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Ukraine: forms of political support and reconstruction

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Russia's aggression against Ukraine effectively began at the turn of 2013 and 2014 and it is culminating in the hottest phase of the conflict so far, which began in February this year when the Russian army launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A European country has invaded its neighbour for the first time in the Post–Cold War era.

Relations between the successor states of the Soviet Union were characterised by asymmetry; the Russian Federation always assertively pursued its interests in these countries without respecting their sovereignty. To achieve its objectives, the current Russian political regime has resorted several times in the last twenty years to using non-standard diplomatic tools; these would be considered hybrid tools from today's point of view.¹ Developments since 2013/2014 have confirmed the thesis that the Russian regime sees Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU as a direct threat to the promotion of its interests.

However, the open aggression of spring this year had the opposite effect on Ukraine's aspirations for EU membership. Soon after the invasion, Ukraine applied to join the Union. It is the first country to do so in times of open military aggression. The European Parliament was the first to take an active stance on this request, calling on the EU institutions to grant the country candidate status in its [resolution](#) of 1 March. In this situation, the Union has the opportunities and means to actively elevate relations with Ukraine, ensure the country's economic recovery, strengthen the political partnership and ensure security.

The EU-Ukraine partnership has been governed by the [Association Agreement](#) (AA), which has provided for political dialogue between the two sides since 2017, and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), provisionally implemented since 2016. The Association Agreement and the DCFTA together provide a framework for deepening political and economic relations, which should ultimately enable the launch of the reform agenda in the country and convergence with the Union's legal environment and access to the European single market. In the latest [Association Implementation Report on Ukraine](#), the EEAS states that the Ukrainian side focused on prioritising the association and further integration with the Union in accordance with the Association Agreement in the last reference period from December 2020 until the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine this year. The Ukrainian government itself has drawn up its own report on the state of the association and set out priorities for its further progress. Despite the persistent problems in some areas of social and economic life, the report of the EEAS is positive about the country's overall direction and the determination of the political representation and civil society to deepen integration with the Union.² The report also highlighted that the reform agenda of the Ukrainian government is focused on areas demanded by the Ukrainian people themselves.

According to [opinion polls](#) in Ukraine, 33% of respondents in a June survey believe that joining the Union should be the country's main goal in the next 10 years; this intention is mostly supported by the younger generation under 35 (around 36%).³ According to these polls, the European Union is clearly the preferred form of economic integration for which Ukrainian citizens would vote; 80% of respondents would vote to join and even in the eastern regions of the country, 76% of respondents declared they would vote in a referendum to join the EU.⁴ Further investigations among stakeholders also suggest that EU support to Ukraine under the Association

¹ This is how political scientist R. Horvath defines the so-called "counter-revolutions" through which the Russian regime is trying to prevent the growth of a civil liberal movement that can lead to democratisation/liberalisation.

HORVATH, R. *Putin's Preventive Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet authoritarianism and the spectre of velvet revolution*. London: Routledge, 2013.

² The report also states that in 2021, Ukraine's foreign policy was 79% aligned with the CFSP position.

³ This was a multiple choice survey. The priority of restoring the country's territorial integrity ranked first and measures against corruption came second. The country's entry into the European Union was more popular than its entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

⁴ On the contrary, support for a customs union with the Russian Federation, Belarus and Kazakhstan has been declining in aggregate over time.

Agreement is of a medium- and long-term nature and has clear positive impacts on the country's environment and the citizens.⁵

As interviews with stakeholders show, Ukraine's integration process into the Union is also associated with certain challenges/concerns. The longer the process takes, the more the disillusionment of a part of Ukrainian society will grow and it will become a target of possible hybrid campaigns claiming the inadequacy and disadvantages of this step, i.e. the country's entry into the Union. This is a strategic challenge for both the Ukrainian political representation and the EU. It should ensure that clear rules are set for the process – benchmarks that the country must meet and targets it would automatically achieve if it meets the benchmarks. The Communication [Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#), which provides a framework methodology for the enlargement of the Union, should also provide guidance for the process in the case of Ukraine, taking into account all the related criticism.

War entails a number of costs for the country's reconstruction after it ends. The Union has found itself in a situation where there is a need for an economic and political plan to rebuild the country and to harness the determination of the Ukrainian political representation and the Ukrainian people.

In its Communication [Ukraine Relief and Reconstruction](#), the European Commission outlined a strategic recovery plan, RebuildUkraine, which will be implemented under the responsibility of the Ukrainian authorities with the prior consent of the EU institutions and international partners who will join the country's recovery. The plan will be set fully within the existing framework of cooperation under the Association Agreement, taking into account existing EU legislation as well as all initiatives and elements of cooperation to which both sides have committed themselves (e.g. sustainability and environment and cyber cooperation). The plan itself does not contain points for further political convergence with the Union.

According to some, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has failed to provide protection for the partner countries. In addition to economic recovery, there are calls for enhanced political and security cooperation between the Union and Ukraine.⁶ The political partnership should maintain the considerable support of Ukrainian society for the country's direction, including the reformist commitment, while preventing voices for accelerated integration from growing. Such political cooperation would also have the potential to draw Ukraine into decisions about the future of the region. A partnership for enlargement will help set new objectives for cooperation between the two sides and contribute to a stronger Eastern Partnership overall. Cooperation with Ukraine appears to be not only a question of values, but also a geopolitical and geostrategic one, given the changing international order.

In addition to political rapprochement with Ukraine through the existing institutions of the Eastern Partnership and the association itself, the Union could also engage strategically with the region. In addition to its economic influence, the EU could help stabilise the country and the region through its security guarantees. The Treaty on European Union, in its provisions on the common security and defence policy, provides that the Union may establish missions to maintain peace and strengthen international security in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. This would demonstrate the Union's role as a security provider, ensure its strategic presence in the country and the region, and help harness the positive wave in the country to launch reform and reconstruction activities.

⁵ RABINOVYCH, M. The Development Dimension of the Eastern Partnership following the 2015 EaP Review: Successes, Challenges and Prospects. Kyiv School of Economics, 2021.

⁶ LANG, Kai-Olaf, BURAS, Piotr. Partnership for Enlargement: A new way to integrate Ukraine and the EU's eastern neighbourhood. ECFR. 17 June 2022. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/partnership-for-enlargement-a-new-way-to-integrate-ukraine-and-the-eus-eastern-neighbourhood/>.

Topics for discussion

- 1) Is there a need to revise the accession methodology for the case of Ukraine; how to use existing tools and prevent the process from stagnating?
- 2) Should the Union expand/strengthen its presence through CSDP missions in the South East Europe and Ukraine?
- 3) How to ensure greater political engagement of the Union with Ukraine?
- 4) What are the lessons to be learned from the stagnating integration process of the Western Balkans for the accession process with Ukraine and Moldova?
- 5) How to define the political partnership in the light of the ongoing conflict? What content should be anchored in the political partnership?
- 6) What measures can be taken to strengthen the EU's strategic communication for the Eastern Partnership?