

Maksym Khyenko

## Brexit: a Challenge and Opportunity for Ukraine

*Like any other crisis, the Brexit simultaneously brings both risks and opportunities – for the United Kingdom itself, for the European Union and for third parties, including Ukraine. The positive/negative balance of the outcome largely depends on how skilfully international actors deal with the new situation.*

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The desire of Brussels, Berlin and Paris to punish London and intimidate other possible candidates considering an exit seems to make the Brexit process painful, with challenging political and economic consequences. Nevertheless, the EU-UK divorce and its associated problems are likely to push the issue of Ukraine further down the EU agenda.

On the other hand, after such depreciative failure as a Britain exit, the EU and its self-proclaimed leaders, Berlin and Paris, might be interested in new success stories. Hardly anybody in Europe still believes that Ukraine might be one of them, yet Brussels has a narrow range of options. Therefore, Kyiv still has a chance to peak the EU's interest, if it dares to implement real reforms and fight corruption. The Brexit also opens new opportunities for developing bilateral co-operation between Kyiv and London. After an exit from the EU, the UK will have to rebuild its foreign relations; and prospects of deeper economic and political ties with the non-EU European countries will be of vital importance.

### **Visa-free regime is still possible**

A Brexit should not necessarily result in the postponing of the EU visa-free regime for citizens of Ukraine. Of course, the EU needs to maintain unity now and Brussels would hardly dare to put pressure on those countries that oppose granting a visa-free regime for Ukraine.

However, there is a flipside to this coin – Brussels will seek to prove the viability of the European Union even without London, as well as its readiness to fulfil its obligations. So, a positive outcome is still possible if Kyiv chooses a proper strategy, and instead of criticising Brussels, does its best to convince those capitals which still oppose this decision of the mutual benefit of a visa-free regime.

### **New prospects for sub-regional cooperation**

Berlin and Paris are awkwardly trying to use the Brexit as an opportunity to reinforce their own leadership in the EU and untimely offer their plan to accelerate European integration. This has caused some concern in the capitals of the eastern EU members, which are not ready to transfer more sovereignty to Brussels, especially in a post-Brexit less balanced European Union with the indisputable dominance of Berlin and Paris. And the fact that the latter does not tend to admit their own mistakes in migration policy has led to further concerns regarding a lack of sensitivity to security issues in the eastern members.

Most likely, the persistence of Germany and France to impose their leadership and model of integration will have an opposite effect and lead to the fragmentation of the European Union, at best, in the form of multi-level integration. In this case, Ukraine may get a chance to join sub-regional integration projects initiated by the EU

member states in the east. Besides the Visegrad Group, it may include strengthening political and military co-operation with Poland, the Baltic states and Romania.

A Sub-regional integration project might also be supported by London, which could be interested in strengthening its ties with Eastern Europe, which could be seen as a way of maintaining some influence on EU's policy via relations in the East.

Most likely, the German-French leadership in the EU will be gravitating away from transatlantic relations; therefore, co-operation on the sub-regional level may trigger interest in Washington as well. Since the end of the Cold War, the Anglo-Saxon states proved to be more decisive in support of Eastern European states and it is very unlikely that Washington and London will hand over their influence in the region to Berlin and Paris. Both the US and the UK are inclined to the idea of European integration of Ukraine and should be willing to support its closer co-operation with the neighbouring EU countries. Such sub-regional cooperation under the patronage of the US and UK may be particularly in high demand, especially considering the current security atmosphere.

### **Filling the security vacuum**

German and French initiatives to accelerate EU security and defence integration by establishing a single EU army may lead to the undermining of NATO solidarity, without proposing any real alternative. Firstly, neither Germany nor France has a strong enough army to protect EU countries in case of large-scale aggression. Secondly, they both lack the political will to do so. Public opinion polls show that the Germans are not willing to send their soldiers to protect the eastern NATO/EU member states and therefore, people of these countries have no reason to rely on Berlin as a guarantor of their security.

If Berlin and Paris continue insisting on developments of an EU-wide security and defence force, aimed at a gradual weakening of transatlantic relations, the eastern states may consider their own security and defence co-operation with London and Washington, primarily focusing on NATO, not the EU. However, since London and Washington do not intend to send a significant number of its own troops to Eastern Europe, the enhancement of sub-regional co-operation under the patronage of the US and the UK may become a reasonable option.

This scenario may open new possibilities for involvement of Kyiv in such sub-regional co-operation, given that the Ukrainian army, after proper reforms, would become one of the strongest in the region, possessing valuable experience of countering Russian aggression.

### **Sanctions and the Russia-Ukraine conflict**

The position of politicians in Berlin and Paris tend to support an easing of sanctions towards Moscow, while London has kept a firm stance. After a Brexit, the fate of this issue is now fully in the hands of the German and French leaders. On the other hand, even before the Brexit, the issue of sanctions was moving towards softening; and London was unable to prevent the eroding of the EU position. Berlin and Paris will now have to either prove that they are capable of maintaining a strong consolidated position on sanctions even without London or openly admit that they do not have the corresponding capacity and political will.

There is also a risk that, while being preoccupied with Brexit, Berlin and Paris may try to find a quick and more-or-less acceptable (for them) solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. To that end, there may be increased pressure on Kyiv to force it to implement decentralisation through amending the constitution and to hold the "elections" in the occupied parts of Donbas – in the presence of Russian troops. Needless to say, even if it were not for a Brexit, the positions of Germany and France would become less favourable for Ukraine. The reason is de facto ongoing election campaigns in these countries, where relations with Russia are among the key topics for debate. Hence, Kyiv should take into account this point while taking part in negotiations in the "Normandy" format.

Another sensitive issue is the possible expansion of the "Nord Stream" natural gas pipeline that is a challenge for Ukraine and other eastern European transit countries. After a Brexit, Berlin may become more vigorous in its attempts to promote this project which could deprive Kyiv of its transit capacities and make it more vulnerable to Moscow's energy weapons. On the other hand, Ukraine has already made a number of successful steps towards reducing dependence from Russian gas and has declared energy independence as one of its goals.

### **Challenges in domestic policy**

Perhaps the greatest risk which awaits Ukraine is in its domestic policy. Kyiv will have to implement reforms against the backdrop of rising Euroscepticism and under conditions of great temptation for the government to shift responsibility for failures in foreign and domestic policy on a Brexit. On the other hand, it is high time to stop referring to reforms as a kind of "homework" for European integration. Ukraine needs good governing, an independent system of justice, democratic control and a competitive economy for its own development. The eradication of corruption should not be considered as a

whim of the EU, but a matter of survival for Ukrainian statehood.

The propaganda of Eurosceptics will be powerless if Kyiv successfully implements reforms to be seen by its ordi-

nary citizens. And the Brexit may become a chance for Ukraine, if Kyiv becomes aware that the key to success in its foreign policy lies in domestic reforms.

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