

Maksym Khyenko, Kyiv

Power Shift in Poland: opportunities and challenges for Ukraine

When shaping relations with new Polish authorities, Kyiv should premise, above all, on the concurring long-term geopolitical interests both in the international and in regional arenas. The task for diplomats is to prevent the minor controversies from taking precedence over the core interests, and to resist the third parties' efforts from affecting the development of partnership relations between Ukraine and Poland.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski's "Law and Justice" party (Polish: "Prawo i Sprawiedliwość" or PiS) convincingly won the parliamentary elections, thus reinforcing the success of Andrzej Duda, who had won the presidential race five months earlier. Henceforth, PiS will control the presidential post, the parliamentary majority and the government, and thus will be able to shape domestic and foreign policy of the country.

Among other factors, the choice of the Poles was inspired by dissatisfaction with the EU policy, which has been shaped in recent years under the decisive influence of Germany. Many Polish citizens are disgruntled with the EU decision imposing quotas to accommodate refugees, as well as with blocking by Berlin of the Warsaw's request to deploy permanent NATO base in the country. The same should be said about Germany's reluctance to let Poland take more authoritative role in shaping the EU foreign policy, including participation in talks on Russia-Ukraine crisis settlement.

With advent of a new government, the Poland's foreign policy will be updated that may imply significant implications for Ukraine. Warsaw will surely try to pursue a more independent from Berlin policy. Though the most pessimistic prognoses about possible confrontation between the two capitals are unlikely to come true (at least, because Germany is the main trading partner for Poland), however, some tension may occur, including the

issues related to Russia. In contrast with the Berlin's policy of appeasement, the PiS leaders prefer tough stance towards Moscow.

Thus, Kyiv might find itself in a rather awkward position, for the Ukrainian government placed its foreign policy stake on Berlin as the most influential player shaping the agenda for the whole European Union. Indeed, Germany worked hard to persuade all the state members to agree on imposing and extension the economic sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, Angela Merkel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier are the most categorical opponents to the idea of arms assistance to Ukraine. In the framework of the "Normandy" negotiations, Berlin is increasingly inclined to agree on actual "freezing" of the conflict in Donbas, including the legalization of the Kremlin-backed separatist regimes through the local 'elections' (just formality if Russian troops are not withdrawn) and bare fulfillment of the Minsk agreements by Russia.

Poland's President Andrzej Duda, by contrast, emphasizes the inadmissibility of "freezing" the conflict or turning a blind eye to Russia's failure to implement the Minsk agreements: "It is important for Poland that there is no frozen conflict in Ukraine, and that Kyiv regains full control over its borders. ... It should not happen that only some provisions of the Minsk agreements are fulfilled, and it is considered as a successful implementation."

Given the clear pro-Ukrainian Warsaw's position, which contrasts with the Berlin's policy of appeasement Russia, the official Kyiv reluctance to involve Poland in the peace process may seem paradoxical at first glance. But the fact is that Ukrainian government does not want to put at risk Germany's support, bearing in mind the Berlin's influence in the EU, especially as there is no guarantee that Warsaw's participation in negotiations can produce significant positive effect.

If Poland persistently pushes the idea of its involving in the conflict resolution, without coordinating the corresponding statements with Kyiv and Berlin, it may put Ukraine before a difficult choice. One should remember how firmly rejected Angela Merkel the proposals of possible expanding the "Normandy" format, mentioned previously by Andrzej Duda.

Ukraine needs the support of both capitals as well as to avoid the situation of being forced to choose between their uncoordinated positions. Therefore, Kyiv should intensify the diplomatic work to develop own proposals on possible modality of Warsaw's involvement in the peace process. Kyiv is interested in preventing the deterioration of relations between Berlin and Warsaw; and at the same time, Ukraine may benefit from the strengthening of Poland's role in shaping the common EU policy. Warsaw's clear position on the need to stop Russian aggression and to fully restore Ukraine's sovereignty over own territory – fully meets the interests of Kyiv, so it is Kyiv who should make efforts to help Poland materialize its desire of being involved in peace process, in a manner that it would not provoke tension with Germany.

Kyiv should also be prepared to possible Warsaw's steps aimed at increasing its influence in Europe through the activation of sub-regional cooperation – within the Visegrad group, with the Baltic States, and maybe with Romania and Bulgaria as well. Poland's policy can open up the new opportunities for Ukraine to strengthen cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, particularly via the "V4+" format. But if the regional policy of Warsaw is excessively active, it may provoke tension in relations with the neighboring countries. Therefore, the Ukrainian diplomacy should be ready to elaborate an optimal position under different circumstances and scenarios of developments in the region.

PiS is known for its cooperation with the Belarusian opposition and support for the independent Belarusian media. In this regard, there is a risk of possible misunderstandings between Warsaw and Kyiv concerning their attitude towards the Alexander Lukashenka's

regime. The Ukrainian government maintains friendly relations with Minsk, considering such relationship as a guarantee of at least neutral position of Belarus over the Russia-Ukraine confrontation.

An ambiguous effect may result from the sympathy of many PiS leaders to the Intermarium concept and the ideas of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth reincarnation. On the one hand, it may imply mutually beneficial intensification of Poland's cooperation with the Baltic States, Ukraine and Belarus. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that certain circles in Warsaw would like to see Poland's role as a kind of "big brother" in the respective integration processes, which is unacceptable for Ukraine. Therefore, it is advisable that Kyiv elaborates its own vision of sub-regional cooperation to direct the relevant trends in the mainstream of equal and mutually beneficial partnership.

Kyiv should also be prepared to deal with possible difficulties relating to the interpretation of controversial chapters of history, above all, it is about the Volyn tragedy of 1943-1944. There are many PiS politicians, whose interpretation of the tragic chapters in Polish-Ukrainian relations, as well as estimations of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in general, do not differ from the Kremlin's propaganda clichés. For example, the newly elected PiS senator Jan Żaryn believes that the Ukrainians should recognize Volyn tragedy as a genocide against the Polish people, and stresses that "there is no Polish nation without Lviv, the city that was always faithful to Poland." One can be sure that Russia will invest efforts and resources to actively promote people's attention to such controversial interpretations.

Special attention should be paid to the promises of PiS leaders to strengthen the defense capabilities of the country. It opens broad prospects for the mutually beneficial cooperation of Kyiv and Warsaw. Ukraine and Poland are already working on a number of joint projects in the military-industrial complex, but the opportunities are far from being exhausted, including on the prospects of cooperation in the global arms market. A new impetus may be given to the idea of creation of the multinational military units with the participation of Polish and Ukrainian troops. Previously this year, the parliaments of Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania ratified an agreement to create a joint military brigade LITPOLUKRBRIG, and this may become a good beginning. Kyiv is interested in Polish experience of reforming the armed forces according to NATO standards, and Warsaw may benefit from learning Ukrainian experience of defensive war against Russian invasion and of withstanding the "hybrid war."

So, the “Law and Justice” coming to power in Poland opens up new opportunities for Ukraine, and creates certain risks in the same time. When shaping relations with new Polish authorities, Kyiv should premise, above all, on the concurring long-term geopolitical interests both

in the international and in regional arenas. The task for diplomats is to prevent the minor controversies from taking precedence over the core interests, and to resist the third parties’ efforts from affecting the development of partnership relations between Ukraine and Poland.

About the author:

Maksym KHYLKO, Senior Research Fellow at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and Associate Research Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine. He holds PhD in Philosophy (2004) and Master’s degree in International Relations (2001). Author of over 50 scientific papers and over 400 analytical notes and policy briefs in the fields of geopolitics, international relations, mass media and social communications.

East European Security Research Initiative (EESRI) is a discussion, analytical and information-sharing international platform aimed at uniting efforts of the experts and researches from various countries to find effective ways for strengthening security in the Eastern Europe as the most vulnerable region of the contemporary Europe.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the EESRI.

© East European Security Research Initiative, 2015