

Reform of the Diplomatic Service of Ukraine: Experience of Poland and other Visegrad Group Countries

Hennadiy Maksak

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The need for reforms

Since the end of 2013, Ukraine has made significant and challenging progress on the way from authoritarianism to democratic standards. Full-fledge implementation of reforms in Ukraine across all sectors is a guarantee for stability and sustainability of the positive changes.

The need for the reform of the diplomatic service of Ukraine is no exception. In June 2014, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Ukraine Pavlo Klimkin declared the need for reforming the MFA system. He also noted that the experience of the EU countries would be taken into consideration and that the society would be broadly engaged into this process. These statements received positive feedback from experts and society. However, by the end of 2014, the leadership of the Ministry has not presented a concept of the reforms, although some of them are already being implemented. President Petro Poroshenko's Ukraine Reform Strategy 2020, published in September 2014, lacks a separate clause on reforming the diplomatic service.

It is known from the open sources that diplomatic service reform is to become one of the first reforms implemented by representatives of Ukrainian government. However, as of now, the MFA has published no consistent reform concept. The reform sectors include reduction of the size and optimization of the operation of the foreign diplomatic institutions, restructuring of the central apparatus, and strengthening the Asian and African vectors. Currently, this is almost all information available about the MFA reform from versatile sources.

Based on the results of an information request to the MFA of Ukraine, it was detected that, as of today, in order to reorganize and optimize the operation of the apparatus of the MFA of Ukraine, Minister Klimkin has signed a decree on enacting the new structure and staff list of the apparatus of the Ministry. The new structure is functioning within the government-approved framework of the maximum staff size of 600 established posts. The MFA Personnel Management Department ensured preparation of the decrees on transferring the employees. However, the mere structural reformatting without the change in strategic and functional approach to the work of the diplomatic service will not become a guarantee for strengthening the foreign-policy weight of the state.

Simultaneously, no public consultations are being held, which poses a threat to choose the path of closed transformations during the reform implementation again, which will not lead to an increase even in openness and transparency of the operation of the service. In spite of all the peculiarities of diplomats' work, their lack of openness is presently justified neither from the perspective of its advisability, nor from the perspective of the effectiveness of their work under such terms.

Priority reform directions

The analysis of the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at this stage and a comparison to the activities of foreign MFAs allows us to define a number of necessary steps the implementation of which can bring more effectiveness and productivity to the sphere of the implementation of the foreign policy of Ukraine:

- 1) The MFA reform concept should become a consistent public document that should envision a justification of the need for the reform, show the best possible solutions for the problem points, as well as provide an idea of what the new diplomatic service should be in general in order to address the current and future foreign policy tasks.

- 2) The MFA reform concept should come hand in hand with development of a new concept of the foreign policy of Ukraine

- 3) In the context of the constitutional reform in Ukraine, it is necessary to strengthen the parliament's participation in the development and implementation of the foreign policy, as well as the Ministry's accountability to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

- 4) The MFA should establish and institutionalize cooperation with state and non-governmental think tanks and civic expert during development and promotion of its foreign policy steps.

5) It is necessary to strengthen the foreign economy vector of the work of the MFA of Ukraine, to create practical preconditions, specific and diversified to various groups, for “economization” of foreign policy in the form of an auxiliary institutional basis.

6) The MFA should be ready to create a full-fledged vector of public diplomacy (cultural diplomacy) as an independent and integral foreign policy instrument.

7) The MFA should play a more active and systematic role in shaping the information policy of Ukraine abroad; strengthen and provide resources to the information component of the activities of foreign diplomatic institutions.

8) It is necessary to improve the system of interaction between the Ministry and foreign representative offices and to increase their independence in political and administrative issues.

9) It is required to strengthen the coordinating interdepartmental function of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine among other ministries of Ukrainian government on the issues of development and implementation of foreign policy.

10) For effective implementation of the specified tasks, the MFA needs to establish additional structures that would take over some of the functions which are being performed unsatisfactorily under the current conditions.

11) Diplomatic service recruiting service requires optimization in order to engage more qualified experts in the work at the Ministry and to change the paradigm

Experience of Visegrad Group for reforming the MFA of Ukraine

Right now, a new understanding of Ukraine as a state is being conceived, which will determine our vision and our opportunities in the middle-term perspective. The crisis of the previous foreign policy doctrine has been practically proved by the bloody events that have led to Russian military aggression and the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians.

In this context and from the perspective of optimizing the work of the MFA, the foreign policy agencies of the Visegrad Four might serve as a fine example for Ukraine to follow in certain aspects.

Undoubtedly, not everything should be copied, for every country has its own specificity, which is defined by historical factors, as well as the state’s current foreign policy vector and political peculiarities of the interest groups that have the power in each of the states. In addition, these countries’ diplomats themselves do not recommend taking their models of the diplomatic service, because the latter are still in the process of permanent search for better approaches and practices. For instance, in 2012, Poland introduced a number of innovative practices, and Hungary is currently in an active state of re-formatting the work of the ministries. However, at this stage already, one can say that in certain issues diplomatic services of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Czech Republic function in a more systematic and effective way.

The major factors that indicate the possibility and use of such study of diplomatic models for Ukraine are:

- these states’ location in similar geopolitical circumstances in the region of Central and Eastern Europe;
- the way to the reform of their MFAs that Visegrad Four states have made after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dismissal of the Socialist camp; breaking from the similar decision-making mechanisms in foreign policy sphere that are still peculiar to the Ukrainian service;
- the countries’ implementation of the process of adaptation of the national diplomatic services’ work to the requirements of the European Union in the course of their accession to the EU and 10-year-long membership.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conducted analysis of the work of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Czech Republic allows us to suggest a lot of interesting and useful examples of the work of foreign policy services.

At the same time, a number of common practices have been selected that are typical of most national diplomacy systems in the countries of Visegrad Group, which can indicate their effectiveness. Moreover, an accent has been made specifically on the work of the Ministry, rather than foreign diplomatic services, due to the fact that regulation of the activities of the central office will allow to adjust the work of Ukrainian embassies and consulates.

Strengthening the strategic and plan-based nature of the work of the Ministry. As noted earlier, reforming the diplomatic service cannot be isolated from the process of shaping the strategic vision of the foreign policy of the state. The MFA is only a tool for implementing foreign policy solutions and tasks. Without clear understanding of the new tasks faced by the country in the time of war and peace, reforming the policy tool is simply a waste of time.

As of today, the reference points for the foreign policy of Ukraine are the Constitution of Ukraine, the Law of Ukraine “On the Bases of Domestic and Foreign Policies,” National Security Strategy of Ukraine, and bilateral international agreements. The law defining the bases of domestic and foreign policies, the core element on this list, was adopted in 2010 and is rather a set of declarations, which only provides an extremely general idea of the current foreign policy course of the state.

For the Ukrainian services, the practices of Poland and other Visegrad Group countries regarding introduction of long-term foreign policy strategies might be interesting. In March 2012, the Council of Ministers approved the Foreign Policy Priorities for 2012 – 2016, the first long-term strategy. In addition, the document “Foreign Policy Reference Points,” which has limited access and is aimed at directing international cooperation of other ministries in the government, is developed on an annual basis. The Foreign Policy Strategy Department at the MFA of Poland is a creation of the mentioned program documents.

Similarly, Slovakia, which has prepared a mid-term foreign policy strategy for up to 2015, has also chosen the course of shaping a mid-term program document. Also, the public document “Foreign and European Policy Vectors” is prepared annually. At the end of the year, there is mandatory public report on the results of the policy implementation.

The main algorithm for development of program documents is as follows: 1) long-term governmental program; 2) long-term MFA program; 3) annual definition of foreign policy vectors; 4) annual public reporting.

These steps are mandatory for the ministries oriented at results, rather than mere imitation of work. Taking into consideration the fact that the president of Ukraine is responsible for foreign policy in Ukraine, the Reform Strategy 2020, currently developed by the head of the state, can become a starting point for implementation of the appropriate program approach.

Strengthening of the economic component of the foreign policy. Currently, most foreign policy strategies of Visegrad Group states are oriented at strengthening foreign economic activities and trade of their countries. At the same time, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs have to take more responsibilities in promoting economic interests and conducting “economic expansion.” The most recent and systematic example is the adoption of the Hungarian government’s program “Openness to the East,” which envisions strengthening cooperation with the countries outside the European Union, for the state to find a way out of the crisis phenomena. It was exactly for the sake of implementation of this program that it was decided to reform the MFA of Hungary through delegating the functions of conducting foreign economic activities in 2014. Several years ago, economic diplomacy was delegated to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. The new long-term foreign policy document of Poland also envisions strengthening cooperation of foreign policy and economy services.

In 2010, trade-and-economy missions were eliminated from the MFA of Ukraine, and economic affairs departments were established as part of foreign diplomatic institutions. An Exporters' Council was established under the Ministry. At the same time, economic departments largely focus on information and analytical support of trade and foreign economy activities, despite the fact that currently there are no sufficient practical tools for providing assistance to the development of more favorable economic connections.

In this sector, the experience of Visegrad Group countries in creating auxiliary institutions and mechanisms for attracting investments to Ukraine, as well as development of Ukrainian state export, can become useful.

The Hungarian economic diplomacy model, oriented at attaining ambitious goals, deserves special attention. Specifically, as was noted before, Hungary has recently adopted "Openness to the East" program, in which economic expansion and transformation of Budapest into a European hub for Eastern business are one of the major priorities. It is interesting that the Deputy Minister (State Minister) is responsible for economic policy, and the Ministry itself has received several auxiliary subordinate institutions designed to ensure a more systematic approach. Thus, during the implementation of the economic vector of the foreign policy, the MFA coordinates Hungarian Trade House, Hungarian Investment Attraction Agency, and "Exim" Bank. All of them are engaged in the complex implementation of the governmental program "Openness to the East." Consequently, the state creates a set of financial stimulating mechanisms called to increase the export of Hungarian small and medium business and to attract additional foreign investments.

Economic diplomacy currently needs to be a top priority for Ukraine, and not only in the sphere of declarations or fragmentary changes.

Allocation of public (cultural) diplomacy into a separate global instrument of the Ministry, which has to be implemented on the same level as classical diplomacy.

The experience of Visegrad Group states indicated the need for revision of the public diplomacy approach. Changes in the global environment of international relations, and the increase in the number of subjects engaged in international communication in one way or another demonstrate that traditional instruments of diplomacy are ceasing to yield the necessary results when used on their own. One does not need to prove the axiom that the level of political dialogue or economic cooperation depends on one state's populations' perception of another state, as well as on awareness and emotional readiness. Public diplomacy should be activated here as a targeted MFA activity.

One of the proofs of the serious attitudes towards public diplomacy is the existence of respective independent public (cultural) diplomacy departments in the countries of Visegrad group, which have appropriate programs and operation budgets for implementation of the assigned functions. In 2014, the post of the Deputy Minister (State Minister) for Cultural Diplomacy with a corresponding office was introduced in Hungary. Annual reporting on the results of the work in the sphere of public diplomacy is a normal practices observed in these countries.

"Decentralization" of MFA activities; establishment of a network of affiliated structures for implementation of individual aspects of foreign policy. The structure of the MFA as a state machine with all its bureaucratic mechanisms is no longer sufficient for effective implementation of the formulated foreign policy tasks. Ukrainian foreign policy service has to be ready for the possibility of delegating its certain powers to the structures that formally are not a structural part of the Ministry. Such structures might significantly increase the level of "soft power," which the Ministry can potentially generate. As an example, one can name public (cultural) diplomacy instruments – national institutes. Polish, Slovak, and Hungarian institutes are an inseparable part of the foreign policy of these Visegrad Group countries.

In general, any function that requires strengthening from the perspective of additional geographic or thematic presence can be moved onto the level of a separate, formally independent institution:

- implementation of development programs;
- cultural or humanitarian cooperation;
- assistance to representatives of diaspora or citizens residing abroad;
- information and research activities.

An interesting example is the 2012 reorganization of the International Solidarity Foundation, which is an operator for democratic transformations projects financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland. Thus, promoting its interests abroad, Polish foreign policy service formally avoids direct engagement into domestic policy affairs of the countries where the mentioned projects are implemented. Another interesting example is the establishment of the International Center for Democratic Transition, launched in Budapest in 2005. Hungarian government, represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, is one of its founders.

An additional significant benefit of “delegating” certain powers of the MFA is full or partial financial independence of the established organizations, which can engage foreign technical and donor resources for implementation of the specified tasks. Under the conditions of an economic crisis in the country, such work might be even more effective than simple operation within the framework of one state budget with the tendencies towards reducing expenses.

Gradual incorporation of European practices of diplomatic service activities. Taking into consideration the declared goal of accession to membership in the European Union, as well as the new regulatory framework for cooperation with the EU, the MFA has to systematically approximate itself to the European standards for operation of diplomatic service. Although in this aspect there is significant independence and uniqueness of diplomatic models of the member states, certain norms have a universal character. One of such vectors is introduction of development cooperation, which envisions development of special programs for assistance to third countries. The EU states assume the responsibility to allocate certain percentage of their GDPs to such assistance, both as money transfers to the European Fund and in a bilateral format. At the same time, there is independence in selecting the countries and the vectors for allocation of the assistance.

Undoubtedly, Ukraine is not a wealthy country at the moment. Nevertheless, introduction of individual programs for the neighboring countries, which could become an additional tool for strengthening Ukraine’s attractiveness, is not too burdensome financially, but can help approximate the state to the desired status of a “regional power,” which the MFA wants to see.