



REPORT

UKRAINE'S ACTORNESS IN RELATION TO THE EU IN TIMES OF WAR

EXPERT PERCEPTIONS AND INSIGHTS

NADIIA BUREIKO
SERGIY GERASYMCHUK
HENNADIY MAKSAK
MYKHAILO DRAPAK





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Authors:

Nadiia Bureiko, Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Hennadiy Maksak, Mykhailo Drapak

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Summary

In November 2023, the European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package, and recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine. In June 2024, the framework for the negotiations with Ukraine, in accordance with the revised enlargement methodology, was approved and the EU launched the first Intergovernmental Conference at the ministerial level to open accession negotiations with Ukraine. This makes Ukraine a unique case: a country which seeks EU membership while simultaneously navigating the challenges of an ongoing war. This situation also places the EU in the unprecedented position of managing an exceptional accession process unlike any it has encountered before.

Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to show how Ukraine's relationship with the EU generally evolved and how Ukraine has strengthened its efforts towards European integration since the onset of the full-scale war.

Methodologically, the research focuses on expert perceptions of Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU. To assess expert perceptions, the study is built upon a mixed method research design which combines both quantitative (expert survey) and qualitative (semi-structured in-depth expert interviews) research instruments.

Our analysis showed that while the first two decades of Ukraine's relationship with the EU could be seen through a 'student and teacher' lens, over time, Ukraine has gradually enhanced its agency and became more assertive in its expectations towards the EU. External pressure from Russia has intensified this and made European integration Ukraine's clear and singular path. Ukraine's foreign policy towards the EU, once characterised as slow, chaotic, and opportunistic before 2014, has since transformed into one that is more active, strategic, consistent, and driven by national interests. Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU reached its peak. While the ongoing war is seen as a challenge to Ukraine's European integration efforts, it is also recognized as a key driver in strengthening ties with the EU. In resisting Russian aggression, Ukraine has demonstrated increased national resilience, built on both internal capacities and growing international recognition.

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, followed by the full-scale invasion in 2022, has posed significant challenges not only for Ukraine but for the whole neighbouring region in terms of security, economic stability, energy, human rights, and people-to-people contacts. In response to Russia's aggression, Ukraine has mobilised resources to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty. While the hardships of war have significantly complicated Ukraine's European integration efforts, Ukraine has remained committed to its European aspirations and has continued to advance its partnership with the European Union (EU). Ukraine applied for EU membership in February 2022 and received EU candidate status in June 2022. According to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the 24th EU-Ukraine Summit, which held in February 2023, ultimately showed that Ukraine would reach its European goals¹, whereas the EU-Ukraine joint statement highlighted that 'the future of Ukraine and its citizens lies within the European Union'².

In November 2023, the European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package, and recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine³. The decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine was taken in December 2023, and followed by the European Commission's proposals for draft negotiating frameworks for Ukraine in March 2024. On 21 June, 2024, the framework for the negotiations with Ukraine, in accordance with the revised enlargement methodology, was approved. Consequently, on 25 June, 2024, the EU launched the first Intergovernmental Conference at the ministerial level to open accession negotiations with Ukraine.

Ukraine's desire to embrace closer ties with the EU is seen as a driving force behind its reform agenda to promote democracy, stability, and economic development, and Ukraine remains strongly committed to it. Additionally, the societal support for Ukraine's membership in the EU has been steadily growing, reaching 84% in January 2024⁴. However, within the EU questions have been still raised vis-à-vis the pace of reforms in Ukraine, including the issue of corruption, as well as the implementation of the rule of law. These problems, compounded by the ongoing war, are seen as significant obstacles on Ukraine's path to European integration.

¹ President of Ukraine. 2023. February 3 Address, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/videos/robimo-vse-dlya-yaknajshvidshogo-otrimannya-nashimi-voyinami-4137>

² European Council. 2023. Joint statement following the 24th EU-Ukraine Summit, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/03/joint-statement-following-the-24th-eu-ukraine-summit/>

³ European Commission. 2023. Commission adopts 2023 Enlargement package, recommends to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_56331

⁴ Razumkov Centre. 2024. Оцінка громадянами зовнішньої політики влади, ефективності міжнародної підтримки та впливу зовнішньополітичних чинників на Україну (січень 2024р.), <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-zovnishnoi-polityky-vlady-efektyvnosti-mizhnarodnoi-pidtrymky-ta-vplyvu-zovnishnopolitychnykh-chynnykiv-na-ukrainu-sichen-2024r>

Against this backdrop, the paper aims to show how Ukraine's relationship with the EU generally evolved and how Ukraine has strengthened its efforts towards European integration since the onset of the full-scale war. Ukraine serves as a unique case study being a country seeking EU membership while simultaneously navigating the challenges of an ongoing war. This situation also places the EU in the unprecedented position of managing an exceptional accession process unlike any it has encountered before.

While the EU's actorness in relation to its neighbourhood has been widely researched⁵, little attention has been devoted to the agency of neighbouring countries in accession negotiations. Concurrently, understanding to which extent these countries can influence the EU accession process under the specific circumstances of a bleak security environment has been so far understudied.

Against this background, for the purpose of this paper, we define actorness as the possession of agency on the international stage. This understanding is based on a widely cited definition of actor capability, which is described as 'a measure of the autonomous unit's capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system'⁶. In spite of the current focus on the EU's external actions, the literature on actorness has long been dwelling on nation-states and on state interactions in an international milieu⁷. While the EU's actorness is often debated in the field of IR, states' actorness is usually referred to 'as a given because they are states and are therefore seen to possess legitimacy in developing foreign policy aims and goals by virtue of being states'⁸.

Methodologically, the research focuses on expert perceptions of Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU. There is extensive scholarship on the significance of perceptions in shaping a state's international role and actorness, as well as how these perceptions can contribute

⁵ Costa O. and Barbé E. 2023. A moving target. EU actorness and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Journal of European Integration*, 45(3), 431-44; Moga T., Bureiko N. and Baltag D. 2022. The relevance and impact of the EaP in Moldova: why local perceptions matter? *International Politics*, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00405-9>; Simionov L.M., Pascariu G.C. and N. Bureiko. 2021. Building resilience beyond the EU's eastern borders. *EU actorness and societal perceptions in Ukraine and Republic of Moldova*. *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 12, 250-272; Chaban N., and Knodt, N. 2020. Perceptions of the EU in Ukraine after 'Brexit' referendum. *Images of capabilities and opportunities*. In N. Chaban et. al. (eds.), *Changing Perceptions of the EU at Times of Brexit*. Global Perspectives, Routledge; Dobrescu M. and T. Schumacher. 2020. The politics of flexibility: exploring the contested statehood-EU actorness nexus in Georgia, *Geopolitics* 25(2), 407-427; Moga, T. L. and L.-D. Dîrdală. 2019. The EU's actorness in the Eastern neighbourhood. In G. Rouet and G. Pascariu (eds), *Resilience and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Countries*; Hoffmann N. and A. Niemann. 2017. EU actorness and the European Neighbourhood Policy. In T. Schumacher, A. Marchetti, T. Demmelhuber (eds), *The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge, 28-38; Gehring, T., Urbanski, K. and S. Oberthür. S. 2017. The European Union as an Inadvertent Great Power: EU Actorness and the Ukraine Crisis. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55(4), 727-743; Rohrbacher, T. and Jenickova, M. 2013. The Dimensions of the EU's Actorness: Attractiveness, In P. Kratochvíl, P. The EU as a political actor: the analysis of four dimensions of the EU's actorness. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 35-46.

⁶ Sjöstedt G. 1977. *The External Role of the European Community*, Westmead: Saxon House, 16.

⁷ Drieskens E. 2017. Golden or gilded jubilee? A research agenda for actorness, *Journal of European Public Policy* 24(10), 1535; Bretherton C. and J. Vogler. 2006. *The European Union as a global actor*. London: Routledge, 16.

⁸ Dryburgh L. 2008. The EU as a global actor? EU policy towards Iran, *European Security* 17(2-3), 255.

to democratic legitimacy and accountability in the decision-making processes⁹. As such, we believe understanding expert perceptions of Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU could contribute to the improvement of Ukraine's European policy and crafting of tailor-made instruments, especially in times of war on one hand and development of more informed, inclusive, and responsive EU policies towards Ukraine on the other hand.

To assess expert perceptions, the project employs a mixed method research design¹⁰ which combines both quantitative (expert survey) and qualitative (semi-structured in-depth expert interviews) research instruments. Such approach is considered among the most efficient for studying perceptions¹¹. The questionnaire-based expert survey, conducted with 40 respondents, helped identify the main narratives existing in perceptions of Ukraine's actorness in the relation to the EU. The interviews, conducted with 16 respondents, helped to identify deeper and more nuanced insights on what is behind such perceptions¹². The questionnaires were developed based on the findings from previously conducted desk research and expert discussions – both open and close – organised by the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism' in Kyiv and Brussels. Data collection was conducted in winter and spring of 2024. Respondents were selected based on their relevant expertise and visibility in

⁹ See, for instance, Wrange J. and R. Bengtsson. 2019. Internal and External Perceptions of Small State Security: The Case of Estonia, *European Security* 28(4), 449-72; Jervis R. 2017. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Bretherton C. and J. Vogler. 2006. *The European Union as a global actor*. London: Routledge; Chaban N., Elgström O., Kelly S. and L. Suet. 2013. Images of the EU beyond its Borders: Issue-Specific and Regional Perceptions of European Union Power and Leadership. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 51 (3), 433-451; Elgström O. and N. Chaban. 2015. Studying External Perceptions of the EU: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches, *Perceptions of the EU in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa: Looking in from the Outside*, ed. V. Bachmann and M. Muller, 17-33. London: Palgrave; Holland M. and Chaban N. 2014. *Communicating Europe in times of crisis: External perceptions of the European Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Lucarelli S. 2013. Perceptions of the EU in international institutions. In *Routledge Handbook on the European Union and International Institutions*, ed. K. E. Jørgensen and K. V. Laatikainen, 429-44. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹⁰ Johnson R. B. and L. B. Christensen. 2013. *Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Approaches Fifth Edition*, SAGE Publications.

¹¹ Elgström O. and N. Chaban. 2015. Studying External Perceptions of the EU: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches, *Perceptions of the EU in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa: Looking in from the Outside*, ed. V. Bachmann and M. Muller, 17-33. London: Palgrave; Mosley, L. 2013. 'Just Talk to People?' Interviews in Contemporary Political Science. In *Interview Research in Political Science*, L. Mosley (ed.), 1-28. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press; Gideon, L. 2012. *Handbook of survey methodology for the social sciences*. New York: Springer.

¹² For the list of respondents please see Appendix 1.

the field, both in Ukraine and internationally. The survey and interviews were conducted online, and the collected data were subsequently analysed using SPSS and Atlas.Ti¹³.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first section provides an overview of how Ukraine has generally developed its foreign policy towards the EU since its independence. The second section examines how Ukraine's actorness in its relations with the EU has evolved since the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022. The third section focuses on perceptions of the overall dynamics of Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU and on the main challenges. The final section suggests an interpretation of the main findings and presents recommendations on how Ukraine's actorness could be enhanced in light of the current domestic and international challenges.

¹³ Several limitations of this study should also be considered. Since the research was based on expert perceptions, questions might arise how the pool of experts was selected. We approached well-known experts in the field of European studies, both from Ukraine and abroad, who have rich experience in research and analytical work and/or advocacy with a focus on the European integration of Ukraine and/or the EU's enlargement policy, making our sample purposeful. However, there is a need to further expand the sample, including more practitioners and policy-makers from both Kyiv and Brussels, as well as from other European capitals. Replicating the survey would prove valuable, given that perceptions can be influenced by a chain of various events. Additionally, a larger sample of respondents could help to identify possible differences in perceptions between experts from Ukraine who are based in Ukraine, experts from Ukraine who are based abroad, and experts from the EU. Our data analysis suggested some differences, but due to the small sample size, we could not present these as significant, so this conclusion was not part of the research findings. However, future studies might reveal a domestic-external perception gap and explore which factors influence the formation of expert perceptions vis-à-vis Ukraine's actorness.

1. Ukraine's European integration endeavours since independence: An overview

For Ukrainian political elites, closer engagement with the EU has always been a strategic goal. The 1993 parliamentary resolution 'On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy' outlined a gradual path towards Ukraine's full membership in the European community, starting with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and progressing towards future associated membership¹⁴. This resolution remained the key document guiding Ukraine's foreign policy for nearly two decades. Although the 1998 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the EU did not explicitly mention the prospect of membership and even omitted the formulation of a 'European perspective', the document emphasised a mutual desire to strengthen political dialogue, investment, trade and economic relations, social, financial, scientific and cultural cooperation. The agreement also reflected the EU's commitment to supporting the development of a consolidated democracy and a market economy in Ukraine¹⁵.

It took some time for the Ukrainian political elites to approach their European partners with a proposal to outline clear conditions for the beginning negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU. During the so-called Orange Revolution, *'Ukraine showed much more action by making explicit its will to be part of Europe. [...] And the EU policy-makers woke up—suddenly everyone saw a country, struggling and striving for [European] freedom. This has increased action a lot, from both sides'*. It was Viktor Yushchenko who first announced that Ukraine's main goal was to gain full membership in the EU¹⁶, thus moving beyond the format of cooperation and strategic partnership proposed by the 2005 EU-Ukraine Action Plan. Previously, the Plan only reflected the European perception of the Ukrainian state as a new neighbour following the EU's 2004 enlargement, rather than touching upon the EU membership perspective¹⁷.

There were notable discrepancies between Ukraine's expectations, which were fully expressed during the pro-European Orange Revolution, and the EU's reluctance to consider further enlargement after admitting the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). This necessitated the outlining of new common denominators. Consequently, Ukraine began negotiations with its European partners to develop additional cooperation instruments, replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and strengthen the tools of the

¹⁴ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 1993. Постанова 'Про Основні напрями зовнішньої політики України', <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3360-12>

¹⁵ 1998 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, and Ukraine. Official Journal of the European Communities, eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A21998A0219%2802%29

¹⁶ Deutsche Welle. 2005. Yushchenko Affirms EU Aspirations, www.dw.com/en/yushchenko-affirms-eu-aspirations/a-1469103

¹⁷ European Commission. 2005. EU-Ukraine – Strengthening the Strategic Partnership, ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_05_57

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Ukraine specifically pushed for deepening political dialogue on all issues, including democracy, the rule of law, and the visa regime, as well as the liberalisation of trade restrictions on both sides¹⁸. These proposals were considered by European partners, who, during the bilateral summit in 2008, agreed with the need to establish new conditions for cooperation in these areas¹⁹. Finally, in June 2009, the EU-Ukraine Cooperation Council proposed the Provisional EU-Ukraine Association Agenda as a framework for preparing an Association Agreement (AA). That year, Ukraine joined the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which one of its initiators viewed as a platform to address the EU's so-called 'enlargement fatigue' and to serve as an interim substitute for the enlargement perspective²⁰. As a result, the EaP is often perceived as a replacement for the integration process, aiming to stabilise neighbouring countries.

However, while Ukraine's ambition for integration was gradually expanding, discrepancies between what the EU offered (merely a neighbourhood partnership) and Ukraine's expectations (membership perspective) were growing. Ukraine's 2010 law 'On the Fundamentals of Domestic and Foreign Policy' declared its membership in the EU among the key foundations of Ukraine's external actions and highlighted that socio-political, administrative, security, trade and other processes in the country should be organised in line with the European experience and standards²¹. The law was adopted after Viktor Yanukovich was elected President. He expressed a willingness to work on reforms to join the EU while simultaneously seeking to improve relations with Russia.

The overall development of Ukraine's relations with the EU faced significant challenges both externally and internally. Externally, progress was hindered primarily by the lack of clear signals from Brussels about Ukraine's potential membership. In fact, European institutions, along with some state governments, were sceptical about the very prospect of Ukraine joining the EU. Instead, viewing the situation through the lens of the neighbourhood paradigm, the EU considered the EaP a sufficient alternative to ensure 'stability and prosperity' along the EU's new borders following the accession of the CEECs. This has been highlighted by the majority of our respondents.

'The EU has always been reluctant to give Ukraine a membership perspective. At the same time, the membership perspective is actually the biggest trigger or biggest incentive for reforms. [...] You

¹⁸ Wolczuk K. 2009. Implementation without Coordination: The Impact of EU Conditionality on Ukraine under the European Neighbourhood Policy, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(2), 187-211.

¹⁹ Council of the European Union. 2008. Joint Declaration on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. European Union-Ukraine Summit, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/102633.pdf

²⁰ Goldirova R. 2008. 'Eastern Partnership' could lead to enlargement, Poland says. *EU Observer*, <https://euobserver.com/world/26211>

²¹ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2010. Закон України «Про засади внутрішньої і зовнішньої політики», <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2411-17#Text>

never get this carrot on the table [...]. But the membership perspective was probably not feasible before, given the internal resistance among member states'.

'There were member states that were simply generally reluctant towards further enlargement [of the EU]. It was about a negative perception of enlargement in general, an enlargement fatigue, increasing populism within the EU. [...]'

'Including Ukraine in the EU means considerable costs for the EU member states. Thus, member states have long been divided on this issue. [...]. The lack of any EU membership perspective has limited the impact of the neighbourhood frameworks since there was no clear finalité politique in sight.'

'The main problem was with the very format of Ukraine's relationships with the EU – meaning the 'integration without membership' format. [...] It was rather relaxed, even though there were some tools to monitor compliance etc.'

Some respondents suggested that it was also the Russian factor which led to the EU's reluctance to bring Ukraine closer, given that *'for many, it has been comfortable to see Russia as a strategic partner and to speak about 'four freedoms' from Lisbon to Vladivostok. This inertia, misinterpretation, misunderstanding and desire to keep the usual comfort – all these contributed to the blindness and shortages of the Western European elite. And the price being paid for those errs now is very high'.*

Internally, the situation was impacted by the complexity of Ukraine's political landscape, where political parties were mostly divided into 'pro-Russian' or 'pro-European', and the authorities were playing off both the EU and Russia under the guise of a so-called 'multi-vector foreign policy'²². As argued by one of our respondents, *'Ukraine's policy in relation to the EU was not very consistent. This was due to the multi-vector idea [of Ukraine's foreign policy]. All the time Ukraine's progress on the EU track was hampered by Russia and there were these eternal attempts to balance the two [EU and Russia]'. Consequently, such 'political behaviour resulted in a low public support for European integration. People did not vote for pro-Western candidates, they chose pro-Russian leaders because Russia was what they knew better'.*

Moreover, in some cases, Ukraine showed reluctance to fully embrace European reforms and attempted instead to circumvent European rules for the benefit of the elites in power: *'Ukraine tried to bend the rules to its advantage, just to avoid implementing reforms. In other words, there were attempts, to some extent, to sabotage – and I use this word in a neutral sense – certain procedures'. By doing so, Ukraine's policy vis-à-vis the EU '[...] was not particularly consistent [...]. We had many declarations but little implementation. We had many programmes and*

²² Bureiko N. and T. Moga. 2018. 'Bounded Europeanisation': the case of Ukraine, In P. Flenley, M. Mannin (eds) *The European Union and Its Eastern Neighbourhood: Europeanisation and its Twenty-First-Century Contradictions*, Manchester University Press, 71-85; Bureiko N. 2017. Ukraine's Image of 'In-Betweenness': Bad Luck or Lack of Political Determination?, *Ukraine Analytica*, <https://ukraine-analytica.org/ukraines-image-of-in-between-ness-bad-luck-or-lack-of-political-determination/>; Shyrokykh K. 2018. The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(5), 832-850; Frye T. 2015. What Do Voters in Ukraine Want? A Survey Experiment on Candidate Ethnicity, Language, and Policy Orientation. *Problems of Post-Communism* 62(5), 247-257.

discussions, but when it came to their implementation, there was always a lack of either a political will, capacity for implementation, or even expertise in certain areas'.

In addition, the presidency of Yanukovich was marked by politically motivated imprisonment of opposition leaders, a bleak state of affairs in the election process and the judicial system, and a generally slow pace of reforms, all of which were criticised by the EU²³. With the slow pace of reforms and available internal struggles and *'with the effect those struggles had on the reforms, Ukraine's actorness was obviously going down. The EU also may have lost its interest and trust that the country can proceed with all those reforms'.*

Concurrently, there were always strong reasons behind Ukraine's quest to become an EU member state. Apart from the push factor to modernise governance, strengthen democracy, ensure the rule of law, raise social standards and effectively protect human rights, Ukraine's European aspirations have been also regarded as a civilizational choice and as a full display of actorness, namely the right and capacity to choose its place within the international system. When Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement, he explained his reluctance with the need to take into account the relations with Russia before deepening cooperation with the EU. Apart from the political clientelism of the then ruling elites, Yanukovich's decision also showed the strong capacity Moscow still had at that point to influence political decisions in Ukraine.

After Euromaidan which had sparked Russia's initial aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the choice for advancing European integration became *'the only game in town'*, when *'suddenly Ukraine was back with a clear agenda towards Europe [...] with the European flags on Maidan when people were really dying for their European future. With the Euromaidan Ukraine's actorness was taking precedence, going to the tops'.* After Yanukovich fled the country, Ukraine duly signed the Association Agreement with the EU. Although the AA did not contain any indications that its implementation would bring Ukraine closer to the EU membership, it acknowledged the European choice and aspiration of the Ukrainian state, and put forward the conditions for in-depth cooperation in political, economic and other fields²⁴. In the expert perceptions, signing the AA, *'Ukraine made it crystal clear where the journey should be going. [...] And even though there would always have been potential for more and better performance, there was a positive tendency forward'.*

After the 2014 parliamentary elections, a stable coalition of pro-European forces was formed in the Verkhovna Rada, intending to reform legislation in line with agreements made with European partners: *'It was about the personnel's vision and overall improvement of capabilities in the ministries that was so important. A lot of networks were created, even informally, through various EU projects [...] that has helped to have professionals with the EU integration mindset to*

²³ European Parliament. 2012. Resolution on the situation in Ukraine 2012/2889(RSP), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2012-0507_EN.html

²⁴ 2014 Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part. Official Journal of the European Communities, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L:2014:161:TOC>

ensure consistency and coherence. Both the presidential strategy and the agreement within the coalition acknowledged the necessity of fundamental reforms and saw the AA as the key framework to facilitate the required transformations. Additionally, in light of the Russian aggression launched in 2014, Ukraine had to strengthen its performance and increase efficiency while ensuring security, economic stability, energy independence, and social cohesion. Therefore, the reforms were also perceived as a guarantee for the future of a sovereign 'European Ukraine', capable to withstand Russian malign actions in the long term. Ukraine proceeded with reforms in the gas sector, the banking system, public procurement, regional decentralisation, the tax system and the business environment, as well as the creation of new patrol police in line with AA provisions. However, in many fields, reforming progress soon stalled, in particular in fighting corruption, establishing a transparent judicial system and effective public administration, privatisation of state assets and land management, education and health care²⁵. Because of these internal problems, Ukraine faced significant criticism from the EU that made the process of European integration more challenging²⁶.

In addition, Ukraine still faced pressure coming from Russia, that *'has been seeking to hamper most of the EU efforts in Ukraine by employing a wide range of instruments from political and economic blackmailing to military aggression'*. In 2014-2015 Russia demanded a revision of the AA between Ukraine and the European Union which would protect its own interests, particularly in the realm of trade. As a result, in 2014, Kyiv and Brussels even agreed to trilateral consultations on this issue. However, the Kremlin managed to only achieve a postponement of the temporary application of the Free Trade Area between the EU and Ukraine until the end of 2015 – Moscow failed to impose its conditions on Kyiv. According to the interviewed expert, *'this is the reference point when Ukraine's actorness began to increase both in the world and in its own, internal perception. [...] Ukraine wanted to integrate into the global economy, to become a full member of the international trade system and took clear steps in this direction. [...] International trade, inter alia, is also about influence, about presence, and in this context, Ukraine wanted and managed to become a global actor'*.

The other challenge concerned the process of the AA ratification that met significant obstacles in the Netherlands. After Dutch citizens voted against of ratification during the referendum, the Verkhovna Rada appealed to the Netherlands to give a green light for the Ukrainian state's European integration and to complete the process of the AA ratification²⁷. In 2017, the Dutch Parliament ratified the AA, and in July, with the EU Council's approval, the

²⁵ Провідник реформ: шість досягнень й сім невдач України з часів перемоги Майдану. 2017, Vox Ukraine, <https://voxukraine.org/longreads/three-years-of-reforms/index-ua.html#form>

²⁶ Панченко Ю. та С. Сидоренко. 2017. Доба критики: в Євросоюзі змінюють ставлення до України, Європейська Правда, www.euointegration.com.ua/articles/2017/06/16/7067281/

²⁷ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2016. Звернення Верховної Ради України до держав-членів Європейського Союзу, парламентів іноземних держав, парламентських асамблей та міжнародних організацій щодо завершення процесу ратифікації Угоди про асоціацію між Україною, з однієї сторони, та Європейським Союзом, Європейським співтовариством з атомної енергії і їхніми державами-членами, з іншої сторони, <https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/Novyny/136116.html>

AA between Ukraine and the EU came into full effect. In Ukraine, the agreement was seen not only as a driver of domestic reforms but also as a step toward EU membership²⁸. Experts generally view it as one of the key tools for fostering socialisation and increasing cooperation between Ukrainian actors and their European counterparts at various levels: *'There was a lot of cooperation [with European partners] at various levels – from the very top to civil society grassroots initiatives. Actually, the bottom levels are always very important'*. The Association Agreement is acknowledged to *'have led to increasing ties between Ukrainian and EU officials. This has not only socialised Ukrainian officials but also EU officials that has so far been under the radar'*. In this regard, *'consolidation of the political elites and civil society on the Ukrainian side was a necessary factor of actorness, but it was not sufficient for a success. The respective approach of the EU was a key'*.

In 2016, Ukraine created the position of Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, held by Ivanna Klymush-Tsintsadze. Her role was to align government activities with EU regulations and standards. Ukraine appeared committed to improving its performance and meeting higher standards while implementing the AA provisions. However, by 2017, the progress in implementing provisions reached 42%²⁹ leaving little room to hope for a clear road map for joining the EU.

In 2019, Ukraine took a key step towards securing its path to full EU and NATO membership. The Verkhovna Rada amended the Constitution to solidify Ukraine's foreign policy priorities, ensuring long-term commitment to European integration and blocking any potential efforts by the pro-Russian forces to reverse this process. This change also empowered civil society and democracy watchdogs to use the Constitution as a reference when monitoring and evaluating Ukraine's progress on pro-European reforms.

In the same year, Ukraine held presidential and parliamentary elections, bringing Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his party, 'Servant of the People,' to power. At Zelenskyy's first Ukraine-EU summit in July 2019, both sides reaffirmed Ukraine's 'European aspirations and European choice.' During the October 2020 summit, they again recognized Ukraine's European goals and acknowledged its progress in reforms, particularly in fighting corruption. They also emphasised the need for further efforts in tackling oligarchic influences and ensuring media pluralism³⁰. By the end of 2020, Ukraine reported a 54% implementation rate of the AA. The most significant progress was indicated in the implementation of provisions related to political

²⁸ See, for instance, Report 2017. Звіт про виконання Угоди про асоціацію між Україною та Європейським Союзом у 2017 році, <https://minjust.gov.ua/files/general/2018/07/06/20180706154857-50.pdf>; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2015. Указ Президента України «Про Стратегію сталого розвитку "Україна – 2020"», <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/5/2015#Text>

²⁹ Report 2017. Звіт про виконання Угоди про асоціацію між Україною та Європейським Союзом у 2017 році, <https://minjust.gov.ua/files/general/2018/07/06/20180706154857-50.pdf>

³⁰ European Council. 2020. Joint statement following the 22nd EU-Ukraine Summit, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/06/joint-statement-following-the-22nd-eu-ukraine-summit-6-octobre-2020/>

dialogue, security and defence, justice and human rights, as well as trade. However, areas as financial cooperation, transport, and combating fraud, were still lagging behind³¹.

To influence the EU's stance on Ukraine's chances for European accession, Ukraine has initiated new formats of cooperation. In July 2020, together with Lithuania and Poland, Ukraine established the so-called 'Lublin Triangle.' Both Lithuania and Poland reaffirmed their support for Ukraine's European aspirations, as well as 'open accession negotiations as soon as conditions allow for it, in order to gain its full-fledged membership in the EU'³². Furthermore, in 2021, Ukraine initiated the signing of bilateral declarations to support Ukraine's membership in the EU. The first documents were signed with the leaders of Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, and Estonia, followed by the ones with Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria. Such an approach arguably sought to strengthen relations with the EU member states to possibly advocate Ukraine's European integration and influence the positions of sceptics within the EU. The last of these interstate agreements was signed just a few days before the start of the full-fledged Russian invasion in February 2022.

In addition, in May 2021, together with Georgia and Moldova, Ukraine initiated the format of the Associated Trio to coordinate the movement towards the EU with membership as the ultimate goal³³. In this way, the three states tried to show they were ahead of the other EaP members in deepening cooperation with the EU. They signalled the need for a special track for their advanced relations and the recognition of their European perspective by the EU. During the EaP summit in December 2021, the EU representatives recognized the right 'to choose the level of ambition and the goals' in relations with European Union, but no prospect of membership – once again – was mentioned³⁴.

³¹ Report 2020. Звіт про виконання Угоди про асоціацію між Україною та Європейським Союзом 2015-2020, <https://minjust.gov.ua/files/general/2021/09/02/20210902103956-39.pdf>

³² Joint declaration. 2023. Joint declaration by Presidents of Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania, <https://www.president.pl/news/joint-declaration-by-presidents-of-ukraine-poland-and-lithuania,63122>; Урядовий портал. 2020. Спільна декларація міністрів закордонних справ України, Республіки Польща та Литовської Республіки щодо заснування «Люблінського трикутника», <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/news/spilna-deklaraciya-ministriv-zakordonnih-sprav-ukrayini-respubliki-polshcha-ta-litovskoyi-respubliki-shchodo-zasnuvannya-lyublinskogo-trikutnika>

³³ Association Trio. 2021. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/association-trio-memorandum-understanding-between-ministry-foreign-affairs-georgia-ministry-foreign-affairs-and-european-integration-republic-moldova-and-ministry-foreign-affairs-ukraine>

³⁴ Council of the European Union. 2021. Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit 'Recovery, Resilience and Reform', https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/53526/20211215-eap-joint-declaration-en.pdf?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eastern+Partnership+summit+%e2%80%93+joint+declaration

2. Ukraine's actorness on the way to the European integration in times of war

Immediately after the full-scale Russian invasion, in February 28th, 2022, President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyy signed an application for membership in the EU. On the same day, President of Ukraine, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada and Prime Minister signed a Joint Statement. Both documents referred to Articles 2 and 49 of the Treaty on the European Union as the basis for the application for EU membership and were addressed to the presidents of the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament as well as to the President of France, who presided the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2022. This move is generally perceived as one of the brightest demonstrations of Ukraine's actorness: *'With the onset of the war, Ukraine's actorness was extremely prominent and decisive. It is first and foremost about Ukraine's resistance and strength shown against the Russian invasion, but also towards the European Union when Ukraine submitted the membership application a couple of days after the Russian full-scale invasion, literally under the bombshells. This is a clear sign of decided action from Ukraine's side'*. On the one hand, this showed Ukraine's determination and readiness to fully embark on the path of membership negotiations. On the other hand, it served as a political move to safeguard Ukrainian sovereignty and uphold democratic governance.

Concurrently, during the first days of the war such political decision also required significant mobilization of resources, which to a great extent were available through the cooperative framework established with the EU that had contributed to building Ukraine's resilience through technocratic means³⁵. As argues by the interviewed experts, the previously established networks and mechanisms of cooperation *'helped Ukraine to get onto the EU's agenda very quickly, when people just activated the ties they had already had. Thanks to those connections, Europeans understood the situation 'on the ground', they understood the Ukrainian needs. It is not one big initiative that is so decisive, but it is about a broad network of ties, when people were in touch for many years'*. Similarly, perceiving an application for membership in the EU as *'a real opportunistic moment [...], a very visionary decision, brave enough'*, it is highlighted that *'Ukraine has made progress leading to this moment, and this has been a lot of work done before the beginning of the full-scale war'*.

An important role is given to general capabilities *when Ukraine's actorness is overall seen as 'manifested through its response to Russian aggression, because one could not imagine that Ukraine would fight so fiercely [...]. This demonstrated the ability to be worth as the partner and moreover the necessary partner'*. Seeing Ukraine capable of resisting the Russian invasion *'has increased Ukraine's effectiveness and the ability to influence politicians on the national arena. On the other hand, while exercising such resistance, Ukraine is dependent on resources from the West'*. Ukraine secured financial support for its state budget through microfinance assistance

³⁵ Pintsch A. and Rabinovych M. 2023. Geopolitical and Technocratic: EU International Actorness and Russia's War Against Ukraine, European Issue 657, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0657-geopolitical-and-technocratic-eu-international-actorness-and-russia-s-war-against-ukraine>

packages and received extensive humanitarian aid through the EU Civic Protection Mechanism. Simultaneously, in an unprecedented move in the EU history, the Council has reprogrammed the European Peace Facility, introduced in 2021, for supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine³⁶.

At this stage, Ukraine's European integration endeavours could be divided into three main tracks. The first one relates to fulfilling obligations to obtain the status of a candidate for the EU membership. The second track is the direct execution and implementation of the EU directives and other conditions stipulated by the AA. The third track includes sectoral integration into the EU, through accession to various EU programmes and instruments. To this aim, Ukraine not only has demonstrated political will and desire, but also adherence to clear performance indicators, regardless of the wartime challenges.

Both the application and the joint declaration of February 2022 called for Ukraine's application to be considered under a special procedure. Ukrainian authorities proactively participated in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic consultations, aiming to establish procedures and a timeline for EU membership. Operating at both the governmental and presidential levels, Ukraine sought to adopt specifically targeted accession procedures. At the same time, governmental institutions and expert community in Ukraine had discussions regarding the possibility of an exceptional fast track for EU membership, given that *'in the process of the European Union enlargement, Ukraine is an unprecedented case. All other countries joined the European Union in times of peace. There is no template on how to deal with the country as an enlargement candidate in times of war [...] with imminent threats to the EU member states'*.

While authorities pursued expedited approaches and directly requested membership, the experts believed the only viable path was the one delineated in the EU Treaties. The latter stance gained significance during the informal EU Summit in Versailles, France, in March 2022, where European leaders acknowledged Kyiv's European ambitions and choice, as formalized in the AA. In light of these discussions, the European Council proposed to the European Commission to prepare an Opinion concerning Ukraine's membership application, grounded in European legislation³⁷. Although among the Ukrainian political lobbies this has been perceived as a setback, given that no special fast track procedure was designed for Ukraine, the Versailles Summit is overall assessed as of a great significance for Ukraine's path to EU membership. In line with the European Union treaties and procedures, in April 2022, during the visit of the EU officials to Kyiv, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen handed a special questionnaire to the President of Ukraine. With this document, the European Commission aimed to assess to which extent Ukraine aligned with the Copenhagen Criteria. The first block of the questionnaire focused on economic and

³⁶ European Parliament. 2024. Proposal of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, with the Support of the Commission, to the Council for a Council Decision Establishing a European Peace Facility (Offbudget Fund for the Duration of the Next Mff) – Q1 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/carriage/mff-european-peace-facility/report?sid=8201>

³⁷ European Council. 2022. Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government. Versailles Declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>

political criteria for membership. The second one covered the assessment of the adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to the EU legislation. As pledged at the political level, Ukrainian side demonstrated exceptional and remarkable speed in filling in the questionnaire, despite taking place in the midst of Ukraine's steadfast efforts to counter the Russian invasion. The initial set of answers was provided in April, with the subsequent portion submitted in May. The European side positively assessed Ukraine's performance on the then progress³⁸.

Although Ukraine completed the technical part of work in record time, there was an understanding in Kyiv that the process of granting candidate status was linked to the political will in each of the member states, which had to vote on it at the level of the European Council. While Ukraine had friends and advocates at the level of individual EU national governments (e.g. in the Central European and Baltic region), there were also governments that had certain reservations (e.g. France, the Netherlands, Germany). To address this concern, at the level of Ukrainian institutions, a special targeted advocacy campaign was launched to persuade the EU member states that remained sceptic about the candidacy status for Ukraine and contested the prospects of its membership³⁹. This campaign provided a coordinated effort to catch up with implementing some long-awaited reforms, which fall under Copenhagen Criteria.

At the governmental level, some high-level envoys were designated to visit those member states, which were not actively supporting Ukraine's candidate status and persuade them to support Ukraine during the European Council meeting in June 2022. In addition to Olha Stefanishyna, Vice Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, the advocacy team included Oleksiy Chernyshov, Minister of Community and Territorial Development, Emine Dzhamarova, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ihor Zhovkva, Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine. The parliamentary track was represented by the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Ruslan Stefanchuk, his First Deputy Oleksandra Kornienko and Vice Speaker Olena Kondratiuk, as well as some MPs.

At the non-governmental level, a number of organisations were involved in this work to explain Ukraine's progress in implementing reforms, with varying degrees of coordination with the government. Furthermore, Ukrainian think tanks participated in advocacy campaigns in Brussels and various member capitals. For instance, active advocacy initiatives were led by the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform, the New Europe Center, the National Interests Advocacy Network 'ANTS', the Anti-Corruption Action Centre, the Agency for Legislative Initiatives, the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism' and other NGOs. Ukraine's civil society, expert community, and watchdog organizations also united their efforts in appealing to the EU members states. In anticipation of the European Commission's issuance of the Opinion, more than 200 non-governmental organizations endorsed a collective letter in support of Ukraine's

³⁸ Zelenskyy V. 2022. Address. 75th day of war, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtsDJsZspTc>

³⁹ Укрінформ. 2024. Посадовці починають серію візитів до ЄС на перемовини про статус кандидата – Стефанішина, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3490608-posadovci-pocinout-seriu-vizitiv-do-es-na-peremovini-pro-status-kandidata-stefanisina.html>

candidacy. Inter alia, the joint letter argued that postponing the granting of candidate status would harm both Ukraine and the EU itself, including slowing down post-war reforms in Ukraine, undermining democracy in other countries, including the Western Balkans, increasing the burden on the EU budget and promoting new instability in Europe⁴⁰.

During diplomatic consultations and high-level meetings held in the capitals of the EU member states, Ukrainian envoys tried to deal with a wide range of concerns, explaining the Ukrainian path in implementing candidacy requirements and providing arguments in favour of timely decision during the European Council meeting in June. Ukrainian representatives put forward a number of arguments about Ukraine's real readiness for candidate status, the high level of implementation of reforms despite the war, and the unfounded nature of fears that Ukraine would upset the balance of European politics.

In parallel with advocating its membership, Ukraine also endeavoured to address concerns associated with the Western Balkans and their European aspirations. Primarily, certain EU member states (mainly, Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Hungary) expressed apprehensions that granting candidate status to Ukraine before extending the same status to the long-anticipated Bosnia and Herzegovina, and initiating membership negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia, could potentially tarnish the overall image of the EU and undermine its commitments within the enlargement process⁴¹. To alleviate these hesitations, Kyiv arranged meetings with the leadership of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, resulting in public endorsements of candidate status for Ukraine by the leadership of these states⁴².

In June 17, 2022, the European Commission recommended granting the candidacy status to Ukraine, although Ukraine had to demonstrate additional progress in some reforms linked to the rule of law, anti-corruption, de-oligarchization, media regulation, national minorities, etc. Ukraine received seven recommendations from the European Commission to improve its readiness before opening accession negotiations. A momentous milestone was reached in June 23rd, when the European Council made a historic decision to acknowledge Ukraine's European perspective and granted status of candidate country. Granting a candidate status and launching of accession negotiations are overall perceived as Ukraine's most outstanding success story at the international level.

Following the EU's decision to grant candidate country status, the European Council invited the European Commission to report on the fulfilment of the conditions set out in the Commission's Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership. On Ukrainian side this prompted the enactment of a comprehensive set of laws, collectively referred to as the 'EU

⁴⁰ Як зберегти віру в ЄС і дати поштовх реформам. Спільне звернення українських організацій, 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2022/06/2/7140485/>

⁴¹ Канцлер Німеччини: короткого шляху до ЄС для України немає, 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-scholz-ukraina-eu/31858192.html>

⁴² President of Ukraine. 2022. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia support Ukraine's course for full membership in the EU – Volodymyr Zelenskyy after meeting with the heads of governments of these countries, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/albaniya-chornogoriya-ta-pivnichna-makedoniya-pidtrimuyut-ku-75829>

package', which had been previously drafted but awaited approval by the Ukrainian parliament. Despite some expectations in Kyiv, the European Commission did not include Ukraine to the enlargement package in October 2022, nor till the end of the year 2022. It was in February 2023 when the Commission handed over to Ukraine the analytical report completing the opinion on Ukraine's application for EU membership⁴³.

Representatives of the Ukrainian government tried different formats to engage European partners and raise awareness of the situation on the ground. This was important for two reasons. First, Ukraine had to demonstrate its progress in implementing the 7 steps proposed by the European Commission. Second, Ukrainian officials had to learn how to operate with European approaches to decision-making and rules of interaction at the level of EU institutions. In 2023, for the first time in the history of Ukraine's relations with the EU, the College of European Commissioners, the EU Council at the level of foreign ministers (Foreign Affairs Council), and the Political and Security Committee paid working visits to Kyiv. It was also the first time that a joint working meeting of the European Commissioners and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine was held⁴⁴.

In addition, Ukraine showed high interest in participating in meetings of the Council of the EU on different thematic policies. Such a format was initiated during the Presidency of the Czech Republic in the Council of the EU and further prolonged during the Swedish, Spanish and Belgian presidencies. Ukrainian ministers and their deputies often participated in EU Council meetings, reporting first-hand on Ukraine's needs and the path of reforms in a particular sector. Concurrently, Ukrainian officials had the opportunity to experience the atmosphere at meetings of national governments of EU member states⁴⁵.

In February 2023, the Ukrainian government launched, as an internal task, a process of reviewing Ukrainian legislation for compliance with the *acquis communautaire*⁴⁶. Although this decision was not binding at the time, it was another sign of Ukraine's willingness to prepare the national legislative system for negotiations on membership in the EU. It took the Government and civic experts six months to analyse about 28,000 EU legal acts. In December 2023, the Government Office for Coordination of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration

⁴³ European Commission. 2023. Commission Staff Working Document. Analytical Report following the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council Commission Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-02/SWD_2023_30_Ukraine.pdf

⁴⁴ European Commission. 2023. EU Solidarity with Ukraine. Joint meeting in Kyiv between European Commissioners and the Ukrainian government, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-ukraine-standing-together_en

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Foreign Affairs Council. 2024. Main results. Russian aggression against Ukraine, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2024/05/27/> or Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. 2022, https://twitter.com/EU2022_CZ/status/1547849015202418688

⁴⁶ Olha Stefanishyna: We embark on self-screening of Ukrainian legislation for compliance with EU law, 2-23, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/olha-stefanishyna-rozpochynaiemo-self-skryninh-vidpovidnosti-ukrainskoho-zakonodavstva-do-prava-ies>

reported that the results of the self-screening process indicated that 2,739 acts of EU legislation were subject to further full or partial transposition. At that time, Ukraine had managed to fully transpose 1,625 EU acts into national legislation as part of the Association Agreement implementation process. The other more than 23,000 acts of EU legislation remain beyond the potential commitments in the negotiation process⁴⁷.

Almost all steps were taken by Ukraine in close coordination with the European Commission and the Venice Commission. According to the interim verbal assessment of the European Commission released in June 2023, Ukraine had successfully completed two out of seven steps, namely judicial reform and adoption of media legislation⁴⁸. Ukraine also demonstrated progress in the implementation of the Constitutional Court reform and achieved some progress in the remaining four steps, namely anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, de-oligarhisation, and national minorities. The Ukrainian think tankers were even more optimistic in their assessment and in May 2023 reported that Ukraine progressed in fulfilment of the seven recommendations with a score 6.8 out of 10⁴⁹. The pace of the implementation of the European Commission's recommendations can be traced through the same analytical instrument Candidate Check, which in September 2023 scored the progress already at 8.1 out of 10⁵⁰.

The European Commission included Ukraine's country report in the enlargement package for the first time in November 2023. It was complemented by the Commission's recommendation to the Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, provided that Ukraine meets four new areas related to the opening of negotiations by March 2024. Political will on Ukrainian side was confirmed by the Decree of the President of Ukraine 'On some measures to prepare for the negotiation process on Ukraine's accession to the European Union'⁵¹. The document, adopted in November 8, 2023, aimed at ensuring the rapid implementation of the European Commission's remaining recommendations which led to European Council's positive decision in December 2023. This has also been a consequence of the strong advocacy campaign by Ukrainian public representatives and civil activists, which lasted throughout the second half of 2023.

⁴⁷ Report on the results of the initial assessment of the progress in the implementation of EU legal acts published, 2023, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/opublikovano-zvit-za-rezultatamy-pervynnoi-otsinky-stanu-implementatsii-aktiv-prava-ies>

⁴⁸ Шевченко, С. 2023. «Два з семи». Чи встигне Україна виконати усі критерії, щоб почати переговори про вступ до ЄС? <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/ukraine-eu-eurointegration-reforms/32472741.html>

⁴⁹ Candidate Check 4: Where Ukraine is in the implementation of 7 EU recommendations, 2023, New Europe Centre, <http://neweurope.org.ua/analytics/kandydat-check-4-de-ukrayina-perebuwaye-u-vykonanni-7-rekomendatsij-yes/>

⁵⁰ Candidate Check 5: Where Ukraine is in the implementation of 7 EU recommendations, 2023, New Europe Centre, <http://neweurope.org.ua/en/project/analitychna-infografika-kandydat-check/>

⁵¹ President of Ukraine. 2023. Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with the Ambassador of the European Union and signed a decree on preparations for the negotiation process on Ukraine's accession to the EU. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsyta-z-poslom-yevrosoyuzu-ta-pidpi-86845>

In the run-up to the European Council meeting the intensity of political consultations has raised. Ukrainian representatives tried to use all leverages and channels to reach out to leaders of the EU member states⁵². Intense diplomatic and advocacy work, as well as the implementation of the 7 steps by the Ukrainian team, led to the decision by the European Council to open accession negotiations with Ukraine. EU leaders invited the Council to adopt the negotiating framework once the steps set out in the Commission's report of 8 November 2023 have been taken by Ukraine by March 2024.

On June 21, 2024 the EU Council approved the negotiating framework for the negotiations with Ukraine. This was done in accordance with the revised enlargement methodology. Already on June 25, the EU held the first Intergovernmental Conference at the ministerial level to open accession negotiations with Ukraine⁵³. It has taken 2 years and 4 months from the submission of Ukraine's application for membership to the official start of accession negotiations between the EU and Ukraine.

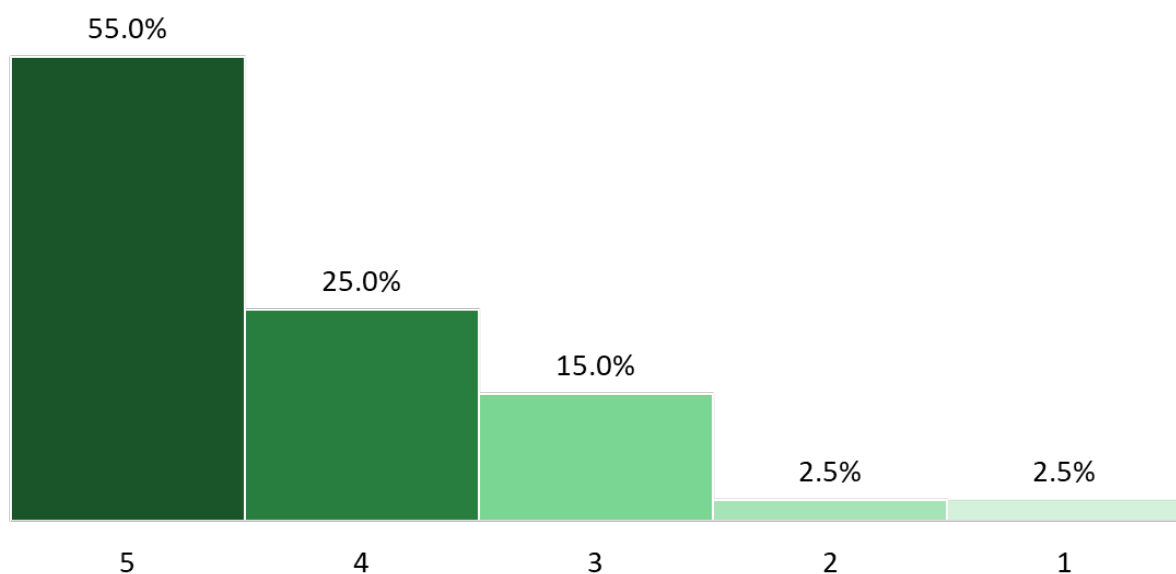
⁵² Кузьменко, Ю., Пашко, В. 2023. Боротьба за початок перемовин триватиме до останньої хвилини Євroradi – Кулеба, <https://suspiine.media/636866-borotba-za-pocatok-peremovin-trivatime-do-ostannoï-hvilini-evroradi-kuleba/>

⁵³ European Council. 2024. EU opens accession negotiations with Ukraine, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/25/eu-opens-accession-negotiations-with-ukraine/>

3. General trends in perceptions of the overall dynamics of Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU

The majority of experts who participated in the survey (80%) consider Ukraine's European aspirations to be a civilizational choice (Figure 1)⁵⁴.

Figure 1. Do you agree with the following statement: Ukraine's European aspirations have been regarded as a civilizational choice and as a full display of actorness, namely the right and capacity to choose its own place in the international system (from 5 – strongly agree to 1 – do not agree at all), %



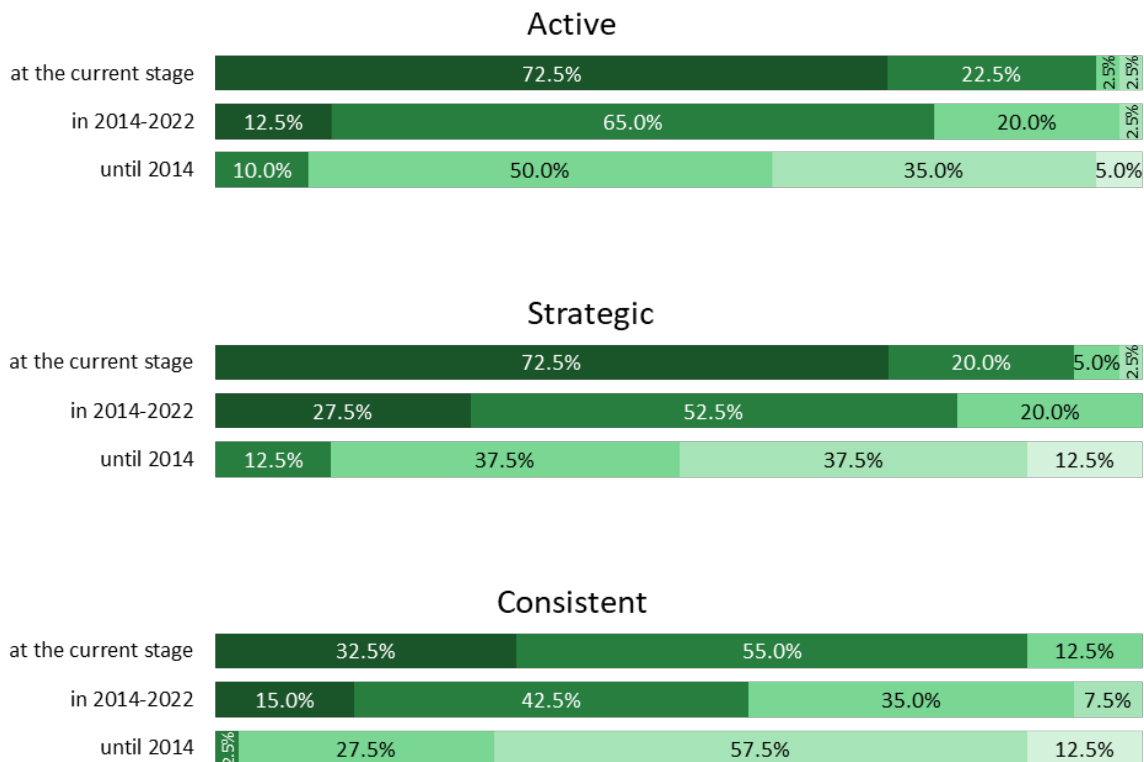
While being asked to characterise Ukraine's relations with the EU in one word, the experts were rather positive in their replies, assessing this cooperation as progressing, friendly, partnership oriented and hope generating. Concurrently, Ukraine's European integration process so far is seen as challenging but hopeful and promising (Figure 2). Experts acknowledge a positive dynamic in cooperation between Ukraine and the EU. While Ukraine's foreign policy in relation to the EU before 2014 is overall perceived as challenged, slow, chaotic and opportunistic, Ukraine's foreign policy in the 2014-2024 timeframe is assessed as active, strategic, consistent and driven by Ukraine's national interests. At the same time the experts express concerns over a certain decrease in efficiency and a higher number of challenges facing Ukraine's integration efforts since the beginning of the full-scale war (Figure 3).

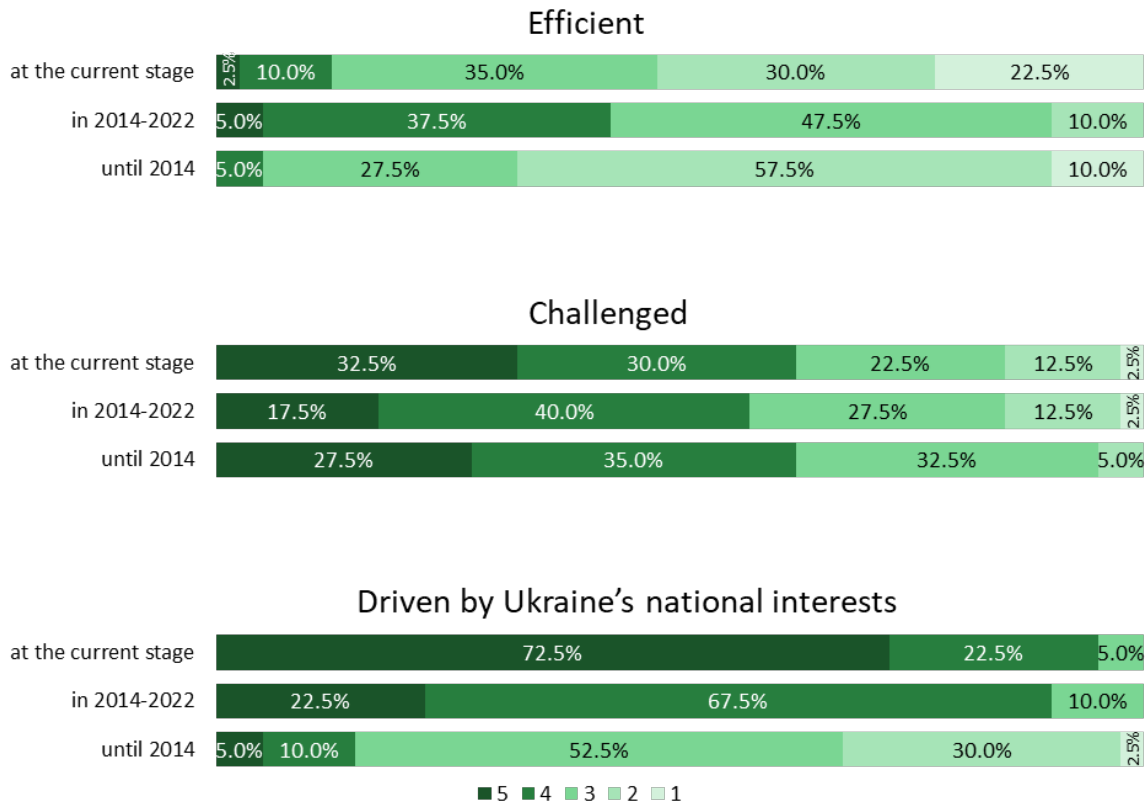
⁵⁴ Here and henceforth: own representation based on the survey data

Figure 2. Perceptions of Ukraine's relations with the EU and European integration endeavours



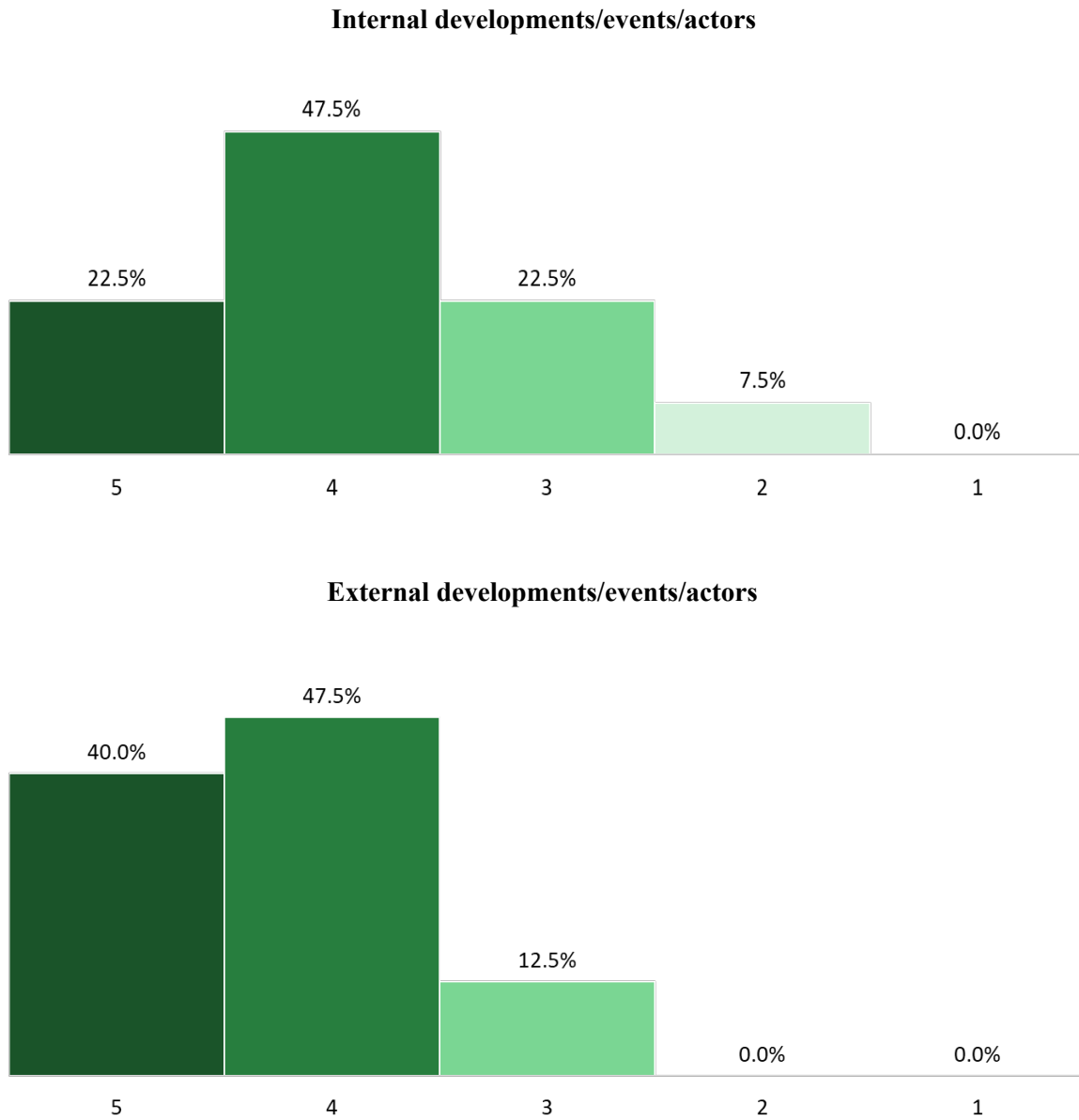
Figure 3. When it comes to Ukraine's relations with the EU at various stages (until 2014, in 2014 – 2022, at the current stage), to which extent do you consider Ukraine's foreign policy to be (from 5 – the most to 1 – the least), %





According to the respondents, both internal and external developments had a significant impact on the overall development of Ukraine's relations with the EU: *'The context influences effectiveness a lot – both internal and international context. Internally, in the past in Ukraine there had been much less societal support for the EU and NATO and also much less awareness about Russia as a real threat [...]. Internationally, the perception of Ukraine was very much driven by the perception of Russia and the so-called post-Soviet world. [...]. The more difficult it was to promote domestically the European and Euro-Atlantic integration to the population, the more difficult it would have been to participate in the negotiations externally and to get some developments and vice versa. It is kind of a vicious circle.'* At the same time, the influence of external factors is perceived as slightly higher (Figure 4). The slow pace of reforms (27.5%) and lack of rule of law (25.0%) are seen as the main internal challenges for the development of Ukraine's relations with the EU. The so-called Russian factor is perceived to be the most important external challenge for the development of Ukraine's relations with the EU.

Figure 4. The impact of external and internal challenges on the overall development of Ukraine's relations with the EU, % (rated from 1 to 5; where 5 – the most and 1 – the least)



Concurrently, the experts define the following stumbling blocks for Ukraine's European integration: the ongoing war with Russia, temporarily occupied territories, affected economy (72,5%); insufficient reforms in Ukraine and lack of political will for reforms (40,0%); individual position of some EU member states (25,0%); corruption in Ukraine (22,5%). The experts believe there were more obstacles to Ukraine's European integration in the past than today, despite the ongoing war (Figure 5). Such perception could be explained by the overall shift in the geopolitical paradigm triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion.

'As the geopolitical context changes, the rationale changes; and we now have a different justification for [the EU] enlargement related to geopolitical concerns, which makes it easier to

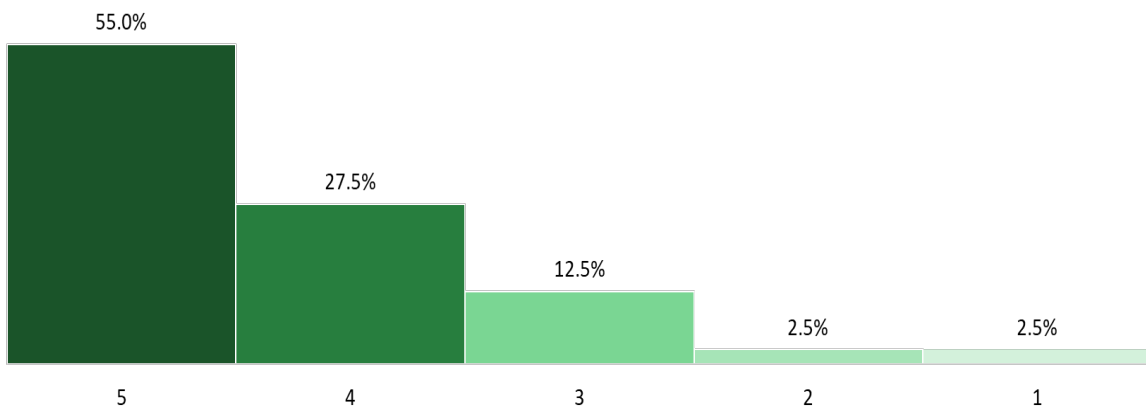
defend the need for enlargement. Without this, it would have been difficult for Ukraine, even with reforms’.

‘The general geopolitical picture plays a much stronger role than all other things related to corruption and internal overflow challenges in Ukraine’.

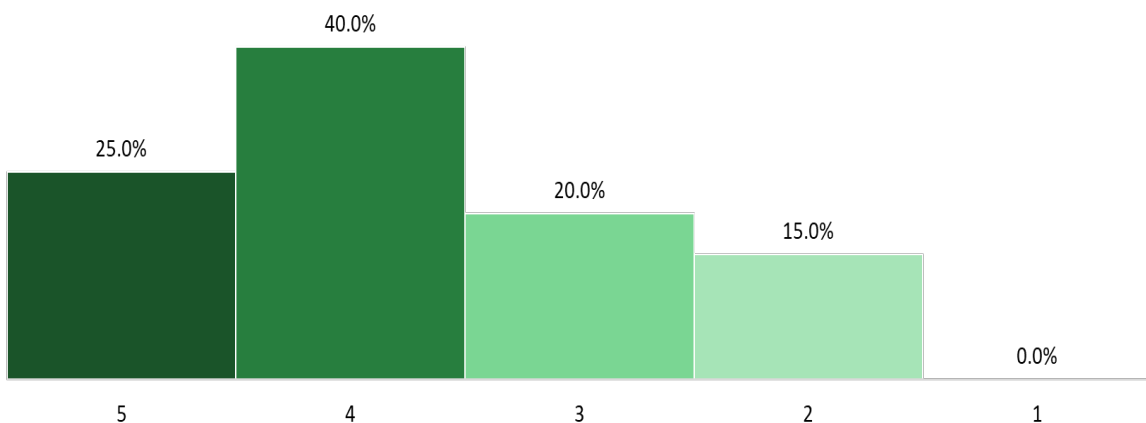
‘I think it is a much broader picture [...], it is geopolitics. [...]. They [Europeans] felt that probably they needed to make some moves, even a symbolic action, given that there was no timing attached to this [candidate] status’.

Figure 5. To which extent do you agree with the following statements (please rate from 1 to 5; where 5 – strongly agree and 1 – do not agree at all):

In the past, there were many obstacles to Ukraine’s European integration



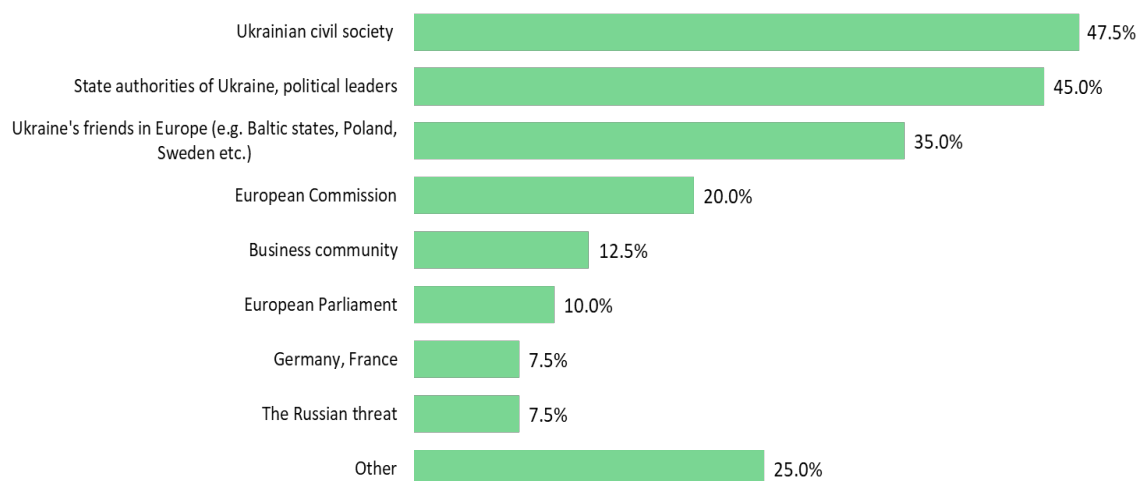
At the current stage, there are many obstacles to Ukraine’s European integration



The experts believe that further enhancement of Ukraine's relations with the EU is triggered first and foremost by the civil society (Figure 6), which is seen *‘a big part of Ukraine’s actorness’*. The Euromaidan movement, with its societal demands to follow the European path, *‘has*

contributed enormously to increasing Ukraine's actorness [...]. As argued by the experts, 'from this perspective, both the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity [...] increased Ukraine's actorness in the framework of relationship with the EU. After these events, initiated by the civil society, the EU reacted with some very practical efficient responses [...]. So, I think that Ukraine's actorness will be always driven by civil society'. In the current situation, an important role is also played by those Ukrainians who are staying abroad, 'including those who had to leave the country due to the security reasons but started actively lobbying Ukraine's interest within the EU countries'. Ukrainians abroad 'do not only provide some financial support, they also play an important role in advocating, creating a media space for the others to understand Ukraine, providing expertise and launching various initiatives'. The contribution of the Ukrainian civil society is assessed as highly significant given that 'in any critical moment of the modern history of Ukraine, it is first and foremost about the contribution of the civil society, its resistance and resilience, and readiness to defend Ukrainian statehood and European prospect. Whereas political elite was often hesitant, imitative and, I would say, hypocritical even, the civil society was proactive'. Although at the current stage, the efforts of Ukraine's political pro-European establishment is overall highly assessed (Figure 6). It is argued that 'governments in Ukraine [...] did their best to promote Ukraine's European inspirations, but still the context was very different. So, it was probably not possible context-wise to do more and to do it better back then'. To this end, the synergy between government and society is of a great significance. Today in Ukraine, there are many organisations 'which provide analytical support to the government. By this, they increase the capacity of the government [...]. Accordingly, this partnership can be very effective, especially while united around a common idea, like it happened with the membership application. And the government recognizes this by not privatising all the achievements'⁵⁵.

Figure 6. Who are the main actors which facilitate Ukraine's European integration? %



Since the war began, Ukraine has demonstrated its most effective actorness since independence, according to the experts. Despite the war, Ukraine has moved closer to the

⁵⁵ For instance, the vice-head of the President's Office, highlighted the role of experts in the membership negotiations with the EU, <https://www.kyivpost.com/uk/post/26265>

EU, including starting talks for EU membership. Additionally, Ukraine is highly motivated to align itself with the West and has actively participated in Western organisations like the EU and NATO. Membership in such organisations is seen as *'a lifeline for the country's statehood'*. At the current stage, Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU *'is capacitated by the war effort the country is embroiled in and by the volatile security environment. [...] Ukraine's capacity and resilience to withstand Russia for more than two years has been motivating the EU to support Ukraine. Ukraine's actorness equates in this case to the country's capacity to survive'*.

Remarkably, the ongoing war is perceived as both the challenge for Ukraine's European integration endeavours and the main engine to further enhance the relations with the EU.

'It is not regardless of all the hardships generated by the war [Ukraine managed to obtain a candidate status during wartime], it's only because of the war. The EU realised that keeping Ukraine in the grey area, between the EU bloc and Russia, would be further instability for the country. [...]. Thus, the enlargement process has in the case of Ukraine mostly a stabilisation and security rationale. Hadn't been for the war, I'm not sure Ukraine would have been able to obtain the candidate status and begin accession talks anytime soon'

'Currently, the main stumbling block is obviously the war which affects Ukraine's statehood and ability to exert control over its occupied territories. Moreover, the war effort consumes Ukraine's energies which could have been, otherwise, focused on reforms'

'The Russian war against Ukraine and the critical situation [caused by this war] both for Ukraine and the EU have made Ukraine's EU candidacy possible, and now we [Ukrainians] are as close to the EU's membership as never before in our history'

There are two main ways for Ukraine to further strengthen its actorness, according to expert perceptions: (1) Ukraine's victory in the war and (2) consistent implementation of reforms. The outcome of the war is perceived as the main litmus test for Ukraine's actorness.

'When Ukraine is close to victory, for example, to fully regaining its territories according to the internationally recognized borders, [...], this would overshadow any kind of rule of law requirements etc. That is security that matters much more.'

'Ukraine is in dire straits right now and needs to withstand the ongoing push by the Russians. Ukraine's future political moves depend massively on the outcome of the war'

'Ukraine will be so much different after this war [...], it is important to have a vision how to rebuild the country after, how the country will look like. [...] The victory and success of Ukraine's future development will impact its actorness internationally'

'Complying with the EU requirements [...] is so important. But I think what is even more important is to continue military actions against Russia and to show some success there. I think whenever Ukraine shows success at the battlefield, this will increase Ukraine's actorness not just in the EU but everywhere'

In addition, the interviewed experts expressed the idea of collective regional actorness, highlighting that the relations with neighbouring countries have to be if not prioritised then at

least seriously considered: *'[...] you need to be sensitive to what the neighbours are interested in, and this is the way how you can make neighbours even more genuinely allied'*. From this point of view, integration into the regional initiatives is also seen of an added value: *'We can also use the Three Seas initiative as a way to bring us closer together. On one side we have the EU member states from Central Eastern Europe. On the other side, there are other participating partners - Ukraine, Moldova. And by discussing very concrete topics (e.g. digital interconnectivity, transportation), we can help each other to overcome obstacles'*. This could be considered as a starting point of regional actorness, given that the neighbouring countries *'understand better what the danger is'*.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Ukraine's relationship with the EU has evolved gradually over the years, with European integration generally seen as a strategic goal for Ukraine's foreign policy. According to experts, Ukraine has always behaved rather actively in relation to the EU, albeit within certain limitations. These limitations stemmed from certain external and internal factors. Internally, Ukraine was not always ready to fully commit to European reforms, often being stuck in domestic rivalries between various political groups which sought to play off both the EU and Russia within the multi-vector algorithm of Ukraine's foreign policy. Externally, Russia did not accept Ukraine's full autonomy to decide upon its ultimate foreign policy choice and thus instrumentalized ties established under Soviet rule to keep Ukraine within its political orbit. Meanwhile, the EU has not signalled any clear European perspective for Ukraine and has been rather sceptical about enlargement. Arguably, such a European approach could be attributed not only to overall enlargement fatigue, but also to a general lack of trust in Ukraine. Despite the formal elements of agency on the international arena, in the eyes of its European partners, Ukraine was still seen as lacking internal cohesion and consensus regarding the foreign policy priorities, which ultimately led to little recognition of its credibility.

The 2004 Orange Revolution is considered as a pivotal moment when Ukraine showed its explicit will to be part of Europe, despite Russian pressure to hinder Ukraine's European path, or the EU's then reluctance to give consent on the accession perspective. Back then, Ukrainian civil society and political elites prevented the election of the pro-Russian candidate as president of Ukraine and resisted Russian influence during the election process. The election results also highlighted a growing consensus on prioritising a European future for the country. Despite the delays in implementing reforms, Ukraine's commitment to these changes increased trust in the country and paved the way for recognizing its right to pursue European integration. The EU's tools, applied to its neighbouring country, strengthened internal democratic and reformist trends.

The dynamics of negotiations with the EU have accelerated reforms which are perceived as the main pillars for the future of sovereign 'European Ukraine' capable of resisting Russian malign influence over the long term. Reforms aligned with European standards and norms have strengthened Ukraine's institutional capacity in areas such as democracy and the rule of law. Meanwhile, the mutual liberalisation of trade restrictions has not only created new opportunities for cooperation but also enhanced the state's resilience. This has allowed Ukraine to act with deliberate intent, guided by what many experts describe as its 'civilizational choice'. The first two decades of Ukraine's relationship with the EU could be seen through a 'student and teacher' lens. However, over time, Ukraine has gradually enhanced its agency and became more assertive in its expectations towards the EU. External pressure from Russia, especially after 2014, has further intensified this shift when Ukraine signed the Association Agreement, making European integration its clear and singular path. Ukraine's foreign policy towards the EU, once characterised as challenged, slow, chaotic, and

opportunistic before 2014, has since transformed into one that is more active, strategic, consistent, and driven by national interests.

Ukraine's actorness in relation to the EU, as perceived by experts, reached its peak following Russia's full-scale invasion. Under immense pressure from the ongoing war, President V. Zelenskyy signed an application for EU membership on February 28, 2022. This move might have been largely symbolic if not for the significant mobilisation of resources, made possible through the cooperative framework previously established with the EU. Decades of reforms driven by close collaboration between state institutions and civil society bolstered the effectiveness of Ukraine's actorness. As a result, Ukraine's efficiency and strong presence on the international stage not only drew increased attention from global partners but also enhanced its attractiveness.

Ukraine's closer engagement with the European Union is a unique case, as accession negotiations were initiated while the country was facing serious security threats. While the ongoing war is seen as a challenge to Ukraine's European integration efforts, it is also recognized as a key driver in strengthening ties with the EU. In resisting Russian aggression, Ukraine has demonstrated increased national resilience, built on both internal capacities and growing international recognition.

Future relations between Ukraine and the EU will involve not only legal harmonization but also a mutual display of European and Ukrainian actorness. Russia will likely continue to challenge this dynamic by undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and casting doubt on the EU's enlargement prospects. It is crucial for both the EU and Ukraine to shape this interaction constructively. This can be achieved by recognizing Ukraine's long and successful history of European integration, acknowledging the reforms already implemented, and emphasizing the resilience developed through these efforts, which has played a key role in Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression.

According to expert perceptions, Ukraine managed to demonstrate its legal authority to act on the international arena, autonomy to act notwithstanding the assertiveness of the external actors, internal political consensus and cohesion regarding the foreign policy priorities, attractiveness to the EU member states (with some exceptions though), credibility in implementing reforms and recognition by the EU which have resulted in opening accession negotiations. After establishing itself as a legitimate, attractive, and reliable actor, Ukraine should focus on becoming a framing force. As the EU works towards eventually strengthening its global role as a normative power, Ukraine can contribute to shaping EU reforms which are likely necessary given potential enlargement and increasing pressure from Russia.

Cooperation between civil society and political elites proved to be one of the driving forces for the manifestation of Ukraine's agency vis-à-vis the EU. Even in case of the deficit of the political will to ensure reforms, civil society has been advocating for and promoting them. Such a sustainable and pro-reformist approach ensured the credibility of the inevitability of Ukraine's European integration. Therefore, European trust in civil society should be

instrumentalized by inclusive approaches of the state, as well as engagement of civil and expert societies into policies' drafting and decision-making processes.

It is also important to maintain Ukraine's international appeal and visibility. Subsequent reforms and integration efforts should be communicated clearly to European audiences and actively promoted at the level of national governments across Europe. This could build further trust in Ukraine and position it as a key actor in shaping the narrative. To achieve this, Ukraine's civil society could take on a leading role and be seen as an ideal intermediary.

The mutual strengthening of the EU and Ukraine's actorness vis-à-vis Russia is also an asset. Efficiency in this regard can be achieved by the further inclusion of Ukraine in the development of European policies towards Russia. Additionally, fostering networking collaborations within the expert community can provide the necessary foundation for such cooperation.

Appendix 1. List of the interviewed experts

1. Dr. Maryna Rabinovych, Post-Doctoral Researcher at the University of Agder, Associate Professor at Kyiv School of Economics
2. Dr. Anatoliy Kruglashov, Professor, Head at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University
3. Dr. Halyna Protsyk, Deputy Vice-Rector for Outreach and Social Engagement (for Internationalization), Ukrainian Catholic University
4. Dr. Teodor Lucian Moga, Associate Professor at the Centre for European Studies, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi
5. Dr. Anne Pintsch, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Management, University of Agder
6. Dr. Olga Oleinikova, Senior Lecturer and Director of the SITADHub (Social Impact Technologies and Democracy Research Hub) at the School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney
7. Svitlana Taran, EPC-KBF Research Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at the European Policy Centre
8. Dr. Natalia Chaban, Professor at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Canterbury
9. Pavol Demes, Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Bratislava office
10. Dr. Liliana Popescu, Director General at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute
11. Wojciech Przybilski, Editor-in-Chief at Visegrad Insight and President at the Res Publica Foundation
12. Dr. Mihai Sebe, Head of Department at the European Affairs Department, Associate Editor at the Romanian Journal of European Affairs
13. Dr. Yurii Vdovenko, Head of Center for Cross-Border Cooperation
14. Olexia Basarab, Eisenhower Fellow, Chairperson at Ukrainian House Žilina
15. Dr. Kateryna Zarembo, Non-Resident Fellow at Central European University
16. Dr. Inna Melnykovska, Assistant Professor in Comparative Political Economy at the Political Science Department, Central European University



REPORT

UKRAINE'S ACTORNESS IN RELATION TO THE EU IN TIMES OF WAR

EXPERT PERCEPTIONS AND INSIGHTS

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www.prismua.org



info@prismua.org



+38093 57 88 405

