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UKRAINE AND MULTILATERAL FORMATS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Taking stock and identifying the role for the EU

by Alisa Muzergues and Pavel Havlíček

LibMod Policy Paper

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NOTE TO THE READER

The first draft of this paper was presented in the fall of 2021, and therefore could not reflect on the subsequent developments, including outside Ukraine, resulting from the new phase of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine starting on 24 February 2022. However, many of its reflections, conclusions as well as policy recommendations for the EU, its member states and other international actors remain relevant and some have even gained in importance.

Although matters purely relating to security have been addressed separately in this series, this paper also discusses the security aspects of multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which has become a particularly urgent issue since February 2022. In particular, it covers the need to step up Ukraine's security and military cooperation with the EU and NATO, which has been traditionally compensated at the regional level and through relations with the CEE countries, as, for example, in the case of Poland and Lithuania and their Lublin Triangle format of cooperation with Ukraine.

Within this context, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive account of opportunities for Ukraine and the EU and all other parties interested in further upscaling the cooperation and promoting closer integration of Ukraine within the Euro-Atlantic community, for which the granting of EU candidacy status in June 2022 provided a new impetus. The EU and NATO should of course not be seen as exclusive of any other regional formats and initiatives. One could cite the example of the Three Seas Initiatives, which by granting a special status for Ukraine as a "participating partner", established institutional ties and opened new opportunities for further cooperation and Ukraine's closer integration not only within the larger Euro-Atlantic community, but also more particularly within the Central European context.

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ABOUT THIS POLICY PAPER

This policy paper was prepared for the project which LibMod implemented in cooperation with the Policy Planning Unit of the German Federal Foreign Office in 2021–22. The project brought together high-profile experts from think-tanks in the EU, Ukraine, and North America to discuss the EU's long-term policy towards Ukraine in key areas and develop policy recommendations. All policy papers initially served as input papers for the discussions and were finalised before being published.

1. INTRODUCTION

The starting point in the discussion on Ukraine's cooperation with Central Europe is that while the EU is a key actor both in the region and with respect to Ukraine's strategic environment, it is not the only game in town. The reality of Central and Eastern Europe became more complex after 2014, when a number of countries intensified their engagement with Ukraine, while others kept their distance and directed their attention elsewhere. Since the EU proved unable to deliver on some of Ukraine's aspirations, including most prominently cooperation in the field of security and stronger integration leading up to the EU and NATO membership(s), a number of cooperation formats were developed on the regional level to compensate for this. Thus, this paper aims at taking stock of the various multilateral formats and cooperation efforts in the CEE region and suggesting where the EU could step in, if at all, and by what means.

Following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity, which was sparked by the aspirations of Ukrainians towards the EU, and the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the intensification of international cooperation became one of the main priorities of Ukraine's post-revolutionary leadership. New formats of cooperation with the West emerged, and old ones were given a new meaning in the context of stark security, governance, and economic realities on the ground. The EU and NATO's significance as the primary protectors of Ukraine's statehood and territorial integrity further increased, while individual members of both alliances stepped up their bilateral commitments to support Ukraine.

In 2019, Ukraine also enshrined its strategic course at the constitutional level, with a stated objective of full membership in the European Union and in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This constitutional amendment provided a further incentive for both society and the government to mobilise and implement the essential reforms.

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Although the level of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU/NATO has intensified since 2014, the lack of political will and preparedness of these organisations to adress the internal and external challenges faced by Ukraine has generated a need for additional efforts. Most prominently, Ukraine's pursuit of increased security in the context of Russia's violation of its sovereignty and military aggression, needed to be satisfied. In addition, Ukrainian civil society's call upon the EU to play a stronger role in promoting the rule of law and good governance is legitimate, given the reluctance of political elites to undertake relevant reforms, and requires EU attention. Finally, the aspirations for stronger integration with the EU up to the prospect of EU membership drove Ukraine's foreign policy agenda with its new goal of building "small alliances" in the region to secure political support for potential EU membership. Against this background, new formats such as the Normandy Format and the G7 Ambassadors' Support Group for Ukraine were established, and Ukraine took the initiative to come up with new bilateral and multilateral formats for dialogue and cooperation.

This analysis will provide an overview of existing formats of multilateral cooperation, of which Ukraine is a member or a (potential) partner. It will identify overlapping and complementary activities, as well as examine the missing activities from the Ukrainian perspective and provide recommendations for operational synergies in the future. In addition, this material intends to deliver an in-depth look from the point of view of the European Union and its member states, primarily Germany, as well as other international organisations and partners (such as the USA, the UK), in order to analyse the potential for future engagement and cooperation.

Section 1. of this policy paper gives an overview of the existing multilateral formats and initiatives; this is followed by 2. Added value(s) and limits of such cooperation, including a critical comparative perspective; 3. The role and engagement of the EU, its member states and other international partners; 4. Potential for strengthening the EU's engagement; and 5. Conclusions and recommendations, outlining the possible steps and concrete actions that might be taken to maximise the Western cooperation with Ukrain in the future.

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1. OVERVIEW OF MULTILATERAL FORMATS AND INITIATIVES

2014 marked the beginning of a new phase in the development of Ukraine's position in the international arena and its bilateral, regional and multilateral relations with the Western partners. This intensification was driven by three main factors: firstly, efforts to restore Ukraine's sovereignty in response to Russian aggression; secondly, a clear declaration of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions, in contrast toits prior dubious multi-vector policy; and finally, Ukraine's readiness to undertake necessary, albeit often painful, transformation(s).

Russia's actions in Ukraine exposed the limitations of multilateral organizations in responding to modern security threats, which employ various methods of influence (cyber, economic, information, political, and conventional warfare). It also exposed these organizations' inability to enforce responsibility for violation of one of the main principles of international law – respect for the territorial integrity of a state.

The ongoing crisis of multilateralism[1] and the intensification of rivalry between major global powers have often paralyzed decision-making processes of international organizations and subsequently their ability to respond to crises. As a result, regional groupings of committed members have taken the forefront in addressing pressing issues, whether related to security or provision of development aid. These formats are much more agile and, therefore, thus more efficient, which make them even more relevant in times of crisis.

With a separate paper focusing on the EU's security role in Ukraine and synergies with other security providers,[2] this input paper provides a deeper analysis of various formats that may provide an impetus for a closer Euro-Atlantic integration as well as resilience in order to withstand external and internal challenges to the Ukrainian state.

In the framework of the analysis, 14 various formats with Ukraine's participation and/or potential for Ukraine and its future cooperation with the West were identified and divided in the following categories:

1) The EU-driven initiatives: the Eastern Partnership, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Energy Community;

2) Formats driven by EU Member States (including other actors) with respect to Ukraine: e.g. the Lublin Triangle, the G7 Ambassadors' Support Group; the Normandy Format;

3) Formats driven and co-driven by Ukraine: the Associated Trio, the Crimea Platform, the Quadriga Format;

4) Regional Central-European Formats with a potential for closer ties with Ukraine and/or including Ukraine as a member, including the Visegrad Group (V4+), the Central Five (C5), the Slavkov Format, the Weimar Triangle, the Three Seas Initiative, the Bucharest Nine (B9), Central European Initiative (CEI),[3] - Organisation of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).[4]

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2. ANALYSIS OF THE FORMATS AND INITIATIVES IN THEIR COOPERATION WITH UKRAINE

2.1. The EU-driven initiatives and formats

The EU has been the biggest provider of international support to Ukraine since the country's independence[5] through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation. **The Eastern Partnership** initiative (EaP), which was launched in 2009 as an Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, includes Ukraine and also Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.[6] It has managed to yield some tangible results, notably in the economic and trade areas and people-to-people contacts.

At the same time, for Ukraine and its citizens, the biggest achievement of cooperation with the EU has been made through a bilateral track, namely signing of the Association Agreement and establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and a subsequent visa liberalization process.[7] However, the EaP has not delivered in some areas, hence compensating / complementary formats emerged, as described below.

Another EU instrument which allows Ukraine to enhance cooperation with EU and non-EU neighbours and coordinate joint efforts to tackle regional issues is the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region**. The EUSDR unites 15 countries of the Danube basin, including nine EU member states. Ukraine is represented by four oblasts (regions): Odes'ka, Chernivets'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka and Zakarpats'ka which belong to the Danube region. This policy framework allows Ukraine to be actively involved in cross-border and regional programmes carried out on the EU level in the areas of mobility, environmental action, education, culture and tourism, and security

among others.[8] In addition, Ukraine became the first non-EU state to hold the Presidency of the macro region, from November 2021 until October 2022. This is another opportunity for Ukraine to enhance integration with its western regional partners but also an indicator of its proactive position towards the EU and its initiatives.

The Energy Community represents another venue for Ukraine for its integration within the European structures and the EU Single Market with energy. It is based on the exchange between the EU member states but also allows for closer cooperation with third parties, such as Ukraine and Moldova, as well as Norway, Turkey and, most recently, Georgia. The Western Balkan countries are also involved in the framework as potential members. The potential of the Energy Community, from which Ukraine – for various reasons – has benefitted only partially, lies especially in harmonisation of the energy acquis and promotion of reform efforts in this field, but it also allows for a more efficient exchange of electricity, gas or oil among the members. Ukraine has already fulfilled a number of criteria for becoming a contracting party, but there is still much to be achieved in terms of the reform process and closer harmonisation with the EU standards.

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2.2. Ad hoc formats / formats and initiatives that compensate for deficiencies of the EaP

2.2.1. Promoting European integration and political reforms (anti-corruption, rule of law)

Ukraine approximates its legislation according to the Association Agreement's provisions and schedules related to the DCFTA. At the same time, the biggest stumbling blocks in the way of Ukraine's successful democratic development are political, namely reform of the judicial sector and the fight against corruption. Given the absence of the specific requirements to the implementation of the political *acquis communautaire*,[9] the EU is not able to monitor and advocate for the reforms in these sectors. This in turn paved the way for the **G7 Ambassadors' Ukraine Support Group** to take the lead and complement the EU's not so public efforts in fostering reforms related to the rule of law. The group was established as a result of the G7 Summit in June 2015 in Elmau, Germany and has held regular meetings with Ukrainian officials, civil society actors, and other international partners with the aim of supporting Ukraine's reforms and exchanging views on the current political and economic situation.[10] The Group's efforts were especially appreciated by the local reformists, when in January 2021, they released a Roadmap for judicial and anti-corruption reforms.[11] Even though Ukraine's Western partners try to avoid publishing documents that might be perceived as interference in the political life of the state, the G7 representatives justified their action by the fact that the Ukrainian partners themselves had turned to them for advice.[12]

The EU had successfully advocated crucial anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine when in 2010, it made visa liberalization conditional on meeting benchmarks, including anti-corruption legislation and anti-corruption bodies. This might require an additional "carrot" to incentivize the "painful" reform process. The EaP initiative which was established with the aim of "building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability and increased cooperation" found itself by 2021 facing a very different geopolitical reality in the region, requiring a strong EU response, but this cannot be provided without EU's vision of its own global role and its engagement with the immediate neighbours, not the least with Ukraine.

Since 2014, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the security deficit in the region has demonstrated that the security aspect could not be ignored and that the EaP framework must complement the economic dimension with a security component, in particular in addressing hybrid threats in the areas of cyber security and counteraction of malign activity and disinformation.[13]

An uncertainty over the EU's membership perspective and willingness to further deepen cooperation with the Union, inspired the three EaP participants Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to join forces and launch an **"Associated Trio"** initiative. This idea, which was promoted by the Lithuanian MEP, Head of EURONEST Andrius Kubilius, initially received a hostile reaction in the Commission but it has since been officially noted by the EU.[14] The Associated Trio should be considered as an additional mechanism to support integration of the willing and the reform-oriented countries to the EU based on the differentiation and more-for-more principles. This complements the existing EaP framework based on further differentiation principle, furthermore the reform experience of the Trio countries can be used to extrapolate to other countries of the EaP as soon as the political environment allows.

2.2.2. Promoting the security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine

In response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the deliberate destabilisation of Ukraine, the EU gradually imposed restrictive measures against Russia[15] and

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pursued a policy of non-recognition towards temporarily occupied Crimea. At the same time, the EU's inability to provide a solution to the escalating conflict in its neighbourhood led to the establishment of the ad-hoc **Normandy Format**, which included France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. Already after the Format's last meeting in 2019, the talks had stalled. Russia's expectation that President Zelensky would proceed with the implementation of the political provisions of the Minsk agreements prior to military withdrawal and transfer of the border control to Ukraine was not fulfilled. The ideas of some security experts and Ukrainian politicians to revitalize the Format through inclusion of the US and / or the UK (both countries having been the signatories to the Budapest Memorandum[16]) as formal parts of the process never came to fruition. With Russia's full-scale invasion (or even a few days earlier, when Russia declared annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions) the format perished.

Given the fact that the attempts to include the issue of Crimea's de-occupation in the Normandy negotiations were constantly blocked by Russia with the aim of decoupling the issues of Crimea and Donbas, in August 2021, Ukraine launched an international multi-level **Crimea Platform**.[17] The prime goals of this ad-hoc format were to create a platform for coordination of both national and international efforts in monitoring and reacting to the (human rights, humanitarian, security) situation in occupied Crimea and bring the issue of Crimea back to the international agenda. In addition to the governmental track of High-Level Summits, the first of which was attended by the leaders and other representatives of 46 countries, the format foresaw cooperation and coordination of efforts on the interparliamentary level (within OSCE PA, NATO PA, PACE) and between experts. The first Parliamentary Summit of the Crimean Platform took place in Zagreb in October 2022 and was attended by delegations from over 50 countries and international institutions. The Expert Network, which brings

together experts, scholars, and human rights activists, works in seven thematic groups but has arguably provided the Western partners of Ukraine with thorough analysis on the developments in Crimea and the Black Sea region.

In the absence of the EU's comprehensive strategy towards the Black Sea Region amid the security vacuum and evolving dynamics, Ukraine has intensified its bilateral relations with Turkey. In December 2020, the inaugural meeting of an ad-hoc political and security consultation "Quadriga format" was held, which further institutionalised the previous strategic dialogue at the level of presidents. The meetings in the format of the Ministers of the Foreign Affairs and Defence of the respective countries are to be held on an annual basis in order to discuss the most pressing issues in the field of politics and regional security, and further to coordinate joint actions and develop new projects in the political, security, economic, and defence industry sectors.[18] This intensified cooperation, in particular in the defence area, has been poorly received in some EU capitals, which were already sceptical about Ukraine's prospects in the EU. Given the destabilization of the situation in the Black Sea region and the EU's geographical discrepancies regarding threat perception, the existence of a comprehensive joint strategy for the region developed in close cooperation with NATO is of utmost importance.

2.3. Regional Central European formats

With regard to the Central European cooperation, seven formats are considered (the Bucharest 9, the Central 5, the Lublin Triangle, the Slavkov Format, the Three Seas Initiative, the Visegrad Group, and the Weimar Triangle), which due to their composition and political dynamics have different potential for assisting Ukraine in its reform efforts and integration into Euro-Atlantic community.

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The **Visegrad Group** (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) is one of the most developed groupings not only in Central Europe but the EU in general. After joining the Euro-Atlantic community themselves, the V4 countries committed to assist third neighbouring countries in preparing themselves to become part of the European Union and NATO. The V4+EaP and V4+Ukraine formats were established, the latter after 2014. During the regular meetings on ministerial and expert levels, the Western neighbours of Ukraine shared their experience of transformation and in particular provided assistance in areas such as energy efficiency, decentralization, transregional cooperation, security and defence, but also education, digitalisation, and the environment. The V4 countries have also provided strong political and financial support to Ukraine especially since the start of the Russian aggression and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Czech Presidency in the V4, the Czech Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček initiated the extraordinary V4East-Solidarity Programme which foresaw financial contributions (EUR 250,000) to the EaP countries. Multilateral assistance to Ukraine has been granted through the International Visegrad Fund's grant and scholarship programmes. Projects have covered areas such as democratization, social and economic transformation or general modernisation leading to European integration, building of civil society, regional cooperation, and development of public administration. Ukraine has traditionally been the biggest non-V4 recipient of support from the Fund. Moreover, Visegrad Group members have also been allocating assistance to Ukraine bilaterally.[19] At the same time, for a number of years following 2014 there have been diverging tendencies in the V4 position on Ukraine and the Russian aggression against it, particularly visible in relations to Hungary and its pressure on Ukraine.[20, 21]

The intensification of debate on the future of the EU and the Rule of Law situation in its member states leads to decoupling within a group (Czechia + Slovakia and Hungary + Poland), which might only intensify with the formation of a new government in Czechia. At the same time, the stark deterioration of relations between Hungary and Ukraine over the situation of ethnic Hungarian minorities in Ukraine can lead to projection of the bilateral relations to the whole V4, especially when Hungary holds the Presidency over the grouping. This might provide an additional impetus for the intensification of cooperation between Ukraine and **the Central 5** (Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia) and the **Slavkov Format** (Austria, Czechia, Slovakia), which has been revived in the midst of the pandemic. In May 2021, the Foreign Minister of Ukraine joined the meeting of the Central 5 Foreign Affairs ministers and proposed three priority areas of cooperation between Ukraine and five Central European countries: vaccination of the population, safe travel for citizens, and business support in a pandemic.[22] The participants of the meeting have also discussed the security situation in Ukraine and the need for coordinated efforts against Russian aggression.

Another regional format which could play an important role in fostering the EU's cohesion and unity not only towards Ukraine, but the Eastern Neighbourhood in general is the **Weimar Triangle** (France, Germany, Poland). In March 2014, the chairs of Weimar Triangle parliamentary foreign affairs committees made a first ever joint trip to Kyiv in order to express their support for the territorial integrity and the European integration of Ukraine. Unfortunately, with increasing demands for cooperation of the three participating states on strategic issues, including the EU's geopolitical role and the security situation in the immediate neighbourhood, the potential of this format remains unused due to the deepening political and ideological disagreements between Warsaw and other capitals.

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In parallel to the Weimar Triangle, one of the aims of which was to integrate Poland into the Western community, another Triangle consisting of two EU and NATO member states Lithuania and Poland and aspiring country Ukraine, was established in 2020 – the **Lublin Triangle**. Given the historical and cultural ties between the three countries and a vocal support of Lithuania and Poland for Ukraine, especially since 2014, the format has a strong potential for developing cooperation and addressing the joint challenges. The countries have outlined the main areas of cooperation, including security, defence, energy, cyber threats, trade, culture, and the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. During the recent meeting, the Foreign Affairs ministers approved a joint action plan to combat disinformation and committed to cooperate not only on governmental and parliamentary levels within multilateral organizations, but also on expert and youth levels. Thus, the National Youth Councils of the three countries signed the memorandum of cooperation and established the Youth Lublin Triangle, which will intensify exchange and cooperation between young people.

Another fast-growing initiative which involves 12 Central and Eastern European EU member-states is **the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)**. The unique feature of this effort, which complements the existing formats, is that it aims to develop a north-south infrastructure axis, rather than a traditional east-west one. The 3SI was launched by the Presidents of Croatia and Poland in 2015, and since then the annual Summits at presidential level have been held across participating states, accompanied by a business forum (since 2018). The prime focus of the initiative is to enhance connectivity, with the development of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure. All of these areas are of great importance to Ukraine, and the desire to join the initiative was declared by high state officials, including President Zelensky.[23] At the same time, there was no official communication from the 3SI about the involvement of non-EU members.

Significant financial support of the 3SI priority projects is expected from the EU funds - with 41%, mostly coming through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and 24% from the national funds. The 3SI Investment Fund which was established in 2019 is expected to provide 9% of funding.[24] In addition, the initiative enjoys strong bilateral support in the US, as it is perceived as an alternative to Chinese (16 + 1) and Russian influence in the region. Ukraine used to be an observer within the 3SI but in June 2022 it was granted the status of "participating partner", which upgraded its standing and opened new opportunities for greater cooperation.

The Bucharest 9 (B9) is a regional grouping of political cooperation and coordination made up of NATO's Eastern Flank states. This was established in 2015 on the initiative of the Presidents of Poland and Romania in response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, including the illegal annexation and militarization of Crimea. Given the shared perception of the Russian threat and the importance of Transatlantic cooperation, the B9 platform, could become a vocal point in assisting Ukraine's transformation in the security and defence sector towards fulfilling its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This format used to lie outside of direct Ukraine's participation but offered an opportunity for ad hoc consultations and dialogue among the closest neighbours of Ukraine for their security and military posture.

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3. EU'S ROLE AND INTERACTION WITH THE REGIONAL FORMATS OF COOPERATION WITH UKRAINE

The European Union plays a key supportive role in various formats of cooperation with Ukraine, both on the bilateral, regional and cross-border levels as well as in *ad hoc* thematic and policy-based formats. The most visible example of the multilateral effort has clearly been the EU's Eastern Partnership policy, but a number of others have also been instrumental in integrating Ukraine closer with the West and the European project. At the same time, the EU and its Member States have been involved in a rich network of projects, initiatives and multi-layered formats of cooperation which have proved to be of crucial importance, especially since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. It is also the case that the EU institutions sometimes play a very weak role, if any, particularly in initiatives that are driven by Member States at regional level.

3.1. The EU-driven track

A common feature of the formats has been an attempt to bring Ukraine closer to the European block, which corresponds to the country's declared foreign and security policy goals enshrined in the Ukrainian Constitution. The Association Agenda creates an overall framework for promoting bilateral cooperation and facilitating relations at various levels, including political high-level (EU-Ukraine and the EaP Summits), parliamentary level (EURONEST), local and regional levels (CORLEAP), as well as societal and civil society level (the EaP Civil Society Forum and the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF). The multilateral working level established around four platforms and a number of panels dedicated to more specific issues (e.g. security, good governance, human rights, etc.) provides a rather efficient overall framework for exchange among the EU and the EaP countries

and civil society. This fact and Ukraine's orientation on the future EU membership makes this kind of cooperation unique and different from cooperation with any third country, including the United States, the United Kingdom or other global powers and players, such as China. Cooperation with the EU is also based on a highly normative agenda and a clearly defined set of values and fundamental principles stemming from the Eastern Partnership founding acts and common declarations, especially the Prague Summit Declaration of 2009.[25]

In the past, numerous studies[26,27] have examined and evaluated the impact of Europeanisation on Ukraine and its possible limitations as well as opportunities for future development. This is not our primary objective here, but, it is important to note that this year, the process of revision of Ukraine's Association Agreement is due to be concluded and the agreement finally revised, five years after the AA entered into force in 2017. This might offer a good opportunity to reflect on the mutual obligations. In September 2021, Ukraine's Commission on the coordination of implementation of the Association Agreement endorsed an Action Plan with 52 drafts in the area of European integration, which must be submitted for consideration by the Ukraine Government by the end of November. In addition, Ukraine has several strategic plans for implementation of the association agenda and coming closer to the European Union, including in the area of strategic communication.

Initiatives under the Trio cooperation has also started to develop into a more differentiated approach, including a new working group under the Euronest parliamentary assembly, a special parliamentary track of cooperation between the three

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parties, as well as direct high-level meetings of presidents, foreign ministers, and other governmental officials, which put the Trio initiative more on the EU radar and emphasize it in the cooperation with the EU. In addition, parliamentary coordination among the Trio has been in place since 2018.

The EU also has a presence on the ground in Ukraine, namely its delegation in Kyiv, which together with the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM), which specialises in the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), helps to promote the association agenda and coordinate the efforts of EU member states in this regard. The EUAM is a pragmatic tool that contributes to delivering concrete results in specific policy fields, with focus on the civilian security sector. It is also free from regular political negotiations at the level of EU27, which makes it easier to navigate in the political reality in Ukraine and is assessed positively by the partners.

On the other hand, the Black Sea Synergy is no longer efficient and operates only in a few elements, e.g. civil society cooperation, which is why it should be replaced by a more robust and overarching plan built together with NATO. This should be modelled on the Danube Strategy to which Ukraine and Moldova are parties, but which does not include other countries of the region. However, the EU-associated parties' regional cooperation might be a format that Ukraine itself would like to keep, as demonstrated when taking over the chair in the Synergy most recently.

3.2. Regional and ad-hoc initiatives

The EU is an important global and multilateral player and funder of projects and initiatives in Ukraine, even if they are often implemented by other actors, including UN agencies. This applies to development assistance and humanitarian aid as well as economic and macro financial assistance to Ukraine's economy, which is still in transition. This may be visible at the level of G7, relevant UN agencies and institutions

or bilateral programmes, which are then implemented by the EU's partners on the ground. EU-Ukraine bilateral relations are the subject of regular meetings during the EU-Ukraine Summits, which, however, have lately brought very little progress.[28] The OSCE and the Council of Europe also play an increasingly significant role together with the EU in promoting reforms and stability in the country in the face of turbulent developments internationally as well as domestically.

Beyond the high-level political agenda, the EU and its members are involved in a number of other regional processes and initiatives (V4+, The Central 5, cross-border bilateral and multilateral cooperation, etc.) as well as ad-hoc thematic and policy initiatives focused, for example, on security and defence-related matters, such as the Normandy Format, the Lublin Triangle, etc.. While the EU as such is not often directly involved, it seeks to have a stake and/or coordinate these processes and facilitate the cooperation, including through the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) at the level of the European Commission. These initiatives promote the original goals of the European Neighbourhood Policy of "stability, security and prosperity" and contribute to the closer integration of Ukraine to the European community, without necessarily pushing for the "institutions" and the membership perspective in the near future.

However, the EU is often a rather passive player (or only a payer), especially in initiatives driven by the Member States, which is apparent not only at the regional level, but more importantly at the level of the ad hoc format. A typical example is the Normandy Format under which France and Germany, representing the EU-27, operate on behalf of the Union, but often promote their own ideas and foreign and security interests. Therefore, this but also other groupings, would certainly benefit from greater involvement of the EU institutions as well as other Member States, especially those with strong commitment

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from the CEE region. The Weimar Triangle used to represent such an opportunity, at least to some extent, but it is now more of a "sleeping" platform rather than a striving forum for discussion and involvement of countries from the eastern flank. It also became obvious that solely CEE-led and driven initiatives deliver only mixed results and are unable to provide more robust support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation and closer integration with the West, which would correspond to Ukraine's ambitions.

3.3. Initiatives of EU Member States

When speaking about the EU Member States level, one of the most important roles is played by Germany, which, together with Poland, is the major economic partner of Ukraine within the EU. This also applies to political and diplomatic support or energy and security matters. Angela Merkel was the most visible European leader on the Ukraine-Russia portfolio, including when putting together and maintaining for more than seven years the European sanctions mechanism against the Kremlin for violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The most notable expression of this is the Normandy Format driven by Germany and France in efforts to resolve the military conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In addition, since July 2021, Germany has taken even more responsibility for the energy sector in Ukraine when, based on the agreement with the United States, the German leadership subscribed to a series of commitments supporting the sustainability of the Ukrainian energy grid as well as the future of energy flows from Russia through Ukraine to the European Union. Even if (often rightly) criticised for its balancing diplomatic position and regular open negotiations with Putin's Russia, Germany's foreign policy has been instrumental and crucial to investing in economic and energy resilience, as well as political and security

survival of Ukraine, which still faces an ongoing Russian aggression in Donbas and Crimea.

The other EU member states, particularly from the CEE countries, led by Lithuania and Poland, have also played an essential role. Poland now ranks first in economic cooperation and trade exchange, and invests substantial political, diplomatic and economic capital in its eastern neighbour, from which it also benefits both directly and indirectly. Unlike in the case of Germany, Polish-Ukraine cooperation is much more focused on specific cross-border projects, and security matters, including cybersecurity. Poland, like other CEE states, has continuously advocated bolstering the security and defence pillar of the Eastern Partnership and systematically promoted the development of Ukraine's capacity and military capabilities. Other countries, such as Czechia or Slovakia and the Baltic states, focus on other priorities and seek added value to complement the existing ties in specialised areas, e.g. in the field of digitalisation (Estonia), people-to-people contacts (Lithuania) good governance (Czechia), energy (Slovakia), cross-border and culture (Hungary), etc.

A number of formats are still driven by individual CEE countries and their groupings (Lublin Triangle, V4+, the Central 5, Slavkov format, Bucharest 9, LIT-POL-UA military brigade, etc.) but they lack stronger capacities and more substantial support from other European members or the EU institutions (beyond rhetoric and official presence during meetings), which cripples their potential and ability to deliver a more ambitious agenda with Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. Also, there is a fairly high level of fragmentation in the CEE region, mostly notably when it comes to Hungary, which has a completely different position on Russia or Ukraine's western orientation than others.

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4. POTENTIAL FOR STRENGTHENING/ EXPANDING THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT WITH UKRAINE

As the final step, it is necessary to evaluate the European engagement with different formats of cooperation with Ukraine. It is also essential to determine the added value and priority areas of the EU approach and of its member states in order to optimise the deployment of scarce resources and mobilise the limited efforts that the EU27 is able to agree on and willing to invest together in relations with Ukraine. It is necessary to realise that the current fragmentation of Western cooperation with Ukraine (due to political reluctance) leads to underperforming and limits the results of mutual relationship.

The nature of the EU's engagement lies on multilevel, multi-thematic focus in various fields that might all be concealed under the omnipresent associated agenda portfolio: from energy and security to political and diplomatic cooperation and economy. Even if this is going to remain a central framework for EU-Ukraine cooperation in the future, it is also essential to acknowledge the shortcomings and weak spots of European engagement and investment in Ukrainian society and its integration in the West. As discussed above, one of the crucial weaknesses of the EU approach is the limited political willingness and capacity to respond to the most pressing issues, namely Russian aggression and the threat to territorial integrity and state sovereignty, for which the EU has so far developed only a limited response. One possible remedy might be to bolster the EU's own toolbox on resilience and allow for closer cooperation with the EU agencies (e.g. Eastern Taskforce StratCom on disinformation, ENISA on cybersecurity or the Hybrid Centre of Excellence in Helsinki related to facing hybrid warfare). Ukraine could also play a much more significant role in the PESCO and European

Defence Agency cooperation and as a major security provider and ally of the European Union be consulted during the EU's Strategic Compass aimed at establishing a more robust understanding of the security challenges and threats in international politics. This way it is possible to overcome Ukraine's domestic challenges of polarisation, distrust towards public institutions or the issue of societal cohesion. A group of security analysts also promoted the idea of establishing security compacts, which could lead to a new series of security agreements in bilateral relations with the more advanced Trio countries of Eastern Partnership and other neighbours of the European Union.[29] Another, and likely more significant option, is to promote much stronger cooperation with NATO, the United States or OSCE, which are better equipped to face the more conventional threats and conflicts in Eastern Europe. For example, the local coordination among states providing on-the-ground military assistance, such as the US, Canada, the UK, Poland and Lithuania, also works well. Both tracks should be better explored and put in practice to allow for a meaningful change that would meet Ukraine's needs and interests.

Another major area for improvement is the pillar of values, normative agenda and founding principles of mutual cooperation, which has even suffered from a certain setback[30] under the leadership of Hungarian EU Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi due to his orientation on the economic and financial side of cooperation with the Eastern Partnership and a different value set that he has been pushing in terms of his political steering within the DG NEAR and European Commission. Here, the European Union and Commission in particular need more allies and better division of labour between the

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like-minded partners on the global level (G7) or similar institutions (Council of Europe and OSCE) and the local civil society that might have a better capacity and leadership on these matters. Together with that, the EU should develop and invest in other areas apart from the economic aspects of mutual integration, investment and financial recovery.[31] The rule of law represents a long-term challenge for Kyiv that needs to be changed into a much more all-society-approach and not only be pushed from above, as we are seeing right now from President Zelensky.[32] In any case, the EU needs to be more vocal about what it wants to see from Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries.[33] At the same time, the EU and its members should be much more aware of their limits and therefore focus on a productive division of labour and on establishing a stronger and more efficient network of partnerships with international actors (the CoE, the OSCE, the United States, etc.) as well as local ones (civil society, pro-reform SMEs and businesses, or more progressive state officials) to achieve a meaningful change. There is, for example, a strong overlap with the efficient and highly prominent framework of G7 ambassadors on anti-corruption efforts, which needs to be better reflected in the EU's own engagement. Without a much clearer voice of the EU, sensible benchmarking and measurement of progress, as well as better collaboration with other international partners, there are strong risks that its strategy *"recovery, reform, resilience"* might face some major problems in the post-2021 EaP architecture. Especially if the EU is going to send mixed signals about the rule of law, human rights and democracy.

The EU and its members should also be much more efficient and complementary in their efforts to work with Ukraine. From the above-mentioned list of platforms, it is clear that there are a number of organisations, regional groupings or thematic and policy initiatives that create a complex net of partnership framework. However, these projects often overlap and underperform in terms of

political and diplomatic capacity but even more importantly lack the financial resources and capability to deliver on often meaningful initiatives. That is why, except for the often strong and committed behaviour of CEE EU member states, it is necessary to include big players and major international powers, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Japan or Germany and France. A good example of such a boost is the US investment in the Three Seas Initiative that massively increased the working potential and possibilities for infrastructural development of the CEE countries, even if at that time Ukraine could still not be a formal party to the grouping (due to its non-EU member status), which should change in the future. There might be a new potential stemming from the post-Merkel reality in Germany, since the new leadership will necessarily be looking for new allies to promote German and common European goals in Eastern Europe. This is also true for the United States, whose attention will shift more and more to the Indo-Pacific area. It might need to rely on the local and regional potential for cooperation, in which it might be willing to invest financially. One clear conclusion is that there needs to be a better division of labour and a clearer vision of what each of the groupings is doing and their added values and responsibilities.

Finally, the EU and its institutions should establish a feasible and widely accepted set of priorities that would be possible to deliver together (at the level of EU-27) or in smaller groupings (regional and cross-border cooperation). Determining such areas might help to determine and realistically communicate the future direction of mutual cooperation beyond the high-level politics and far future prospects of EU enlargement. One of the possible approaches is to focus primarily on the economic integration stemming from the AA/DCFTA and allow for the "silent integration" into the EU Single Market, copying the model of Norway and other EEA countries along the lines of multi-speed European integration,[34] which became a new normal in the complex

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environment of the European continent. This would decrease the pressure on the EU regarding its own promises and current political situation that does not allow for any short-term enlargement (also related to the Western Balkan countries) but would at the same time give a clear middle ground for Ukraine on its way to Europe. In any case, economic integration, institutional sociali-sation (via observer status as part of the EU meetings and coordination, as proposed by the European Parliament)[35] or low-profile smaller-scale projects and exchanges seem to be key to it.

Last but not least, the EU should focus more on the labour migration from (and back to) Ukraine, which benefitted the EU Single Market, but is rarely mentioned in the official documents and discourse on the EU-Ukraine relations. More resources should be spent on this topic in order to have a better understanding of the scale as well as communicating about its benefits to the European societies and member states. The EU should also tackle the issue of brain drain and help facilitate the development of human capital in Ukraine, which is needed for further growth of the country and its economy.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the existing formats of Ukraine's cooperation with international partners proved that there is a relatively high level of fragmentation, overlap and underperforming among various EU, regional and ad hoc platforms. This drains resources both from the EU and even more from Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries, which have only limited capacity for such cooperation on multiple levels. There is the EU with an overarching framework of the Association Agenda, which touches many different fields but often lacks concrete results, such as in the field of rule of law and anti-corruption efforts. At the same time, there are not enough synergies and cooperation with like-minded organisations, initiatives and countries, such as the Council of Europe, the G7 Ambassadors' Ukraine Support Group, the EUAM, or the United States, which are often better positioned to achieve a meaningful change and re-establish the failing EU system of "carrots and sticks" for Ukraine.

This fact simultaneously hampers the realization of Ukrainian national interests and goals and undermines the efforts of the Western community to facilitate closer cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Therefore, these efforts need to be reviewed, and new possible synergies need to be sought and followed, including by abandoning some of the old projects (the Black Sea Synergy), that should go to the *"graveyard of initiatives"*, and developing new ones with sufficient political, diplomatic, and economic capital. This applies both to Ukraine, and to the West and its individual states which need to review their strategy to deploy scarce resources and maximise achievements given the political reluctance of individual members of Western alliances or lack of capacity of the West to counter the malign activities of Russia and China in the region of Eastern Europe.

In order to avoid an unnecessary proliferation of new formats and maximise the outcomes of cooperation between the West and Ukraine, it is recommended to:

• Follow a policy- and target-oriented strategy of regional cooperation, in which each player and/or member state should clearly identify their added value and divide the labour in cooperation with Ukraine. The V4+ Ukraine Format set a good example when each of the Visegrad countries took the portfolio there were working on and complementary shared transformational know-how with Ukraine,

• The EU should propose a new system of "carrots and sticks" that would motivate Ukraine to continue implementing complex transformations under the Association Agenda without necessarily focusing on the ultimate goal of EU membership in the short-term; however, this should remain on the table for later phases. The EU needs to come up with a middle stage (intermediate[36]) status (e.g. Norway Model) that would be sufficiently appealing for the Ukraine's leadership and if well-communicated to the society and elites would generate public interest and help to overcome the difficulties.

• The EU and its Member States should continue to promote common understanding and perception of threats and risks, especially in its immediate neighbourhood, namely in the framework of the Strategic Compass project which should also be consulted with Ukraine,

• In the area of fundamental values and pillars of cooperation, it is necessary to try to re-establish the EU's original reputation and "rebuild" the European house of norms and values, which would help the Western community to advocate for the normative agenda and its future development. The rule of law is fundamental for

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Ukraine's democratic development and the West should be much more persistent in promoting the change, while also demonstrating progress "at home",

- With regard to security, the West and the EU should expand the range of instruments and strengthen cooperation and coordination between relevant bodies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the OSCE and NATO. The European military training mission aimed at capacity and standard-building as well as education that is currently being discussed would emphasize the importance of security cooperation between Ukraine and the EU,

- The new German government will continue to play a crucial role in the EU-Ukraine relations, and it should re-establish ties with the Ukrainian leadership as soon as possible in order to promote even closer cooperation and seek a new common ground in mutual relations,

- Engage the countries of the Associated Trio in a much closer format of cooperation, including granting observer status within the EU's internal political processes. The Conference on the Future of Europe and other future-oriented planning processes in the EU (Strategic Compass) and NATO (NATO 2030) provide good opportunities for a closer integration of the Trio countries,

- Cooperate with the US on inclusion of non-EU Member-States in the Three Seas Initiative, including the Trio countries, which would enable them to improve connectivity with the western neighbours and further integration within the European community.

- Develop a comprehensive Black Sea Strategy in close coordination with NATO and other partner countries in the region, in order to replace the outdated and underperforming formats, such as the Black Sea Synergy of 2007,

- Open regional cooperation and invite the third parties and other relevant like-minded democratic members of the international community (Japan, South Korea, Canada, and others) that could come up with additional resources, instruments and tools for achieving the original goals,

- Through a more developed labour migration policies, the EU must address the problem of the brain drain from Ukraine and instead increase its support to programmes and bilateral exchanges (Twinning) that would encourage (or require) return to the country of origin with concrete benefits,

- The EU should be more proactive in communication with Ukrainian society, including at the local and regional levels, to achieve realistic expectations by providing more information about the state of EU-Ukraine relations and the goals and results of EU support programmes.

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INITIATIVES / FORMATS DRIVEN BY THE EU

The Eastern Partnership

Participating states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine

Date of foundation: 2009

Population: 73 million

Mission: joint initiative of the EU and six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries aimed at strengthening and deepening their political and economic relations

Ukraine's role: participating state

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Participating states: nine EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia) and five non-EU countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine)

Date of foundation: 2010

Population: 115 million

Mission: EU macro-regional strategy aimed at creating synergies and coordination between existing policies and initiatives taking place across the Danube Region

Ukraine's role: participating state, Chair 2021-2022

The Energy Community

Participating states: 19 EU member states and the EU as participants, 9 contracting parties (WB6, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), 2 observers (Norway, Turkey)

Date of foundation: 2005

Population: 115 million

Mission: The Energy Community is an international organisation which brings together the European Union and its neighbours to create an integrated pan-European energy market. The organisation was founded by the Treaty establishing the Energy Community signed in October 2005 in Athens, Greece, in force since July 2006. The key objective of the Energy Community is to extend the EU internal energy market rules and principles to countries in South East Europe, the Black Sea region and beyond on the basis of a legally binding framework.

Ukraine's role: contracting party

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The Black Sea Synergy

Participating states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine

Date of foundation: 2008

Population: 291 million

Mission: An institutionalised forum for EU cooperation encouraging cooperation between the EU and the countries surrounding the Black Sea and for tackling common problems while encouraging political and economic reform.

Ukraine's role: participating state

REGIONAL CENTRAL EUROPEAN FORMATS

The Visegrad Group

Participating states: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia

Date of foundation: 1991

Population: 64 million

Mission: regional intergovernmental cooperation format with the initial goal of the countries' accession to the EU and NATO

Ukraine's role: participant of the Visegrad+ Format, the International Visegrad Fund recipient

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The Central 5

Participating states: Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia

Date of foundation: 2020

Population: 37 million

Mission: informal initiative in the format of foreign affairs ministers established during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to coordinate anti-pandemic efforts and intensify regional cooperation

Ukraine's role: invited guest

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The Slavkov Format

Participating states: Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria.

Date of foundation: 2015

Population: 25 million

Mission: regional initiative aimed at enhancing cross-border cooperation between the participating countries

Ukraine's role: passive object

The Weimar Triangle

Participating states: France, Germany, Poland

Date of foundation: 1991

Population: 188 million

Mission: regional cooperation format with the initial goal of identifying shared fundamental interests regarding Europe's future and to extend cross-border cooperation

Ukraine's role: passive object

The Lublin Triangle

Participating states: Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine

Date of foundation: 2020

Population: 82 million

Mission: regional cooperation initiative focused on the cultural, economic, and strategic interests of three central European nations, as well as support to Ukraine's integration in the EU and NATO

Ukraine's role: participating state

The Three Seas Initiative

Participating states: 12 EU Member States between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Date of foundation: 2015

Population: 112 million

Mission: boost economic growth and well-being in the region through development of infrastructure in the energy, transport, and digital sectors

Ukraine's role: aspiring participant

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The Bucharest Nine

Participating states: Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia.

Date of foundation: 4 November 2015

Population: 96 million

Mission: deepen military cooperation between the countries of the NATO Eastern Flank and regularly discuss and react to key security policy issues, given Russian aggressive actions in the region

Ukraine's role: partner

AD-HOC FORMATS

The G7 Ambassadors' Ukraine Support Group

Participating states: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States

Date of foundation: 2014

Population: 770 million

Mission: support Ukraine's reforms and exchange views on the current political and economic situation

Ukraine's role: partner and recipient of support

The Associated Trio

Participating states: Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine

Date of foundation: 2021

Population: 48 million

Mission: a joint coordination and cooperation format which aims to further deepen European integration of the participating states

Ukraine's role: initiator, participating state

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Normandy Format

Participating states: France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine

Date of foundation: 2014

Mission: resolution of the military conflict in Donbas following Russia's aggression

Ukraine's role: co-initiator, participating state

The Crimea Platform

Participating states: Ukraine + 43 signatories of the Joint Declaration of the International Crimea Platform

Date of foundation: 2021

Mission: an international consultation and coordination format aimed at improving the effectiveness of the international response to the ongoing occupation of Crimea

Ukraine's role: initiator and leader

The Quadriga Format

Participating states: Turkey, Ukraine (in format of Foreign and Defence Ministries)

Date of foundation: 2020

Population: 128 million

Mission: bilateral format of political and security consultations aimed at restoring stability and security in the Black Sea region
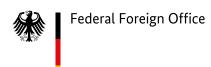
Ukraine's role: initiator, participating state

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