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A relationship without commitment

The US-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership is off to a wonky start. Only time will tell how effective the meeting between Biden and Zelensky really was

'This will be a success story, there will be tangible agreements', stated Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba a few weeks before a meeting on 1 September between Ukraine's President Zelensky and US President Biden. While expectations of the meeting were either highly hopeful or negative, the outcome lies somewhere in between.

According to the text of the joint statement of the US-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership, both sides were satisfied with the outcome. Now, we just have to wait for both parties to implement what was agreed. Only then will it become clear to what extent relations between Ukraine and the USA are of a strategic nature.

A new partner for patronisation

So, what will change if all the points set out in the final joint statement are actually implemented?

For the US nothing at all. A strategic partnership, however painful this may be, still sees Ukraine in a subordinate role: our countries do not complement one another, but rather one of them patronises the other, helping it with financial assistance and explaining basic democratic principles.

For Ukraine today, these changes could indeed be important milestones. If they were all to be implemented, Ukraine's judicial practice would comply with global standards. The work of the country's anti-corruption agencies and security service would at last be effective. Ukraine would see a drop in the level of xenophobia, racism, and antisemitism, and an improvement in respect for human rights and LGBT communities. The National Bank of Ukraine would become independent again and, thanks to USD 45 million in humanitarian aid, life for refugees from Donbass would improve.

If we assess the level of democracy in Ukraine and its compliance with Western standards through the prism of its relations with the US, then, essentially, there is not very much left to do. The joint statement, which reflects the problematic areas, is not only interesting in terms of what it includes and which areas require further refinement, but also in terms of what it does *not* include. And this, in fact, does not amount to very much: local self-government, elections, medicine, freedom of the press. This means that, in or with Ukraine, the situation is not so critical that this needs to be raised at a high intergovernmental level.

Concrete agreements

The question of defence arrangements is clearer than support for human rights initiatives. Ukraine will receive USD 60 million to enable it to purchase an additional batch of Javelin anti-tank missiles from the US. Agreements have been concluded with the Lockheed Martin Corporation, Harris Global Communications Inc., Global Ordnance, and Day & Zimmermann Lone Star LLC. All of these are intended to support the development of the Ukrainian defence sector, the production of new types of weapons, and increase the operational capability of the Ukrainian army.

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The situation in the energy sector is similarly concrete. Ukraine included a point in the final statement about its intention to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Apparently, this was included only out of respect for America's interest in combatting climate change. For Volodymyr Zelensky, it might actually have been worth mentioning Ukraine's large-scale 'Green Country' project and reiterating what he said at the Ukraine 30. Ecology forum: 'We have set ourselves an ambitious but achievable goal: to increase the area of forests by 1 million hectares in 10 years. To this end, in the next three years, we seek to plant one billion trees in Ukraine'.

The energy component of the visit will continue to bear fruit. Ukraine is emerging both as a proving ground for new technologies such as the export of hydrogen, which is most certainly set to become a substitute for natural gas, an arena for foreign policy struggles involving Russia, and as a gateway for the US to enter the EU energy market, using the country as a transit route for its liquefied gas.

Russia's looming shadow

One wonders how the meeting between Biden and Zelensky might have gone had there not been a war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin was undoubtedly an invisible third party in attendance. And if we measure the success of the visit in terms of whether Kyiv might have been able to secure more protection from Washington, the gathering was certainly not ground-breaking.

After the closed-door meeting with the US president, Zelenskywas already reported to have said: 'I heard from President Biden that he personally supports Ukraine's membership in NATO, but it is difficult to say what form this will take'. For now, the US does not look much like a state that is particularly interested in or aggressively pushing for Ukraine's entry into NATO. And here, Washington is unwavering.

The same applies to Nord Stream 2. On the one hand, for the US, the matter is settled: they were unable to block the project. Another country needs the gas pipeline, one which is a more important strategic partner than Ukraine: Germany. According to Zelensky, Ukraine secured an important guarantee from Joe Biden that, in the event of the Russian Federation or any other parties in the project posing a threat to Ukraine's energy security, the US promises to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2.

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But what exactly is meant by 'threat'? Is the loss of transit via the territory of Ukraine a potential threat or an existing one? Is gas price extortion a threat to European consumers, and this includes Ukraine which buys its gas in the EU, or not? The situation would have been much simpler if the US president had taken a clear and unambiguous position on the issue.

Expectation management

There is little doubt that the US will provide the USD 60 million it promised, or that Westinghouse Electric Company, with which Ukraine signed a Memorandum of Cooperation providing for the construction of nuclear power units worth USD 30bn, will delay starting work. There are doubts, however, that Ukraine will uphold its side of the bargain. And not only because it is more difficult to organise — after all, adopting draft legislation takes time. But also because it requires a crucial ingredient, the lack of which politicians in Ukraine like to give as an excuse for every unpopular decision they have to make — namely, political will.

There is also another aspect of the talks, the conflict with Russia. On the surface, it seems as though everything is clear cut. In the words of President Biden, 'The United States remains firmly committed to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression, and our support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations'. To which Zelensky responded: 'I want to thank you for supporting our sovereignty and territorial integrity. This is something that is very important to us'. Both presidents said the right things, but that is pretty much it.

Ukraine will be grateful for the additional financial support, which, incidentally, it is only allowed to spend on the procurement of military supplies, and exclusively from the US. Moreover, according to the Minsk agreements, it is now not allowed to use these very Javelin missiles in the field. The US will not go to war with Russia in support of Ukraine — open conflict is simply not in line with Washington's principles.

Here it is worth recalling the promise made by Deputy Prime Minister Oleksii Reznikov at a meeting with Glen Howard, President of the American think tank Jamestown Foundation, that American troops could be stationed on Ukrainian territory. The US, however, is yet to respond to this proposition.



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