

## **Ukraine as a Battleground for the Future of Europe**

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Ukraine may become either a major success or the main challenge for the Eastern Partnership project launched by the European Union seven years ago.

On the one hand, the EU-Ukraine Association and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) Agreement signed in 2014 became the most indicative victory of the EU's soft power proving the attractiveness of the European values. Against strong Moscow pressure and threats, the largest Eastern Partnership (EaP) nation made the choice in favour of the European future and proved its readiness to defend this choice resisting the military aggression of much stronger power. Despite the Russia-imposed military conflict and still remaining internal problems mainly related to the corruption, Ukraine implements the provisions of the Association Agreement (AA) and DCFTA, though not as quickly and successfully as one would prefer.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian case has revealed all the shortcomings of the present EU's Eastern Partnership policy, including the lack of strategy and appropriate instruments. Without proposing such strong motivator as membership perspective, without sufficient financial support and strategy of reacting to Russia's aggressive interference in the EaP countries' internal affairs, the EU was close to fail in its EaP policy, when in 2013 Moscow imposed on Kyiv the decision to abandon the Association Agreement.

If the Euromaidan did not rise and win, then, just in a few years, Ukraine would become "the second Belarus", and Moscow would more easily find arguments for other EaP countries, such as Moldova, to curtail its cooperation with the EU. The majority of the EaP countries would lose the prospects for democratisation, and the EU would get the reincarnation of the USSR on its Eastern borders.

The challenge of possible EaP fiasco is still vital. If Ukraine fails to implement reforms, it would be a warning signal for others EaP nations, discrediting the whole EaP project. The prospects for reforms in Ukraine have their internal and external dimensions. Without strong political backing from the EU (both through the EaP tools and generally through the principle supportive political steps conducted on the highest institutional level of the EU) even efficient domestic efforts could not have the needed effect.

The nature and scope of the challenges that Ukraine is facing are incomparable to those of the challenges confronting the Central European countries after the fall of their communist regimes and amid the transformation process at the end of the 1980s. Ukraine today is exposed to diverse threats – from overall political destabilization due to persistent separatist activities, to the ever-present possibility of an overt military invasion by Russia, to the occupation of a large part of Ukrainian territory, to de facto (or even formal, in some circumstances) loss of national sovereignty. No Central European country that embarked on a societal transformation after 1989 was faced with such overwhelming challenges.

It is therefore of utmost importance that in conditions of continuing struggle for the survival of the nation state, Ukraine successfully conducted democratic presidential and parliamentary elections, and ratified the Association Agreement with the EU. The norms and values on which the EU is built were also the main driving force and dominant motivation for Ukrainian civil society, when it demanded a pro-European choice – both in internal reforms as well as in foreign policy.

In coping with difficult challenges, Ukraine will have to use its own internal potential. It will have to employ various solutions to maximize the efficiency of its political, economic and civil capacities. Obviously, strong Western support for Ukraine's survival and development as an independent, united, democratic and stable country can play an important role in the success of the whole reform process.

**On the backdrop of the current security developments, Ukraine has become a key country in the security architecture of modern Europe**

Ukrainian success story in implementing reforms could be seen in Europe as the most convincing answer to counter the Russia's aggressive policy. Duly reformed and successful Ukraine would definitely mean the domination of the EU soft power security approach. Ukraine might become a successful alternative to Russian authoritarian and corrupted model of development for the post-Soviet countries.

And vice versa, the defeat of Ukraine in current hybrid confrontation would lead not only to loss of reputation of the EU, but also could increase the threat of growing instability on the eastern expanses of the European continent.

Under a new security environment triggered by the Russia-Ukraine crisis, there is an obvious need to broaden current partnership's agenda for covering security issues.

Article 7 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement envisages the intensification of the dialogue and cooperation, and promoting gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), to address in particular issues of conflict prevention and crisis management. Ukraine has already received initial experience of practical involvement in joint civil and military operations under the EU auspices within the framework of the CSDP.

Although if to compare the EU activity on handling the Russia-Ukraine crisis with the previous European policy towards resolving conflicts in the post-Soviet space, for instance, in the South Caucasus, a number of positive changes should be noted, including more resolute use of economic and political leverages to influence the aggressor state.

Economic and political sanctions against Russia remain vital EU instruments for curbing further aggressive actions of the Kremlin. With that, the EU policy on conflict resolution still remains to a great extent reactive-driven by events rather than by long-term strategy to create stable and secure environment in the EU neighbourhood. Moreover, unity of the EU in the issue of sanctions against Russia can be potentially endangered by activities of different EU insiders – from influential business groups complaining that these sanctions are worsening their positions on the markets to prominent politicians, including some governmental ones (for example in Slovakia, Hungary or in Czech Republic). Although none of such politicians used so far the opportunity to raise the question of possible cancellation of sanctions on the EU summits, they are presenting their dissenting views in different occasions in more and more vocal manner that can influences the whole atmosphere related to the issue.

The lack of the strong common security policy towards the Eastern Partnership and neighbouring countries leads to the situation, when the EU as an institution is actually absent at peace talks on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Instead, the EU is de-facto represented in peace process by Germany and France being parties to the “Normandy” format negotiations. This situation can hardly be considered optimal in view of the EU unity, given the fact that Germany and France are exactly those countries, where economic sanctions against Russia are on the top of domestic political speculations. Not to mention the fact that the “Normandy” format excludes from the peace process those countries that border Ukraine and are the driving forces of the Eastern Partnership.

### **Ukraine should learn to use effectively current instruments provided by the EaP and speed up the reforms**

Along with the Russian aggression, the biggest challenges facing Ukraine are deep-rooted corruption, weak governance, and fragile political system dominated by big business interests. Ukraine's further progress at home and relations with major EU partners will largely depend on the ability to overcome these systematic difficulties on its hard way from an elite-driven to a society-oriented country. Despite of permanent political turbulences, there is an urgent need for Ukrainian authorities to proceed further with reforms necessary to restore the confidence of the Ukrainian population and the international community.

For the seven years of the EaP functioning, Ukraine has neither elaborated a clear strategy for participation in the project using proposed benefits, nor has worked out the mutually beneficial initiatives for cooperation with the EU. The normative nature of the EaP offers ample opportunities, providing that the main goal (the approaching of partner states to the EU) is achieved through the tools of the Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, and visa-free regimes. Their successful implementation opens direct way to bring the membership perspective closer. Therefore, Ukraine should focus on full usage of the above EaP potential as the most efficient available tool for approaching membership.

In order to correspond to the realities on the ground, the Ukraine's European integration strategy should incorporate modern vision of the horizons between rooted in the past moribund provisions and new happenings featuring current situation in Europe. It should be understood that the future of the European Union would be closely identified with the formation of a multi-tiered integration system. Therefore, associated status proposed by the EU and Ukrainian participation in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area along with visa-free regime will definitely correspond to the practical integration of Ukraine into all functional systems of the EU. Hence, Ukraine should utilize this opportunity in a rather efficient and rational way to be a stepping-stone for getting access to the next level of the Euro-integration course.

The combination of joint efforts of the EU officials and Ukrainian civil society would be regarded as the best approach and a main prerequisite facilitating reforms' implementation that has already proved its effectiveness.

### **The EU should increase the motivation and officially admit Ukraine's membership perspective**

The root of misunderstanding in the EU-Ukraine relations always was the inconsistency of ultimate goal for such cooperation. For a long time the "old" Europe was ready to propose only partnership, while Ukraine always considered full membership as the ultimate goal of its relations with the EU.

When the Eastern Partnership was launched within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), it was perceived in Kyiv without enthusiasm being considered as an alternative substitution to the membership. The issue of membership prospects was also a stumbling point at the negotiations on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in 2009-2011. Even after the Association Agreement was initialled in 2012 and then signed in 2014, Kyiv continued to push the issue of membership perspective at the negotiations with the EU and during the EaP summits.

In its resolution of 27 February 2014, the European Parliament stressed that "Article 49 TEU refers to all European States, including Ukraine, which may apply to become a Member of the Union, provided that it adheres to the principles of democracy, respects fundamental freedoms and human and minority rights, and ensures the rule of law".

Although the Eastern Partnership has never been offered as a tool for integration, it should not be an alternative to this purpose. Tremendous amount of reforms being necessary for fulfilling the Association and DCFTA Agreements are comparable to the requirements previously put forward to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a main prerequisite for getting the EU membership.

Taking into account the enormous price being paid by the Ukrainian people for their right to choose European future as well as formal absence of legal obstacles for this aim to be proclaimed, it would be advisable to officially admit Ukraine's right for the membership perspective as provided in Article 49 of the EU Treaty. This may have a strong motivation effect for Ukraine to speed up the reforms and will deprive the Kremlin's propaganda of possibility to speculate on the matter.

Offer of EU membership perspective to Ukraine can form the mode of conditionality comparable with conditionality that was functional in Central European countries before and during the accession process.

### **More EU's involvement is needed**

Pro-European course of Ukraine is becoming more popular among population of the country. According to sociological survey conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs (Warsaw) and Bertelsmann Foundation in 2015, 51% of the Ukrainians support the idea of joining the EU (versus 17% supporting the idea of membership in the Euro-Asian Custom Union led by Russia and 31% of those who do not have clear opinion). Substantial part of the population welcomes the more robust participation of the EU in internal development of the country. Opinion polls held by GfK Ukraine in 2015 indicated the main thing that Ukrainian citizens expected from the EU was not the financial assistance, but more active involvement in Ukrainian affairs, including pressure on the authorities on the issue of implementing reforms and more engagement with European advisers.

Thus, the EU should not hesitate to take more active part in helping Kyiv to conduct reforms that should not be considered as only internal issue for Ukraine, since Kyiv took a number of concrete obligations after signing the Association and DCFTA Agreement. This would act in favour of more systemic approach in general support of the EU for Ukraine's reform process, including technical assistance, macro-financial help, unilateral trade measures, development aid, humanitarian assistance, budget support and investments. In fact, the EU being a leading supporter of Ukrainian political and socio-economic reforms with deep involvement into the process can require from Ukrainian authorities the consequent implementation of reform's strategies, using the existing assessment and verification mechanisms.

### **Main areas for strengthening the EU-Ukraine cooperation**

The following main areas could be identified for strengthening the EU-Ukraine cooperation in line with on-going discussions on the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy as well as its revised ENP components, namely:

- Modernizing all existing formats of the EU-Ukraine cooperation into functional instruments for practical support in executing reforms on the ground;
- Elaborating mechanisms for closer coordination between the involved EU member states in allocation of the support areas to avoid overlapping;
- Increasing cooperation with civil society and people-to-people initiatives;
- Active support in fighting corruptions, promoting rule of law and establishing transparent governance;

- Supporting reforms, economic development and job creation; improving investment climate;
- Coordination on elaborating effective energy policies, including promoting further diversification, increasing energy efficiency and using alternative energy sources;
- Providing expertise and more efficient support in security sector reform/development process oriented on a wider concept of human security;
- Active involvement of Ukraine into the mechanisms of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, as well as maximizing the potential of bilateral and multilateral military-technical cooperation, including with the European Defence Agency;
- Strengthening the EU formal participation and presence in all formats of negotiations and peace talks on settlement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

EU assistance can substantially help Ukraine to tackle with the most pressing internal challenges, including de-bureaucratization, de-monopolization and deregulation of economy, de-oligarchization of politics and society.

It should be kept in mind that any actions leaving aside interests and potential of civil society would have no chance for success. Only a tandem combining the EU support and determination of the Ukrainian non-governmental initiatives, civil society organizations, think tanks, watchdogs, advocacy groups, independent media and public intellectuals could introduce major changes in the country on its transition to citizen-oriented democratic model.

### **Making the EaP a success as the Visegrad 4's European mission**

The Visegrad countries are the most valuable examples for Ukraine to modernise its society and economy, and to succeed with European integration. Ukrainians are closely connected to the V4 countries both historically and culturally. Transformation experience of the Slovaks, the Czechs and the Poles are often used in Ukraine as an example of successful stories of Slavic nations, crashing the Russian propaganda cliché as though democracy and liberal economy do not match to the Slavic nature.

For more than a decade, the V4 countries have constituted an integral part of a united European and transatlantic community. These states have always manifested the inclusive attitude of an “open door” to the aspirations of countries in Eastern Europe, particularly those participating in the EaP. Ukraine is the largest country in the EaP and one that has immediate borders with the Visegrad region. It has developed remarkable economic, political and cultural relations with the V4 states. Ukraine’s democratic political elite and civil society actors have

made clear their hopes for support and concrete assistance from the Central European democracies.

Having common borders and large ethnical groups within Ukraine, the V4 countries are primarily interested in Ukraine's successful transformation and integration with the European Union and NATO.

Helping Ukraine as well as Belarus and Moldova is considered as a kind of historical mission of the Visegrad countries and their substantial contribution to the common European goal of creating sustainable and prosperous environment. In previous decades, the "old" Europe assisted the Visegrad countries in their "return to Europe", and now it's high time for the V4 to help their neighbours in democratic transition.

V4 as a functional format of regional cooperation developed a special model for cooperation with other countries – "V4Plus". It can be more actively employed in relations with the EaP countries, especially with Ukraine. In their interactions with the EaP states, the Visegrad countries are acting as both members of broader European community and members of specific format of the regional cooperation. In this position, the V4 countries can initiate and lead the coalition of like-minded EU member states in elaborating the vision of deeper engagement with the EaP countries, including Ukraine. It is especially needed in today's situation, when the perspectives of reaching the full-fledged EU membership as a consequence of successful performance in the EaP are not enough clearly emphasized or even omitted.

*The main areas in which the V4 countries can assist Ukraine are the following:*

- Promoting further development of civil society as the most committed reform player through deepening cooperation at the level of the NGOs, civic initiatives, think tanks, advocacy groups, independent experts and intellectuals;
- Promoting active public control over the government at all levels;
- Assistance in elaboration of reform programs and advisory support in their implementation;
- Close cooperation in energy sector, including elaboration of common position within the European energy strategy and creation of regional energy hub;
- Cultural and media cooperation; joint efforts in countering Russian propaganda.



## **Slovakia's contribution**

Due to close historical and mental relations, Slovakia has taken a very ambitious position on Ukraine's transformation. This is highly appreciated by the Ukrainian people and should be considered as a strong contributing factor for further strengthening successful cooperation between both countries.

Slovakia enthusiastically supported the launch of EaP in 2009, from the beginning Slovakia has included it into its main foreign policy priorities, stressing that EaP can be good preparation for unification of Europe, therefore gradual reaching the status of full-fledged members by the applicant countries.

During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, when Moscow developed harsh pressure on Kyiv in the issue of energy supply, Slovakia has become the key EU partners of Ukraine in maintaining reverse procurement of natural gas, thus supporting Kyiv's path to energy independence. Hence, the winter of 2015/16 may become the first one when Ukraine did not buy any gas from Gazprom, and succeeded in completely meeting its needs from Western imports and own extraction.

Nevertheless, further bilateral and multilateral measures should be taken to achieve a sustainable effect, including the development of infrastructural connections and launching additional supplies. There is also an urgent need for implementing respective EU rules to establish effective cooperation between Ukrainian, Slovak and other European gas pipelines operators.

Despite the ongoing EU crisis, the economic recovery in Slovakia is under way now. National GDP is growing at quite satisfactory pace, and foreign investments began to arrive in the country. All these facts could be considered as a good example for Ukraine to follow.

Security sector reform is broadly declared to be among strategic priorities shaping Slovak's foreign policy towards Ukraine within the framework of the Visegrad Group. Based on the available experience of building defence system corresponding to NATO standards, emphasis is given to practical assistance in Ukraine's security sector reform and development process both on governmental and non-governmental levels.

Nevertheless, there have been some conceptual distinctions in realizing security sector reform in Ukraine and V4 countries to be taken into account. On the backdrop of current enemy-centric environment, a new so-called breakthrough strategy in security sector reform is

implemented in Ukraine to differ from the peacetime gradual strategy of the Visegrad Group that was initially oriented on step-by-step developments started back in 1990th. Having in mind successful Slovak experience in security sector democratic transformation, main focus should be on the broader context of establishing interaction between all the elements of Ukrainian security sector and civil society promoting comprehensive human security agenda in line with a “whole-of-government” approach.

Slovakia’s priorities in relationship with Ukraine in light of the upcoming Slovak 2016 Presidency of the Council of the European Union, as well as on-going review of the EU Global Strategy, European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, could therefore include: energy security and security sector reform; border management issues; good governance and democratization; public administration reform; sectoral socio-economic reforms and humanitarian aid.

To implement the above priorities, the following tasks should be proposed to be accomplished on the ground, namely:

1. Strengthening energy security and efficiency, stimulating energy savings, and setting the state’s priorities for energy policy, including in the field of diversification.  
Holders of the expertise: responsible governmental officials, independent experts, representatives of think tanks, academia and private sector engaged in the topic.
2. Implementing comprehensive human security concept in national security and defense sector reform/development process according to NATO standards.  
Holders of the expertise: civil society activists, volunteers, representatives of think tanks and academia, responsible governmental officials.
3. Promoting good governance and combating corruption, especially in public procurement, health and energy sectors.  
Holders of the expertise: responsible governmental officials from the anti-corruption bodies, civil society activists, independent experts and lawyers, representatives of think tanks and academia engaged in the topic.
4. Implementation of public administration reform.  
Holders of the expertise: independent experts (analytical centers, academia), representatives of local authorities, civic activists, state officials.
5. Developing elections campaign rules and harmonizing electoral practice according to democratic standards.  
Holders of the expertise: representatives of political parties, civil society activists, independent experts and lawyers.
6. Countering and preventing radicalization.

Holders of the expertise: civil society activists, independent experts and lawyers, responsible law enforcement and security forces officials.

7. Integration of national minorities in the political process.

Holders of the expertise: civil society activists, representatives of national minorities, representatives of political parties.

8. Implementation of sectoral socio-economic reforms (financial sector, tax system, pension system, social policy, health care etc.)

Holders of the expertise: experts (analytical centers, academia), state officials, representatives of political parties, representatives of the organized business groups (e.g. associations of entrepreneurs).

9. Attracting foreign investments and strengthening market economy based on the EU standards.

Holders of the expertise: responsible governmental officials, representatives of entrepreneurship and small business.

10. Strengthening efficiency in border management.

Holders of the expertise: responsible governmental officials from the state's border, migration and customs services; representatives of think tanks.

11. Humanitarian aid to population in the areas devastated by military conflict as well as to population displaced to other regions of Ukraine; assistance to democratic actors in the occupied Crimea.

Holders of the expertise: humanitarian aid organizations, NGOs, civic activists, independent media.

## **Ukraine–Belarus Relations**

Ukraine is the largest EaP country, and Ukrainians and Belarusians have much common in history, culture and mentality, considering each other as “brotherly” nations. That is why Ukraine's example and support is so important for Belarus. And it is equally important for Ukraine's own safety to help Belarus become free, democratic and prosperous European nation.

There have been expectations that after the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) Kyiv's politics toward Belarus would change, especially given the enthusiasm and heroism of the Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukrainian freedom. Unfortunately, it has not yet happen. There are no actual systematic changes in Ukrainian approach towards developing bilateral relationship with neighbouring Belarus. The manifest example proving such conclusion could be the current developments in economic and military-technical cooperation characterized by

prevailing pragmatism of ruling elites in Kyiv and Minsk on the backdrop of periodic bilateral trade confrontations triggered by Moscow.

The current version of the so-called “Belarusian smuggling hub” in the Ukraine-Belarus trade relations seems to satisfy both sides, showing willingness to turn a blind eye on some political discrepancy in order to get the short-term benefits without finding a hint of some long-term strategy. Moscow is often not averse to benefit from this hub as well by manipulating the sanctions mechanism after the suspension of the Free Trade Zone Agreement with Ukraine and entry into force of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the EU and Ukraine.

In the same vein can be considered a military-technical cooperation between Minsk and Kyiv, which began to flourish with the start of the Russian aggression and entered into the most active phase after Kyiv decided to terminate the military-technical cooperation with Moscow. Nevertheless, the room for manoeuvre is shrinking further, and the Kremlin begins to demand clarity in the actions of Minsk, forcing it to forget the friendly nod to Kyiv.

Lukashenka’s regime is mostly concerned about its own survival against the background of deepening economic stagnation, permanent oil price fluctuations and shrinking state budget. President Lukashenka just uses the Russia-Ukraine crisis as well as Minsk quasi-intermediary position for his mercenary aims – to improve own reputation, break the foreign isolation and get some financial support.

*Kyiv should not let Lukashenka’s regime to use Ukrainian problems for its own profit neither from ethical, nor from practical points of view.*

*Firstly*, Ukraine has no moral right to betray the Belarusian people suffering from the repressive autocratic regime.

*Secondly*, Lukashenka’s regime actually will not be able to guarantee Kyiv any security, if Putin decides to use the Belarusian territory for invasion to Ukraine.

*Thus, instead of current playing along with the Lukashenka’s regime for the sake of illusive security guaranties, Ukraine should elaborate a new, effective strategy towards Belarus, placing ahead the interests of people. In order to develop a systematic approach in Ukraine-Belarus relations, diminishing the negative Russian impact and contributing to enhanced cooperation with the EU, the following measures could be proposed:*

- Including political agenda to Ukraine-Belarus bilateral relations. Kyiv can find arguments to convince Minsk that democratization is more reasonable option than collapse of the regime due to people uprising;
- Strengthening bilateral contacts at the level of civil societies, NGOs, independent experts and media. Ukraine should provide ground and support for the Belarusian activists, who develop and strengthen the Belarusian civil society, maintain open dialogue and distribute truthful information;
- Establishing relations with Belarusian opposition and supporting its legal activity;
- Reinforcing mutual information cooperation dedicated to raising awareness about current developments in both countries. Minsk promised to let Ukrainian TV channels broadcast in Belarus, and this promise should be fulfilled;
- Supporting independent Belarusian media to provide counterbalance to the Kremlin's and official Minsk's propaganda in Belarus so that protecting Ukraine's national interests as well;
- Initiating joint economic projects supported by the EU, establishing joint trilateral ventures with the EU funding;
- Joint exploiting of the Black Sea region's transit potential, developing new transit routes and corridors;
- Reshaping the military-technical cooperation with emphasis given to the projects supported by the European Defence Agency within the framework of renewed ENP.

### **Ukraine as a partner and a model for other post-Soviet countries**

Ukraine is the largest, after Russia, post-Soviet country, which for a long time has been considered as incapable for successful political and economic transformations. Strong Russian involvement in Ukraine's politics, economy, cultural life and media resulted in making one believes that Kyiv would never escape from Moscow's orbit. Such situation to great extent reminded the current state of affairs in many other post-Soviet countries, including the EaP participants Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

That's why the Ukraine's success story would be so important for the others post-Soviet nations – to help them understand that they are not doomed to authoritarianism and corruption, that they could do better in order to become modern and democratic societies.

Ukraine can and should become a successful alternative to Russian authoritarian and corrupted model of state's development.

Hence, one more task for the EU's politics towards Ukraine is *to inspire Kyiv to deepen relations with the other EaP countries at all levels with special focus on non-governmental initiatives and people-to-people relations*. In this regard, the V4 countries may help Kyiv to learn how to use own advantages to provide practical assistance to other nations.