

# New opportunities for cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom after Brexit

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## **Abstract**

The article is concerned with the study of Ukrainian-British relations after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The main purpose of the research is to determine the most effective model of post-Brexit cooperation. To this end, the key factors of relations have been identified, which are: deterrence of the Russian Federation aggressive policy, the implementation of the UK global influence strategy and the "special relationship" between the UK and the United States. The conducted research allowed determining the effect of these factors through the main dimensions of cooperation and finding out the points of intersection of the parties' interests. In addition, the main constraints on the prospects for interaction have been identified, among which there is a need to overcome the effects of the current pandemic and address British internal problems of leaving the EU. It is concluded that Brexit opens a window of opportunity to intensify the bilateral dialogue, which will allow Ukraine to best satisfy its own interests in the context of national security in the process of interaction with the UK.

**Key words:** relations between Ukraine and the United Kingdom, Brexit, cooperation model, the United Kingdom global influence strategy.

## **Introduction**

The complexity, unpredictability and high dynamics of the international system in a globalized world necessitate the development of new models of military-political cooperation between countries. One of Ukraine's most reliable partners in political and security spheres is the United Kingdom (UK), which has been traditionally supporting Ukraine in carrying out internal reforms aimed at achieving stable economic and political development. The

withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit) creates opportunities for new dimensions of bilateral interaction. It is important for Ukraine now to adjust to these realities in order to reach qualitatively new levels of cooperation in critical areas. An effective model of Ukrainian-British cooperation will help ensure Ukraine's national security and protect its national interests.

## **Material and methods**

The relations between Ukraine and the UK have been widely investigated in modern scientific and professional literature. In recent years there has been considerable interest to this issue following the UK's decision to leave the EU. Among the Ukrainian researchers, the perspectives of bilateral cooperation after Brexit was studied by prominent scholars and

practitioners of diplomatic work: Hanna Shelest (2020), Serhii Solodkyi and Mykola Bielieskov (2017). The implications of Brexit for international security are thoroughly analysed in publications of the Deputy Director-General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Professor Malcolm Chalmers (2017, 2018). The key issues surrounding this historic event and its

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uncertain aftermath are also pointed out by Kenneth A. Armstrong (2017), Professor at the University of Cambridge. The UK – Russia economic relations under sanctions and Brexit are outlined by the Russian economist, Professor Efim S. Khesin (2019). Instead, there is still a considerable ambiguity with regard to defining the impact of the above-mentioned matters on the Ukrainian-British relations after Brexit. These issues require further scientific development.

## **Results and discussion**

An effective and reliable model of Ukrainian-British cooperation in the context of Brexit should take into account not only modern approaches to classifying the levels of interaction between the subjects of international relations, but above all the degree of influence on national security. The model is based on a synergetic approach, which provides an opportunity to take into account the latest changes in the Ukrainian security environment and the peculiarities of bilateral cooperation in the current circumstances.

The materials of the research allow us to identify a number of factors that motivate the parties to interact between each other and that affect its intensity. To determine the degree of influence of these factors on the development of bilateral relations, it is necessary to study their effect through the main dimensions of Ukrainian-British relations, identifying the interests of the parties in each dimension.

### **1. The main factors influencing bilateral relations between Ukraine and the UK after Brexit**

The United Kingdom formally withdrew from the European Union (EU) on January 31, 2020. According to the UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson and other Brexit supporters, this event is a great start for the formation of a new political, economic, external and security agenda of the United Kingdom (Stewart, Boffey & Syal, 2020).

The Ukrainian foreign policy experts are convinced that there is an urgent need to ensure the legalization of bilateral relations after Brexit (Shelest, 2020; Solodkyi & Bielieskov, 2017). It is

The purpose of the article is to determine the most efficient model of relations between Ukraine and the UK after Brexit. This goal requires defining a number of related objectives. In order to develop a model of cooperation, first of all, it is necessary to analyse the current state of bilateral interaction, prospects for cooperation, as well as to identify the key factors of interaction and explore their impact through the main dimensions of Ukrainian-British relations.

also emphasized in the Presidential Decree No 837/2019 "On urgent measures to reform and strengthen the state" (2019) in the section on foreign policy, as the UK is one of Ukraine's key partners in Europe, primarily in the sphere of security and countering Russian aggression.

It is noticeable that Brexit creates a new European reality, and there are emerging opportunities for new dimensions of the UK's bilateral relations with countries whose prospects for EU membership are currently quite distant. The urgent task of the Ukrainian side should now be to adjust to such long-term trends, when the combination of positive experience of bilateral relations, partnership within the European integration processes and NATO programmes will create opportunities for new levels of cooperation in crucial areas (NISD, 2018).

At the same time, it should be also considered that Ukraine will play an important but not a priority role in British foreign policy in the early years of post-Brexit, due to the need to address bilateral issues with key global partners, overcoming the internal consequences of leaving the EU and the current Covid-19 pandemic (Shelest, 2020). The UK's resources to combat the crisis caused by pandemic and quarantine measures make it difficult to keep the government's promises to stimulate the internal economy and finish the Brexit process.

#### **1.1. Russian Federation factor**

One of the most significant factors that determine the British-Ukrainian relations trajectory is the factor of Russian Federation. To some extent, it determines the subjective interests in interaction of both parties.

A British-Russian relations researcher, professor Khesin (2019) outlines, that until 2014, the bilateral political and economic ties were at a fairly high level. However, undeniable is the fact that after Russia's attempt to annex Crimea, official political contacts almost ceased, most of the announced projects were curtailed, and military cooperation was frozen. The UK has suspended the export licenses of military and dual-use items to Russia, abolished naval exercises, refused visits from senior military officials and almost interrupted bilateral military cooperation, except for obligations under international treaties.

From the first days of Russian aggression, the UK took a clear pro-Ukrainian position. Moreover, British position crystallized in 2018, when the situation was exacerbated by the incident with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Julia in Salisbury. One should note here that, the UK supported the full package of international sanctions through the occupation of Crimea, aggression in the East and the seizure of Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait. Although these sanctions were imposed within the EU, there is already a decision to extend them in the UK after Brexit process is completed (Gov.uk, 2019).

British political experts and senior officials conclude that it is impossible to restart relations between the UK and Russia. In January 2020, in course of a conference on the situation in Libya, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has stated (Gov.uk, 2020) that normalization in bilateral relations would not take place until Russia stopped destabilizing activities that threatened the UK and its allies and undermined the security of citizens and collective security.

The factor of the Russian Federation will continue to affect the trajectory of British foreign and defence policy, especially in the context of deterrence against the spread of its influence in Eastern Europe. For Ukraine, British support is essential in the context of combating Russian aggression.

### **1.2. The UK's Global Influence factor**

The trend of British post-imperial foreign and defence policy is the desire of the United Kingdom to make use of relations with other countries to strengthen its geopolitical

influence, rather than to deepen and develop bilateral ties. The UK's National Security Strategy (2015) emphasizes the desire to return to its role as a global player. One of the main tasks of the government, set by Prime Minister B. Johnson by the end of 2020, is to analyse the strategic environment and determine the place of the "Global Britain" strategy in its new foreign and defence policy.

Professor Malcolm Chalmers (2017, 2018) mentioned in his research that to be a global player is the instinct of the United Kingdom. Following the tradition of global politics, the UK finds it difficult to see itself as a purely European country, and has always been one of the most active actors in the international arena in terms of trade and military cooperation, but Chalmers realistically assesses the UK's economic potential and points out that we cannot compare Britain with the capabilities of the Chinese or the United States' economy, but according to the researcher, a solution to this problem is that for almost about forty years, British foreign and defence policy is based on the principle – a global country through cooperation.

Under such circumstances, Ukraine has the opportunity to take a higher priority in British foreign and defence policy, both with the view of British desire to expand its international defence engagement activities and through Ukrainian initiatives of mutually beneficial projects and common themes that can be voiced in the process of political consultations and inter-parliamentary dialogue (Shelest, 2020).

### **1.3. "Special Relationship" factor**

Another important factor influencing the course of British-Ukrainian relations is "special relationship" between the United Kingdom and the United States. The close ties between these countries, despite the great difference in military and economic power, have been maintained for over seventy years and remain the core of British foreign and defence policy. Supporting the main strategic ally in the face of the United States is an important prerequisite for maintaining the UK's role as a key global player (Solodkyi & Bielieskov, 2017). In conditions of Brexit, the deepening of relations with the United States is seen by the UK as a

means to offset the negative consequences of this process.

## **2. The influence of key factors on the Ukrainian-British cooperation**

Having identified the key factors influencing the dynamics of Ukrainian-British relations, it is necessary to investigate their impact through the main dimensions of bilateral cooperation.

### **2.1. Political and security dimension**

The Ukrainian-British political relations are based on the 1994 Cooperation Agreement. In 2008, the strategic nature of bilateral relations and the revival of cooperation were recorded against the background of Ukraine's attempts to obtain a NATO Membership Action Plan.

The factor of the Russian Federation, with the view of its aggression against Ukraine and the attempt to annex Crimea in 2014 provoked the intensification of Ukrainian-British interaction. In recent years, contacts at a high political level have been quite active with the same level of intensity on both sides. The change of government in both states did not affect this trend. The slowdown in 2019 was due to the elections in Ukraine and the UK and the end of Brexit procedure. At the same time, all meetings at the level of heads of state for the last 2 years took place only within the framework of multilateral events, so the visit of the President of Ukraine to London announced for 2020 is on time.

It is important for Ukraine, that the UK regularly makes statements in support of maritime safety in the Black Sea, condemning such aggressive and illegal actions of the Russian Federation as the annexation of Crimea, the crash of the MH17 flight, escalation in the Donbass area, political imprisoning, etc. Ukraine-related issues are regularly discussed in the British Parliament. Significant revitalization in bilateral interaction has taken place since the Salisbury incident, when the British establishment felt a direct threat from Russia on its territory.

#### **2.1.1. Cooperation within the framework of international organizations**

The priority cooperation area for Ukraine is London's support of Ukraine's position within international organizations. On the positive side, despite leaving the EU, the UK remains a

permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with a right of veto. In addition, after Brexit process is completed, mutually beneficial for both parties will be the cooperation within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).

Under the influence of the UK global influence factor, after its withdrawal from the EU, one can expect more active involvement of the British delegation in the PACE in the context of the strategy of returning to the global role in the world. The position of the British delegation on the return of the Russian delegation to the PACE and the restoration of its rights is very important for Ukraine. Within the framework of the PACE, it is also possible to hold joint events on such humanitarian issues as resettlement of migrants (including internally displaced persons) and children's rights during conflicts (Shelest, 2020).

The United Kingdom is one of the most consistent and active supporters of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in eastern Ukraine. In the early stages of the mission, it was the British side that provided the SMM with the necessary equipment, transport and specialists on a large scale. The British staff is one of the largest in the OSCE SMM. Within the OSCE, the UK is exerting significant pressure on Russia to prevent obstacles to the OSCE SMM's access to the uncontrolled territories of Luhansk and Donetsk areas, as well as to ensure the security of mission personnel. The understanding of Russia's responsibility for the controlled and illegal armed formations of temporary occupied territories is clearly demonstrated. In addition, promising areas of Ukrainian-British cooperation within the OSCE are joint work on updating the Vienna Document, gender equality issues, religious rights, especially in the context of restricting the rights of Crimean Tatars and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Crimea.

Cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom within NATO also remains a priority area of bilateral relations. Despite leaving the EU, official London has made it clear that it remains a leading member of NATO and retains all its commitments within the Alliance.

Moreover, the UK now sees NATO as a cornerstone of its national security, and after leaving the EU one can expect an intensification of work within the Alliance. The UK is participating in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence program to deter the Russian aggression. In addition, to that end the UK is also stepping up its cooperation with Norway and Iceland to protect its access to the Arctic, leads a naval task force in the Mediterranean, and is involved in protecting airspace over the Black and Baltic Seas.

The factor of "special relationship" between the UK and the United States provides Ukraine with these ties as an additional channel of communication with Washington to convey its position to the American side. A good example of this is the statement of the UK Prime Minister against the return of Russia to the Group of Seven (G7), in which Boris Johnson stressed (Cooper, 2020) that he would veto any attempt by Donald Trump to return Russia to the G7.

## **2.2. Economic dimension**

Economic cooperation with London is one of the priorities of bilateral relations for Ukraine, as the UK is the third largest investor in the Ukrainian economy with a total investment as of October 1, 2019 – \$ 2.03 billion (ukrstat.gov.ua). The UK is interested in economic cooperation with Ukraine, mostly in the field of agriculture (poultry, sugar, corn).

After Brexit, Ukrainian exports to the UK are likely to grow due to London's less protectionist agricultural policy than in other EU countries. Other promising areas of economic cooperation are military-technical cooperation, the automotive industry, infrastructure projects, and the maritime complex.

In her analysis of British-Ukrainian cooperation perspectives, a Ukrainian political expert and scholar Hanna Shelest (2020) affirms that one of the urgent Ukraine's interests is the signing of a new basic Agreement on Cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Bilateral negotiations on a free trade area began in 2018 and are in the final stages. From the beginning of 2020, Ukrainian-British consultations on political and security issues have been held.

At the same time, the factor of Russian Federation has a significant impact on British economic policy. Russian influence in the UK is still amplified by a sufficient number of Russian oligarchs in the economy and active lobbying among British parliamentarians (Fisher & Greenwood, 2018; Woodcock, 2019). In addition, despite the sanctions policy Russia's economic ties with the United Kingdom remain quite close. In 2019, the trade turnover between the countries amounted to 17.3 billion dollars, with an increase of 25.86% compared to 2018 (Khesin, 2019).

## **2.3. British assistance in promoting reforms in Ukraine**

The UK global influence strategy provides for financial and advisory support to its allies in order to maintain their stability and minimize the likelihood of threats to British national interests or security (NSS and SDSR, 2015). An important dimension of bilateral relations is British assistance in promoting domestic reform in Ukraine. Financial assistance programmes are aimed at supporting the development of the Armed Forces, the independent media, good governance, and fighting corruption. For 2019 – 2020, the total funding of programmes is amounted to 36,95 million pounds (Gov.uk). Ensuring the effectiveness of domestic reforms in Ukraine through the provision of appropriate financial and technical assistance has been formally identified by the British government as one of the key interests of bilateral cooperation.

Given the Russian Federation factor, the British financial, technical and advisory assistance, including in the process of restructuring the security and defence sector, is extremely important for Ukraine. After all, only through effective internal reforms the problem of structural weakness (Solodkyi & Bielieskov, 2017), which has partially enabled Russian aggression, can be resolved.

## **2.4. Military dimension**

As was already mentioned, British National Security Strategy (2015) set a difficult task to bring the UK to a new qualitative level of global influence in the international relations system. In this context, in 2017, the UK's International Defence Engagement Strategy was adopted,



which was fully in line with these plans and defined a new quality of the country's international influence. The strategy aims to prevent conflicts, humanitarian crises, and create zones of stability and prosperity in various regions of the world. To achieve these goals, the UK's long-term participation in international processes was planned, which would contribute to its global influence, as well as to ensure the security and prosperity of the country and its citizens. This strategy envisages, in particular, the provision of various assistance to the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Under the influence of the Global Britain factor and the Russian Federation factor, since 2014 the UK has been providing significant logistical assistance to the Armed Forces. Regular visits of both sides at the level of heads

of the Ministry of Defence, the General Staff of the Armed Forces, the Navy and other military delegations were carried out. Ukrainian military transport airplanes provide logistical support to the British Armed Forces.

The cooperation priorities in the military and defence sphere are the following: cyber defence, countering hybrid threats, military intelligence, expanding operation ORBITAL, military education, military-technical cooperation, defence infrastructure development, naval development.

According to Ukrainian for the last two years, the defence and security cooperation has been one of the most active and productive spheres of bilateral relations, both at a high political level and at the level of training, advisers, and military education.

## **Conclusions**

Taking into consideration the proposed model of cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom after Brexit, one can draw the following conclusion. Although the withdrawal of the UK from the EU weakens pro-Ukrainian sentiment within the Union, on the other hand, it opens a window of opportunity for intensification of bilateral Ukrainian-British dialogue. The main drivers of relations that contribute to such intensification are factors relevant to both parties: the deterrence of the Russian Federation aggressive policy, the implementation of the UK global influence strategy and the "special relationship" between the UK and the United States.

Due to this, the Ukraine's priorities for bilateral cooperation with the UK are: signing of a new ambitious cooperation agreement, intensification of security and defence dialogue, cooperation within international organizations and use of opportunities to benefit from British ambitions in the new global foreign policy.

Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the constraining factors in the

cooperation prospects. Ukraine is likely to play an important but non-priority role in British foreign and defence policy in the early post-Brexit years, due to the need of UK to cope with bilateral issues with key global partners, overcoming the internal consequences of leaving the EU and the current pandemic that has dramatically hit the country's economy.

Having analysed the proposed factors and their impact on the relations through the main dimensions of cooperation, we can conclude that the interests of Ukraine and the UK complement each other. This, in turn, opens new opportunities for Ukraine to maximally satisfy its national interests in the context of ensuring national security in course of cooperation with the UK.

### **Prospects for further research**

A perspective area for further research is to develop predictive scenarios for further cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom with respect to the model, presented in this article.

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