

DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2023.41.02

EU'S LARGEMENT TOWARDS THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP. THE INTEGRATION OF UKRAINE IN THE MIDST OF THE CRISIS

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Abstract: *After the fall of the communist regimes, the former Eastern bloc countries stated that they wanted to join the European Community. However, the legacy of Soviet socio-economic systems and structures made it difficult for the countries of Eastern Europe to integrate faster into the Community. Nevertheless, the accession of the former communist states, in the opinion of former European Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn, has served as an anchor for stability and democracy and an engine of personal freedom and economic dynamism in Europe. The enlargement process has made a positive contribution to narrowing the gap between East and West in terms of democracy, although progress among post-communist countries is still lower than in "Western European" states. In the context of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian troops and the global crisis that arose from this event, the integration of Ukraine into the European Union seems more palpable than ever. This paper tries to explain the relationship between the EU and Ukraine since the latter managed to gain its independence from Russia and became part of the Eastern Partnership and to come up with a possible scenario of how the enlargement process will take place from here onwards for the countries that are on the Russian line of fire.*

Keywords: enlargement, integration, Ukraine, EU, Eastern Partnership.

Introduction

At a certain point in history, the European Union realized it was destined to have different and developmentally heterogeneous neighbors as a large geopolitical entity with extensive borders. Thus, in the context of the most extensive enlargement in the history of the EU, which included eight states from Central and Eastern Europe and two states from the Mediterranean Sea, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was created. Developed in 2004, the main aim of the ENP was to avoid the emergence of new lines of demarcation between the

European Union and its neighbors and to strengthen the prosperity, stability, and security of them all. The 2004 enlargement to 25 states expanded the place occupied by the EU in Europe's international relations, with membership now comprising most European nation-states.

The ENP is a bilateral policy between the European Union and partner countries. Under the ENP, the European Union offers its neighbors a privileged relationship based on a mutual commitment to shared values including democracy and human rights, rule of law, good governance, market economy principles and sustainable development. The level of ambition of the relationship depends on the extent to which the partner states share these values. In addition, the ENP includes political association, deeper economic integration, and increased mobility (Whitman and Wolff, 2010, pp.3-5). In concrete terms, the actions within the ENP are aimed at framing all three pillars of the EU and promoting strategic security objectives.

After spending the first five years working in the ENP format to build relations with very different neighbors like Tunisia and Ukraine, the EU made the logical decision to start viewing its neighborhood through the lens of dividing it into different groups. Thus, currently, within the ENP, we distinguish four types of actions carried out by the EU:

1. Cooperation with all neighboring countries. In addition to bilateral and regional cooperation programs, neighborhood-wide cooperation programs have been created, as it is believed that these can be managed more effectively at the interregional level.
2. Cooperation with neighboring EU countries. Cross-border cooperation aims at sustainable development along the EU's external borders to enhance the quality of life and solve common problems.
3. Southern Neighborhood – cooperation program covering a wide range of key sectors such as good governance and the rule of law, socio-economic development, migration (in the context of migratory crises) and refugee support, climate change, energy, and security. This program involves Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia.
4. The Eastern Partnership is a specific dimension of the ENP, which aims to deepen the political and economic relations between the European Union and the six partner states in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (Eastern Partnership, 2022).

The Eastern Partnership represents a joint initiative of the EU and its Eastern European partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. Launched in 2009 at the EU Summit in Prague, it aims to bring Eastern European partners closer to the European Union. Furthermore, the Eastern Partnership supports and encourages reforms in the member countries of this Eastern Program for the benefit of their citizens and the subsequent attainment of candidate state status for EU accession. Created at the proposal of Poland and Sweden, the Eastern Partnership allows these partner states to integrate into EU policies and programs gradually and into the common market (Eastern Partnership, 2022).

The Eastern Partnership was officially launched in May 2009 and has been described as an ambitious new partnership that goes far beyond the achievements of the ENP. The notion of "partnership" became central to the renewal of special relations with the eastern neighbors and promised to provide a flexible approach tailored to the needs and capacity of each partner. In each case, the EU tries to provide the maximum support possible, given the internal political realities of the partner states. The Eastern Partnership provides several new and essential measures and activities to facilitate the commitment of neighbors to the course of European integration.

In particular, the policy envisioned a new two-track approach by adding a multilateral dimension with a regional focus to the partner states' traditional bilateral relationship with the EU. In this way, the ENP managed to embrace all countries in the region as initially intended, including those that previously had no structured relationship with the EU (i.e., Belarus) as well as third countries (i.e., Turkey and Russia) not covered by PEV. Measures have also been designed at different levels to differentiate policy focus and attractiveness, thus allowing the EU to develop enhanced association agreements with accession leaders such as Ukraine and Moldova and to approach other partners based on needs. The EU has also stepped up its efforts to address frozen conflicts in the neighborhood (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk / Luhansk People's Republic) and put more emphasis on engagement through civil society to drive domestic reforms.

At the multilateral level, based on the proposals received from the partner states, the EU has developed five initiatives to support the specific interests of each country and provide additional financial aid. The initiatives range from border management programs, SME

facilities, energy diversification, and the Southern Energy Corridor in response to natural and artificial disaster prevention. In addition, the Eastern Partnership has challenged making EU policies more attractive to the Eastern region by diversifying its measures, activities, and resources (Korosteleva, 2012, pp.7-8).

The EU's relationship with its neighborhood is based on the principles of soft power, which covers the general scope of the interests of the EU and partner countries. Closer cooperation between the EU and its Eastern European partners – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine – is a key component of the EU's external relations because as the EU has expanded, the economic and social development of these states influences the economies of the EU directly.

The EU aims to promote democratic values and support its eastern neighbors in implementing the rule of law and adopting high-quality European standards for trade. The implementation of large-scale reforms in partner countries is undoubtedly a positive development.

The EU signed Association Agreements on June 27, 2014, with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. The political association and economic integration of the Eastern Partnership countries with the EU comprise three general chapters: Common Foreign and Security Policy, Justice and Home Affairs, and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). In addition, before signing the Association Agreement, a country must become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and become a party to the multilateral trade agreement, which is a prerequisite for entering and completing negotiations on the DCFTA.

Eastern Partnership member countries must adopt 350 EU laws, standards, and regulations within ten years. The opening of markets through the progressive elimination of tariffs and customs quotas and the harmonization of laws, rules, and regulations in various trade-related sectors contribute to the achievement of this objective.

This paper tries to explain the relationship between the EU and Ukraine since the latter managed to gain its independence from Russia and became part of the Eastern Partnership and to come up with a possible scenario of how the enlargement process will take place from here onwards the countries that are on the Russian line of fire.

The question that arises is if the Union is prepared to change the enlargement process from the ground or, given the critical situation in the area, if it agrees to compromise and skip some of the procedures that need to be followed in order for a country to become part of this community? In this regard, I set as my goal to answer the following research questions:

1. Has the Eastern Partnership created an open platform for strengthening relations between the EU and Ukraine?
2. What were the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership?
3. Will Ukraine obtain the status of an EU candidate state in the current context?

This research was carried out through the historical-interpretive approach of the contexts in which the analyzed facts took place, their significance and importance and their evolution over time. The technique used in this research is secondary data analysis, which involves conducting a scientific investigation based on information from other research carried out by distinguished experts in this field and analyzing official documents. Thus, books in a physical and online format, articles in specialized magazines and documents issued by the official institutions of the EU and Ukraine were consulted.

1. A short analysis of the EU-Ukraine relationship

With the collapse of the USSR, through the signing of the Belaveja Accords on December 8, 1991, between the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, the aim of the Ukrainians was based on two interrelated tasks: dealing with the legacy of the Soviet Union and building the future independent state. How Ukraine approached these tasks was shaped by concerns about sovereignty, identity, and interdependence.

For the leadership of Ukraine, led by President Leonid Kravchuk, the Declaration of Independence of August 1991 meant the complete and final separation of Ukraine from the USSR. Consequently, the priority was to consolidate and protect the newly won independence, which was contested by Russia at every turn, citing arguments such as borders, the status of the Black Sea Fleet, the issue of citizenship, and the status of Crimea.

While Ukraine has sought to avoid post-Soviet integration with Russia at the helm, it has shown genuine openness to the EU. Ukraine has sought to create complex and systemic interdependencies through persistent demands and desire for integration into the European community.

However, from the beginning, Ukraine's pro-European orientation was limited to foreign policy statements and was not accompanied by domestic "acts." As a result, the Ukrainian political elite has carved out a niche for itself, allowing it to continue its search for profitability, balancing between the West and Russia, each of which treats Kyiv's integration rhetoric with a heavy dose of skepticism (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, p.30).

We can delineate four distinct periods in the cooperation between the EU and Ukraine:

1. The first period can be **declarative Europeanization**, led by President Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004).
2. The second period was **political stagnation** under Yushchenko's presidency (2005-2010).
3. The third period was manifested by the **pragmatism** of Yanukovych's presidency (2010-2014).
4. The last period refers to the presidency of Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky and **the final rapprochement** with the EU.

Before 1994, under Kravciuk's presidency, the problems of European integration began to be addressed by the country's leadership, but they did not constitute a political priority. The most decisive step toward EU-Ukraine cooperation during that period was the creation of the Intergovernmental Committee for 90 cooperation with the EU by the Presidential Decree of August 28, 1993 (Liga 360, 2022), which laid the foundations for the preparation and signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in June 1994 (CORDIS, 2022).

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement were concluded in the first days of Leonid Kuchma's presidency. This step had great symbolic importance for Ukraine, the first country in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to sign such an agreement with the EU. Although it went through a ratification procedure for four years, the PCA provided Ukraine with a much-needed commercial and economical avenue for convergence and building political dialogue with the EU, in the form of annual Summits and meetings of EU-Cooperation Councils

Ukraine and the EU-Ukraine Cooperation Committees. However, any reference to the prospect of EU accession negotiated with CEE countries simultaneously and left Ukraine half committed to implementing EU-led reforms was explicitly avoided (Korosteleva, 2012, p.84).

Within three months of the entry into force of the PCA in June 1998, Kuchma signed a decree entitled "Strategy of Ukraine's Integration into the European Union," which formally proclaimed EU membership as Ukraine's long-term strategic goal and listed the main priority areas for integration. Furthermore, in interactions with EU officials, Ukrainian leaders have expressed a desire to follow the path of integration of Central and Eastern European states, which began accession negotiations with the EU in the 1990s (Bărbulescu, Brie, and Toderaş, 2016).

Achieving an accession perspective has become a key objective of Ukraine's strategy toward the EU. Ukraine had hoped its membership aspirations would be recognized at the European Council meeting in Helsinki in December 1999 but had to settle for a message of appreciation for Ukraine's European choice. The government in Kyiv reviewed and re-evaluated the key documents that coordinated relations with the EU. In many ways, the PCA resembled the association agreements signed between the states of Central and Eastern Europe and the EU. The primary purpose of the PCA was to align Ukraine with the legal framework of the European Single Market and the World Trade Organization system. However, unlike association agreements, the PCA was legally "static." Ukrainian officials have criticized the PCA for many reasons, mainly for failing to provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap for closer ties between Ukraine and the EU. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement only delineated areas of cooperation without specific priorities and timeframes, which leaders in Kyiv saw as a lack of political will to deepen cooperation. Ukrainian officials also wanted a comprehensive framework that included new areas of European integration, such as foreign policy, defense, and Justice and Home Affairs, which were not covered by the PCA (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, p.38).

Despite the country's grandiose expectations, which were not realized, many important institutional activities took place in Ukraine, including the creation of the Department for European Integration and the Center for European Law under the Ministry of Justice in Kyiv. Overall, however, progress was slow and uncoordinated. Moreover, the absence of legislative

initiative on European integration has led to a situation where almost ten years of political declarations regarding Ukraine's "European choice" have not resulted in the adoption of even the most fundamental legislative acts necessary to launch any integration policies. Consequently, although some political actors were identified, no clear priorities were agreed upon, implemented, or monitored by either the EU or the Ukrainian government, and Ukraine's "European choice" remained on the back burner (Korosteleva, 2012, p. 85).

In order to expand and intensify relations and overcome the stagnant situation, Ukraine proposed a series of initiatives to the EU in 2000-2001, which were met with little interest by the European institutions. In the early 2000s, Ukrainian leaders agreed on achieving a comprehensive, detailed, and binding framework for Ukraine's closer integration with the EU. For political leaders, it was about obtaining candidate status. For other domestic actors, it was about forcing political elites to carry out internal democratic reforms, thus triggering a modernization process. However, preoccupied with eastern enlargement and the new treaty framework, the EU has been slow to engage in bold policies in the post-Soviet space and respond to Ukraine's demands in particular. As the political system led by Kuchma became repressive, the EU became more critical of human rights abuses in Ukraine. Given the stark divergence between pro-European statements and domestic events, the EU rejected Ukraine's calls for a more substantial commitment. While this gave the EU a pretext to avoid deeper commitments to Kuchma-led Ukraine, the EU felt compelled to respond to demands following the Orange Revolution in which the country demonstrated its democratic values (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, pp. 38-39).

The year 2004 marked a turning point in EU-Ukraine relations, which were considerably accelerated by the events of the Orange Revolution and the emergence of a common border with the EU after the 2004 enlargement wave. Although Ukrainian political elites engaged in discussions regarding the EU's 'Wider Europe' (European Commission, 2003) initiative, the launch of the ENP in 2004 was a disappointment, once again failing to satisfy Ukraine's EU membership ambitions. The frustration was partly precipitated by the legacy of Kuchma's presidency, which saw accession as the ultimate goal of Ukraine's relations with the EU. Under the ENP, the EU launched the EU-Ukraine Action Plan negotiations, which were completed in December 2004 and approved by the EU-Ukraine Cooperation Council in February 2005. The

Council's decision was, however, complemented by a "Schedule of Additional Measures," which offered considerable concessions to Ukraine related to its domestic performance. For example, the future Enhanced Association Agreement and Free Trade Agreement depended on Ukraine's satisfactory compliance with the standards of the 2006 parliamentary elections and its accession to the WTO (European Commission, 2005).

The Action Plan was signed after the presidential elections scheduled for the fall of 2004. Unexpectedly, these elections sparked mass protests against electoral fraud committed in favor of Viktor Yanukovich at the expense of opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko. The resulting impasse was resolved through elite-level negotiations (involving high-ranking EU figures such as Javier Solana, Former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), culminating in a repeat of the second round of the presidential elections, won this time by Viktor Yushchenko. The election of the leader of the pro-European opposition demonstrated the extent to which Ukraine was guided by and committed to European values (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, pp. 41-42).

The newly installed president immediately demanded specific measures from the EU in response to the democratic changes in Ukraine, including the start of negotiations for an Association Agreement and giving Ukraine the prospect of membership. Within the EU, this request was supported by politicians in some EU member states, especially in Central-Eastern Europe, and supported by a resolution of the European Parliament. However, given the continued lack of consensus among its member states, the EU has faced a dilemma over recognizing and rewarding Ukraine for upholding democratic values while discouraging Ukrainian leaders from applying for membership. Therefore, the European Commission found a compromise, yielding to Ukraine's second preference: a "new consolidated agreement" was to be negotiated after the 2006 parliamentary elections in Ukraine, provided they were held in a free and fair manner. These negotiations began following the favorable evaluation of the 2006 parliamentary elections (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, pp. 41-42).

The period of Viktor Yushchenko's presidency (2005-2010) is symbolically associated with the institutionalization of the "European election" in Ukraine. In 2005, the post of Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration was created, coordinating EU integration at all levels. Subsequently, the Department for European Integration of the Secretariat of the Cabinet of

Ministers was established to provide for the negotiation and implementation of the roadmaps, supported by the responsible ministries. These institutions were essential for overseeing the effective implementation of the adopted Action Plan. In particular, three ministries – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economy, and the Ministry of Justice have become the "real engines" for the institutionalization of compliance and convergence with the EU acquis. By 2006, the MAE had aligned with 549 out of 589 positions on the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The Ministry of Economy, for its part, has set WTO accession as a priority and has constantly insisted on the implementation of sectoral reforms as part of the Action Plan (Korosteleva, 2012, pp. 85-86). However, changes in the government in 2006, which installed Viktor Yanukovich as prime minister and Mykola Azarov as his deputy, both staunch supporters of cooperation with Russia, hindered progress on democratic reforms and cooperation with the EU. Despite some positive beginnings, the Action Plan has been hampered by the country's bureaucratic inertia and political infighting. Thus, without a strong political leader in European affairs and an effective coordination and monitoring mechanism, progress in implementation has been limited. Of the 73 priorities of the approved Plan, only 11 were fully implemented, most were partially implemented and needed to be completed, while one priority was not implemented at all (Wolczuk, 2009, p. 207).

In March 2007, negotiations were launched for an Association Agreement to replace the old Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Furthermore, after Ukraine acceded to the WTO in May 2008, it included the prospect of establishing a Free Trade Agreement with the EU and further visa liberalization. However, the EU Progress Report, published in April 2008, indicated that progress had stagnated compared to previous years, particularly on economic and structural reforms, due to the political instability that characterized most of 2007 (European Commission, 2008, p. 2).

However, limited progress was enough for the EU. EU-Ukraine negotiations continued, including four rounds on the Association Agreement and three rounds on the Free Trade Agreement in 2008. In December 2008, negotiations were launched on a New Practical Instrument (NPI) to replace the Action Plan. Of course, the NPI was not entirely different from the old Action Plan. Ukraine did not successfully implement many parts of the Plan and, therefore, found itself in the NPI (Mayhew, 2009, pp. 10-12).

Domestic political crises and the escalation of gas disputes with Russia considerably accelerated the negotiations on the New Practical Instrument, launched in 2008, to help prepare Ukraine to facilitate the entry into force of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The new instrument was approved by the Cooperation Council in June 2009 and entered into force in November 2009. The EU-Ukraine Summit in Kyiv in December 2009 recognized Ukraine's European aspirations, commenting on the substantial progress made in EU-Ukraine relations over the past year in all areas of mutual interest. Also, within this summit, the leaders of the EU and Ukraine expressed their total commitment to the Eastern Partnership that was launched in May in Prague. The desire for the Eastern Partnership to contribute to political association and economic integration was also emphasized (European Council, 2009, pp. 4-6)

The launch of the Eastern Partnership had some indirect but essential consequences for Ukraine. First, while the ENP was a virtual, document-based policy implemented through the adoption of Action Plans and the development of country-specific progress reports, the EP was designed to raise the profile of relations with post-Soviet countries. One of the innovations was the introduction of biannual high-level EaP summits. Summits since 2009 have created pressure within the EU to show progress in its relations with its eastern partners. Even though the EP did not have more substantial incentives than the ENP and had very few differences from a financial point of view, it was designed to give the EU's Eastern policy greater political visibility (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, p. 45).

On February 7, 2010, Ukraine's second round of presidential elections was held. Viktor Yanukovich was elected president with 48.95% of the votes, 3.5% more than his opponent, Yulia Tymoshenko (Copsey and Shapovalova, 2010, p. 211). The election of Yanukovich brought a new era to Ukrainian politics, which raised several difficulties in the relationship with the EU. Although he made his first official visit to Brussels to bolster his European credentials, Yanukovich's genuine connections are far more complex. First, European integration was not a priority of the new government's domestic policy. Even though Prime Minister Azarov was responsible for European integration, the new government began to dissolve public institutions whose role was to facilitate European integration. First, the State Department for the Adaptation of Legislation within the Ministry of Justice, created during Kuchma's presidency in the early 2000s, has been reduced, thereby diminishing its ability to ensure compliance with Ukrainian

legislation with the *acquis* the European. Second, the Office for European Integration was transformed into a department of the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers with reduced powers. Third, regarding legislative power, Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada enacted laws regarding relations with the EU only if they coincided with the interests of the oligarchs, who gained increasing power during Yanukovich's presidency (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2016, p. 56).

Upon coming to power, the new president made sure, first of all, that relations between Ukraine and Russia were restored as a priority. In his first 100 days in office, he negotiated a deal with Russia to supply natural gas to Ukraine at a price that gave him a cut of about \$4 billion a year over ten years. Instead, he extended the lease of the port of Sevastopol to the Russian fleet for another 25 years (Radio Europa Liberă, 2010). Furthermore, he intensified the dialogue with the leadership of Russia and the CIS, which in two months saw a record number of meetings with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and other officials of the Russian Federation. Both countries discussed the prospects for closer cooperation, including Russian capital investment programs, the creation of a free trade area, and security cooperation. In addition, Ukrainian Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov expressed his willingness to consider the prospect of Ukraine joining the Eurasian Economic Union, which consists of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. As a result, Ukraine signed 15 of 19 documents proposed at the CIS Summit in St. Petersburg, and Ukraine's trade with Russia increased by 70%, while trade with the EU decreased by almost 12% during that period (Korosteleva, 2012, pp. 88-89). It is, therefore, not surprising that the EU soon began to doubt Ukraine's commitment to a European course. As Elmar Brok, a member of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, aptly put it: "Does Ukraine want to join our organization? I am not sure about that anymore, and we need to get assurances if that is the case" (Interfax-Ukraine, 2010).

A Progress Report followed in 2011 as well, according to which, by the end of 2010, only a few chapters had been provisionally closed, including those on institutional provisions, general and final provisions, and those on economic and sectoral cooperation aspects. Some progress was made in the negotiations on political dialogue and association in the field of foreign and security policy, and it was noted that further negotiations on the DCFTA are needed. However, the report reflected a general dissatisfaction with the progress of political reform, suggesting that greater commitment is needed from the Ukrainian state, particularly in

upholding democratic standards and freedoms. Once again, EU-Ukraine relations have reached an impasse, with Ukraine insisting on clear accession prospects stipulated in the new Association Agreement and on concrete steps toward a visa-free regime to be approved by the year 2011 (European Union External Action, 2011).

The Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius on November 28-29, 2013, was supposed to represent a turning point in EU relations with the six Eastern Partnership member states. Since the long-awaited Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU was to be signed, it will demonstrate to the other states the effectiveness of the EP and the consolidation of their efforts. Furthermore, the Association Agreements would bring the signatory countries of the Eastern Partnership closer to the EU through the application of EU norms and standards, including the adoption of the Community *acquis*, a significant step in the European integration process. However, on November 21, just one week before the Vilnius Summit, the Ukrainian government announced its decision to suspend preparations for signing the Association Agreement with the EU. In its statement, the Kyiv government said the decision was made for reasons of national security, as well as the need to improve declining trade with Russia and other CIS countries.

As the Vilnius Summit approached, pressure from Russia intensified significantly. In mid-August, Russia introduced an embargo on goods from Ukraine. As a result, a significant part of Ukrainian exports to Russia was blocked. In this way, Moscow sent a warning signal to Kyiv, indicating that the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU would significantly limit the access of Ukrainian products to the Russian market, which at that time represented a third of Ukraine's total exports. In the context of the upcoming presidential elections at the beginning of 2015, where victory was a priority for the ruling elite of Ukraine, the most important task of President Yanukovich was to stabilize the economic situation by ensuring the continuous access of Ukrainian goods to the Russian market, but also to obtain a financial loan, which would not be subject to strict conditions on loan management and democratic reforms, imposed by the International Monetary Fund, and obtaining lower gas prices.

The withdrawal of the Ukrainian government from signing the agreement with the EU sparked the largest public protests since 2004, known as EuroMaidan. In February 2014, after dozens of demonstrators were killed by security forces in Kyiv and parliament voted to impeach him, Yanukovich fled to Russia. The parliament established an interim government and a few

days later faced a crisis in the Crimean peninsula. Unidentified gunmen later confirmed to be Russian troops occupied key positions across the peninsula. In the following two weeks, pro-Russian paramilitary groups consolidated their hold on the peninsula and organized an independence referendum, which most international actors criticized. On March 18, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin formally annexed Crimea, creating the biggest rift between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. The following month, unidentified troops carrying Russian guns and devices seized government buildings in Ukraine's Donetsk and Lugansk regions, triggering an armed conflict against Ukraine's military. The self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk were formed in the spring of 2014 following these protests. Administrations and police stations in several localities have been occupied by Moscow-backed separatists, who have held disputed referendums to legitimize "self-rule" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022).

Kyiv tried to contain the insurgency. As a result, the Ukrainian military regained control of most areas by the summer of 2014. However, in August, it suffered a heavy defeat after being surrounded in the Battle of Ilovaisk, southeast of the city of Donetsk. Moscow denies that the Russian army was involved in this conflict. The Minsk agreements, negotiated in the Normandy format between the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France, in February 2015, established a cease-fire that has been periodically violated by both sides (Goncharenko, 2022).

In this context, Ukraine organized early presidential elections. On May 25, 2014, Petro Poroshenko, former Minister of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine, won the presidential election, beating his primary opponent, Yulia Tymoshenko, by about 40%. Shortly after winning the elections, on June 27, 2014, the EU signed Association Agreements with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, which, at the initiative of President Yanukovich, did not sign the agreement that was prepared for the EP Summit in Vilnius 2013. As a result, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement entered into force on September 1, 2017, after it was ratified by all EU member states, completing its negotiation process, which began back in March 2007 (European Commission, 2014).

The Association Agreement can be considered a new stage in the development of contractual relations between the EU and Ukraine, which aims to promote and implement political association and economic integration by strengthening political dialogue and

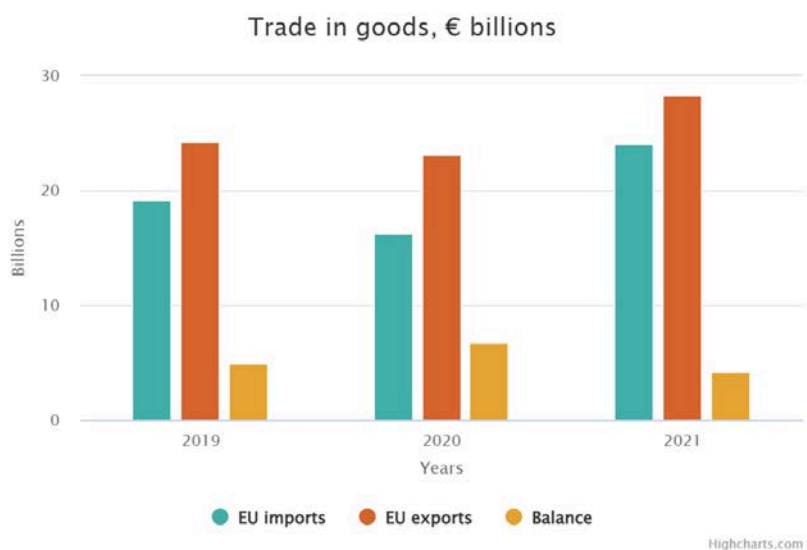
cooperation in key areas. The Association Agreement also aims at the gradual integration of Ukraine into the EU internal market through the establishment of the DCFTA. It also includes a reform agenda for harmonizing Ukrainian legislation with EU legislation. The signing of the Association Agreement was the point of no return for Ukraine's foreign policy. This development marked the definitive change in the country's geopolitical and economic orientation to the detriment of Russia's interests and pressures. Namely, this act offered Ukraine a clearer perspective of accession, a fact that was mentioned and desired by the Ukrainian leaders in all the negotiations with the EU leaders (Spiliopoulos, 2014, pp. 257-258).

The 2019 presidential election was won by Volodymyr Zelensky, representative of the Servant of the People party. On March 31, 2019, Zelenski won more than 30% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election, while Petro Poroshenko had 16%. In the second round, Zelensky was elected president of Ukraine with about 73% of the votes. The new president continued the development of the European vector and promoted cooperative relations with the EU. During the EP Summit, held on June 18, 2020, Volodymyr Zelensky reiterated the democratic values of Ukraine, emphasized the importance of the EP for bilateral cooperation, and expressed Ukraine's desire to become a full-fledged EU member state. This objective has become a priority during his presidency. Namely, starting with Zelenski's mandate, the results of the implementation of the DCFTA agreement began to become more visible. The EU is Ukraine's largest trading partner, accounting for 39.5% of its trade in 2021. Ukraine is the EU's 15th largest trading partner, accounting for approximately 1.2% of total EU trade. Total trade between the EU and Ukraine reached EUR 52.4 billion in 2021, which is double the figures of 2016, before the entry into force of the DCFTA agreement (European Commission, 2022).

Ukraine's exports to the EU amounted to EUR 24.1 billion in 2021, an increase of over 47% compared to 2020. Ukraine's main exports to the EU are iron and steel (20.8% of total exports), ores, animal and vegetable fats and oils (8.5%), especially sunflower oil (7.8%) and cereals (7.3%) (see Figure 2.1.) (European Commission, 2022).

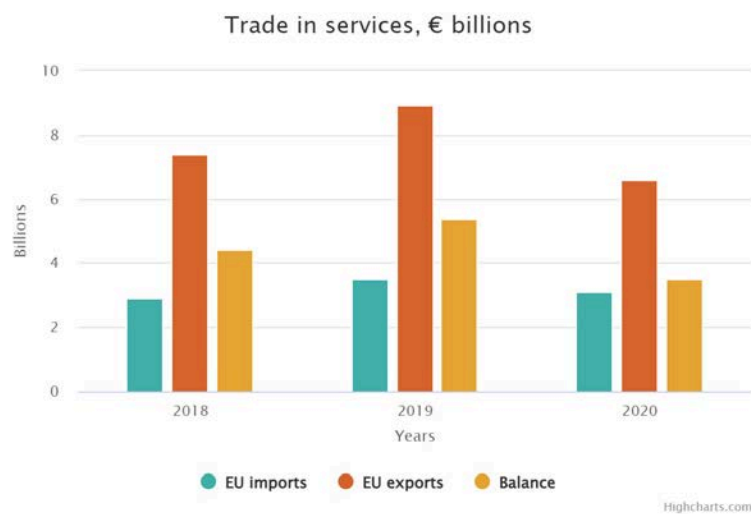
EU exports to Ukraine were around €28.3 billion in 2021, 22.4% more than in 2020. The main EU exports to Ukraine are machinery (14.8% of all exports), transport equipment and vehicles (10.2%), mineral fuels (9.4%), electrical machinery (9.3%), and pharmaceuticals (5.9%) (see Figure 2.2.) (European Commission, 2022).

Figure 2.1. Trade in goods between the EU and Ukraine



Source: European Commission. *EU trade relations with Ukraine. Facts, figures and latest developments*

Figure 2.2. Trade in services between the EU and Ukraine



Source: European Commission. *EU trade relations with Ukraine. Facts, figures and latest developments*

Although the described period was a productive one in EU-Ukraine relations, Ukraine's European path is blocked, for the most part, by the slow vector of the implementation of democratic reforms and laws. Ukraine's past attempts at reform and modernization have seen many failures. The change of government triggered by the EuroMaidan protests, the election of

Volodymyr Zelensky as president, and the consolidation of the European course can play an essential role in strengthening the relationship with the EU and carrying out reforms in key areas, so necessary for the eventual integration into the European bloc.

2. Ukraine's accession to the European Union and the future of the Eastern Partnership

The Association Agreement signed with the EU is the most important instrument for Ukraine's internal reforms. Thus, we consider only a few aspects of the Association Agreement and how its implementation may affect the future development of Ukraine. According to the reports of the European Commission, there is a determined implementation of the reforms, although there are challenges in certain areas. Mainly, Ukraine's success depends on reforming the public administration sector by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public services, customs regulation, tax system and policy, justice and the rule of law, fight against corruption, environment and climate change, digital and energy sector (PubAffairs, 2022).

As Ukraine aims to achieve democratic changes in many areas, in 2014, the European Agenda for Reform was created, jointly developed by the Ukrainian government, the European Commission, and the European External Action Service. This document contains a broad set of measures that reflect the priorities of the Ukrainian government and describes the support provided by the EU to facilitate this process (European Commission, 2014).

In the field of public administration, Ukraine has started a series of reforms, among which we can mention de-bureaucratization and decentralization. Progress on de-bureaucratization is slow, although public administration reform is central to the entire reform process, as the government's ability to implement the necessary democratic reforms will depend on the bureaucracy's ability to implement new policies. Over the past two decades, Ukraine has failed to reform its civil service, which is still built on the Soviet model, designed to follow the top-down order rather than develop quality policies. This phenomenon was caused by low wages and non-transparent recruitment, promotion, and firing rules. Thus, the bureaucratic system failed to attract talented and incorruptible civil servants (Chromiec and Koenig, 2015, p. 5).

This aspect was improved by adopting the law "on the state service," approved in December 2015. It introduced a merit-based approach to recruitment, promotion, and remuneration, as well as safeguards against discretionary dismissal of civil servants. At the same time, this included the much-needed separation between public and political functions (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2015). Another law aimed at improving the quality of public administration is the lustration law, adopted on September 16, 2014. The law prohibits high-level bureaucrats with ties to former President Yanukovich's regime, foreign intelligence services, former members of the Communist Party and Komsomol apparatus, and secret KGB employees from public service positions for up to ten years, except for persons elected to these positions directly by the citizens. Therefore, this lustration law targets the group of civil servants who can constitute a significant obstacle to the achievement of reforms. As a result, 2,000 civil servants, primarily mid-level, left their positions following the adoption of this law. However, the Parliament of Ukraine is working on certain amendments to the law to expand the scope of officials under this reform (Chromiec and Koenig, 2015, p. 6).

The decentralization process initiated by the government in Kyiv has made substantial progress but is subject to political difficulties. Through a series of constitutional amendments and accompanying laws, Ukrainian parliamentarians initiated substantial change and the transfer of political responsibilities from higher levels of government to lower ones, particularly from regions to "amalgamated territorial communities" with increased autonomy created following the merger of small municipalities. Under the principle of subsidiarity, lower-level units have a stronger voice in areas such as education, health, infrastructure, and local development. Following the example of the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, the new communities are to receive 60% of the income tax collected to fulfill the tasks and obligations that will fall to them following decentralization to avoid duplication of public services (Romanova and Umland, 2019, p. 4). The process of decentralization and the initiation of related legislation started in 2014 and is expected to be fully adopted in 2022 (European Committee of the Regions, 2021).

The issue blocking the implementation of decentralization reform is the status of the territories in eastern Ukraine currently controlled by pro-Russian separatists, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. According to paragraph 11 of the Minsk II agreement, the Ukrainian authorities were obliged to adopt permanent legislation on

the special status of these territories by the end of 2015 (Niland, 2016). However, this did not happen, as such a law would formalize these territories as autonomous from the Kyiv government, which Ukrainian leaders do not desire. Even the wording included in the Minsk agreement is ambiguous, and it is not clear whether this "special status" will fall under the policy of decentralization, whereby these territories will be granted some autonomy. However, control over core policy areas will remain the prerogative of the government in Kyiv, or will it mean the beginning of a federalization process, whereby these two separatist regions will be granted ample autonomy and a legislatively confirmed handover of control over the territories (Chromiec and Koenig, 2015, pp. 6-7).

In the field of customs regulation, Ukraine must develop joint initiatives on import, export, and transit operations, cooperate on the automation of customs and other trade procedures, and exchange information to develop common positions within relevant international organizations. The gradual approximation to EU customs legislation, as defined by EU and international standards, will promote transparency and simplification of customs procedures and reduce the length of customs procedures (Poshedin and Chulaievska, 2017, p. 102). In this sense, on August 1, 2016, the first step was taken by introducing the "Single Window" system. This system aims to create a single electronic database, allowing all control authorities and customs offices to automatically exchange information about consignments crossing the border with Ukraine and the results of their inspection. The new system reduces costs for the business environment, as all companies can initiate customs control before the goods arrive at the respective customs office. Also, this is a step toward reducing corruption in this field, with all communications with the authorities involved being carried out electronically. At the same time, the "Single Window" system ensures the efficient distribution of resources since cargo shipments are examined simultaneously by all control authorities (Government Portal, 2016).

The fiscal system and policy also need to undergo significant reforms. Ukraine is committed to applying the principles of good governance in the tax field, particularly transparency, information exchange, and fair tax competition. The signed Association Agreement provides cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the fight against tax fraud in both the private and public sectors. Since the single market of the European Union provides for

the free movement of people, goods, and capital, and with the implementation of the DCFTA agreement, trade between the EU and Ukraine has increased considerably, solving the problem of tax fraud is a priority for the Ukrainian government. Ukraine has introduced international regulatory and supervisory standards to combat tax evasion and improve cooperation with the EU in the fight against the smuggling of excise goods (Poshedin and Chulaievska, 2017, p. 102). In recent years, the total number of taxes has been reduced from 22 to 11, and a major tax reform currently being debated proposes a single tax rate of 20% for wages, VAT, and personal and corporate income, thus significantly simplifying paying taxes and minimizing the possibilities of conflict with the tax authorities regarding their interpretation (Chromiec and Koenig, 2015, p. 5).

Ukraine's flawed judicial system is one area where the country has seen a lack of progress in reforming it. Two bodies govern the Ukrainian justice. The High Council of Justice is the main body in the judicial governance system of Ukraine. It has complete control over the appointment and dismissal of Ukrainian judges. Key responsibilities also include protecting judges from unlawful interference by other agencies and holding judges accountable for professional misconduct, including allowing the prosecution of judges. The High Qualification Commission of Judges is Ukraine's second body of justice. It is responsible for the selection of future judges and checks current judges who do not meet the criteria of professionalism and integrity during recertification processes. Unfortunately, both bodies were for a long time under the influence of interest groups existing within the judicial system, often subordinated to the Ukrainian oligarchs. As a result, both institutions have often been accused of covering for corrupt judges and blocking all previous attempts to overhaul Ukraine's judiciary.

The lack of progress in this area has demonstrated that it is impossible to reform the judicial system without changing the approach regarding the composition of these institutions. The idea of a new approach has been supported by government reformers, civil society experts, and Ukraine's international partners. Even the current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, during his campaign for the 2019 presidential election, promised to initiate a comprehensive reform of the judicial system. Accordingly, in June 2021, parliamentarians of the Supreme Rada adopted two laws aimed at establishing a credible basis for reforming the judicial system. Mainly, these laws provide for the participation of independent international

experts in the future selection process. The approach goes beyond the European recommendations regarding justice reform, and the Venice Commission positively evaluated the assumed commitment (Halushka and Shevchuk, 2021).

The deoligarchization of the state was another campaign promise of President Zelenskiy, who aimed to identify and prosecute corrupt officials. Since he came into office and his party won an absolute majority in parliament, some progress has been made in this area by reinstating the law on illicit enrichment. However, in most cases of illicit enrichment, the connection of the officials involved with various Ukrainian oligarchs is demonstrated. Thus, the fight against corruption began explicitly with the adoption of legislation aimed at reducing the influence of these oligarchs. Historically, Ukrainian oligarchs have embezzled funds through several methods: they manipulated public procurement and subsidies, particularly in the energy market, pursued enterprise privatization and large-scale tax evasion, and obtained illegal profits from the state. It is estimated that fraudulent public procurement alone brought annual losses of around 11 billion euros to the public budget. Thus, in order to intensify the fight against corruption, two agencies were created: the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, responsible for verifying the wealth declarations of parliamentarians, mayors, police officers, judges, and prosecutors and for identifying conflicts of interest in the public service, and the National Office Anticorruption conducts preliminary investigations and initiates criminal cases against high-ranking officials whose incomes do not match their expenses (Chromiec and Koenig, 2015, pp. 7-8).

Another essential aspect of the process of democratic change in Ukraine is the concern for the environment and climate change. The Association Agreement with the European Union pays considerable attention to environmental issues. This partnership enables Ukraine to improve its environmental standards in areas such as air quality, water quality, waste and resource management, and industrial pollution. However, it should be noted that there are no transparent and clear procedures for the environmental assessment of any economic activity in Ukraine, an extremely challenging chapter for the Kyiv government. Thus, it is necessary to approve a law on environmental impact assessment by introducing a European model for establishing an environmental impact assessment procedure. To meet these challenges, Ukraine

is working to stabilize and improve the environment by integrating environmental policies into economic and social development (DAI, 2022).

One of Ukraine's successful reforms has been in the digital sector. In this regard, a new branch of the government was established, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, which aims to create a "smartphone state." In 2018, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the strategy for developing the Digital Economy and Society for 2018-2020. Thus, the principles of Ukraine's development in the digital space at the state level and the development of the digital economy were identified. According to them, any member of society has the right to access digital technologies, and they should become a tool for achieving the development goals of various sectors of the national economy. At the same time, the Ukrainian government saw this reform as an opportunity to attract additional investments and integrate Ukraine into the European and global communications system. This strategy has also led to the strengthening of cyber security measures at the state level, which until this point, has been extremely poorly developed (Yanovska, Levchenko, Tvoronovych, and Bozhok, 2019, p. 3). For example, one of the largest energy companies in Ukraine was the target of hacker attacks that caused power outages for two million people. Thus, in 2020, the mobile e-government application, Diva was launched, which allowed all interaction between Ukrainian citizens and their government to be managed online. Thus, this step towards digitization not only simplified the provision of public services but was also another measure in the fight against corruption. According to the Minister of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, preparing this reform involved studying the experiences of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Great Britain, and Singapore. The digitization reform is to have an impact on the "traditional" sectors of the Ukrainian economic system and facilitate a critical change in the behavior of citizens and businesses. In this sense, Ukraine's ambitious digitization reform still has enormous potential (Ukraine World, 2021).

Energy is one of the strategic sectors of the Ukrainian economy whose safe, stable, and sustainable operation and development are vital for most aspects of social life and public welfare. The energy sector of Ukraine is crucial for the EU because Ukraine is a key actor in the energy security process of the entire European continent. Ukraine's energy security has become paramount with the onset of Russia's hybrid aggression. The government in Kyiv has been forced to adopt a new approach to energy security under the pressure of economic aggression,

ongoing blackmail from Russian state corporations, and the threat of cutting off energy supplies, natural gas, and petroleum products from Russia. In this context, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the Energy Strategy of Ukraine 2035. The energy reform aims to align national legislation with EU legislation, norms, and standards, as stipulated in the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. The given reform includes the introduction of efficient rules and mechanisms for the energy market, de-monopolization, and promotion of competition. Also, the mentioned strategy follows the introduction of competitive conditions to stimulate the production of energy from renewable sources, the reform of the coal industry in Ukraine, and the introduction of an integrated approach to the establishment of energy and environmental policies. In addition to this long-term Plan, in March 2022, Ukraine will be connected to the European electricity grid. This process came as Ukraine's electricity grid operator disconnected its electricity system from the Russian-operated grid to which it had always been connected on February 24. This disconnection was planned and was to be a 72-hour trial to demonstrate that Ukraine could function independently. This test was one of the requirements for further connection to the European network, which Ukraine has been working on since 2017. However, the armed attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which began on the night of February 24, prompted the electricity transmission system operator, Ukrenergo, to send a letter to the European Network of Electricity Transmission System Operators, requesting authorization for the connection to the European network, which, according to the plans, was supposed to take place in 2023. Ukraine initiated the process of joining the European network as early as 2005 in order to reduce its dependence on Russia, which, over time, has proven to be an unreliable partner. Thus, on March 16, 2022, the two systems were synchronized following a process that was compared by the European Commissioner for Energy, Kadri Simson, to "a year's work in two weeks" (Blaustein, 2022).

Since 2014, Ukraine has taken significant steps towards modernization and democratization. In this process, the EU is a crucial economic and political supporter. EU support for reforms in Ukraine consists of various types of financial aid, without which the correct implementation of the Association Agreement would be impossible. Since 2014, the EU and the European financial institutions have mobilized an unprecedented support package of over €16.5 billion in grants and loans to support reforms in Ukraine. EU assistance to Ukraine

is carried out in various programs, advisory missions, projects, and sectoral and direct budget support (European Commission, 2020).

However, a whole series of obstacles and risks remain in Ukraine's democratic path. These include domestic factors such as bureaucratic resistance, corruption, or oligarchic influence, as well as the costs and uncertainties of destabilization in eastern Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

2.1. The integration of Ukraine amid the crisis

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched against Ukraine, a war not seen on the European continent for about 80 years. The trauma of World War II transformed Western Europe into a community dominated by "a state of eternal peace." The European Union was the nucleus that enabled this dream to become a reality, elaborating a broad set of political values based on peace, democracy, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. This reality gradually spread in Central and Eastern Europe, except for Russia and Belarus, which followed a different course of the totalitarian state, which the EU or other global actors did not challenge in any way which could be perceived as a threat to Russia's security. EU member states, which have so far opposed the extension of the accession prospect for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, invoked the strategic realist argument that they did not want to provoke Russia into undermining the peace of Europe. As time has shown, this reasoning has proven to be flawed, considering Russia's successive invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 on a much larger scale.

On the contrary, it seems that this argument is what helped start the war. The failed policy of strategic ambiguity towards the three most active states of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, must be changed with a policy of concrete actions. Granting candidate status to these states would be a strong political signal to support these states and start the complex accession procedures (Emerson, Blockmans, Movchan, and Remizov, 2022, pp. 1-2). In an extraordinary session of the European Parliament on March 1, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made a direct request to MEPs and EU leaders. Speaking from a bunker in Kyiv, as Russian missiles bombarded Ukraine, he asked the EU for a path to EU membership. The day before, Ukraine submitted its formal application for EU membership and

requested that it be considered under a special procedure due to its submitted context (Europa Liberă România, 2022). Despite this rhetoric about a potential 'special' or 'fast track' procedure, no such procedure exists under the EU Treaties. Like the other candidate countries, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia must go through all the stages of the accession procedure provided for in Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union. This article states that any "European state" that respects the democratic values and principles on which the Union is built can apply for EU membership. This official step triggers a long preparatory process in which member states must approve each step unanimously (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012).

The results of the 2020-2021 Eastern Partnership Index, a monitoring tool produced by the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership, show that Ukraine has made significant progress in normative and legal harmonization. Even if there are still gaps between the law and the implementation of the rules, especially when it comes to fighting corruption and ensuring the independence of the justice system, the democratic progress achieved so far is a testament to the far-reaching effects of the Eastern Partnership framework and the implementation of the Agreement of Association with Ukraine since 2014 (Longhurst, 2021, pp. 4-7). Through financial and administrative support, the Eastern Partnership policy has effectively helped guide the democratic progress of Ukraine and other partner states, and its results so far demonstrate the potential for democratic development that EU candidate status can bring.

The granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia must be done in line with the existing framework of the Eastern Partnership. The EU should be careful not to abandon this policy and its associated toolkit, which has delivered results and supported democratic development in its vicinity. Maintaining the policy of the Eastern Partnership alongside the candidate status opens up a series of opportunities both for the EU and for the region that falls under the purview of the Eastern Partnership. So far, the Eastern Partnership, especially in its multilateral dimension, has functioned as a framework for addressing important priorities such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and structural reforms. Coherence in the Eastern Partnership region will be essential to address the common challenges the region faces and will continue to face, such as corruption, the rule of law, connectivity, and climate change.

In times of tense relations between neighbors, the framework of the multilateral Eastern Partnership continues to offer a mediated space for continuous dialogue between politicians,

public administration, civil society, and other actors, increasing the chances of conciliation and negotiation. Furthermore, after the war in Ukraine, the instruments and regional structures of the Eastern Partnership will be essential in addressing environmental damage and cross-border issues, which Ukraine will have to address in cooperation with the Republic of Moldova (Furtuna, 2022).

The results of the Eastern Partnership index show a growing gap between Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova on one hand, and Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia on the other. This gap is a testament to a lack of democratic development and a clear perspective, which makes countries more vulnerable to subjugation and exploitation by domestic and foreign autocrats (Longhurst, 2021, p. 5).

Investing in the democratic development of some countries at the expense of others is neither a functional approach to security nor a correct application of European values. Ensuring the continuity of the Eastern Partnership policy would send an important message to stakeholders in Armenia and democratic actors in Belarus and Azerbaijan regarding the opportunity that exists for these states. Indeed, the Eastern Partnership requires an adaptation according to the current developments and context. Nevertheless, maintaining a robust regional framework will be essential to ensure the overall development and resilience of the region. Weakening it would be a strategic mistake, significantly undermining the EU's regional influence (Furtuna, 2022).

Conclusions

The article followed the description and analysis of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, one of the instruments for the implementation of this policy by the EU. We have identified the objectives of this program, among which are: the gradual integration into the EU economy of the partner states and the convergence with its policies, the simplification of the entry conditions into the EU, cooperation in the field of energy security, integrated border management, regional development, and others. Thus, I managed to find whether the EP created a genuine platform for strengthening relations between the EU and the partner states and what the difficulties were recorded during the implementation of this program. Indeed, the EP can be described as a successful project, given that a large part of the previously

proposed and described objectives have been achieved. However, this success can be characterized as relative. In this regard was achieved only by 3 of the six partner states achieved significant progress: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia. According to the Eastern Partnership Index, on a scale from 0 to 1, Ukraine and Moldova are leaders in the areas of cooperation targeted by the EaP, each with a score of 0.70, followed by Georgia with 0.65. Armenia and Azerbaijan scored 0.63 and 0.44, respectively (Longhurst, 2021, p. 14). Moreover, a fundamental failure of the EP can be considered that Belarus suspended its participation in this program in June 2021. Namely, the weak progress of Armenia and Azerbaijan and the self-exclusion of Belarus indicate to us that the progress of the EaP is a relative one, manifested only in the case of the other three partners states.

By analyzing the relations between the EU and Ukraine starting from 1991 until now, we have concluded that there have been several stages in these relations. The period 1991-2010 is characterized by a rapprochement of Ukraine with the EU, in which there is a consensus, both at the political and societal level, regarding the need to carry out democratic reforms and obtain the status of a candidate for EU accession. The period of 2010-2014 was marked by the total change of the vector of the Ukrainian state. President Yanukovich and the political elite opted for a rapprochement with Russia and the abandonment of the progress achieved in the relationship with the EU. Thus, the signing of the Association Agreement at the PDE Summit in Vilnius in 2013 was refused, which led to civil society dissatisfaction and the organization of protests against the leadership, known as EuroMaidan. Thus, President Yanukovich was dismissed, and the new political leadership continued the path of European integration and the implementation of democratic reforms. The significant progress made by Ukraine in harmonizing its legislation with European standards, but also the context of the crisis in which this state is currently, led to the submission of the application for EU membership in February 2022. There is some divergence within the EU regarding the granting of candidate status to Ukraine. Granting this status will mean a message of strong political support for Ukraine. By obtaining this status and starting the negotiation process with the EU, Ukraine can continue with new and additional forces in its process of achieving democratic reforms in order to join the EU once all the criteria are met. What is certain is that there will be no "special" or "fast" procedure for this process and that Ukraine will have a long way to go to the status of a member state of

the EU. The European Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, announced that it recommends the European Council grant candidate state status to Ukraine. The final word on this possibility was given at the European Council meeting on 23-24 June 2022, when the European leaders decided to grant this status to Ukraine and Moldova.

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