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CURRENT STATE AND MAIN TRENDS OF UKRAINE'S SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The end of 2021 is the time when President Zelenskyy reaches a halfway point of his presidential term. Since the government and political system (or political regime) in Ukraine is traditionally built around the President's figure, who eventually personifies the regime, it is the time of a peculiar watershed, which already allows for certain conclusions and reveals certain trends that make it possible to consider scenarios of further developments.

During the first half of his term, Volodymyr Zelenskyy almost entirely focused on concentrating power and monopolising his influence on other state bodies, often beyond constitutional regulations.

Full and partial changes in the government, as well as the model of relations with those who formed the "Zelenskyy's team" in 2019 and who joined later, suggest that the approaches of the President and his entourage to public policy are not so much professionalism as personal loyalty.

The concentration of power in the single centre of state decision-making – the Office of the President – has levelled the constitutional role of the Verkhovna Rada as the Parliament of a democratic country and caused the de facto loss of independence by the Cabinet of Ministers and its unconstitutional subordination to the President. There is a clear attempt to extend the head of state and his entourage's influence on the judiciary, which in turn requires immediate and profound reform to address decades-old systemic problems.

Therefore, since the arrival of the new government in Ukraine, the compliance with the constitutional principle of three independent branches of power is out of the question. Instead, the country leadership's actions seem to be aimed at further weakening of key state institutions.

According to experts, the reversal of the public policy's course to curtailment of democratic rights and freedoms, further weakening of state institutions and persecution of political opponents are highly likely in the future. So far, it is still an assumption, which, however, is based on real facts that increasingly run counter to the expectations of society or the needs of state development.

CURRENT STATE OF UKRAINE'S POLITICAL SYSTEM

The assessment of the general features of the socio-political situation at the end of 2021 is as follows.

- ✓ Ukraine has generally developed a model of government that can be conditionally described as «presidential» or even «hyper-presidential», with the formal preservation of the parliamentary-presidential system as defined by the Constitution.

- ✓ President Zelenskyy and his entourage, anchored in the Office of the President and

among the Verkhovna Rada leadership, have a de facto monopolistic control over the legislative and executive branches. This enables relatively smooth decision-making serving the interests of the President, which could also contribute to fulfilling key theses of his election programme.

- ✓ Although most Ukrainians are dissatisfied with the current situation in the country and the fulfilment of the current government's election promises, President Zelenskyy remains the leader with the highest support from society. At the same time, the level of this support and public confidence in the President demonstrate a steady downward trend.

✓ President Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party are no longer perceived as new political force. Meanwhile, public demand for new leaders remains high.

✓ As of the end of 2021, none of the leading politicians and parliamentary political forces could compete with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party by offering their agenda and vision of the model of the country's future development.

✓ Society does not share a single vision of further development.

✓ Most of society and the majority of experts alike have rather negative expectations regarding the country's development in the near future. This situation contrasts sharply with public expectations two years ago.

Ukraine's political regime is traditionally influenced by the way the President fulfils his constitutional duties. Therefore, each subsequent presidential election becomes the starting point for each regime or its modification, while the results of parliamentary elections (which often do not coincide with the presidential elections), mostly serve to confirm the regime's change following the change of a person in the presidential chair.

Until now, every political regime in Ukraine was formed on the basis of popular will expressed in the general elections, which were mostly recognised as democratic. Current regime personified by President Zelenskyy is no exception, as it is based on the results of 2019 presidential and early parliamentary elections. Therefore, it has a formally democratic origin.

Current regime is characterised by a certain degree of resilience, which is confirmed by the absence (at least, for now) of any obvious consequences for President Zelenskyy and his immediate entourage, despite many ill-conceived political decisions that led to inadequate policy response to COVID-19 and poor organisation of vaccination, numerous scandals involving the President and some of his people, as well as reduced international subjectivity of Ukraine. A noticeable trend of declining real income of many Ukrainians and increasing fiscal pressure on entrepreneurs will produce relevant public response later.

There are several reasons for that.

First, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party won the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively, with a phenomenal lead, receiving the highest vote of confidence ever since Ukraine's independence. Being under permanent stress since the Revolution of Dignity and the onset of Russia's armed aggression, Ukrainian society has made a clear call for a new quality of politics and new political practices that could bring «new faces». Although such a credit of trust cannot evaporate overnight, the confidence in the government diminishes, potentially affecting the country's stability. At the time of this study, it is safe to say that society's confidence is running low, but the public does not yet see worthy alternatives among other leaders and political forces.

Second, already during the 2019 election campaign, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Servant of the People party enjoyed the support of many key actors and stakeholders of socio-political and socio-economic processes in Ukraine, including powerful financial and industrial groups, regional and local elites, and opinion leaders in many segments of society.

KEY TRENDS THAT WILL AFFECT FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION

The trends that will shape further vector of the socio-political situation in Ukraine during the remaining presidential term of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and until the next presidential elections, include the following.

1. Further concentration of power and influence on government institutions in the hands of President Zelenskyy and his immediate entourage. This general trend will primarily include actions to ensure the re-election of Mr Zelenskyy for a second term in 2024.

Therefore, the current regime is likely to take action to reduce political competition, take over information space and maintain control over the Verkhovna Rada, the Cabinet of Ministers and other central executive bodies, as well as to reach certain agreements with other important actors, including the most influential business circles (primarily oligarchic)

and regional elites. It is logical to assume that considerable attention will be paid to achieving control of the judiciary, the Constitutional Court, and anti-corruption bodies (National Anti-Corruption Bureau, National Agency on Corruption Prevention, Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, High Anti-Corruption Court).

Activities of the government in general will continue to be predominantly reactive – instead of being proactive, it will mostly react to events or trends, trying to take into account both public sentiment and the positions of other factors affecting the ruling elite, specifically the largest FIGs (Financial Industrial Groups, representatives of «oligarchic» capital), foreign partners of Ukraine, etc.

If during the first half of his term President Zelenskyy demonstrated total unwillingness to reach any significant compromises with other political forces, then such political behaviour in the future will pose significant challenges and even threats for him and his staff.

Despite his clear propensity for favouritism, Mr Zelenskyy will sooner or later have to choose between keeping his closest advisers at all costs and acknowledging the fact that they are becoming increasingly «toxic» in the eyes of society. Therefore, preserving the image of the President will require certain sacrifices. This issue became particularly relevant after the Wagnergate publications, especially in the context of direct and indirect criticism of the President and his entourage through oligarch-owned TV channels that have a significant media coverage.

Society does not support Zelenskyy's nomination for the second term, and this trend is unlikely to reverse. However, the second term for Volodymyr Zelenskyy and for many of his people means not only political future but also the way to avoid responsibility for various abuses of power (e.g., the above-mentioned Wagnergate case), violations of various legal norms (e.g., the Rules of Procedure of the Verkhovna Rada), acts of corruption and the like. So, President Zelenskyy will run for a second term, and the actions of the state leadership from 2022 on will be aimed at achieving the most favourable conditions for future presidency.

Ensuring such conditions amidst the growing criticism of Mr Zelenskyy and his entourage by society and key stakeholders (FIGs and other influence groups, civil society, media, foreign partners) will tempt the ruling regime to possibly use the repression policies against political and other opponents.

Selective enforcement of the Law «On Prevention of Threats to National Security Related to Excessive Influence of Persons with Significant Economic or Political Weight in Public Life (Oligarchs)» may become an important tool in this approach, since «oligarchs» are to be identified by the National Security and Defence Council, headed by the President himself.

Selective use of this Law may be aimed at «cleansing» the political and information space from opponents and potential competitors of the incumbent President, which, in turn, can not but provoke a response, both internal and external.

In the next period, the government will try to «cover» its frailties, especially incompetence, inadequate personnel policy, propensity to corruption, poor understanding of risks and threats with attempts to narrow the field of political competition and with populist information campaigns. The experience of previous regimes suggests that such attempts are unlikely to be effective.

According to recent public opinion surveys, many Ukrainians are wary of a possible transition to authoritarianism and believe that there are no reliable safeguards against this in Ukraine. In practice, however, none of key stakeholders will be interested in the excessive strengthening of the President and his entourage, so the «oligarchs» are likely to intensify their support for greater political competition and public criticism of the government. Against this background, it is important that Volodymyr Zelenskyy is no longer perceived as a «new politician» by society, while the current government is no better than the previous one.

Populism will play a significant role in the intentions and rhetoric of current regime. However, the government's opportunities amidst weak economic growth, endless problems in the energy sector and the growing signs of crisis in various sectors will look

increasingly futile. The gap between household incomes and the growing prices and tariffs will hardly be addressed anytime soon.

For the same reasons, the opportunity to present the «Big Construction» infrastructure project as a key achievement and to use it as a basis for the re-election strategy will be also limited.

2. Loss of support from various segments of society.

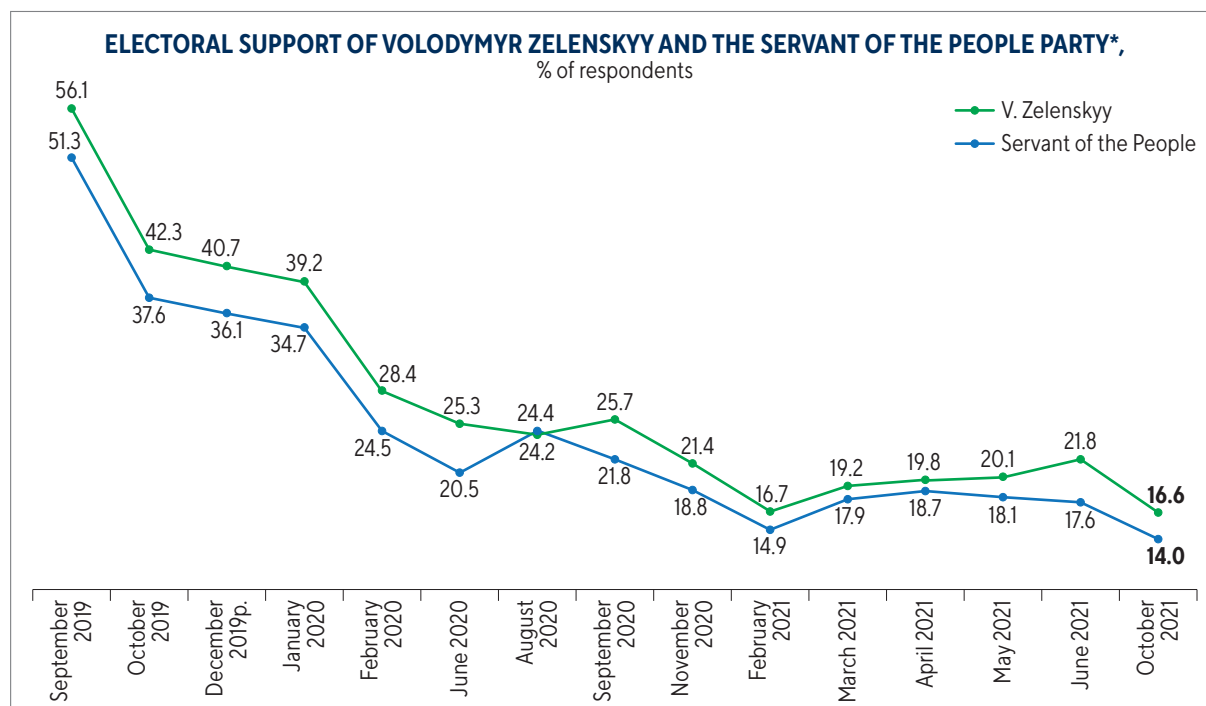
The evolution of national identity with clear orientation of the majority of society to European and Euro-Atlantic choices, patriotism and democratic governance has become apparent, reducing the government's ability to make sharp political turns and strengthen authoritarian tendencies. In turn, the pro-Russian voters will be increasingly frustrated by the government's reluctance to end the war on Russian terms and move closer to Russia. Over the past two decades, no political team has been able to overcome the general trend of people's growing frustration with then-governments, and their fates differed only in the way of change of power. This depended on the level of protest mobilisation in society, as well as the cohesion and organised nature of the opposition.

3. The public's disappointment in politicians as mouthpieces of expectations

of different social groups. As the end of Zelenskyy's presidential term grows near, he will be less perceived by society as a «new» leader, a representative of a «new» political formation. Even greater public frustration will be channelled towards the Servant of the People party, which is already behaving like the prototypical party in power.

At the same time, this trend is unlikely to translate into a significant electoral support for political forces that are generally considered as traditional and «old», such as the European Solidarity, Batkivshchyna, the Opposition Platform – For Life. Each of these political forces is approaching its maximum possible public support, and none of them will have significant benefits even from the complete loss of public confidence in the ruling party. As already noted, this is due to significant distrust in each of them, caused by both objective circumstances and entirely subjective and largely emotional reasons.

4. A significant public demand for a «new» political force and «new» leaders, evidenced by opinion polls, will lead to competition primarily in the fields of populism and the emotional perception of particular politicians and parties by potential voters. For now, the competition of party programmes, visions, and specific action plans of future development



* Figure shows the support expressed in respondents' answers to questions «Who would you vote for in the election of the President of Ukraine?»; «If the Verkhovna Rada elections took place next Sunday, which political party would you vote for?».

is out of the question. Therefore, the development of the party system based on ideological competition will be complicated.

5. The likelihood of an information covert operation in Ukraine aimed at wreaking internal havoc and deepening mutual mistrust between different parts of society is high and growing. Its key messages may include the statements that the oligarchic system has not changed, while the level of corruption is growing. This threat becomes particularly serious with the increasing role of social media as a source of information for many Ukrainians.

The nearest anticipated landmark of pre-election mobilisation for the Ukrainian political system is the parliamentary elections. Most likely, they will result in a significant weakening of presidential influence on the Verkhovna Rada, leading to yet another reboot of the entire power structure, with a radical change in balance between its key institutions. A significant fall in public support for the current ruling team is a key prerequisite for this forecast.

POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN 2022-2024: KEY SCENARIOS

These trends inform a number of scenarios of further political developments in the country. It was decided to limit the forecast horizon to the current electoral cycle, which, in the absence of force majeure, should end with the next presidential election in March 2024. The suggested scenarios are very conditional and cannot anticipate all potential situations. The purpose of their development is to outline the general directions of development of Ukraine's political system. A characteristic feature of this period will be socio-political turbulence, with its intensity depending primarily on the government's actions and behaviours.

The key subjects of interaction in any scenario are the **government** (including the entourage of President Zelenskyy), the **opposition** (consisting of political players with different interests and positions) and **financial-industrial groups** (also with different interests). **Local elites and influence groups** will play an important role, and their behaviour will be determined by each particular situation.

External actors will also play a significant role in future events, including **Russia**, which

may step up its aggression against Ukraine «when the time is right» or resort to blackmail or bribery, as well as Ukraine's key **international partners**, which may influence internal political processes by regulating Ukraine's access to international aid, integration processes, public diplomacy, etc. Unfortunately, there are very few grounds to include **civil society** in this list. Instead, it is expedient to view it as a kind of natural force that can be activated by certain triggers (blatant attempts by the authorities to restrict democratic rights and freedoms, pro-Russian «U-turn» in public policy, or other actions of key actors that provoke widespread public protests).

1. The baseline scenario for the development of the domestic political situation in the next 2-2.5 years (until the end of President Zelenskyy's term) is possible in the absence of full-scale Russian military aggression and active Western intervention in Ukraine's domestic political process. It has the following basic features.

The President and his entourage will continue their efforts to consolidate power, removing insufficiently loyal team members. At the same time, these people will increasingly have to rely not on President Zelenskyy's public legitimacy, but on access to mechanisms of power and backroom deals. Control over law enforcement agencies and anti-corruption bodies, such as the Ministry of the Internal Affairs, the Security Service of Ukraine, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the Office of the Prosecutor General and Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, High Anti-Corruption Court (and the entire judiciary), the State Bureau of Investigation, the recently established Bureau of Economic Security, and the Constitutional Court, will be particularly important.

«De-oligarchisation» — an illustrative attack of the President and the entire government system on certain financial-industrial groups and their leaders with reasonably expected approval of society — will be in the heart of public policy. This fight against the «oligarchs» will, however, be selective and depend on the extent to which Mr Zelenskyy and his entourage will be able to see that the political space is «cleansed» of potential competitors in the elections and the information field is free from any criticism of the government (except for

remarks approved by Mr Zelenskyy), which should make it easier for him to be re-elected. The policy of appointing people depending on the degree of their personal loyalty to Volodymyr Zelenskyy will continue, resulting in substandard management and further accumulation of problems in various spheres.

Zelenskyy's team will try to build its own media pool, but it will hardly dominate the information space, as leading FIGs will retain necessary resources allowing them to influence the political process. It is possible that Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his people – consciously or not, by action or public statements – will contribute to the general socio-political destabilisation, which, in the face of Russian aggression, can lead to unpredictable and even tragic consequences for the entire country and for most key players.

The next parliamentary elections are scheduled on 29 October 2023. Public opinion polls show the steady decrease in public support for the pro-presidential Servant of the People party, with other parliamentary parties catching up. This also opens up space for «new» political projects. As a result, the President will look for ways to postpone the parliamentary elections until after the presidential election.

The President's statements and behaviour during the recent «press marathon» on 26 November 2021 suggests that he may opt to follow a path of so-called «soft usurpation». *First*, the President appointed two Constitutional Court judges to vacancies that did not legally exist, and *second*, he stated that MPs could apply to the Constitutional Court to determine the order of elections. By doing so, President Zelenskyy may plan to run for office and win in the 2024 elections, and then to conduct parliamentary elections, already dictating terms to other players.

The realisation of these intentions will entirely depend on the situation in the East (along the contact line), the evolution of government views on ending the war, and the internal situation that will be shaped by the economy, public sentiment, and behaviour of alternative political forces. Given the country's dependence on foreign aid, its policy will be significantly influenced by international partners. Since Volodymyr

Zelenskyy, unlike Viktor Yanukovich, cannot seek Russia's support, he will have to recognise certain demands from the international community, especially the United States.

The «old» opposition and the newly formed opponents will attack the incumbent government from several fronts, including «patriotic» (betrayal of national interests), «socio-economic» (deterioration of living standards), and «anti-corruption» (abuse of power by Zelenskyy's entourage). Some political forces will exploit the narratives of «Ukraine's external governance by the West» and the absence of the promised peace in Donbas.

«Soft usurpation» will require significant support from key FIGs, regional and local elites, and influential groups, as well as full and unconditional trust from law enforcement and security agencies, including the Armed Forces. Given that the current government has done a lot to lose credibility among the military and lacks necessary resources to meet the needs of other players, such a scenario looks questionable.

The peculiarity of the upcoming regular or early parliamentary elections is that 4 or 5 political forces («patriotic», «populist», «pro-Russian», «new opposition») will all get roughly similar results at 15–20% of votes. Several more parties will have a chance to reach the 5% threshold. As a result, the new parliament can be excessively fragmented, which will hardly contribute to political stabilisation.

2. There are two scenarios of future events with possible early elections:

✓ Early elections (both presidential and parliamentary) held in the manner determined by the Constitution (respectively, by decision of the Verkhovna Rada and the President);

✓ Early elections held under certain circumstances, such as the President's inability to perform his duties, the constitutional and legal grounds for impeachment of the President, a political crisis caused by certain factors, etc.

2.1. Early elections held in the manner determined by the Constitution and by decision of the current government could theoretically look as follows:

2.1.1. The idea of holding early presidential elections could look quite attractive to the President and his entourage, allowing them to achieve several goals:

first, amidst the declining public trust in the current government, the President and his entourage are given the opportunity to stay in power, as President Zelenskyy at the moment does not have strong electoral competitors;

second, elections provide an opportunity to temporarily divert public attention from many negative trends in the fields of economy, energy, fiscal policy and the like;

third, it would be easier for President Zelenskyy to undertake the reformatting of the political and information space.

A significant disadvantage of this idea is that the current Election Code of Ukraine explicitly states that «a person whose powers as the President of Ukraine have been terminated early in accordance with the Constitution of Ukraine may not be nominated as a candidate for President of Ukraine in an extraordinary election scheduled with regard to the said termination of powers» (Para 6, Article 75).

This obstacle can be circumvented by amending the text of the Election Code. Theoretically, the President can do so, as he already managed to get the necessary results in key votes. However, there are no guarantees in this case because the President's «mono majority» in the parliament is no longer there, especially after the dismissal of Speaker Dmytro Razumkov, who declared an independent political role. Partner factions of «Dovira» and «For the Future» may have their own intentions and visions, in which Volodymyr Zelenskyy is not necessarily re-elected in regular or early elections. In addition, their terms and conditions for cooperation may be unacceptable for Mr Zelenskyy himself.

To implement this approach, the President and his team lack the major resource – time. As already mentioned, the dynamic loss of public trust has become a factor, while political competition will inevitably intensify by mid-2022 with the approaching next parliamentary elections. Any steps towards authoritarian tendencies will predictably lead to increased

social tensions, not to mention economic losses for the state. Therefore, this scenario does not seem the most likely, even if the Constitutional Court rules on the inconsistency of the above provision of the Election Code with the Constitution.

In addition, as of the end of 2021, there were no political players demonstrating readiness for early elections.

2.1.2. Early parliamentary elections prior to the presidential elections are highly undesirable for both Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his people, even though they may be supported by some opponents of the current government.

In case of such elections, President Zelenskyy will likely lose his monopoly on power, while the formation of a stable parliamentary coalition will be challenging.

On the other hand, early elections could become a «bleed valve» for releasing public discontent, if the socio-political situation reaches the boiling point. Reasons for such social tension can include insufficient government policies in the socio-economic sphere, growing pressure on businesses, inability to adequately respond to the latest challenges (including the COVID-19 pandemic), especially in the face of external aggression.

Avoiding large-scale public protests by calling early elections will result in the formation of an unstable parliament. The newly formed factions will be in constant conflict with each other and have weak bargaining power, suggesting long and difficult negotiations to form a coalition. This, in turn, will jeopardise the appointment of a capable Cabinet. Moreover, this will have adverse effects on socio-economic development, defence, and resilience of the state.

However, the need to hold early parliamentary elections may become a reality for any winner of the next presidential election, regular or early. The main reason for that may be minimal constructive cooperation between the «new» president and the «old» parliament (such as political confrontations between President Viktor Yushchenko, the Verkhovna Rada of the 5th convocation, and the cabinets of Viktor Yanukovich and Yulia Tymoshenko in 2006–2010).

This allows the President to find constitutional grounds (for example, inability to convene plenary sessions within 30 days, inability to form the new Cabinet, etc.) to call early elections, given that under Article 90 of the Constitution of Ukraine, «the powers of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine elected at extraordinary elections... shall not be terminated within one year from the date of its election», and «the powers of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine may not be subject to an early termination at the initiative of the President of Ukraine within the last six months of the term of powers of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine or the President of Ukraine». Further development in this case is highly unpredictable.

2.2. The likelihood of extraordinary presidential elections due to various pressures, such as large-scale public protests, will increase with the authorities losing control of the situation, while different players, political forces, and civil society uniting for the sake of changes in the political landscape.

The likelihood of such a scenario will increase with each new failure of the government, especially in the context of the war with Russia and the socio-economic situation. Radicalization of society clearly demanding for a change of government can be triggered by as aggravation of sense of injustice, mass emotional rejection of the state leadership, openly anti-social behaviour of the President and his entourage. As constitutional provisions on the impeachment of the President and relevant law adopted in 2019 have no chance to be enforced, so public and social movements are the only driving force of such a scenario under the current political conditions.

Current dissatisfaction with the government's actions is rather a traditional public reaction. In turn, the expert community predicts further escalation of social tensions. However, these are not enough to trigger events comparable to the Revolution of Dignity. Public demand for new leaders remains unmet, but there are still no strong candidates capable to become leaders acceptable to the majority of society. At the same time, the probability of detonation of mass protests similar to the 2004 and 2013-2014 Maydans cannot be predicted given the dominance of emotional

reactions that can be triggered by any situation or event.

3. Force majeure remains likely, including due to the increased concentration of Russian armed forces near the Ukrainian borders. Even if Russia is only bluffing and intimidating Ukraine instead of planning a large-scale military offensive, the possibility of escalation in the East of Ukraine along the contact line cannot be ruled out.

The deterioration of the financial and economic situation is also likely. In particular, if the government for some reason refuses to fulfil its obligations to foreign partners, which are also the largest creditors of Ukraine, such an aggravation will seem inevitable. The question will be only in its scale.

If the government's socio-economic miscalculations and other actions lead to a significant decline in the living conditions of most Ukrainians, large-scale public protests and demonstrations of disobedience by regional elites will become a reality. In this case, extraordinary parliamentary elections may be called to maintain control over the situation, as it happened in 1993-1994.

If the situation becomes threatening, the President and the Verkhovna Rada have a powerful tool at their disposal called the declaration of the state of emergency or martial law.

The legal regime of the state of emergency and martial law can be introduced both throughout the country and in its individual regions. During such a regime, the powers of the President and key government institutions may not be terminated (during the martial law regime, the powers of local authorities and local self-governments shall be exercised by specially formed military administrations). Therefore, the emergence of force majeure situations will be about the creation of fundamentally different conditions for the coexistence of government and society and the development of completely different trends.

In the near future, the probability of such situations is still not very high. Therefore, the baseline scenario of further socio-political development of Ukraine remains the most likely in the next two years.