

## President Zelensky visits Warsaw after a year of full-scale war in Ukraine

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted Warsaw and Kyiv to put aside grievances in the name of common security interests. A year after the invasion, Poland remains to be one of the most committed and staunch supporters of Ukraine. However, ahead of the Polish parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2023, new challenges for the relations of the two neighbouring states have already emerged.

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### First official trip to Warsaw since February 24th

On April 5, 2023, Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky met with his Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda to discuss common security issues, economic cooperation, including participation of the Polish business in the reconstruction of Ukraine, and, noteworthy, history-related matters. Zelensky's visit to Warsaw was his first official trip to Poland in contrast to the previous ad hoc meetings between the two leaders in December 2022 and February 2023 that took place in Rzeszów.

The intense one-day visit was full of high-level meetings, where memorandums on reconstruction and joint ammunition production were signed.<sup>1</sup> At the press conference with Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki a new package of military assistance to Kyiv consisting of armoured personnel carriers, air defence systems and mortars was also announced.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from that, the visit had also a strong symbolic character and was paid in a gesture of appreciation to Poland and its citizens for providing unwavering support to Ukraine. The speeches that Andrzej Duda and Volodymyr Zelensky delivered to their nations were full of historical references and belief in the great future of Polish-Ukrainian relations.

### A friend in need is a friend indeed

Poland's response to the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine serves as an excellent example of solidarity that undoubtedly will be remembered by generations of Ukrainians. Noteworthy, not only the Polish government undertook all necessary measures to address the humanitarian crisis,

but also ordinary Poles mobilised themselves to alleviate the suffering of Ukrainians fleeing their homes. Not without reason, the US ambassador in Warsaw Mark Brzeziński described the country as a 'humanitarian superpower'.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from sheltering millions of Ukrainian refugees and providing financial aid to them, Warsaw has played another particular role: it has been the pioneer in breaking 'psychological barriers' in regard to supplying Ukraine with new types of weapons, something that has been perceived by many NATO allies as an escalatory move. Initially, Poland was ready to donate its Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter aircraft to Ukraine in March 2022, just a few weeks after the start of the Russian invasion. But the decision was postponed amidst the Chinese alleged intervention and fears of a nuclear escalation with Russia.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, a year later, together with Slovakia, Poland became the first nation to supply Ukraine with fighter jets.

Apart from sending over 300 Soviet-era T-72 and modernised PT-91 tanks (MBT), it was also the first nation to donate its German-made Leopards 2A4 to Ukraine. This bold move prompted other Western capitals, especially Berlin, to follow the pattern and supply Kyiv with more Leopards of different modifications that are urgently needed for the announced Ukrainian counteroffensive. The most recent example of cooperation between the two states is the procurement of 150 Polish-made armoured personnel carriers Rosomak by Ukraine, which will be financed from the US and EU funds.<sup>5</sup>

Last but not least, Warsaw has been an 'advocate' of Kyiv on different international platforms, in particular in the European Union and NATO, where the latter wants to obtain membership. It is no exaggeration to argue that the role of Poland in supporting Ukraine's fight against Russia is absolutely outstanding and goes beyond the expectations of many.

### Time to address difficult issues

Until the 2022 invasion, the primary obstacle in Polish-Ukrainian relations was the lack of settled accounts with the past. This concerns the role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the massacre of the Polish population of Volhynia and Galicia between 1939 and 1945 and the issue of glorification of this formation in the modern Ukrainian state.

After Russia's attack on Ukraine, the discussion temporarily disappeared from the bilateral agenda as common security interests were of primary concern to the two neighbouring states. In the aftermath of Ukraine's successful counteroffensive and shifting focus to the positional warfare in Donbas, the fears of Ukraine's imminent military defeat and subsequent Russian advances westwards have waned among Polish politicians and ordinary citizens. A year after the invasion, and more importantly ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland, historical matters that once were put on the back burner seem to start gradually regaining their significance.

The year of Poland's unwavering support to Ukraine has only reinforced Warsaw's moral position to expect bold and long-awaited decisions by the president Zelensky when it comes to settling accounts with the past. The Russia-Ukraine war appears to be far from resolution, so Kyiv will need support of Warsaw in the long run and securing this crucial support will not be possible without addressing the difficult past. But even after the war, friendly relations void of grievances are not possible without reaching reconciliation.

In 2022 at least two important developments from the perspective of the historical disputes took place: in May Ukrainian authorities gave their consent to unveil the statues of lions in the Eaglets Cemetery located in Lviv and in November the Polish archaeologists were allowed to conduct search and exhumation works on sites of mass killings of Poles in 1945.<sup>6</sup>

Worth noting that the representative of Poland's main opposition party – Civil Platform - Grzegorz Schetyna on the eve of Zelensky's visit also emphasised the importance of settling historical disputes and its role in building future relations between Poland and Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

### Grain exports as 'a blot on the landscape' in the relations between Warsaw and Kyiv

Since February 2022, maritime commerce in the Black Sea has been severely disrupted by Russia's hostile activities, which in turn has negatively impacted Ukraine's ability to export its goods, in particular grain that constitutes a substantial part of its revenues. In response to that Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria agreed to provide the government in Kyiv with alternative exporting routes within the "Solidarity Corridors" launched by the European Commission.

Under this initiative the European Commission lifted custom duties and import quotas in order to facilitate the transport of the Ukrainian grain through the mentioned states.<sup>8</sup> Among the factors that give advantage to the agricultural production from Ukraine are its industrial scale (versus fragmented farms), low cost of labour and higher quality of soil.<sup>9</sup> Instead of being transported to Africa and the Middle East, cheaper grain from Ukraine flooded the markets in Poland and as a result caused a drop in prices, which inflicted huge financial losses on Polish farmers.

On March 28, Polish and Romanian prime ministers asked the European Commission to develop tracing mechanisms that will prevent Ukrainian grain from ending up in their countries.<sup>10</sup> Just ahead of Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Warsaw, enraged farmers threatened to organise protests in the capital that would severely disrupt transport communication if their demands were not properly addressed by the authorities. Resignation of the minister of agriculture Henryk Kowalczyk was probably a temporary remedy for the crisis, although one that does not bring a long-lasting solution to the problem.

The need to undertake urgent steps aimed at solving the problem, including tightening control of grain imports from Ukraine, seems to be inevitable as otherwise the ruling party Law and Justice might lose substantial support in the rural areas ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections.

Another important component in Ukraine's grain exports is the Black Sea Initiative - an agreement between Ukraine and Russia brokered by Turkey and the UN - was prolonged for another 60 days. Although, the problem most likely will resurface in mid-May, as Russia has warned that any future extension will be dependent on lifting Western sanctions.<sup>11</sup> This creates potential risks for Ukraine and Poland as sea routes might be blocked again and grain exports will have to be redirected through the neighbouring countries that have already suffered losses from Ukrainian cheap agricultural products.

### Changing attitude towards Ukrainian refugees

The most recent opinion poll indicates a worsening perception of Ukrainian refugees in Polish society. Among the groups where resentment towards Eastern neighbours fleeing the war is rising are workers and farmers - 53% and 42% of respondents respectively.<sup>12</sup> These groups constitute a vast electoral base that will become the object of courting different political parties, especially those which represent far-extreme views.

The reasons for deteriorating attitudes towards the refugees in those particular groups are quite obvious: Ukrainians obtained access to the labour market and social benefits in Poland. The government in Warsaw has tightened control of the benefits that Ukrainians had been receiving after February 24, namely the so-called 500+ paid for child's care, as some of the refugees are believed to have abused the right to them.<sup>13</sup> The issue of the grain from Ukraine flooding Poland has also impacted the attitudes of Poles living in the rural areas towards their Eastern neighbours.

Additionally, the growing fatigue with the war in Ukraine as well as soaring inflation have only reinforced this negative trend. Disinformation campaign aimed at Ukrainian refugees, which started right after the outbreak of the war, will be inevitably intensified in the following months. Fake news disseminated in the social media usually claim that the refugees are entitled to higher social benefits than Polish citizens and can enjoy political rights, such as a right to vote in the elections.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, 90% of the respondents from Poland support the idea of helping Ukraine, which constitutes a rare example of solidarity in the scale of Europe and even the entire world.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusions

1. After a year of war, Poland remains one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine and this positive trend will most probably continue. Despite that ahead of the 2023 parliamentary

elections one should expect new challenges for the bilateral relations, as the cost of supporting Kyiv becomes more and more noticeable.

2. The issues related to the common difficult past will re-emerge in the bilateral agenda and Warsaw will be expecting Ukraine to make ground-breaking decisions in that regard. Finding common ground in regards to history will be crucial in the process of reconciliation between the two nations.
3. Ukrainian grain flooding the Polish market poses a real challenge for the government of Mateusz Morawiecki ahead of the elections, as support of Law and Justice might wane in the rural areas if demands of the farmers are not adequately addressed.
4. Ukrainian refugees will become one of the central topics in the upcoming autumn elections as far-wing parties will attempt to gain voters using anti-immigrant rhetoric. There is growing resentment towards the refugees from the East among farmers and workers, who constitute a vast electoral base, although in general 57% of polled perceive positively the long-term stay of Ukrainians in Poland.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> „Польща і Україна підписали меморандуми щодо відбудови та спільного виробництва боєприпасів”, *Європейська Правда*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2023/04/5/7159277/>

<sup>2</sup> „БТР, міномети та системи ППО: Зеленський розповів про пакет військової допомоги від Польщі”, *Європейська Правда*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2023/04/5/7159279/>

<sup>3</sup> „US envoy calls Poland ‘humanitarian superpower’ for helping Ukraine“, *Polskie Radio*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/Artykuł/3124609.us-envoy-calls-poland-%E2%80%98humanitarian-superpower%E2%80%99-for-helping-ukraine>

<sup>4</sup> Tanmay Kadam, “China Prevented Transfer Of Polish MiG-29 Fighter Jets To Ukraine; Kept Russia Away From Nuclear Escalation”, *The Eurasian Times*, November 25, 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/china-transfer-of-polands-mig-29-fighter/>

<sup>5</sup> „Ukraina kupi polskie rosomaki i karabinki Grot. Umowa podczas wizyty Zełenskigo”, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 5, 2023, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,29636871,ukraina-kupi-polskie-rosomaki-i-karabinki-grot-umowa-podczas.htmlv>

<sup>6</sup> Rafał Pikuła, „Ukraina zezwoliła na ekshumację grobów Polaków pomordowanych przez UPA”, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 12, 2022, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,29133744,ukraina-zezwolila-na-ekshumacje-grobow-polakow-pomordowanych.html>

<sup>7</sup> Jónasz Jasnórzewski, Robert Mazurek, „Schetyna: Wizyta Zełenskigo w Polsce jest ważna i symboliczna”, *RMF24*, April 4, 2023, [https://www.rmf24.pl/tylko-w-rmf24/poranna-rozmowa/news-schetyna-wizyta-zełenskigo-w-polsce-jest-wazna-i-symboliczn.nId,6695683#crp\\_state=1](https://www.rmf24.pl/tylko-w-rmf24/poranna-rozmowa/news-schetyna-wizyta-zełenskigo-w-polsce-jest-wazna-i-symboliczn.nId,6695683#crp_state=1)

<sup>8</sup> Monika Scisłowska, Veselin Toshkov, “Ukrainian grain inflow triggers protests in Poland, Bulgaria”, *Associated Press*, March 29, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/war-ukraine-grain-russia-poland-bulgaria-protest-906f712ccc01543a7a33d76c79882cc4>

<sup>9</sup> Mateusz Lubiński, „Oto dlaczego ukraińskie zboże to dla polskich rolników duży problem”, *money.pl*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/ceny-zywnosci-polska-ma-megaproblem-z-cenami-zboza-oto-dlaczego-6881626677881760a.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Polish, Romanian PMs ask EU for mechanism to trace Ukraine grain exports”, *Euroactiv*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.euroactiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/polish-romanian-pms-ask-eu-for-mechanism-to-trace-ukraine-grain-exports/>

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Theus, “Coś się zmienia: młode kobiety tracą serce do ukraińskiej obecności w Polsce [SONDAŻ IPSOS]”, *OKO.press*, April 4, 2023, <https://oko.press/ukraincy-w-polsce-sondaz-ipsos>

<sup>13</sup> „ZUS wstrzymuje świadczenia dla Ukraińców. Odzyska 2 mln zł”, *money.pl*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/zus-wstrzymuje-swiadczenia-dla-ukraincow-odzyska-2-mln-zl-6874496249776832a.html>

<sup>14</sup> Mateusz Zadroga, „Wojna w Ukrainie, wojna informacyjna. Rok od rosyjskiej inwazji”, *Fakenews.pl*, February 24, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/wojna-w-ukrainie-wojna-informacyjna-rok-od-rosyjskiej-inwazji/>

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