

# Polish-Ukrainian Relations Euromaidan and the Donbass Conflict

## The Challenges For Warsaw

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This article contributes to the discussion about the multidimensional consequences of the crisis and conflict in Ukraine. It focuses on the rarely discussed subject of the implications of the events in this country since 2013 for Polish-Ukrainian relations from Warsaw's perspective. This article has three major goals: firstly, to present the historical determinants influencing contemporary Polish-Ukrainian relations; secondly, to characterize the reaction of Poland to the events in Ukraine since 2013; and finally, to point out major implications of the crisis and conflict for bilateral relations from a Polish standpoint. The paper concludes that, contrary to many domestic official statements, the Ukrainian crisis and conflict brought more challenges and dilemmas than tangible benefits for Poland. Obviously, bilateral contacts with Kiev are nowadays much better than a few years back, but this does not mean that Warsaw profits greatly from this situation. Moreover, new and rather unexpected challenges emerged in these relations, concerning, among others, Ukraine's historical policy, the activities of right-wing extremists and the lack of prospects of joining the EU and NATO, which is a long-term Polish ambition for her neighbour.

*Keywords: war in Donbass, Polish foreign policy, Euromaidan*



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The recent crisis and conflict in Ukraine has become an object of a great deal of insightful scientific analyses. Some of these have focused on the very roots of this war, explaining the intricacies of inter-Ukrainian relations, most notably the visible rupture between the western and eastern part of this country.<sup>1</sup> Others attempted to analyze the course<sup>2</sup> or the geopolitical background of events in Kiev, the Crimean Peninsula and Donbass, with a special emphasis placed on relations between the United States, Western European powers and Russia.<sup>3</sup> In the plethora of books and papers on the Ukrainian conflict, one topic is usually omitted or neglected: its strictly regional dimension. It is surprising as the events in Ukraine since the end of 2013 have a substantial connection with the dynamics of international relations in Central and Eastern Europe.

In this context, this paper aims to fill this gap by presenting the Euromaidan revolution, the annexation of Crimea, as well as the conflict in Donbass from the Polish perspective. Adopting such a scientific approach is justified as it is the only Central European state that is a member of NATO and the EU, which in turn played a certain role in the initial phases of the Ukrainian crisis. This is also the only Central European actor that perceives an independent and pro-Western Ukraine as a long-term and fundamental goal of its foreign policy in the East. Thus, the study has three major goals. Firstly, it aims to present the historical determinants influencing contemporary Polish-Ukrainian relations. Secondly, it will characterize the reaction of Poland to the events in Ukraine since 2013. And finally, it will address major implications of the crisis and conflict for bilateral relations from Warsaw's viewpoint.

## Ukraine in Polish Foreign Policy: a Historical Perspective

The roots of contemporary Polish-Ukrainian relations can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when the Kingdom of Poland in the 14<sup>th</sup> century started its expansion eastward, towards territories previously held by the *Kievan Rus* ("Red Ruthenia").<sup>4</sup> From that time, Poland for several hundred years focused on the subordination of wide reaching territories that belong today to contemporary Ukraine. This process was strongly determined by Poland's personal, and later real, union (the Union of Lublin in 1569) with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which resulted in the incorporation of Ukraine, including the so called Wild Fields, to the Polish Crown. Under the rule of the Polish-Lithuanian

Commonwealth, former *Kievan Rus* territories were subjected to various processes, such as colonization by the magnates, Tartar incursions from the Crimean Peninsula, the foundation of Cossacks, the creation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and repetitive uprisings against Polish rule.<sup>5</sup> They visibly contributed to the creation of the Ukrainian national identity, which was later built partially on historical resentments, fueled by economic and religious differences.

Historically, Polish-Ukrainian relations were almost always influenced by the 'Russian' factor. It is due to the fact that at the same time, the territories of Ukraine were a subject of long-term rivalry between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Grand Duchy of Moscow/Russia that aimed to unite all the principalities formerly under *Kievan Rus* control.<sup>6</sup> These tendencies manifested themselves in a series of wars between Russia and Poland, e.g. 1654-67. In time, due to the slow decline of the Commonwealth, Moscow gained the upper hand, which resulted in the partitioning of Poland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in effect, seizure of Ukraine by Russia. From that time both nations were subjected to foreign domination. According to Szeptycki "even if Poland was not any more an independent country, the relations between the Polish and Ukrainian communities remained conflictual and asymmetrical. The already existing religious differences were doubled by an economic and social conflict."<sup>7</sup>

This specific rivalry over Ukraine between Poland and Russia resumed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Poles and Bolsheviks perceived Ukraine after World War I as a strategic area which should be seized in order to secure crucial foreign policy goals. Moscow sought to conquer Ukraine not only due to its economic importance. They also perceived control over this territory as a *sine qua non* requirement to launch a global Communist revolution. Poles, on the other hand, perceived this area as a pivotal 'buffer zone,'<sup>8</sup> which would separate the Second Polish Commonwealth from the imminent Bolshevik threat.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, many decision-makers and representatives of the political elite believed that, without Ukraine, Russia would cease to be a great power. There were generally two Polish concepts concerning relations with Ukraine during the interbellum. The first, promoted by the right-wing leader Roman Dmowski, suggested that Poland should seize only limited territories in the east. Dmowski aimed to control areas with a dominant Polish national element, which would allow eventually for the assimilation of the rest of the inhabitants. Thus, only a small

part of western Ukraine, including Lviv, should be incorporated into the Second Commonwealth. The rest, according to Dmowski, would remain within the Russian empire. The second concept, pushed by Poland's leader Józef Piłsudski, envisaged a broad confederation of Poland with nation-states in the east, these being: Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Both Polish and Bolshevik concepts clearly neglected rising Ukrainian ambitions to gain independence.

These contrary interests clashed during the Polish-Bolshevik war 1919-1921, in which the Ukrainian factor played a major role. Poles and some Ukrainian leaders (Symon Petlura) cooperated against the Communists during the conflict.<sup>11</sup> However, the 1921 Riga peace treaty once again divided Ukraine between Poland and Bolshevik Russia, which naturally disillusioned and angered its inhabitants, as well as the former leaders of the Ukrainian People's Republic. The reinstatement of Warsaw's rule over Western Ukraine in effect raised armed opposition, organized mostly by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which was repressed by the Polish government.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, Ukrainians on the other side of the border were subjected to Communist repressions and the greatest famine in Ukraine's history – *Holodomor* – which killed around 4 million people. Despite this fact, during September 1939's German and Soviet invasion of Poland, many Ukrainians supported both invading armies.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, it has to be stressed that World War II contributed to the huge historical controversies between Poles and their eastern neighbors. It is due to the fact, that since the Third Reich's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 many Ukrainians with nationalistic attitudes flirted or sided with the Nazis. This was perfectly visible in the activities of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army).<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that initial Ukrainian hopes to obtain sovereignty with Hitler's help proved to be trivial, many of them still cooperated with Germany in the form of the creation of the 14 Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS, composed of Ukrainian volunteers. This division was involved in counter-insurgency operations against Polish rebels, as well as responsible for war crimes against the civilian population.<sup>15</sup> Much more serious crimes against Poles were committed by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) – which was responsible for brutal ethnic cleansing (or, as many Polish scientists and journalists insist – even genocide) of Poles in Volhynia and Galicia, which resulted in the deaths of more than 100 000 people in 1943 and 1944.<sup>16</sup> In Polish

historiography these tragic events are usually denominated as the 'Volhynia slaughter' (*rzeź wołyńska*).

The experiences of World War II deepened divisions among Ukrainian society, which became visible in the Post-Cold War era and played a certain role in the eruption of conflict in 2014.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, they also opened a serious wound in Polish-Ukrainian relations, as both societies blamed one another for their sufferings. On the one hand, Poles remembered the genocide in Volhynia, as well as the attitude of many Ukrainians during the invasion of September 1939 and the following occupation of the Second Commonwealth. On the other hand, Ukrainians stressed their mistreatment during the interbellum period, the *Vistula* operation against UPA/OUN members and supporters (1947-1950), as well as forcible expulsions from Poland after the war.

After World War II, these resentments were largely buried by Communists from both sides, as the Soviet decision makers focused on new challenges concerning rivalry with the West. Moreover, it has to be mentioned that the Polish People's Republic, dependent on the USSR, obviously forgot about any ambitions concerning Ukraine. Thus, the proactive stance towards this state could only resurface during the democratic transition period of 1989-91. As the dissolution of the Soviet Union approached, independent Poland adopted the so called 'two-way policy'. On the one hand, new Polish decision makers officially declared that they aimed to maintain good relations with the Kremlin, which was at the time crucial due to national security reasons. On the other hand, the leaders of the Third Commonwealth supported movements that were struggling to regain independence from the Soviet Union. In this context, many politicians in Warsaw assumed the traditional approach towards Ukraine, dating back to the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was however adapted to the international reality of the Post-Cold War era. To begin with, decision makers hoped that an independent Ukraine would help to dismantle the Soviet Union and weaken its successor – Russia. Otherwise, the Kremlin's domination of Central and Eastern Europe might be reinstated. Moreover, they also supported the idea of Ukraine's integration with the European Union and NATO. This, in effect, would effectively mean that Poland would not have to be a border state of both organizations. And finally, the realization of this goal would fulfill the traditional objective – the creation of a strong 'buffer zone' between pro-Western Central Europe and the Federation of Russia.<sup>18</sup>

From Moscow's standpoint, Ukraine was perceived as a part of the so called 'Near Neighborhood' zone, vital for Russian national interests. According to Moscow's decision makers, control over Ukraine was crucial not only for domestic reforms and influence in the Post-Soviet area but also for relations with the West. Paradoxically, they also perceived Ukraine as a specific kind of 'buffer zone', which in time could separate Russian borders from the NATO zone of influence, which was still perceived as a major threat to the Federation's security.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in the Post-Cold War era the traditional regional rivalry over Ukraine was, in a certain sense, resumed. It was initially proven by Warsaw's decision, as the first state in the world, to recognize the independence of Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> In the following years Poland remained interested in supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, as well as its democratic and capitalist reforms. Both states tried to omit difficult historical experiences and focus on similar interests in the international environment. Warsaw attempted to bind Kiev with Western organisations; however, it was not ready to sacrifice its own European ambitions to reach this goal. This was manifested by the failure of the so-called 'Kravchuk plan', which was rejected by Poland due to fears that it would ruin its own integration with the NATO and the EU. In effect, despite the fact that the atmosphere of bilateral relations was rather cordial, decision-makers in Warsaw failed to reach their most important goal concerning Kiev.<sup>21</sup> This situation was obviously beneficial for the Russians, who successfully kept an edge over relations with Ukraine. Taking into consideration cultural similarities, as well as strong political, economic and military ties between both states, it was relatively easy for the Kremlin to preserve its unofficial domination. This was especially visible during Leonid Kuchma's presidency.<sup>22</sup> Moscow's activities towards Kiev usually included such tools as strengthened political and economic cooperation, as well as the containment of Western presence.<sup>23</sup> To recapitulate, in the clash between contrary Polish and Russian interests in Ukraine, Moscow held the upper hand.

This rather stable situation slightly shifted at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Internal political crisis in Ukraine, transformed into the Orange Revolution in November 2004, proved to be a perfect opportunity to change the tide of the Polish-Russian rivalry over Ukraine. As electoral fraud during the presidential election sparked huge public protests, the Polish political elite sided vigorously with demonstrations against pro-Russian politicians: Kuchma and Yanukovych. Many

of Poland's most popular politicians travelled to Kiev in order to express their support to the democratic movement and its candidate Victor Yushchenko.<sup>24</sup> Its eventual success proved to be a major setback for Moscow and a great opportunity for Warsaw, which expected to benefit from this change. Warsaw hoped that under Victor Yushchenko's presidency, Ukraine could be permanently drawn to the Western zone of influence. Therefore, Polish decision-makers attempted to enter into multidimensional strategic cooperation with Kiev, which was manifested, for example, by their constant support of Ukraine's candidature to NATO and the European Union. Warsaw and Kiev also coordinated their policies during the Georgian-Russian war in 2008.<sup>25</sup> Russia on the other hand, perceived the fall of Yanukovych and Kuchma as a major failure, as well as a threat to the Near Neighbourhood policy. Therefore, it attempted to change this state of affairs using, among others, political and economic tools. As a side effect, the Orange Revolution also contributed to the deterioration of Polish-Russian relations. Moscow used many opportunities to manifest its negative stance towards Warsaw, which was proven by, for example, the establishment of a national holiday commemorating the expulsion of Poles from Kremlin in 1612.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, the presidency of Victor Yushchenko proved to be not only a great disappointment for Ukrainian citizens but also for the Polish political elite. He did not meet their hopes for rapid pro-Western transformation. Moreover, during his term, the difficult history finally resurfaced in bilateral relations, as he officially glorified UPA and OUN members. Moreover, he granted the title of the Hero of Ukraine to one of the most controversial leaders of UPA – Stepan Bandera. Such a policy was negatively received in Poland, due to the aforementioned responsibility of UPA for the genocide of Poles during World War II.<sup>27</sup> Thus, from the Polish perspective, results of the strategic cooperation with Ukraine between 2004 and 2010 were considered a failure.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, another political change in Ukraine in 2010, i.e. Victor Yanukovych presidential election success, was met in Poland with somewhat limited interest, as decision makers became weary of 'strengthened cooperation' with Kiev. Obviously, they were aware that he aimed to maintain close, strategic relations with Russia, which made all potential attempts of rapprochement futile. Hence, while the atmosphere of bilateral contacts was still positive, they had lost their former drive. Before the crisis Warsaw still supported Kiev in its asso-

ciation process with the EU, but its level of commitment, compared to earlier periods, decreased. Also Poland's domestic mass media became relatively less interested in Ukrainian politics.

### Poland's Reaction to the Ukrainian Crisis from Caution to Limited Commitment

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These trends reversed in 2013 due to the Revolution of Dignity in Kiev. In November, when the Euromaidan protests erupted, the political elite in Poland quickly realized that it was another chance to 'pull out' Ukraine from the Russian zone of influence. This time, however, the initial reaction of Warsaw was much more cautious than during the Orange Revolution. Despite the fact that again many representatives of political parties travelled to Kiev (e.g. Jarosław Kaczyński from the Law and Justice party), in order to support protesters, the government limited itself to overly diplomatic statements and declarations, which sided with the pro-Western ambitions of Ukrainian citizens.<sup>29</sup> As the internal crisis deteriorated at the beginning of 2014, Poland, alongside Germany and France, mediated between conflicting sides in order to avoid further bloodshed. Its role was symbolized by the February 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 agreement. However, as Victor Yanukovych fled the country, the treaty was immediately cancelled.<sup>30</sup> As it soon became clear, this was the apex of Polish political engagement in the crisis.

The following emergence of the new pro-Western government was naturally considered in Warsaw to be a major benefit which could end its long-term rivalry with Russia over Ukraine. It was due to the fact that its association with the European Union created mechanisms, which were somewhat difficult for the Kremlin to nullify with the use of traditional instruments of the 'Near Neighbourhood' policy. Therefore, it was not a surprise that Prime Minister Donald Tusk decided to recognize Arsenij Yatsenyuk's government, despite its violation of the February 21<sup>st</sup> agreement. This laid strong foundations for rapid rapprochement between both states. It must be noted that no one at this point in Poland expected a military reaction from Moscow or the upcoming civil war in Donbass. Thus when the Russian 'green man' started to seize strategic points on the Crimean Peninsula, Polish decision-makers took a much firmer position than during Euromaidan, stressing that the territorial integrity of Ukraine must be maintained. Moreover, they stressed that the international community should in-



crease pressure on the Kremlin in order to force it to withdraw.<sup>31</sup> The subsequent Russian aggression on Crimea and the war in Donbass fundamentally changed the reception of Ukraine's events in Poland. Public opinion shifted from satisfaction of the transformation in Kiev to rapidly rising anxiety concerning the conflict's negative influence on national security. It was mostly due to the fact that relations with Russia quickly deteriorated, as a rising scale of political incidents between both parties occurred. For instance, in October 2014 a spy scandal in Poland broke out, as the security services arrested two Poles accused of gathering intelligence for the Kremlin. This was followed by the decision to expel four Russian diplomats.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, numerous military incidents between the Federation and NATO troops, a Russian embargo on Polish fruit and vegetables imposed in July 2014, as well as unexpected military drills near the Polish border also played a certain role.<sup>33</sup>

As a result, many experts, journalists and even some politicians contributed to the widespread fear of an immediate Russian invasion against Poland.<sup>34</sup> Obviously a scenario of imminent Russian aggression was impossible at the time.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the Kremlin was rightly categorized as a rising military threat to Poland's security. This was confirmed by the 2014 National Security Strategy, which stated: 'In the vicinity of Poland there is a risk of regional or local conflicts, which may involve it indirectly or directly. Poland is also not free from the forms of political pressure using military arguments. In its vicinity there is a high concentration of military capabilities, also with offensive configuration.'<sup>36</sup> Between the lines, this obviously referred to the Federation of Russia. This situation therefore created another dilemma for Polish foreign policy, concerning the development of a new and efficient *modus operandi* in relation to a clearly hostile Kremlin.

It is unsurprising that Poland chose to visibly support Ukraine during the conflict in Donbass, which reflected the cordial atmosphere of bilateral contact at the time. There are several examples to support this statement. To begin with, in August 2014 The Polish Ministry of Defence decided to send 320 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukrainian soldiers.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, during the most intensive battles, domestic associations gathered equipment which could be used in support of Kiev's efforts in the east. One of them transferred eight off-road vehicles to the Maidan Self Defence troops.<sup>38</sup> Thirdly, in July 2014 2000 bulletproof vests and 6000 helmets produced in Poland were sold to the Ukrainian

National Guard.<sup>39</sup> Other military deliveries from Poland were concluded after two years, in mid-2016, with the condition that they will only concern non-combat equipment.<sup>40</sup> Finally, aside from strictly material help, Warsaw launched political and economic initiatives, aimed at stabilizing its eastern neighbour. Among others, it supported internal reforms in Ukraine, promoted democracy and human rights through various state-sponsored grants.<sup>41</sup> It also provided financial help, which was symbolized by the 100 million euro loan program, granted in January 2015 for 10 years.<sup>42</sup>

Considering Ukrainian shortages during the war, the amount of Polish involvement was somewhat insignificant mostly due to the scarcity of Poland's own resources. Economically and militarily, Warsaw was not ready to provide greater help, which would have made a difference in Donbass. It was well understood by the Ukrainians themselves, which were much more interested in cooperation with the United States and Western European countries.<sup>43</sup> It is thus unsurprising that the political significance of Poland in the international debate over the events in the east dropped significantly in 2014 and 2015. From one of the key mediators in February 2014 in just a few months Warsaw's role was reduced to only one of many foreign supporters of the new government in Kiev.

## The War in Ukraine and its Implications for Poland

Careful analysis of Poland's foreign policy goals towards Ukraine before and during the war indicates that almost none of them have been reached so far. Warsaw traditionally pushed for Kiev's rapid integration with NATO and the EU, which would ensure its democratic political system, internal stability, and hence, the creation of a strong 'buffer zone' separating Central Europe from Russia. In effect, Poland would lose its border state status, which entails serious security and financial challenges. Moreover, Poland's decision-makers maintained ambitions to play the role of Ukraine's "advocate" in their relations with the West. As Andrzej Szeptycki put it: "Such a position stems from the importance of Ukraine for Poland, but also from a will to strengthen the position of Poland in the international arena (in particular in the European Union). In consequence Poland considers that it should be consulted on the Ukrainian issues."<sup>44</sup> Finally, Warsaw attempted to minimize the negative effects of the conflict on its own national secu-

rity. None of these aims have been met so far, despite the fact that currently the Ukrainian government can be perceived as pro-Western. In this context, the events in Ukraine since 2013 have created several important challenges for Warsaw concerning bilateral relations with Kiev.

To begin with, Poland was visibly sidelined in the international negotiations over the events in Donbass. Early in the crisis, Warsaw played an important role in mediations between the opposition and the Yanukovych government. However, immediately after the failure of the February 21<sup>st</sup> agreement,<sup>45</sup> the new Ukrainian leaders ceased to be interested in Poland as a partner and mediator in negotiations with Russia, focusing mostly on the aforementioned cooperation with the United States and EU leaders.<sup>46</sup> This unwillingness was quickly noticed with surprise by many journalists and politicians in Poland, which were until now convinced that the pro-Western shift in Ukraine would strengthen the international position and influence of Warsaw.<sup>47</sup> This was confirmed by the lack of Kiev's visible initiatives to include its western neighbour in the Milan (during 2014 10<sup>th</sup> Asia/Europe Summit) or Minsk talks. President Bronisław Komorowski summed up the unexpected Ukrainian *désintéressement* in 2014 with a meaningful statement: 'a good advocate is one that helps when you request it, and not the one that forces assistance.'<sup>48</sup> This sentence symbolically reflects the failure of Polish ambitions to be included in high-profile negotiations on the Ukrainian conflict, which were visible in multiple statements of, for example, Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz and Foreign Affairs Minister Grzegorz Schetyna.<sup>49</sup> This situation may be considered a serious problem for Poland, which had not only suffered a prestigious setback but also had lost even minimal influence on negotiations over issues which hold great importance for its national security. It is worth noticing that Kiev's stance has not changed even after the emergence of a new government in Poland in 2015, despite its numerous friendly gestures towards Kiev.<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, it has to be stressed that, despite Polish hopes, Ukraine currently has barely any visible perspectives of joining the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This was suggested several times by the top European and Euro-Atlantic leaders, for instance, by the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker who stated that 'Ukraine will definitely not be able to become a member of the EU in the next 20 to 25 years and not of NATO either.'<sup>51</sup> This meant that despite Ukrainian hopes expressed during the Euromaidan

revolution, association with the EU was not the first step for accelerated integration. This statement is not a surprise considering not only the Copenhagen criteria but also the fact that the EU and NATO will never accept a member that is coping with a serious internal crisis. Furthermore, several Western European states are traditionally sceptical towards such a scenario due to the logic of relations with Russia<sup>52</sup>. Poland was and is, due to the aforementioned interests, a strong advocate of Ukrainian membership in both organisations; however its influence on European and Euro-Atlantic decision-making processes is too insignificant to make a real difference.

In this context, the current impossibility of Kiev's accession may be considered as another setback for Polish foreign policy, as the 'buffer zone' scenario is currently in tatters. Without membership in the EU/NATO, Ukraine will remain in a geopolitical vacuum, a grey zone of security, located between two hostile blocks –The Federation of Russia and NATO. Such a position is challenging not only for its own security and internal stability, but also for the security of its neighbours, including Poland, exposed to negative processes appearing within Ukraine now and in the future. Considering such problems as the smouldering conflict in Donbass, the still high tension in relations with Russia, widespread corruption, activities of oligarchs, economic crisis, energy supply problems and the rise of organized crime, it is not a surprise that many Western journalists and experts debate the risk of Ukraine's serious destabilization.<sup>53</sup>

The possibility of such a scenario has already been manifested by the subversive activities of armed formations which are not subordinate to the government in Kiev – i.e. the Right Sector. In July 2015 three people died and seven were injured in a firefight between local armed group and the Right Sector battalion in Mukachevo.<sup>54</sup> As the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace *Ukraine Reform Monitor: August 2015* authors stated: 'The armed confrontation in the town of Mukachevo in July 2015 between a private security group working for a Rada deputy and members of the nationalist Right Sector political party cast a spotlight on significant internal security problems in Ukraine. The problems stem from a combination of organized crime, corrupt law enforcement agencies, illegal trafficking of goods and weapons, proliferation of weapons in the country, and the increasing militarization of some political groups.'<sup>55</sup> This sparked legitimate concerns that Ukrainian security services are inefficient, and hence, that such phenomena

may endanger the security of the Polish border. Thirdly, the Donbass conflict may be considered to be one of the causes of the unexpected phenomenon of mass Ukrainian migration to Poland. The annexation of Crimea and the civil war caused internal displacement, estimated at around 1.5 million people.<sup>56</sup> According to United Nations estimates in 2015, around 800 000 have fled Ukraine due to the conflict.<sup>57</sup> It is unknown how many left the country due to the deteriorating economic situation and how many due to the threat of military mobilization, which was announced in 2015 and encountered serious problems due to draft dodgers.<sup>58</sup> However, the fact is that one of the most important directions of the recent outflow of Ukrainians was and is Poland. This naturally sparks some controversies, both domestically and in the international environment.

The new Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło stated at the beginning of 2016 that 'Poland has accepted around a million refugees from Ukraine, people whom nobody wanted to help.' This statement, used as an argument against the EU's relocation system proposal, was quickly criticized by Ukraine's ambassador to Poland Andriy Deshchytzia. According to him, these citizens cannot be categorized as 'refugees' as they are simply 'economic migrants.'<sup>59</sup> Obviously the statement about a million refugees can be seen as an exaggeration, but it is a fact that hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have arrived in Poland since the beginning of the crisis, usually as workers or students.<sup>60</sup> The inflow of a huge wave of Ukrainian migrants to Poland usually sparks few controversies among society, mostly due to their cultural proximity.<sup>61</sup> However, it has to be stressed that there are two apparent challenges emanating from this situation. On the one hand, this is a serious problem for Poland's integration policy which is currently non-existent. So far there has been little to no public debate on its coherent vision and plans to integrate about one million foreign workers and students in Poland. The lack of such may have serious social and internal security consequences in the future, as Western European examples prove. On the other hand, there is the burning issue of an increasing wave of Ukrainian right-wing extremist incidents in Poland, including these of anti-Semitic and Nazi backgrounds. Some were connected to activities of the Nazi and neo-pagan organization called the Misantrropic Division (MD), related to the infamous Azov volunteer battalion, which possesses firearms and combat experience due to its former activities in Donbass.<sup>62</sup> This sparked legitimate concerns about the possible ef-

fects of these trends on Poland's national security, especially taking into consideration that the MD has even opened a Polish branch.

Fourthly, the new Ukrainian political elite have promoted a new vision of Ukrainian history since February 2014, which is highly controversial from the Polish perspective. According to Kiev, UPA/OUN members, including one of their leaders and ideologists, Stepan Bandera, are national heroes, meritorious for the fight for Ukrainian independence. This approach was adapted with complete disregard of their cooperation with the Third Reich, 'ss-Galizien' war crimes during the World War II and the UPA genocide in Volhynia and Galicia, which spark obvious controversies in Poland. In this context it is surprising to note that Kiev, despite its grave geopolitical situation and lack of tested allies, made several provocative gestures towards Warsaw concerning the perception of bilateral history. One of the most debated gestures concerned the visit of the Polish President Bronisław Komorowski to the Ukrainian parliament in April 2015. The same day, this parliament decided to honor UPA/OUN as "combatants for freedom and the independence of Ukraine."<sup>63</sup> Many journalists, intellectuals and politicians naturally considered this move to be a serious insult to Poland. Moreover, one can mention the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada move in September 2016, which criticized Polish parliament for its July 2016 resolution on the genocide in Volhynia. Ukrainian deputies described the decision to commemorate this tragedy as a politicization of history.<sup>64</sup> Such a reaction suggests that Kiev is not ready for historical debate and reconciliation with Poland, as once happened between Poland and Germany. This is visible among the Ukrainian political elite, even if President Petro Poroshenko paid homage to the Volhynia massacres victims during his visit to Warsaw in July 2016, which in itself was an important gesture.<sup>65</sup>

What is even more interesting is that current Ukrainian historical policy has had so far relatively little influence on the course of the eastern policy of Poland. Despite the aforementioned controversies, which cooled the atmosphere of bilateral relations, the decision makers seem to be torn between the long-term dogma of supporting Ukraine as a crucial buffer zone and the need to defend historical truth about the Volhynia and Galicia events, recently commemorated by the Sejm after a long debate. Usually a pro-Ukrainian stance prevails, which was manifested symbolically by the 2015 statement of the Foreign Affairs Minister Grzegorz Schetyna. He stressed that the criticism of Ukraini-

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an nationalism can be perceived as support to the Russian narrative.<sup>66</sup> In reality, it is just the opposite. Such an approach basically hampers any Polish initiatives to launch a proper historical dialogue, based upon truth and mutual forgiveness. And without the overcoming of historical differences, sooner or later a political crisis in relations between Poland and Ukraine will emerge. Moreover, without full historical reconciliation between both nations, a postulated Polish-Ukrainian partnership will never be possible. And such a scenario is certainly in the interests of Vladimir Putin.

## Summary

The dynamics of events in Ukraine, especially since February 2014, surprised the majority of the political elite in Poland, which failed to develop a coherent plan of action. While general foreign policy goals have not changed, their substantiation and realization has left much to be desired. Warsaw, which traditionally perceived Ukraine as a crucial partner in the east due to the logic of its long-term but uneven rivalry with Russia, has been strongly interested in supporting the pro-democratic and pro-Western movement since November 2013. Its *modus operandi* was, however, rather cautious. After the outbreak of war in Donbass, Poland attempted to strengthen its neighbour, but the scale of the support provided failed to meet Kiev's expectations and needs. At the same time, new Ukrainian decision makers since day one have not met Warsaw's hopes for better bilateral relations. Thus, the Revolution of Dignity, which was expected to bring great advantages, instead has had rather mixed outcomes for Poland. Obviously, bilateral relations are officially perceived as strong, dynamic and cordial. The political shift in Kiev allowed new kinds of cooperation, which were unattractive or impossible before. Both states have developed contacts in such areas as education, the military industry, hi-tech industry and science.

Nevertheless, the current situation in relations with Ukraine can be barely classified as a great success for Poland's foreign policy. The good atmosphere in relations with Kiev is obviously an asset which should be recognized and appreciated, but it does not affect several important issues for Warsaw. Firstly, Poland was sidelined and became a passive observer of "power politics" conducted by stronger actors around Ukraine. Kiev is partially to be blamed for the marginalization of Poland in negotiations over Donbass, which visibly weakened its internation-

al position in Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly, the “buffer zone” exists only in theory, as Ukraine has little chance of joining the EU or NATO soon and its internal stability is lacking. Moreover, it has to be stressed, that so far there has been little debate on how to counter new and unconventional challenges to the security of Poland emanating from this crisis, i.e. the activity of right-wing extremists, which may be linked to the inflow of Ukrainian migrants to Poland. Finally, the biggest dilemma emanates from the historical policy adopted in Kiev. This stance, which is highly controversial from the Polish perspective, will have to be altered in the future if both countries seek to develop bilateral contacts.

In conclusion, in contrary to many domestic official statements or opinions in the press, the Ukrainian crisis and conflict brought more challenges and dilemmas than tangible benefits for bilateral relations from the Polish perspective. Obviously, contacts with Kiev are nowadays much better than before, but this does not mean that Warsaw experiences great profit from this status quo. The aforementioned challenges, if not addressed properly, in time may transform into serious problems, which will be beneficial only for one country – Russia. Finding efficient solutions to these dilemmas requires, however, political will and courage, which currently seems to be lacking in both states.



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## Notes

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