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**PRO-WESTERN POLICY OF THE NEW UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT
VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY AS THREAT FOR POSSIBLE
RUSSIAN CONCEPT OF UKRAINE FEDERALIZATION**

Abstract:

The election of a new president of the Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, was for many analysts and ordinary citizens of Ukraine a big astonishment. The new head of the state is a complete debutant on Ukraine's political scene and will be having to make many decisions, related to the shape of foreign policy, especially in determining the vectors of its development. President, often emphasizing the will of further integration with European and Atlantic structures must reckon with Russia's interferences in any attempts which can bring Ukraine closer to the Western structures. Ukraine's federalization concept can be considered as one of such undertakings. Treated by Russian politics as a remedy for political and national cleavages, is received by Ukrainian politicians as a first step to destroy the state unity. This concept also has been negatively received by president Zelensky. His resolute answer for federalization proposal is associated with many questions: is his openly pro-Western foreign policy a serious threat for Russia's vision of Ukraine as a federal state? Despite Zelensky's objection will he agree to be a partial federalization due to the ongoing conflict in the Eastern part of Ukraine? And how this concept can influence the frames of his presidency in the context of planned rapprochement with the West?

Keywords:

Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's federalization, conflict in Eastern part of Ukraine, sphere of influence, foreign policy

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Introduction

During the last few years of socio-political transformations which took place in the Ukraine, have changed the political scene in this country. The Euromaidan crisis, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation and conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine (Donbas War), seriously violated Ukraine's sovereignty and weakened this state position, especially in the context of relations with Western Europe and Russian Federation. Connections with the last entity can be considered as particularly the most important, due to Russia's intensive attempts to restore the power status in the international area. The mentioned undertake is usually carried out at the expense of politically and economically weaker countries from 'near abroad' states, which gained or restored their independence after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and still recognized by Russia as a traditional sphere of influence. Ukraine, which not once had serious conflicts with eastern neighbour mainly on the political and military areas (Crimea and Donbas case), but also on the economic field (infamous 'gas wars') also belongs to this group.

The society reaction to Russia's continuous pursuits for maximum weakening of Ukraine and the unstable internal situation was the discourage for the political elites, notably oligarchs, represented by the last president, Petro Poroshenko. Choosing in 2019 in his place popular comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky, famous for his role in satirical TV series *Servant of the nation*, was the sui generis expression of demand for changes in Ukrainian politics. New president, political debutant, will have to face political challenges that may determine the overall shape of his term of office.

The main issue of this article is to show how one of the frequently cited concepts – Ukraine's possible federalization could influence president Zelensky's policy, especially his intentions to cooperate with the West. His presidential term obviously would be not easiest for lack of political experience and mentioned earlier problems with Russia's activities on the Post-Soviet area. Principally, the federalization case is one of the most disturbing for young presidents, due to the potential undermining of the unity of Ukrainian state and enlargement of Russian influence. Concerning these matters this short article will try to answer the following questions, which presents the main research concerns. First of all, how the concept of federalization should be understood, especially in the Ukrainian case? What attitude to this subject has presents V. Zelensky, and how it can be implemented on the ground of his foreign policy view? Could the pro-Western policy of Zelensky block the possible federalization and change the Russian view on Ukraine's place on the Post-Soviet territory? For young and inexperienced on political field president, these issues are crucial.

The concept of federalization and its reference to the Ukraine's situation

Zelensky's election program was focused on economic, anti-corruption and foreign policy concerns. The first two mentioned issues were calculated to create an efficient and fast developing state (like the Zelensky's proposal to simplify private entrepreneurship)², the last – to strengthen Ukraine's role on the international stage. This goal would be achieved through resolving the conflict on the Eastern Ukraine³, regaining the Russian-controlled territory⁴, and cooperation with Western structures⁵.

Achieving these intentions will not be possible without proper relations with the Russian Federation, which are now very far from ideal, for the sake of repeated endeavours of expanding Russia's sphere of influence and interests in Ukraine. In addition to previously mentioned sort of instruments (like cited Russian involvement in the conflict on Eastern Ukraine or manipulation of prices and supplies of gas), as other methods can be included plans for territorial changes within this state, proposed by the Russian side. One of the most famous schemes is the plan for Ukraine's federalization, presented in the statement of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 17.03.2014⁶.

What is the concept of federalization? The basic term 'federalism', according to the definition of William H. Riker should be understood as a type of political organization, in which government competencies are divided between central and regional authorities. Another definition, written by Michael Burgess and Alain Gagnon presents these phenomena as an organizational form which enables the constituent parts of the state to participate in the decision-making process⁷. According to these definitions, federalization in Ukraine's case can be explained as the decentralization⁸ of the formal unitary state (this form was officially proclaimed in the Ukrainian

² *Power of people in Dreamland: Election programme of Volodymyr Zelensky*, <<https://112.international/article/power-of-people-in-land-of-dreams-election-program-of-volodymyr-zelensky-38402.html>>, (31.12.2019).

³ T. Iwański, *The great experiment: Zelensky as the new president of Ukraine*, <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-04-21/great-experiment-zelensky-new-president-ukraine>>, (31.12.2019).

⁴ *Inauguration of Zelensky: concessions in Donbas?*, <<https://warsawinstitute.org/inauguration-zelensky-concessions-donbas/>>, (31.12.2019).

⁵ M. Mierzejewski-Voznyak, *Ukraine's presidential election and future of its foreign policy*, <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/03/ukraines-presidential-election-and-the-future-of-its-foreign-policy/>>, (31.12.2019).

⁶ T. A. Olszański, *Ukraine: sovereign decentralization or federalism without sovereignty?*, "OSW Commentary", 2014, no 134, p. 1.

⁷ J. Law, *How we can define federalism?*, *Perspectives on federalism*, 2013, vol. 5, is. 3, p. 94-95.

⁸ V. Ryzhkov, *Putin's federalization card in Ukraine*, <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/07/putins-federalization-card-in-ukraine-a33715>>, (31.12.2019).

constitution)⁹ by giving the regions the governing bodies with a high level of autonomy from Kiev¹⁰.

The federalization issue was raised both by Ukrainian (like Viktor Medvedchuk, former head of president administration office¹¹) and Russian politicians from the beginning of the crisis in 2013. This process could be – in their opinion – the remedy for state problems, which are based among others on the actual divisions of Ukraine in many areas: ethnic, linguistic, and religious. These cleavages are most visible in the eastern and southern part of the country, where the Russian language dominates over Ukrainian and where a live significant percentage of citizens who considered themselves Russians (in Luhansk and Donetsk region their number accounts even 40% of the population)¹². The government attitude towards language case was often the subject of criticism from Russian-speaking areas inhabitants¹³. Ukrainian Eastern regions can be regarded even as more specific case – the population was shaped by co-existence of Ukrainian population, which dominated in 19th century¹⁴, and migrants from other parts of Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, resettled in this territory, especially after II World War, resulting in Russification of marginalization of Ukrainian culture and language¹⁵. Also, in Soviet times the identity of inhabitants was determined not by a sense of national belonging, but by a specific ethos of the miner profession. As another factor can be considered Soviet ideology, which emphasized the special status of miners as exemplary working people. The result of the ‘sovietisation’ of the Donbas area inhabitants' mentality is the sentiment to Russia, associated with work opportunities and a high standard of living. In their opinion, the Ukrainian state did not guarantee them adequate protection of their interest and rights after Soviet Union dissolution¹⁶.

The mentioned cleavages and Russia's pursuits to influence Ukraine's home affairs has an impact on possible federalization concept. According to the Russian government proposal, the de facto controlled by Russia Donbas area with two unrecognized states – Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk

⁹ R. Goncharenko, *Would a federal Ukraine be viable*, <<https://www.dw.com/en/would-a-federal-ukraine-be-viable/a-17404541>>, (31.12.2019).

¹⁰ V. Ryzhkov, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Federalizacja Ukrainy była przygotowywana od dawna*, <<https://www.eastbook.eu/2014/04/22/federalizacja-ukrainy-byla-przygotowywana/>>, (8.10.2019).

¹² K. A. Kaczyńska, *Federacja Rosyjska a mniejszość rosyjska na Ukrainie. Nowe narzędzie kontroli przestrzeni postradzieckiej?*, „Przegląd Geopolityczny”, 2014, t. 8, p. 179.

¹³ V. Ryzhkov, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ I. Topala, *Tożsamość regionalna mieszkańców Donbasu*, [in:] M. Dąbrowska, J. Parnes, M. Żakowska, *Europa swoich, Europa obcych. Stereotypy, zderzenia kultur i dyskursy tożsamościowe*, Łódź 2017, p. 177.

¹⁵ A. Gil, *Źródła i konteksty separatyzmu w Donbasie*, „Studia Europejskie”, 2015, no 4, p. 129-130.

¹⁶ I. Topala, *Tożsamość...*, p. 177-179.

People's Republic, should be given the special status within the frames of the Ukrainian state. One of the consequences would be the right to pursue their own foreign and economic policy¹⁷. The supporters of this concept claim that the proposed solution would cause many benefits for Ukraine. Some of these profits are: give more political and economic independence for the regions, reduce religion and national tensions and enable greater control of central and local authorities¹⁸.

The opponents on the Ukrainian side reply: this is the idea of destroying Ukraine independence and sovereignty. The concept of changing the unitary status of the country was often considered not only as the threat for Ukraine self-governance but can be seen as the possible entry to slow decay, especially in the field of political corruption and instability. One of the greatest adversaries of this idea is ex-prime minister Arseniy Jaceniuk. In his opinion federalization will cause a situation where instead of one Viktor Yanukovich, infamous ex-president, would be many little Yanukoviches – local ‘feudal lords’, dependent on Russia, particularly in the Eastern part of the country¹⁹. The former president P. Poroshenko openly called the federalization proposal as ‘infection’, imposed by foreign powers. In his speech P. Poroshenko obviously meant Russia²⁰. Also, Ukrainian society has mostly negative attitude to all proposals, which can undermine country unity. Survey, which was held in 2014 showed about 70% of Ukrainians from the southeast part of the state are against federalization processes²¹. This idea is overwhelmingly treated as one of the greatest dangers to Ukraine position in the context of relations with Russia, which ultimately can lead to the split of the country.

How the new Ukrainian president refers to this concept? The difficult tasks facing Zelensky are the results of his country geopolitical situation. Located at the junction of Western and Russia's scopes of influence, Ukraine was forced to balance between two spheres, which was expressed at the multi-vector foreign policy²². What vector the newly elected president will choose?

¹⁷ H. E. Hale, N. Kravets, O. Onuch, *Can federalism unite Ukraine into the peace deal?*, “PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo”, 2015, no. 379, p. 2.

¹⁸ V. Ryzhkov, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ K. Dronova, *Federalization problem: Russia vs. Ukraine*, <<https://voxukraine.org/en/56/>>, (8.10.2019).

²⁰ *Poroshenko endorses referendum on federalization of Ukraine*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/06/poroshenko-endorses-referendum-on-federalisation-of-ukraine>>, (26.10.2019).

²¹ *KIIS Survey: Ukraine southeast's is against federalization processes and sees no problems with the Russian language*, <<http://uacrisis.org/2237-kiis-survey-ukraines-south-east>>, (8.10.2019).

²² Y. Prystupa, *Wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne uwarunkowania polityki zagranicznej Ukrainy w latach 1999-2007*, „Wschodnioznawstwo”, 2008, no. 2, p. 267.

President Zelensky pro-Western foreign policy and the federalization concept

The concept of possible federalization is strictly connected with possessed positions and relations on the foreign policy area. In this field Zelensky seems to be the continuator of pro-Western course of predecessors – Petro Poroshenko and Viktor Yushchenko. He emphasized his attitude through visits and declarations. During his visit to Paris and Berlin in June 2019, he confirmed the will to join EU and NATO²³. Also, President discussed on 2nd Ukraine-European Union Summit in July 2019 the possible financial support proposals, which can be offered by Brussels²⁴. According to some analysts, Zelensky wants to strengthen ties with the West to put more pressure on Russia in the context of the ongoing conflict in the Eastern part of the country, hoping that the solidarity policy would continue and Russia would be still under pressure from the Western side²⁵.

His pro-Western attitude is also connected with a strong opinion on the federalization issue. The new president admitted that he would never allow any forms of country federalization and the loss of Eastern territories. Zelensky perceives all attempts to violate or modify the unitary state system as the big obstacle for the cooperation and at least – integration with European and Atlantic structures. The federalization issue as the hypothetic problem can be also connected with the searching for the remedy of the still smouldering dilemma of the Eastern Ukraine (principally Donbas part) separatism, especially in the context of constantly appearing peace proposals. For Zelensky the Donbas case is clear: it will remain as the part of the Ukrainian state, which was confirmed by his advisor, Andrij Jermak²⁶.

There is however no doubt that ‘frozen conflict’ in Donbas is the constant threat to the fulfilling process of Ukraine's unity. Despite Zelensky's firm will to preserve the unitary form of the state he knows that in terms of potential peace process some modifications and concessions will be unavoidable. The question of the possible granting of some kind of autonomy for Donbas is still an open issue. In mid-September of 2019 Vadim Prystaiko, minister of foreign

²³ H. Bazhenova, *100 dni prezydenta W. Zelenskiego: polityka międzynarodowa*, <<https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/100-dni-prezydenta-wolodymyra-zelenskiego-polityka-miedzynarodowa-60-60-2019>>, (8.10.2019).

²⁴ B. Bodalska, *Szczyt UE-Ukraina: Wsparcie dla reform na Ukrainie i utrzymania sankcji wobec Rosji*, <<https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-zagraniczna/news/szczyt-ue-ukraina-wsparcie-dla-reform-na-ukrainie-i-utrzymania-sankcji-wobec-rosji/>>, (10.10.2019).

²⁵ *Zelenski: zaprzyjaźnić się z Zachodem i ograć Wschód*, <<https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/306049897-Zelenski-zaprzyjaznic-sie-z-Zachodem-i-ograc-Wschod.html>>, (8.10.2019).

²⁶ *Zelenski odrzuca federalizację Ukrainy i specjalny status dla okupowanych części Donbasu*, <<https://kresy24.pl/zelenski-odrzuca-federalizacje-ukrainy-i-specjalny-status-dla-okupowanych-czesci-donbasu/>>, (11.10.2019).

affairs, announced that special statuses of the regions would not be included into Ukrainian constitution²⁷. From the other side, Zelensky cannot leave the situation in Donbas unsolved and he has to consider possible changes in his attitude towards the status of the questionable part of the state.

An example of such a change in Zelensky's problem perception is his positive opinion on Frank-Walter Steinmeier (current president of Germany) formula, which is the latest proposal of resolving the Donbas question. This plan implies granting the Donbas special status within the frames of the Ukrainian state, which has been approved by the president and signed on 1st October of 2019²⁸. By some political circles in Ukraine this decision was tantamount to giving Russia some part of the Eastern territories. Polish analyst Wojciech Konończuk from Centre for Eastern Studies predicts that one of the results of the adopted plan will be maintaining control over disputed territory by Russia²⁹. This plan was denied by the president himself. "I will never give up Ukraine", said Zelensky³⁰. In December 2019 the president again proved in his own words that he will not allow to concede Ukraine's territories³¹.

His opinion of the potential federalization of the country is firm. But the president's European aspirations may be blocked because of the unstable situation in the Donbas area. EU won't accept as the probable member state with unresolved territorial conflict. Despite choosing the pro-Western vector in his policy, Zelensky will have to reckon with the threat of reappearing the Donbas frozen conflict and the possible Russian influence on disputed territories. The president intends to manoeuvre between the complete unitary of his state and the special treatment of the regions, that pose a problem for this stability and which can seek support in Putin's Russia. Despite his earlier words about the unity of Ukraine and his idea of complete rejection of federalization, the president knows that the full integration of Donbas after the conflict can be no longer possible. But whether giving Donbas special status within state won't be the reasonable form or an introduction to the further

²⁷ B. Bodalska, *Rosja stawia warunki podjęcia rozmów w sprawie Donbasu. Ukraina je odrzuca*, <<https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-zagraniczna-ue/news/rosja-stawia-warunki-podjecia-rozmow-ws-donbasu-ukraina-je-odrzuca/>>, (26.10.2019).

²⁸ G. Gigitashvili, R. Osadchuk, *Backlash against the controversial peace deal spun on Ukrainian and Russian media*, <<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/12/13/backlash-against-the-controversial-peace-deal-spun-on-ukrainian-and-russian-media/>>, (31.12.2019).

²⁹ M. Potocki, *Rzykowna gra Kijowa. Ekipa Zelenskiego wykonała pierwszy krok do legalizacji samozwańczych republik Donbasu*, <<https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/swiat/artykuly/608044,zelenski-ukraina-donbas-plan-steinmeiera.html>>, (26.10.2019).

³⁰ M. Trojan, *Zelenski do protestujących Ukraińców: nigdy nie poddam Ukrainy!*, <<https://kresy.pl/wydarzenia/zelenski-do-protestujacych-ukraincow-nigdy-nie-poddam-ukrainy/>>, (10.10.2019).

³¹ *Zelensky reject the idea of Ukraine's federalization*, <<https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/629504.html>>, (31.12.2019).

federalization? This is now one of the biggest dilemmas of the new Ukraine president.

To be able to think about integration with the European structures, he must cooperate with parliament and the most important political forces to develop a possible plan for giving Donbas region some of self-governance, at least some autonomous powers in the field of internal policy. But in this case the situation is complicated by the reluctance of some Ukrainian politicians. The former Ukrainian president, P. Poroshenko called Steinmeier formula 'The Putin formula'³². The Poroshenko political party European Solidarity openly accused Zelensky of being a tool in Russia's hands³³. Achieving any sort of compromise in the Donbas future could be extremely difficult. The history of this conflict has shown that this dispute can resume at any time, what recently showed shelling of territories in which the withdrawal of troops took place in October 2019³⁴.

It can be assumed that president Zelensky sees the future of Donbas within Ukraine, but on the path of gradual integration, that may be compatible with European aspirations. But further Russia's attempts to extend its control and potential domination on the conflicted area can be continued. From the Russian side we can expect to block attempts to rearouse the conflict by using the separatist will to disunited with Kyiv by intensified cooperation with autonomous region subjects (like self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk). The concept of federalization of the country can be again taken into account by Moscow, which may cause another outbreak of the conflict.

President Zelensky's intentions to join the Western community are clear but to what extent this plan can be carried out? It would be very hard for the new president to achieve the pro-Western goals with continuous destabilization of the Donbas region and Russian perpetual attempts at interference in internal affairs, with constantly returning federal concepts. Permanent stay of anxiety and uncertainty in the Donbas area effectively blocks the possibilities of Ukraine integration with Atlantic and European structures. Unresolved problems with controlled by Russia Eastern territories will be the most important problem of Zelensky's presidency beginning. It certainly will take him away from issues related to European and Atlantic integration and hinder potential negotiations, which creates for Ukraine the prospect of joining the EU and NATO even more distant.

³² G. Gigitashvili, R. Osadchuk, *op. cit.*

³³ H. Coynash, *Ukraine's agreement to Steinmeier formula – Russian victory or same stalemate?*, <<http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1569971258>>, (31.12.2019).

³⁴ *Ukraina: ostrzał terytoriów, które miały podlegać wycofaniu wojsk*, <<https://polskie-radio24.pl/5/1223/Artykul/2381021,Ukraina-ostrzal-terytoriow-ktore-mialy-podlegac-wycofaniu-wojsk>>, (10.10.2019).

Conclusions

The pro-Western policy of president Zelensky won't be a serious threat to Russia's concept of Ukraine federalization. Even despite president Zelensky adamantly confirm the rejection of the federalization concept it is certain that Ukraine won't be a unitary state in the shape that existed before the conflict. At present the Ukrainian state is weakened by the conflict in the East and existing cleavages in the country. Zelensky is aware of that fact and knows that the possible Donbas integration with the state structures will not happen too quickly.

Considering constant tensions in Donbas probably will cause that president with cooperation with parliament to give this region at least autonomy, which could be very complicated due to the hostility of some Ukrainian political circles towards such a solution. This explication – what was mentioned before – can be the first step to undermine the unity of Ukraine. Full federalization is not possible at that moment, due to facts, which were mentioned before – the appearing big social and political cleavages, as the result of that conflict. But the possibility of a problem will come back, connected with Russian pressure and lack of the political experience of the new president is very plausible.

Federalization concept can be treated by the Russian side as some kind of 'bogey' in case of conducting too pro-Western (in Russia's point of view) policy by Zelensky or again as worth considering potential solution in case of another outbreak of separatism. Depending on the situation on Ukraine and policy direction, chosen by Zelensky, the meaning of the federalization concept can change. On the other hand, the president can use this political idea as a tool to strengthen the state's internal unity, by showing that he won't make any compromises with Russia about Ukraine's political system. It could also have an impact on president pro-Western policy: his reception as the guarantee of Ukraine's stability and independence would be confirmed.

The first year of Volodymyr Zelensky presidential has not passed yet. At the current times it is hard to say whether the new president strategy will be successful or if he will achieve all proclaimed intentions. His presidency definitely will not be among the easiest – probable resolution of the Donbas conflict and relations with Russia will influence it's reception and Zelensky popularity among Ukrainians. President's pro – European aspirations may not be able to withstand the pressure from the Russian side, based on its constant will to expand political and economic influence. One of the forms of this insist is the concept of federalization. Zelensky shouldn't forget about this idea – further destabilization of Ukraine's situation may result in new endeavours to subordinate some of its parts by pro-Russian separatists, which can seriously destroy his biggest ambition – Ukraine's chance for becoming a strong state in European and Atlantic structures.

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