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**UKRAINE AND ITS  
NEIGHBORS:  
ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL  
TRENDS**

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# INTRODUCTION

It is very hard for countries that are in difficult geopolitical and / or security conditions to find friends.

Ukraine fully understands this by its own experience. In the fifth year of Russian aggression, Hungary is blocking Ukraine's cooperation with NATO, and Poland, once the main lobbyist of Kyiv in Brussels, is more often resorting to anti-Ukrainian rhetoric at all levels.

The Maidan victory, the reason for which was the refusal of the government to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, would seem to have opened up the European perspective for the country - the opportunity to adopt European norms and make a big step towards the common European space.

But the achievement of these perspectives almost immediately became much more complicated. Russia's occupation of Crimea and the incitement of the conflict in the east of Ukraine

have become instant factors that prevented the realization of Ukraine's European dream. Long-term factors arose due to the deepening destabilization of the international system, which led to a crisis within the EU, domination of realpolitik principles, the consolidation of the influence of nationalism as an ideology, and the lack of democracy, in particular in Eastern Europe and, in general, increased uncertainty for Ukraine in world politics.

The internal factors familiar to Ukrainians continued to work: a weak and inefficient state, corruption and a lack of legal and democratic principles.

Such a configuration in a decisive manner has influenced and continues to influence the European perspective of Ukraine. But no less important than the European one is the level of Ukraine's relations with neighboring states. Despite a lot of common rhetoric about the Russian threat, several problems remain.

# ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL TRENDS

The crisis of the European integration project, in conjunction with the aggressive revisionist policies of Russia, has badly affected the situation in Eastern Europe. Historically, the region is predisposed to irredentism, ethnic nationalism, conflicts between neighbors and suspicious attitudes towards the great Powers, culminating in the influence of contradictory tendencies.

On the one hand, this is an increase in the deficit of democracy. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, in 2013 the region of Central and Eastern Europe scored 5.53 points out of 10 according to the Democracy Index, which was equal to the global index. But in 2017, the score for the region - 5.40 - was already below the global level by 0.08<sup>1</sup>. This is the biggest drop among all regions of the world. For various reasons, both internal and external, the quality of democracy in the region is deteriorating. Thus, one of the key regulatory frameworks for regional security has weakened, leading countries in the region to be less inclined to trust one another.

On the other hand, an important trend is the increasing influence of nationalism and demand for it among the population and political elites. During the last four years, political forces with slogans and programs, in one way or another, related to questions of national identity and patriotism, won the elections in a number of countries in the region.

Against the background of various problems with refugees, xenophobia has been increasing. The references to historical disputes create the temptation to popularize similar topics to find the shortest path to the support of voters. Interestingly, in the history of the region, such tendencies have already been observed, in particular during the so-called “third wave” of nationalism after the end of the First World War. Their geopolitical consequences were catastrophic.

The chain reaction of constructing national identities leads to mutual hostility, historical and linguistic controversy, the struggle for the loyalty of national minorities and other similar processes. Compounding these issues, it would be quite difficult to find those responsible for perpetuating such sentiments.

Fragmentation of security policy is another important and noticeable regional trend. The countries of the region were unprepared for the strategic challenges that arose as a result of Russian steps to revise international security. Their perception of challenges and opportunities has become different, sometimes - diametrically different. Where one sees a threat, others can see opportunities.

Complex processes occur in the region where Ukraine is located. The geographic commonality of those in this region is their proximity to the Russian Federation. There is a need to learn how to survive and implement a shared foreign policy in this regard. Slogans about friendship may not be enough for this.

## POLAND

On the surface of recent disputes in relations between Ukraine and Poland is the historical question of attitude to the events of the Second World War and the interpretation of the participation of Poles and Ukrainians in mutual massive ethnic cleansing. Gradually, the conflict changed from the academic and journalistic spheres to the political sphere. Until the beginning of this year, however, when it supplanted all other questions on the first line of the agenda of bilateral relations after the adoption of the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance by the Senate of Poland. The Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine responded with a statement of convictions, and negotiations of the commission on historical issues, which took place shortly after, to resolve

<sup>1</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index // <https://infographics.economist.com/2018/DemocracyIndex/>

the dispute. These negotiations failed to bring about any resolution for the issue.

It is widely believed in Ukraine that the conflict regarding the historical interpretation is associated with temporary political or even personal factors. President Duda is a politician with conservative values who came to power due to several reasons, those important among them being his patriotic slogans. As the winner of recent parliamentary elections, he is a former member of the Law and Justice Party – a conservative political force for which Polish nationalism is one of the ideological foundations. However, linking the crisis in bilateral relations only with the ideological peculiarities of the LJ party, or the preferences of Duda, may be an overly simplistic way of viewing the issue.

It is more useful to consider the growth of demand for nationalism and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in Poland as a tendency for at least the medium-term. It is directly related to the peculiarities of the current political stage in the region, including the strengthening of nationalism as a political ideology and a crisis of normative principles of European integration. The difficult social and economic situation in Ukraine, in addition to open conflict on its territory also does not contribute to the pro-Ukrainian sentiments in Poland<sup>2</sup>. And, ultimately, the path chosen by Ukraine for constructing a modern national identity, similar to the region's usual way during the early XX century, provokes Polish politicians into using such rhetoric in response. Most likely, such tendencies will remain at least in the medium term.

Poland is the fourth largest trading partner of Ukraine, a state considered to be Ukraine's lobbyist for NATO and the EU, and Kyiv's "strategic partner". Continued confrontation on historical issues, taking into account the increased attention of society to them, can seriously damage bilateral relations. It is unlikely, however, that this will contribute to the blocking of foreign policy initiatives of Ukraine as in the case of Hungary. But weakening diplomatic support from Poland can affect a wide range of issues, from the formation and implementation of the European Neighborhood Policy, to the retention of the anti-Russian

sanctions regime. And if Poland is unlikely to take an anti-Ukrainian stand on issues that affect its own interests - for example, in the issue of the Nord Stream-2, and in general Russia's energy policy - then in all other cases unconditional support from Warsaw for Ukraine should not be expected.

The usual slogan "to leave history to historians" is unlikely to help resolve the situation. History in Eastern Europe has become a part of politics – indeed even perhaps one of the most dynamic and attractive parts. It has become profitable to speculate on historical issues and, therefore, would be impossible to leave them to historians. We need pragmatism, and actions are needed: unfortunately, Ukraine's position, due to various reasons, is the weakest in the region today.

## HUNGARY

The trigger of the conflict with Hungary was the adoption of the Law on education by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in September 2017, in which the language article caused severe criticism from Hungary, and subsequently led to the blockade of a number of initiatives by Budapest in the Ukraine-NATO relations. The wider context is the policy of protecting national minorities on the territory of Ukraine by Hungary. The language aspects of constructing a national identity in Ukraine affect the interests of different foreign language groups, and Hungary took the most vigorous position on this issue.

As in the case with Poland, it is not only a conservative ideology with a strong national element of the ruling Fidesz party or President Orbán. Hungary enjoys the moment - the moment of weakness for Ukraine, the growing demand for nationalism on a regional scale, as well as the opportunity to play with the Russian factor. The combination of these factors will remain in the regional policy for at least a few years, and

<sup>2</sup> Poles' Attitude to Ukrainians Worst in Last Decade – Poll // UNIAN, March, 13, 2018 // <https://www.unian.info/society/10040087-poles-attitude-to-ukrainians-worst-in-last-decade-poll.html>

current Hungarian policy has all the chances for continuation in the future.

Hungary is the tenth largest trading partner of Ukraine and one of the largest importers of Ukrainian electricity. It has fewer opportunities to put pressure on Ukraine in economic matters or labor migration, while energy and cross-border cooperation remain sensitive areas of bilateral relations.

But membership in NATO and the EU, and therefore participation in the decision-making of these organizations gives Hungary the most benefits, and it is ready to use it. Ukraine has already been shown that Budapest is ready and willing to press the block button in relation to important issues for Ukraine.

By consolidating at the legislative level its aspirations to join NATO and the EU, we cannot ignore the position of Hungary. Sooner or later, it will be necessary to answer the difficult question of what is more important for national interests - deepening relations with NATO and the EU, or building a national identity in its original form. On the other hand, with its pressure and high rates, Hungary has demonstrated that the protection of national minorities.

Concessions in this direction by Ukraine should be exchanged for something substantial. For example, it is not just the unblocking of the dialogue with NATO, but also active support from Budapest.

## ROMANIA

After the Maidan victory, euphoria greatly influenced the perception of relations with Romania, a country that for a long time was one of the regional rivals of Ukraine, and historically the relations with which did not easily evolve. The Russian threat - and the occupation of Crimea has seriously changed the balance of power in the Black Sea basin, a key region for Romania

- have largely brought the positions of Ukraine and Romania closer, pushing traditional subjects of controversy to the background.

Romania has taken a pro-Ukrainian position on the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions, strengthening opportunities of containment of Russia in the Black Sea region, intensifying cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, and ratifying and implementing the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU.

However, the potential of such cooperation was not fully realized for various reasons, and controversial issues again appeared on the agenda.

One of them, as in the case of Hungary, concerns the protection of the language of the national Romanian minority. At the same time, the position of the Romanian government is much milder than the position of the Hungarian government. Romania does not resort to making high-sounding statements or blocking the decisions of international organizations.

The importance of issues regarding cooperation with Ukraine in the field of security, in particular regional, prevails over any other agenda in terms of bilateral relations. This may be the key element in building a strategy for bilateral relations.

A long-standing challenge to the security of both countries, the Transnistrian conflict in the territory of Moldova, may also be a potential source of problems. Both Romania and Ukraine are interested in resolving it, and not on Russia's terms. But the views on the future of Moldova in the two capitals are different.

Romania plays an important role in the regional energy security system as a country with large reserves of natural gas and oil, as well as significant transit potential, which in the future may increase. Energy, as well as security, can become a sphere of strategic cooperation between Romania and Ukraine.

## BELARUS

The neighborhood of Ukraine with Belarus, an ally of Russia, remains unpredictable and challenging. Like Russia, Belarus is an important trading partner of Ukraine (the sixth in terms of volume), but this trade interdependence does not turn into a guarantee of security and mutual trust.

It seems that there is no clear policy towards Belarus in Ukraine. There are episodic exacerbations in relations, such as those that occurred after the Ukrainian journalist's detention in Minsk in October 2017. There are manifestations of the depth of the Russian-Belarusian partnership that could threaten the national security of Ukraine, such as the large-scale military exercise Zapad-2017, which took place in September 2017. Ultimately, there is a high degree of integration of Belarus and Russia, their joint participation in a number of international organizations and integrational entities, as well as the significant economic dependence of the former for the latter. Does all this mean that Belarus is unconditionally under the influence of Moscow in the realm of foreign policy?

In the current situation in the region – rather than the escalation of conflicts and the destruction of security institutions - it would be better to come out of this difficult scenario by responding positively to the question formulated above. Belarusian rhetoric positions the country as an intermediary, but dependence on Russia makes Minsk an ally of Moscow, rather than an unbiased provider of a platform for dialogue. Belarus voting in international organizations, in particular the UN General Assembly, perhaps, is the most simple but reliable indicator of the true position of Minsk.

In these conditions, Ukraine faces a difficult task: not to neglect and not to lose the opportunities that still remain in relations with Belarus. To do this is to get rid of messianic approaches and focus on pragmatic issues: trade, especially in sanction regimes, cross-border cooperation, and the search for joint projects within the framework of deepening relations with the EU.

## TURKEY

The neighborhood with Turkey also does not promise cloudless prospects and simple decisions. The only thing that can be considered an axiom in bilateral relations is the failure to recognize the annexation of Crimea by Turkey. Everything else is an open question.

Being the second largest army of NATO and the second largest trade partner of Ukraine, Turkey has demonstrated active and pragmatic foreign policy in recent years. It is this type of behavior demonstrated by the neighbors of Ukraine which, as a rule, the country is unprepared.

The pragmatism of Turkey stems from the nature of the challenges facing it and the limited resources that it has at its disposal. Additional risks arise both in the Black Sea region and in the south, in connection with the war in Syria. Against this backdrop, the consolidation of power and the rise of the ideology of neo-humanism are taking place. This makes Turkey a more difficult neighbor for Ukraine.

Turkey's pragmatism, first of all, determines the trajectory of its relations with Russia. Moscow is an active player in the Black Sea region, supplier of weapons and natural gas, as well as one of the stakeholders in Syria. These factors make Russia an extremely important partner for Turkey. How far will cooperation between the two most powerful Black Sea countries go, and under what forms, remains to be seen. In any case, Ukraine is unlikely to have any significant influence.

Turkey has its own view on Crimea's fate. Not recognizing and condemning the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Ankara is predictably making a basic bet on the support of the Crimean Tatar people. The Crimean factor will remain on the agenda for a long time and may have a decisive influence on Turkey's policy towards Ukraine; and our vision of the future of Crimea should be formulated with this in mind. Turkey can provide good services or even act as an intermediary, but will remain a pragmatically strong neighbor of Ukraine, whose altruism is unlikely to be counted upon.

By focusing on energy and / or the economy, we must also remember that an increase of the transit role of Turkey can happen at the expense of Ukraine, in addition to strengthening the energy position of Russia and the influence of Moscow on Ankara. Ukraine has always been the weakest link in the Black Sea triangle of Russia-Turkey-Ukraine. Today, its positions have become even weaker.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The easiest way to explain the difficult relations with neighbors lies in the search of influence of Russia. It is also the most incorrect way. Speculations about the “Kremlin’s hand” hide the real causes and sources of problems. They lie in the features of regional policy, the decisions of Ukraine itself and the nature of this historic moment. Russian revisionism has accelerated some destructive processes and gave them a particularly threatening character.

Under complicated conditions, Ukraine should not rely on the fact that problems with its neighbors will be solved by themselves on the basis of regular elections. It is more reasonable to proceed from the fact that these problems are of a deeper character.

The part of the regional tendencies that led to an aggravation of relations between neighbors such as the lack of democracy is beyond the control of Ukraine. There is a need to adapt to such processes, developing and implementing more pragmatic and less normative policy. Other trends - for example, the spread of nationalism by the region – are partly dependent on the steps of Ukraine. Reducing emotional tension around discussions about identity, the search for alternative elements for the construction of things such as identity so that it is not ethnic but civilized, and reducing the rhetoric that affects the feelings of neighboring peoples - such steps can help to move political discussions from the plane of ethnic interpretations, where Ukraine’s positions are not so strong, into a more constructive direction.

More attention should be paid to constructive initiatives in the field of regional security and, in general, to creating a positive agenda in relations with neighbors. The basis of such work should not be fantastic projects of past centuries, the realization of which is a priori impossible, and a pragmatic vision of Ukraine’s role in the Eastern European region.

Problems in relations with neighbors are first of all the problems of Ukraine, not its neighbor’s. Now Ukraine is in the most vulnerable position, in which threats and expectations are not the best decisions.