

## **The development of Polish-Ukrainian Relations since the Beginning of the Maidan**

Honourable guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity and privilege to be here to present a few remarks with regard to the current situation of Ukraine which I think is of special importance.

I am especially honoured as I am not an academic expert with broad and long-term expertise and theoretical knowledge in this matter. I would like to share a few observations based on my personal experience and the experience of my organization, gained since the very beginning of the **EuroMaidan** in Kyiv at the end of 2013, later called the Revolution of Dignity or, simply, the Maidan.

Please be aware that my point of view is rather a voice of the young generation of Polish people. Perhaps some personal circumstances may matter as well. My wife is a Ukrainian, born in Sevastopol, actively involved in the political developments in Ukraine as a social activist over the last 15 years - far longer than me. Before the war, a greater part of my family lived on the territory of today's Ukraine and some of them were murdered during the **massacres** in 1943; on the other hand some were saved by their Ukrainian neighbour.

Now, let me proceed to the core issue of my speech.

Thanks to different social media channels and friends in Ukraine, we observed the developments on the Kyiv's Maidan since the early days of the revolution. Shortly after the beginning, we realised there was a need to go there in order to gather more information and then make a decision as to how to proceed. My wife, the initiator of our mission, said: 'When there's a Maidan, there's also a need to be there'.

But in addition to sending a mission to Kyiv, we also took part in **Warsaw's first EuroMaidan** - the first public gathering in front of the Ukrainian embassy, organised in order to show our solidarity with the protesters from Kyiv and for the signing of the association agreement (there was still hope that it would be signed). Then, having

convinced a few Members of Parliament to go with us, we went to Kyiv (finally, we have sent more than 60 volunteers apart from politicians and experts there).

Some of us generally remembered the impressions from the previous, 'revolution' of 2004. The memories of the **Orange Revolution** were very vivid and vital for us and that's why, this was, of course, our first and obvious association.

Another revolution. What we have experienced, or what we are still experiencing even now (of course, having in mind that now Ukrainians are exhausted and frustrated due to the current, long-lasting crisis), was an **extremely friendly attitude of Ukrainians**. We were not able to cross the street without being stopped at every corner by grateful inhabitants of Kyiv, but also by newcomers from the whole country. It was **gratitude** which we did not expect.

While speaking with us, they were looking for things which connect us - Ukrainians and Poles. They were telling us, but also reminding themselves, about their Polish ancestors, their visits to Poland, former work or/and studies in our country. Their own experience as well as that of their families. They were trying to speak Polish, even if they only knew a few words. Shortly speaking, I have never been greeted anywhere in the world - and - on such a massive scale - as in Kyiv in the first days of the recent revolution.

This was a wonderful experience for two reasons: the Maidan itself, the spirit of the revolution, people's unity etc. and the **Ukrainian attitude, ordinary people's attitude towards some strangers from Poland**. But that was not all.

Their **attitude towards Poland** is also worth mentioning. It quickly became apparent that Ukrainians perceive us as a **role model**, a **guiding light** for themselves. They perceive **contemporary Poland as a success story**. Many times I have heard that Ukrainians wish that Ukraine were even half as 'good' as Poland in terms of being a friendly place to live. Which was something a little strange as - like everyone knows - we are a nation of complainers. While we loved to complain about Polish roads, we surprisingly realised that the very Polish roads are a symbol of excellence for Ukrainians.

So, the first summary is as follows. Their **gratitude for our solidarity**, for just being there, with them, with Polish flags, was an exceptional experience. The special feeling grew over time, enhanced by their aforementioned perception of our country. And that created in us a sense of **obligation** to be more seriously involved, to become truly helpful to those people, demanding fair and European future. We felt we should do more.

What we have done and what we are doing is another story. But let's focus on this sensation for a while. We have personally discovered that there's something we can do. **There are some achievements in our transformation we could and we should export.** They want to be like us; they want to live like we live; they share some common, European values. And they believed that Europe and the world would be with them.

Now, the Polish side. During the Maidan, Polish society showed **extraordinary generosity** (however, frequently inspired and mobilised by a very active **Ukrainian diaspora**). Many people simply cared. There were two dimensions of their involvement: **moral support** which usually resulted in people's participation in various forms of public gatherings, pro-Ukrainian manifestations and, on the other hand, more practical, **material support**. Not only ODF, but also many other organisations carried out fundraising events and activities, organised public collection of medicines and other necessary equipment (like body armours). Hundreds of **people** were willing to go to Ukraine in order to help. And so, this is **society.**

Now, the media. **Huge media interest**, many correspondents sent to Ukraine in order to observe the revolution and the war. Since the beginning, Ukraine has become one of the main topics for the Polish media. It still continues. As far as we know, some of the media outlets keep the Ukraine-related topics, despite a relatively low and decreasing interest, from the broader public.

At the same time, the **government policy** was rather careful (although many MPs and MEPs from Poland (what's interesting, rising above political divisions), were actively supporting Ukrainian civil society and, later, the Ukrainian state in its struggle with Russia). This unity could be a chance to create **a new strategic objective of Poland's policy** - to share our experience, to promote democracy and the rule of law, to support the European aspiration of our eastern neighbours in order to broaden and strengthen the area of free,

democratic countries situated between our borders and Russia. It has two faces of the coin: it is idealistically right and pragmatically useful as it helps us to improve our security, political influence and importance on international level as well as to create new economic links - new opportunities for growth. There are no other **ambitious ideas** and **long-term goals** after Poland's accessions to NATO and the EU. Strategically, we have achieved what we desired. And now, we should help Ukraine to achieve the same strategic goals: free market economy, rule of law, low level of corruption and other socio-political pathologies, EU and NATO membership. This should become our own goal as it is in our best interest. The good thing is that **the stronger Ukraine is, the stronger Poland becomes**. But I am afraid that the Polish state is not willing or ready for such big initiatives; many times, it prefers to remain passive and rely on the decisions of others or even limit itself to a mere reaction to the latest developments.

Ukraine and Ukrainians showed us that **there are dreams and values really worth fighting for**. I remember the sharp contrast when I returned from Kyiv in January 2013 and shortly after coming to London. I saw the people on the frozen streets standing under the EU flags, oppressed by the authorities while the UKIP was gaining its popularity as it was calling for withdrawal from the EU. The Western world, and especially the EU countries, usually prefer keeping their status quo, as they are afraid to lose their prosperity and well-being.

This is, generally, the bright, the good side of my story.

What do we have on the other side? Usually **misused and distorted history, internet trolls, paid or crazy haters** and different faces of **propaganda** and **provocations**.

Unfortunately our common history has become one of the main tools used by the Russian propaganda. From my point of view, Ukrainians generally have no problems with history at all. Of course, it is a huge mental shortcut and I do not mean Ukrainians' problems with their self-identity, controversial heroes etc. I mean it is not an important issue when they meet and talk with people from Poland. Moreover, while in Ukraine, a few times we were surprised by the people who missed the idea of the Commonwealth of Three Nations. It is very nice for a Pole to hear that, although we rather don't propose it as we fear potential

accusations of Polish neocolonialism / imperialism or something like that.

But when it comes to Polish people, one of the most typical associations with Ukraine is **the Volyhnia Massacre in 1943**. I know such stories quite well as I heard them sometimes at home: the stories about **Ukrainian natural born murderers** killing innocent children, women and old men. Well, it is especially crucial for some people from the old generation, extreme right or left-wing parties and organisations as well as people, for some reasons aligned with the current policy of Russia (well, let me be frank and call them agents and useful idiots). And, of course, Russia is most interested in using some parts of 'history' in order **to provoke tensions between our nations**.

It does not mean that history does not matter. It matters, and we all should pay tribute to the victims but pragmatically - it is history from many, many years ago. Contemporary Ukrainians usually do not know anything or they know very little about those tragic developments. It is about education which cannot be carried out overnight. Therefore we cannot blame them for their interpretation, even if we do not agree with them. Besides that, Ukrainian history was even more tragic and ambiguous than ours.

Besides, a war is being waged now. We share a common threat and, potentially, a common enemy. Nowadays, Ukraine opposes it directly. **Stepan Bandera** (now quite well known in Poland as the main symbol of bloodthirsty Ukrainian nationalists) **is dead and I think he is rather unlikely to be resurrected, while Putin is alive and dangerous**.

Today's Ukraine fights for Europe. Or, even not for Europe, **but in place of Europe** (as one soldier from the ATO zone said to us some time ago). The same Europe, the same West which is perceived by Putin as the main ideological and geopolitical antagonist. We know this role very well from our national myths. **Antemurale Christianitatis** - a label used for **Rzeczpospolita - The Commonwealth** defending the frontiers of Christian Europe and western civilisation for centuries. The very existence of Ukraine gives us the comfort of passing this function to another country. This is **the reality**. And this is another reason why we should do everything in our power to support Ukraine as much as it is only possible.

Another, and probably more serious danger (than Russian-inspired propaganda) is **frustration and exhaustion of ordinary people** in Poland. Two opposite slogans: ***We have our own problems and hungry children vs. for our freedom and yours.*** Many people simply do not care; they do not pay attention; they are tired. They have **their own problems**. And they hate politicians blaming them for ignoring their own problems for the sake of another country. Probably this was the reason why the vast majority of candidates (except two major figures from the two largest parties, though they were also influenced) during the recent presidential campaign were, let's put it diplomatically, quite assertive with regard to Ukrainian needs and requests (although some of them openly brought up some anti-Ukrainian issues). **Indifference** may become a problem as the long-lasting Ukrainian crisis is far from over.

**Immigration.** A wave of refugees fleeing from the war and economic crisis is of vital importance. A challenge which should be a wisely used chance for the development (economically, demographically etc.) but it seems, unfortunately, that our government has **no real immigration policy**. There's also a social factor; some would say *they steal our jobs* and – the opinion I have heard more frequently - *they wanted a revolution, fine, but let them face their consequences; they love their country and they want our help? So why do they flee Ukraine, hiding from mobilisation, instead of defending their country?*

We need to learn how to deal with immigrants effectively.

The last thing to mention is **the existence of the issue (of Polish-Ukrainian relations) itself**. Many old links have been restored, many new have been created. There are thousands of articles, dozens of new books published about the Maidan, the current war and everyday life in Ukraine, its culture, corruption, oligarchs etc. There are also **new valuable initiatives** in the field of common research studies undertaken e.g. by both - Polish and Ukrainian - Institutes of National Remembrance. It is still not enough but they are steps made in the right direction.

We need to learn how to benefit from them to the greatest possible extent. There is no reason for Poland not to be aligned with contemporary Ukraine in all possible areas of cooperation as much as we are with Germany. Ukraine's current situation gives us an

extraordinary chance to render assistance to our neighbour while its house is on fire. And it gives us no excuses. ***A friend in need is a friend indeed*** – the old proverb says. What we do today will be our capital and contribution for **the sake of common future.**