

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Ukraine

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Ukraine's main objectives to join the EaP initiative

Fifteen years ago, Ukraine became a member of the Eastern Partnership initiative alongside 5 other former Sovietized countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova. Prior to this, Ukraine was only part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). By establishing the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the EU finally differentiated EU eastern and southern partners and designated a new status for countries like Ukraine, eager for a European future. However, while the EaP certainly raised the status of these Eastern European countries, there was still the challenge that Ukraine was placed into a group of countries that were far behind in the European integration process. Moreover, some of them, like Belarus, had much lower or no aspiration to join the EU.

Since the start of the ENP in 2004, EU-Ukraine Relations made significant progress. In 2008, a visa facilitation agreement was signed, and Ukraine was also one of the first ENP countries to be granted a Governance Facility in 2005. Furthermore, the EU already supported the harmonization of Ukrainian law and the country's capacity building through instruments such as Twinning and Taix in 2005. Ukraine was therefore far closer to the EU than other EaP countries. Taking this into consideration, Ukraine's main initial objectives to join the EaP initiative were the liberalization of trade and mobility with the bloc. Also, in the first years of the Eastern Partnership, Ukraine concentrated on the development of the Association Agreements with the EU.

Besides bilateral relations between the EU and partner states and various bilateral programs, the Eastern Partnership also includes the multilateral dimension of cooperation featuring different initiatives and expert panels.

The main objectives of Ukraine's joining the EaP are reflected in the thematic platforms launched in 2009. These platforms are decent facilitation tools between the partner states for the implementation of reforms. The platforms also promote the establishment of direct links between the experts of partner countries and the EU member states.

The following thematic platforms are currently active:

- Democracy, good governance and stability: focusing on democracy consolidation, human rights, security and stability;
- Economic integration and convergence with EU policies: focusing on trade, regulatory approximation, environment and climate change;
- Energy security: focusing on diversification of energy sources, energy efficiency and renewable energy, energy policies;
- People-to-people contacts: focusing on culture interconnections, education, and science, media, and information flows.¹

¹Eastern Partnership <https://ukraine-eu.mfa.gov.ua/en/2633-relations/spivpracya-ukrayina-yes-u-sferi-zovnishnoyi-politiki-i-bezpeki/shidne-partnerstvo>

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative has played a vital role in enhancing Ukraine's cooperation with other EaP countries by providing a multilateral framework that fosters collaboration in matters of shared challenges. Through platforms focused on governance, economic integration, and security, Ukraine has benefited from closer ties with countries like Georgia and Moldova, especially in advancing democratic reforms, trade liberalization, and infrastructure projects aimed at energy security.

Diverging political orientations within the EaP, particularly regarding Belarus and Armenia, present obstacles to deeper regional cohesion. Despite these challenges, Ukraine's partnerships with like-minded countries have grown, especially through initiatives like the Associated Trio 2, which aligns Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in their European integration goals. The EaP thus remains a crucial vehicle for fostering cooperation and aligning Ukraine's policies with its broader European ambitions.

Belarus' suspension from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and its support for Russian aggression effectively removes the possibility of cooperation with Belarus for Ukraine. Additionally, the ongoing instability between Azerbaijan and Armenia limits multilateral collaboration in the region. Despite these challenges, Ukraine's cooperation with Moldova remains strong, as both countries are now EU candidates, while Georgia continues to pursue its European perspective. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, through the Associated Trio, aim to strengthen regional ties and advance their shared goal of European integration. This shifting landscape within the EaP highlights the growing need for differentiation between countries committed to EU membership and those with divergent political alignments, such as Belarus and Armenia. The focus for Ukraine's future cooperation in the EaP lies in economic integration, security, and aligning with countries that share its democratic and European aspirations.

1. **Boost the Associated Trio's Integration:** The EaP can provide targeted programs for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to harmonize their EU-related reforms and accelerate economic and political integration.
2. **Joint Security Initiatives:** Support regional defense cooperation by promoting joint training, intelligence sharing, and cybersecurity collaboration to counter common threats.
3. **Regional Infrastructure Projects:** Facilitate joint energy and transport projects to strengthen economic ties and energy security, reducing reliance on Russia.

These steps would enhance trilateral cooperation within the EaP and support their European integration efforts.

Main priorities and expectations

The main priorities and expectations of Ukraine regarding the Eastern Partnership can be summarized as follows.

Through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Association Agreements, Ukraine secured free trade and a visa-free regime with the EU, making the EU its main trading partner after Russia's aggression. To align with EU standards, Ukraine began harmonizing its laws and launched reforms across sectors like law enforcement and energy. In 2021, Ukraine, Georgia, and

² Dmytro Kuleba: Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova establish the Association Trio
<https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/dmitro-kuleba-ukrayina-gruziya-ta-moldova-zapochatkuvali-asocijovane-trio>

Moldova formed the Associated Trio within the EaP to pursue clearer EU membership guidance. Additionally, Ukraine uses the EaP to drive economic development, focusing on investment, improving the business climate, and diversifying trade relations while gaining access to EU markets and infrastructure support.³

Ukraine is a strategic transit country for energy resources, making energy security a key priority within the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Ukraine seeks support in diversifying energy sources, improving energy efficiency, and strengthening its energy infrastructure, especially amid Russian missile attacks. Additionally, Ukraine looks to collaborate on environmental issues, such as pollution, climate change, and sustainable development, which have worsened due to the war. The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly has called for continued investment in Ukraine's energy transition and for funding multi-country projects to meet future energy demands.⁴

In summary, Ukraine's engagement with the Eastern Partnership prioritizes tightening relations with the EU amidst Russian aggression. As Ukraine advances towards EU accession, ongoing support is crucial, especially following the recent decision to open accession negotiations. Ukraine uses the partnership to drive economic development, energy security, environmental challenges, and others, showcasing the shared commitment to regional resilience and prosperity.

Successful projects, main benefits, and deliverables

It goes without saying that the main successful benefits for Ukraine within the Eastern Partnership framework include:

- *Association agreement.* This agreement ensures political and economic convergence between Ukraine and the EU. The recent milestone is a political decision to open accession negotiations, a negotiation framework proposed by the European Commission, and continuous deepening in the form of a pre-accession screening of legislation.
- *Visa liberalization.* The Eastern Partnership has facilitated visa liberalization dialogue between Ukraine and the EU, leading to a visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens traveling to the Schengen Area. This has increased people-to-people contacts, boosted tourism, and enhanced cultural exchanges between Ukraine and EU member states.

Other benefits include:

- **Reforms and Institutional Strengthening:** The EaP helps Ukraine implement political, economic, and institutional reforms aligned with EU standards in areas like the judiciary, anti-corruption, public administration, and human rights, offering technical and financial support.

³ Rehina Chulinina. Article "Format with an uncertain future: history, achievements and prospects of the Eastern Partnership" - <https://prismua.org/history-and-achievements-of-eastern-partnership/>

⁴ Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on the economic impact of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine and the Eastern Neighbourhood, 20.3.2024

- **Economic Development:** Ukraine gains access to EU funds and programs supporting economic growth, infrastructure projects, and competitiveness through initiatives like the European Neighborhood Instrument and European Investment Bank financing.
- **Civil Society and People-to-People Ties:** The EaP fosters closer cooperation between Ukrainian and EU civil societies through exchange programs and initiatives, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding.

In 2020 the EaP 20 Deliverables for 2020 expired. Ukraine's progress was assessed based on specific deliverables:

1. Cross cutting deliverables: structured engagement with civil society, gender equality and non-discrimination, strategic communications and plurality and independence of media
2. Economic development and Market Opportunities: regulatory environment and SME development, gaps in access for finance and financial infrastructure, new job opportunities at local and regional level, harmonization of digital markets, trade and DCFTA implementation
3. Strengthening institutions and good governance: rule of law and anti-corruption mechanisms, implementation of key judicial reforms, implementation of public administration reform, security
4. Connectivity, energy efficiency, environment: extension of the TEN-T core networks, energy supply, energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, environment and adaptation to climate change
5. Mobility and people-to-people contacts: visa liberalization and mobility partnerships, youth, education, skill development, and culture, Eastern Partnership European School, research and innovation

Overall, the evaluation yielded satisfactory results. It was recommended that Ukraine increases its involvement in EU programs and initiatives, both within and outside the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework, particularly those with potential for deeper thematic or sectoral integration.⁵

Challenges and hardships

While the Eastern Partnership offers numerous opportunities and benefits for Ukraine, there are also several challenges and hardships associated with the partnership. The main challenges were:

1. No clear step-by-step plan outlined for Ukraine to become an EU member.

While the EaP offered ways to deepen the relationship between the EU and the six Eastern neighbors through further economic and political integration, it did not offer a direct path to EU membership which was important for some members like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. It can be explained with so-called enlargement fatigue in the EU at the time. Radoslaw Sikorski suggested that the period of EaP membership should be dedicated to prepare for the time when

⁵ UKRAINE'S IMPLEMENTATION OF 20 EASTERN PARTNERSHIP DELIVERABLES FOR 2020 Monitoring report by the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP Civil Society Forum <https://www.civic-synergy.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Ukraine-s-Implementation-of-20-Eastern-Partnership-Deliverables-for-2020-.pdf>

this fatigue would diminish. Thus the Eastern Partnership could be optimistically perceived as a tool to prepare countries for the eventual submission of membership applications.⁶

2. The lack of Ukrainian society consolidation on EU membership.

However, some of the confusion between the parties was mutual. Despite Ukrainian declarations of EU membership as a strategic goal ever since 2005, public approval for it stood at a mere 46% in 2012. Even after the Orange Revolution, political elites in Kyiv hesitated to pursue closer ties, with consideration given to the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area until 2014. However, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war that year shifted perceptions, leading to increased pro-European sentiment in both the public and the elites. This shift was primarily driven by Russia's actions, highlighting the EU's secondary role in shaping Ukrainian aspirations.⁷

3. The lack of political will in the EU to challenge Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

This is also an explanation for the fact that the Eastern Partnership initiative didn't cover security aspects. Russia's position here also had much influence. In response to the Bucharest Summit, Russia started the war in Georgia, which aimed to show the EU and NATO that the former Sovietized countries are under Russia's patronage. Russia is ready to defend this order even if it requires using military means.

Apart from these factors, Ukraine's economy faces various challenges, including macroeconomic instability, high levels of debt, and dependence on external financial assistance. Structural reforms are needed to improve the business environment, enhance competitiveness, and promote sustainable economic growth. Additionally, the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022 disrupt economic activity and hamper development efforts.

One more point of Ukraine's dissatisfaction with the Eastern Partnership initiative was that it was believed to be underfunded. The recent Euronest Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on the economic impact of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine and the Eastern Neighborhood stresses that the NextGenerationEU Fund and Recovery and Resilience Facility component, under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework, are not sufficient to cover the financial needs caused by the war in Ukraine. The resolution suggests engaging international partners for support and expertise⁸.

Recently, Dmytro Kuleba outlined that over the past year since the last Eastern Partnership summit, the region has undergone huge changes: Russia started a full-scale war against Ukraine, Belarus suspended its participation in the initiative and joined the aggression, and the situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia is unstable. Meanwhile, Ukraine and Moldova have become candidates for EU membership, and Georgia has received a European perspective.

While one country in the region was purposefully implementing an aggressive and anti-European policy, the EU's strategy should have been focused on reducing the gray zone of

⁶ Rehina Chulinina. Article "Format with an uncertain future: history, achievements and prospects of the Eastern Partnership" - <https://prismua.org/history-and-achievements-of-eastern-partnership/>

⁷ The EU and Ukraine's Public Opinion: Changing Dynamic <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-and-ukraines-public-opinion-changing-dynamic>

⁸ Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on the economic impact of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine and the Eastern Neighbourhood, 20.3.2024

uncertainty to the east of its border and integrating those countries that sought to defend their European choice and identity. Putin perceived the EU's uncertainty regarding its eastern neighbors as an invitation to aggression.⁹

Special attention should be paid to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) as one of the most challenging projects, primarily because of the significant legal, economic, and political reforms required by Ukraine. Since the DCFTA was provisionally applied in January 2016, Ukraine has made significant strides in aligning its regulations with EU standards in areas such as competition, public procurement, sanitary and phytosanitary standards, and technical barriers to trade. However, the implementation process has been uneven, with Ukraine still facing challenges in fully adopting and enforcing EU-aligned regulations.¹⁰ The main challenges are:

1. **Regulatory Convergence:** Ukraine has made progress in aligning its legislation with EU standards, but full implementation remains difficult due to the complexity of EU regulations and Ukraine's limited institutional capacity.
2. **Economic Barriers:** Ukraine's economy, already strained by the conflict with Russia, faces challenges in complying with some of the EU's high standards, particularly in agriculture and industrial sectors.
3. **War and Economic Instability:** The ongoing conflict with Russia, particularly since the full-scale invasion in 2022, has significantly disrupted economic activities, infrastructure, and trade, which directly impacts Ukraine's ability to fully implement the DCFTA.¹¹

From Ukraine's side, the priority is to accelerate legal reforms and strengthen governance and the rule of law. From the EU's side, continued financial and technical support, flexibility in standards, and enhanced security assistance are essential to support Ukraine's integration process and ensure regional stability.¹²

The Priority Action Plan for 2021-2022 (updated for 2023-2024) was introduced to accelerate the implementation of the DCFTA between the EU and Ukraine. The updated plan focuses on four key areas:

1. **Further Market Access:** Speeding up customs duty removal and expanding into sectors like public procurement and agriculture.
2. **Trade Facilitation:** Promoting technical cooperation and greater Ukrainian participation in EU regulatory bodies.
3. **Short-term Measures:** Steps like access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) and improving food safety regulations.

⁹ The Eastern Partnership of the EU needs to be modernized in light of Russia's aggression: <https://interfax.com.ua/news/political/877914.html>

¹⁰ EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-ukraine-deep-and-comprehensive-free-trade-area>

¹¹ EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/tradoc_150981.pdf

¹² Ukraine https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/ukraine_en

4. Dynamic Approximation: Regularly updating Ukraine's regulatory framework to align with the evolving EU acquis.¹³

This approach strengthens Ukraine's path toward deeper economic integration with the EU while addressing current challenges.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) presents both opportunities and challenges for Ukraine. To maximize engagement, Ukraine must accelerate reforms and comply with EU treaties, especially in the security sector to counter Russian aggression. The EaP offers access to EU markets, financial support, and infrastructure projects, which Ukraine should leverage to diversify its economy and attract investment. The 6th EaP Summit reaffirmed key objectives but noted the lack of a strong security component, which Ukraine continues to emphasize while the EU focuses more on resilience.

In December 2023 the foreign ministers of EaP countries stressed the importance of strengthening security and establishing connections with regions like Central Asia.

The Eastern Partnership can continue to work as a format for maintaining and establishing new ties between the countries of the region. However, in addition to the protection of democracy and human rights and the improvement of economic ties, its focus should be on security – personal, infrastructural, economic, informational, etc.

As for Ukraine separately, this format, according to the government's position, has not exhausted itself. In particular, during his online speech at the last Eastern Partnership summit in December 2022, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba proposed the following reforms: “First, the initiative should become a transit tool for those countries that are interested in strengthening political association and economic integration with the EU. Secondly, the powerful tool “Global Europe,” with a budget of almost 80 billion euros, should continue to be implemented. Thirdly, the Eastern Partnership should become a tool for deepening sectoral cooperation with the EU in the fields of security, migration, energy, transport, countering hybrid threats and disinformation. At the same time, the key component should be security itself.”¹⁴

In line with the priorities mentioned in previous paragraphs, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine stressed the importance of regional projects, cooperation within the energy field, and communication systems development, particularly integrating Ukrainian rail, road, and inland waterways into the indicative maps of the Trans-European Transport Network.

“In response to Russia's use of energy supplies as a weapon, there should be diversification of energy supply routes, reduction of dependence on Russian fossil fuels, transition to clean

¹³ PRIORITY ACTION PLAN For enhanced implementation of the EU-Ukraine DCFTA in 2023-2024 https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/ukraine_en

¹⁴ The Eastern Partnership of the EU needs to be modernized in light of Russia's aggression: <https://interfax.com.ua/news/political/877914.html>

energy, full synchronization of Ukraine's energy system with the ENTSO-E power grid, and integration into European energy markets,” said Dmytro Kuleba.¹⁵

As a candidate for EU membership, Ukraine views the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with a strategic lens, seeking changes that reflect its new status and deeper European integration goals. Ukraine advocates for:

1. **Differentiation:** The EaP should create a distinct track for countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (the "Associated Trio") that are actively pursuing EU membership, recognizing their progress through Association Agreements and DCFTAs.
2. **Security Focus:** Ukraine pushes for a stronger security component in the EaP, including defense cooperation and resilience against hybrid threats, which are crucial given the ongoing Russian aggression.
3. **Energy Independence:** The EaP should prioritize projects aimed at energy diversification, infrastructure resilience, and renewable energy to support Ukraine's energy security.

Ukraine believes these changes will make the EaP more relevant to the ambitions of countries committed to EU membership.

Ukraine can offer several key contributions to the EU to enhance cooperation in both regional and inter-regional formats:

1. **Strategic security partnership:**

Given its experience in dealing with Russian aggression, Ukraine can provide valuable expertise in countering hybrid threats, cyber defense, and military strategy. By sharing intelligence, coordinating security measures, and participating in joint EU-led defense initiatives, Ukraine can strengthen the EU's collective security framework, particularly in the Eastern European region.

2. **Energy security and transition:**

Ukraine holds significant potential in supporting EU energy diversification efforts. By collaborating on energy transit infrastructure and increasing its role in renewable energy development, Ukraine can help the EU reduce dependency on Russian energy. Moreover, Ukraine's integration into EU energy grids (like ENTSO-E) offers a pathway for deeper cooperation in sustainable energy projects.

3. **Economic and trade links:**

Ukraine can offer to deepen economic cooperation with the EU by enhancing trade routes, particularly through regional infrastructure projects like the development of transport corridors that connect the EU, Black Sea region, and beyond. Leveraging its agricultural and industrial sectors, Ukraine can position itself as a crucial trade partner within the EU's regional supply chains, boosting economic resilience.

¹⁵ Dmytro Kuleba took part in the Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmitro-kuleba-vzyav-uchast-v-ministerskomu-zasidanni-shidnogo-partnerstva>

By contributing in these areas, Ukraine not only enhances regional stability and economic growth but also positions itself as a strategic partner to the EU across a range of vital sectors.