



Deficiency and Elusion: Relations between Israel and Ukraine

Michał Wojnarowicz

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2014 broadened the political dimension of Israeli-Ukrainian relations. However, Israel's cautious attitude towards Russia remains a burden for mutual relations with Ukraine. Since the renewed Russian aggression in February, Ukraine has diplomatically engaged Israel, but the limited nature of the latter's support has led to criticism from Ukraine. The scale of the current assistance and pledged aid for the reconstruction of Ukraine, as well as Israel's policy towards further tightening of sanctions against Russia, will be key to future relations.

Israel and Ukraine before the Russian Aggression. Until 2014, relations between Israel and Ukraine focused mainly on social and historical issues. After Russia's occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbas, the Israeli authorities adopted a policy of non-involvement, fearing that support for Ukraine would induce Russia to act unfavourably towards Israel in the Middle East. Manifestation of Israeli neutrality was its abstention on UN General Assembly resolution condemning the annexation of Crimea and absence during other votes regarding the war in Ukraine at the UN. Military cooperation also has been limited. However, political contacts continued. In 2017 and 2019, mutual visits of the prime ministers took place, with Israel's presidents trading visits in 2016 and 2021 in ceremonies commemorating the massacre of Jews in Babi Yar, and President Volodymyr Zelensky (whose Jewish origin is strongly emphasised by Israeli public opinion) took part in the World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem in 2020.

In bilateral relations, the main source of dispute and criticism from Israel has been in historical policy, especially related to the commemoration by Ukrainians of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). For example, Israeli and Polish diplomacy protested after the naming of the stadium in Ternopil after Roman Shukhevych (a UPA commander responsible for ethnic cleansing during WWII). A short-term crisis in relations was also caused by Ukraine's support for a UN Security Council resolution in December 2016 that criticised [Jewish settlements in the occupied territories](#). However, in 2021 Ukrainian diplomacy pointed to the

possibility of recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in order to persuade the Israeli government to change its policy towards Ukraine. It was also reported that in recent years Ukraine repeatedly asked for Israeli mediation regarding a possible agreement with Russia.

Israeli-Ukrainian relations are determined by strong historical and identity ties. Ukraine has traditionally been an important source of Jewish emigration to Israel and is still a state with one of the largest Jewish diasporas, at about 40,000 people. About 5-7% of Israel's population has Ukrainian origin (slightly more than from Russia). Between 2014 and 2020, migration increased, with about 41,000 Ukrainian Jews emigrating to Israel. It is estimated that about 200,000 Ukrainian citizens have the right to Israeli citizenship. Religious issues play a special role in mutual relations as local Jewish organisations in Ukraine have extensive institutional networks. Ukraine is a destination for Hasidic pilgrimages to the grave of Rabbi Nachman in Uman where the number of pilgrims annually reaches tens of thousands (mainly on the Jewish New Year). Their presence also has a political dimension—in 2020, religious parties pressed the Israeli government to reach an agreement with Ukraine to admit pilgrimages despite the closure of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both countries have been parties to a free trade agreement since 2020, but trade still has not returned to the level from before 2014 (currently it is around \$0.9 billion; like other Middle Eastern countries, the main element is [Ukrainian edibles](#)). The deterioration of the economic situation after

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2014 resulted in an increase in [Ukrainian labour immigration](#), and now Israel is one of the 10 largest sources of foreign financial transfers to Ukraine, which also remains an important subcontractor for [the Israeli high-tech sector](#).

Israel's Actions since the Russian Invasion. After Russia's attack on Ukraine, Israel tried to [maintain a cautious political stance](#), focusing in the first days of fighting on the evacuation of its citizens (which had started before 24 February). At the diplomatic level, Israel condemned Russia's aggression and war crimes, and voted against Russia at the UN, including in a [vote suspending it from the Human Rights Council](#). At the same time, Israeli leaders are still showing caution in criticising Russia for fear it may cancel the [military coordination mechanism in Syria](#). This is particularly evident in the limited criticism of Russian propaganda and [historical manipulation distorting the memory of the Holocaust](#). Limited also was Israel's political response after the shelling of the Babi Yar historical site complex, but a sharper reaction was triggered by the invocation of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories by the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov. Likewise, analogies to World War II used by Ukrainian leaders were also perceived as misleading. At the same time, there has been a visible improvement in the image of Ukraine in Israeli society.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in consultation with Western countries and Ukraine, attempted to mediate between the parties. It included a meeting in March with Vladimir Putin in Moscow as well as a series of telephone conversations. The last one at the beginning of May concerned the evacuation of the defenders of the Azovstal complex in Mariupol. Although these actions did not bring any specific, official outcomes, the Ukrainian authorities supported this form of involvement. At the same time, Ukrainian politicians, including President Zelensky, expressed disappointment with Israel's distance in relation to other aspects of the conflict, especially the lack of consent to supply arms. There have been numerous media reports of Israel refusing to provide anti-missile or anti-tank weapons, or the notorious Pegasus software. It took until April for the Israeli Ministry of Defence to decide to supply even small amount of protective equipment.

Instead, Israel focuses on providing humanitarian aid, also to Ukrainian refugees in EU countries (e.g., in Poland). In addition to the distribution of 100 tonnes of aid, for six weeks Israel ran a field hospital in Mostyska, Ukraine, and gave consent to the treatment of Ukrainian soldiers in Israeli hospitals. About 28,000 refugees reached Israel, including 16,000 who obtained citizenship. The authorities also

decided to extend residence visas for Ukrainians already residing in the country, open the labour market to refugees, and provide facilitations for current employees of Israeli high-tech companies. About 11,000 out of 20,000 continue to work, some after relocating to EU countries.

PM Bennett's diplomatic activities were the subject of attacks by the opposition, which accused them of being involved in the Ukrainian matter at the expense of the current situation in the region, for example [regarding Iran](#). At the same time, public opinion supports the government. Although the vast majority of society sympathises with Ukraine, only a minority wants to increase Israeli involvement. According to polls conducted in March, 60% of Israelis favour maintaining the current policy. Since the beginning of the war, no major tensions have been noted between the Russian-speaking part of Israel and others, but the authorities decided to lower the profile of the official Victory Day celebrations held in Israel on 9 May (as did former Soviet states) to avoid political controversy.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The stabilisation of support for Ukraine from EU and NATO countries has reduced the role of other partners, including Israel, in Ukraine's current foreign policy. The dynamics to date indicate that Ukraine will see Israel more as an ad hoc channel of communication with Russia rather than as an actual mediator. This is beneficial from the point of view of the Israeli government in view of the current problems (loss of parliamentary majority, continued conflict with the Palestinians and Iran) and the lack of social pressure.

Additional political disputes may be generated by the issue of legalising refugees of non-Jewish origin, which is traditionally opposed by the Israeli right. At the same time, Israel will encourage as many Ukrainians as possible who are eligible for citizenship to relocate permanently. However, Israel's attractiveness is limited by the high cost of living and the poor security situation (two Ukrainian citizens were killed in the terrorist attack in April). Hence, it is likely that some of the migrants will return to Ukraine after the fighting is over.

Israeli efforts to increase support for Ukraine are evolving slowly. A faster change of policy is only likely if Russia escalates the war further, such as deliberate attacks on Jewish targets in Ukraine. An important factor will be the attitude of the U.S. and its pressure on its ally to change its level of support. In turn, EU diplomacy may start talks on the role of Israel in [rebuilding the Ukrainian economy](#), a role supported by its ongoing involvement in Ukraine, which is one of the main recipients of Israeli development aid.