into the “hybrid regime” group in EIU Democracy Index, but also important for other countries in the region, including Poland. More democracy would mean less internal conflicts, more power-sharing, and better protection for minorities – benefits, which any state of the region would welcome.



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NOTES

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