

UKRAINE, MOLDOVA, AND GEORGIA: POLITICAL VISION OF THEIR EU MEMBERSHIP



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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has rapidly changed political visions regarding the future EU membership of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This chapter analyses and compares ways by which these countries may attain EU candidate status, tracing these paths from the initial conditions set by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It further examines the challenging democratic transition and problematic institutional consolidation required for the participation of the countries in designed EU projects, notably the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, Eastern Partnership or Association Agreement. Various perspectives on the evolution of European integration over time are analysed from the position of key member states, European Institutions or governments, and representatives of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Thus, this chapter provides a better understanding of the causes and factors behind the European aspirations of these countries and their evolving expectations regarding future EU membership, EU countries, EU institutions, and Russia.

Keywords: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, enlargement, candidate, EU, membership

1. Introduction

On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and recognised Georgia for possible EU membership. It was not only a

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formal and symbolic step in the history of these three Eastern European countries but a strategic turning point for the European integration project. From a historical perspective, granting EU candidate status to the three former Soviet countries is a logical and inevitable result of a series of preceding events, stemming primarily from the EU's reaction to Russia's revisionist aspirations and need to secure its 'near abroad' to satisfy imperialist ambitions. However, from the political science perspective, there are many unique factors behind this breaking decision of the European Council, including the unique composition of political forces that enabled previously unthinkable steps. Indeed, for decades – even centuries – controlling territories of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine was of key interest for the Russian state, to enhance its security and gain prosperity.

This chapter aims to explore and discuss the paths of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia to EU candidate status, including a political vision of their future membership, support among political actors, and their expectations. The objective is to map the political factors that provided EU membership prospects to these three countries that just a few years ago were considered far from EU membership. Their candidacy was perceived as a rather unrealistic adventure owing to the historical inheritance of many social, economic or political problems and underdevelopment in many areas. The chapter adopts a chronological approach with an analytical focus on the period between the 1990s and 23 June 2022, beginning with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and rebirth of the independent states, and concluding with the European Council decision granting EU candidate status. It also offers a comparative perspective of the three countries with some future expectations. On the one hand, the comparison is aimed at domestic political forces and developments which shaped these countries' attitude towards the EU; on the other hand, it provides the perspective of the EU and its member states towards future EU enlargement by including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. In other words, via a chronologically driven comparison, two perspectives meet: the perspective of the states on the EU and that of the EU towards the individual states. Several sources are available on the possible EU membership of selected countries; however, these studies often deal with specific aspects of individual countries. Hopefully, this chapter will provide a better understanding of the causes and factors behind the European aspirations of these countries and their expectations of future EU membership. It takes a comprehensive view of the issue and, to some extent, enables comparison of possible integration prospects.

The selected countries are comparable as they share many similarities. Notably, all three were strongly influenced by the post-Soviet legacy, their transition characterised by political and economic upheaval following the Soviet Union collapse in 1991. All three faced challenges in establishing stable governance and transition to market economies. Each country has had to deal with conflicts and ongoing challenges related to Russian influence and territorial disputes, and all three pursued EU membership as a strategic, and to some degree, ultimate goal, which often required problematic implementation of domestic reforms related to governance, rule

of law, anti-corruption and economy – areas at the heart of the Copenhagen criteria. However, these countries also have noticeable differences related to political stability, conflict intensity or reform progress. While Ukraine has experienced significant political movements such as the Orange Revolution or Euromaidan, leading to continuous political changes, Moldova is known for frequent changes in government and intensive oscillation between pro-Russian and pro-European orientations. Additionally, the conflict in Ukraine is more intense and prolonged than in Georgia or Moldova, where conflicts have been localised. In the case of Ukraine, significant reforms were conducted in the post-2014 period; in Georgia, reforms are linked mainly to President Saakashvili; and in Moldova, progress is generally slower and more inconsistent owing to political instability and oscillations.

Regarding the method, it is necessary to define variables subject to comparison. The study is strongly inspired by the most similar system design (MSSD) as it is based on similarity in variables, assesses different outcomes, and attempts to identify different factors that influence the outcomes. The adopted approach allowed for focused analysis built mainly around the fulfilment of political criteria for potential EU membership in the selected countries. Naturally, MSSD has limits as it is not possible to generalise to dissimilar cases. However, other EU candidate countries in Western Balkans share similarities with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, including the struggle in conducting reforms, weak institutions, and political instability, often linked to Russian interference. Consequently, analysis of complex factors behind the selected countries being included in the EU is of significant value and may contribute to better understanding of other candidate countries.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first deals mainly with the attempts of democratic transformation in the 1990s, and the relationship between Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and the EU. This part helps in understanding the context that contributed to the future aspirations of these countries, and analyses the relationships between the EU and these three countries in post-Soviet Europe in relation to their transformation. The second part analyses the changes that led to the inclusion of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in structured, more consolidated cooperation, including the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership, which shaped the expectations of the involved countries and provided significant experience with conditionality. It analyses relations between the EU, its member states, and the three countries, especially regarding their political and economic proximity to EU integration. The third part analyses actual development, marked by the post-Euro Maidan development in Ukraine, and the increasing importance of these countries for the security of Europe. Finally, the fourth part is dedicated to the expectations from EU membership, both from the perspective of key political actors in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and from the EU and its Member States.

2. 'Our Goal: Europe'

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union had a significant impact on Central and Eastern Europe, but also on the European Communities that, under the indefatigable leadership of Jacques Delors, were focused on building the single market with the aim to establish a common currency. Political changes in early 1990s – mainly the re-unification of Germany – contributed to the acceleration of the integration process. The vital partnership of French President Francois Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl led to the signature of the Maastricht Treaty, establishing the EU with its Common Foreign and Security Policy within a strictly inter-governmental pillar. While the Soviet Union disintegrated, and eastern markets with it, European integration gained new momentum and attracted the attention of Central and Eastern Europe countries, which found themselves in a political vacuum. The newly established Russian Federation, struggling with internal political and economic problems, had limited interest and resources to influence development in its former empire. Simultaneously, increasing ethnic tensions in the Balkan peninsula urged the need for economic, political, and democratic consolidation of countries that had newly acquired freedom. Offering a clear prospect of future EU membership and integration within western security structures associated mainly with NATO became imperative. 'Return to Europe' became a political priority of many Central and Eastern European countries facing uncertainty linked to their new freedom. However, the situation and development in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were slightly different, despite these countries having similar aspirations.

Among this trio, Ukraine played the most important role, mostly due to its size and geographic position. On the 1 December 1991, 92% of voters supported the Act on Declaration of Independence, leading to the establishment of independent Ukraine. Notably, the 'Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic' had already declared its European future in the Declaration on State Sovereignty by expressing willingness to 'participate in European process and European structures'.¹

The first years of the reborn state were characterised by economic instability borne of transformation and the search for stable relations with the international community and the Russian Federation. In this regard, the birth of Ukraine as an actor in international relations is linked to the government of Leonid Kravchuk (President of Ukraine, 1991–1994) who defined the country's reliable attitude towards the international community and expressed pro-Western orientation: '*Nasha meta: Evropa!*' (Our goal: Europe) was one of his mottos. The official intention to participate in European integration was approved by the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) on 2 July 1993 in the Resolution on 'Main directions of foreign policy of Ukraine',² wherein membership in the European Communities was set as one of the foreign policy aims. This indicates that interest in a pro-European future was demonstrated in the early

1 Section X, Declaration on State Sovereignty of Ukraine.

2 Verkhovna Rada, 1993, Resolution on main directions of foreign policy of Ukraine.

stages of Ukrainian independence, when Ukraine was searching for solutions to inherited Soviet era problems, including possession of former Soviet nuclear weapons left on Ukrainian territory – a key focus of the international community.

A responsible attitude and willingness to be accepted by the international community was demonstrated by the signature of the Budapest Memorandum³ in 1994, wherein Ukraine decided to voluntarily give up a Soviet-era nuclear arsenal⁴ left on its territory in exchange for security guarantees, including the respect of territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the non-use of force or threat of force, and so on. However, it is worth noting that international pressure on Ukraine was strong and refusal to get rid of the nuclear weapons may have resulted in sanctions and isolation, similar to the status of North Korea.

During Kravchuk's presidency, Ukraine cut off several inherited links from the Soviet Union. For example, Kravchuk signed on behalf of the Ukraine Belavezha Accords leading to the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, Ukraine never fully ratified the accords and Kravchuk opposed the idea of a common currency and military.⁵ Conversely, Kravchuk had a warm attitude towards Western Europe and NATO, while having many disagreements over Russian military presence in Ukraine, especially regarding naval bases in Crimea and docking of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. From the beginning, Crimea and Kravchuk's attitude towards NATO provoked Russian interest in the region, and in May 1992, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation voted that the Soviet grant of Crimea from 1954 was illegal and the status of the Russian fleet unresolved, making it a permanent thorn in Russo-Ukrainian relations.

Kravchuk's positive attitude also reflected in the relations towards the United States, as George H. W. Bush provided Ukraine credit line support to purchase US goods worth 110 million USD in exchange for the denuclearisation of Ukraine – money that was essential for an economy suffering from poor nationalisation and corruption. For example, under just the presidency of Kravchuk, Ukraine lost an estimated 40% of its GDP and struggled with massive inflation; in 1993, inflation was calculated at 10 155%.⁶ Notably, the denuclearisation of Ukraine helped open doors for their membership in the NATO's Partnership for Peace, which was a significant step towards friendly relations with NATO (and departure from Russian security interests); however, denuclearisation itself was a relatively long process, blocking Ukraine from further access to US economic help in crucial years.⁷ Accumulated economic problems contributed to the fall in Kravchuk's popularity and to political

3 Budapest memorandum. In full: Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons from 05.12.1994.

4 The 46 solid propellant missiles with 10 nuclear warheads on each (460 warheads) and 1150 warheads in storage made Ukraine the third largest nuclear arsenal country in the 1990s, after the Russian Federation and the United States.

5 Donaldson, 2005.

6 Aslund, 1999.

7 D'Anieri, 2012, p. 448.

changes. Consequently, Leonid Kuchma assumed office in 1994 and remained till 2005.

In many ways, Kuchma followed Kravchuk; however, his position towards Russia was slightly more open. The softer pro-Russian attitude was already reflected in the presidential elections: while Western Ukraine voted mainly for Kravchuk, Kuchma received more support in Eastern and Southern Ukraine because of his advocacy of rapprochement with Russia.⁸ This internal division of Ukraine – also visible during the independence referendum vote – is a characteristic feature influencing internal politics and was reflected in the country's foreign policy until 2014. Kuchma sustained Kravchuk's aspirations of making Ukraine similar to other Central European countries, but simultaneously tried to balance relations with Russia.

Leonid Kuchma's presidency (1994–2004) is associated with 'vector politics', balancing the pro-Western orientation of the country with Russian interests. Kuchma initially opposed NATO enlargement, allegedly out of fear of intensifying Russian pressure on Ukraine. However, increased Russian rhetoric about the possible reintegration of former Soviet republics was not very welcome in the newly independent Ukraine, and led to the position of silently accepting NATO enlargement to Central Europe.⁹ Another important influence was related to bilateral relations with other countries. For example, Czech President Václav Havel and Czech Minister Václav Klaus promised Ukraine a seat in the Council of Europe for not opposing NATO enlargement. Similarly, promoting friendly relations with Poland and Romania, which had territorial disputes with Ukraine, created a space for a 'special partnership' with NATO.¹⁰ Ukraine managed to enter the Partnership for Peace Programme in 1994 and was promoted on 9 July 1997 by the signing of the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership during the NATO summit in Madrid. Notably, establishing closer relations with NATO was possible because of the reduced fear of direct Russian intervention, despite general expectations that Russia would soon recover and might push for regaining dominance in the near abroad, which would be a great danger to Ukraine's independence. However, the risk was considered acceptable by the Ukrainian elites.

Proximity to NATO might be well seen in the context of securing Ukrainian independence against Russian aspirations. The first Chechen war (1994–1996) demonstrated that Russia will not hesitate to use military force to promote its interests, and closer relations with NATO might have served as a counter-balance to the extension of Russian power. Developing relations with NATO was seen as a unique historical opportunity. During the Western European Union summit in June 1996, President Kuchma said: 'Supporting Ukraine in this decisive stage of her development is a strategic investment in securing Western European interests'.¹¹ Thus, the West slowly approached Ukraine. During the September 1996 visit, the president of the North

8 Bukkvoll, 1997.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Kuchma, 1996, cited in Bukkvoll, 1997.

Atlantic Assembly, Karsten Voigt, stated that ‘The West is not interested in Ukraine developing under the domination of other countries, especially Russia’.¹² The positions of Ukraine and the West were converging at the normative dimension; however, the practical dimension lagged behind.

Kuchma partially succeeded in joining the political West in the security context. However, he refrained from deeper economic integration, which required complex domestic reforms under the notion of economic liberalisation. In other words, Ukraine did not want to undergo an economic transformation, which was necessary to comply with EU entry requirements represented by the Copenhagen criteria. Consequently, there was no intention of EU enlargement to include Ukraine or the other countries that demonstrated willingness to conduct domestic reforms. Thoughts about the future enlargement of the EU to include Ukraine were not realistic in the 1990s as the EU was preoccupied with the integration of Central European countries.

Regarding Russia, in May 1997, Kuchma succeeded in concluding a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership.¹³ In the ‘big treaty’, Russia acknowledged the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including the possession of Sevastopol as the home of the Black Sea Fleet, in exchange, Russia was granted a lease of the base. The signing of this act removed a big burden from mutual relations; however, the issue of security guarantees and relations with NATO were repeatedly raised by all actors. Kuchma was appreciated for his achievements towards NATO and Russia. Nevertheless, acceptance in the EU was limited by his unwillingness to conduct domestic reforms, and his image was further damaged by the murder of the journalist Georgiy Gongadze in 2000 – a well-known critic of Kuchma’s government.

The end of Kuchma’s rule is characterised by democratic decline, corruption scandals, and electoral fraud. For example, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had already concluded during the 1999 presidential elections that ‘the International Election Observation Mission reported the first round of the Ukrainian Presidential Election failed to meet a number of OSCE commitments’, especially in the media’s campaign coverage.¹⁴ The country continued its economic struggle as privatisation did not provide for reforms not fulfil the promise of economic stability. Instead, it supported the growing oligarchising of the state, and various indexes on democratic performance show a remarkable decline from 1997 to approximately 2003.¹⁵ This suggests that, in reality, Ukraine departed from complying with the Copenhagen criteria and future EU membership while aiming for the opposite.

Despite being a difficult issue, it was the nuclear deal that enabled Ukraine to develop friendly relations with the West. The situation in Moldova turned similarly

12 Voigt, 1996, cited in Bukkvoll, 1997.

13 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation from 31.05.1997.

14 OSCE, 1999.

15 Herron, 2023.

problematic, as the country with 3 million inhabitants seemed less important and more peripheral than its northern neighbour. After the failed Soviet coup to reclaim the country on 19–22 August 1991, Moldova declared independence on 27 August and soon signed the constitutive act of the CIS. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova declared itself a neutral state, not to take part in military activities within the CIS. However, unlike Ukraine and Georgia (and the Russian Federation), Moldova has been part of the NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme since 1994.

Similar to Ukraine, the 1990s in Moldova were turbulent because of the challenging and rather chaotic economic transformation. The country suffered rapid inflation, which led to the introduction of a new currency in 1993 – the Moldovan leu. Alongside the dramatic economic developments – marked by poverty, corruption, and failed privatisation – the country also faced many internal political problems. Among them were Transnistria – an international breakaway quasi-state with pro-Kremlin government – and Gagauzia – an autonomous area in southern Moldova. The status of Gagauzia was unresolved till 1995, when the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia entered into force.

The relationship between Moldova and Russian-backed Transnistria (located around the river between Moldova and Ukraine) remains unresolved, and a *de facto* ceasefire signed on 21 July 1992 is still in force. Despite the conflict being labelled 'frozen' for almost three decades, there is a legitimate fear that the 'Transnistrian card' might be played by the Russian Federation to destabilise the region and put pressure on Ukraine or Moldova. The legitimacy of this fear is supported by separatists having already demanded Russian intervention for the 'protection' of the people in Transnistria.¹⁶ This might be read as an invitation to strengthen Russian military presence or preparation for future annexation, similar to Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. Because of their geographical location, shared problems of Transnistria, and economic and political links, we can claim a special relationship between Ukraine and Moldova. In other words, developments in Ukraine may significantly determine developments in much smaller Moldova, which suffers from internal cultural and political division.

Because of the division between pro-Western (or pro-European) and pro-Russian forces, Moldova position towards the EU was not always clear. Furthermore, the relatively small size of the country and its location on the European periphery meant that the attitude of the EU towards it was sometimes ambivalent. In the 1990s, the EU focused on northern enlargement through Austria, Finland, Sweden, and potentially Norway; since the mid-1990s, its focus extended to prospective candidates from Central and Eastern Europe. Since 1999, the EU has negotiated future membership with 12 countries, including Bulgaria and Romania, which brought in other post-communist countries that were on track to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria. However, deepening relations with Moldova was merely a second-order issue, and considered dependent on the future membership of other countries (especially Romania) and the

¹⁶ France24, 2024.

moving of the EU's geographic borders in the eastern direction. Similar to Ukraine, Moldova was not also economically and politically prepared for the accession.

Among the three countries, Georgia is unique in many aspects. Problematic and bloody moves towards independence, a peripheral position beyond the Black Sea, under the hills of Greater Caucasus, together with strong Soviet/Russian influence made the country the least appropriate candidate for Europeanisation. Similarly to Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia inherited severe economic and political problems from the collapse of the Soviet Union, including weak institutions, corruption, and political division, fuelled by Russian-backed separatism. The situation between 1991 and 1993 resulted in a civil war, fought in parallel to conflicts with separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This violence and instability meant that Georgia was not considered part of the European Community in the 1990s, despite the EU maintaining some relations since 1992. Practically, in the early 1990s Georgia was a failed state without European prospects.

The situation in Georgia slowly started to change when Zviad Gamsachurdia was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, who pleased Russia by entering into the CIS, while simultaneously pursuing closer relations with the EU and NATO. Notably, Shevardnadze gained fame as Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign minister who served between 1985 and 1991. Thus, Shevardnadze influenced many European affairs, including negotiations for the peaceful reunification of Germany or Soviet attitudes towards Central Europe, and was well known in Western diplomatic circles. As the political leader of Georgia, Shevardnadze had opened doors to the West and during his presidency, Georgia joined the Council of Europe and was, at least superficially, aspiring to the EU membership. In 2002, Shevardnadze said: 'Since restoration of our independence, joining the EU became [Georgia's] goal' and added the joke that 'I could not make him [Javier Solana] tell when the EU would accept Georgia', but added also that Georgia's accession to the EU 'is not too far away either'.¹⁷ While this statement is indicative of a pro-European orientation, it is also accepting of the fact that Georgia is not ready for EU candidacy. Indeed, the economic aspects of integration were secondary to the security issues, as Georgia's relationship with the Russian Federation played a crucial role in ensuring its security and stability.

Shevardnadze was aware of Russian sensitivity towards Georgian security assurances but tried to promote close cooperation with NATO nonetheless. For this attitude, he received high recognition from NATO leaders. For example, NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson labelled Georgia one of the most crucial countries in the Southern Caucasus, very advanced in the modernisation of its armed forces, which would be helpful in combating terrorism.¹⁸ The Russian Federation cautiously observed such developments, and when Georgia refused to provide its military bases for Russian armed forces to bombard Chechen rebels, it had a strong impact on mutual relations and the 'reliability' of Georgia regarding Russian security

¹⁷ Shevardnadze, cited in Sepashvili, 2002.

¹⁸ Sepashvili, 2002.

interests. Moreover, on 22 November 2002, the Georgian president officially requested an invitation to join NATO at the Prague NATO summit:

NATO membership means security for Georgia. It means that we will have final security guarantees. Throughout our history, we have seen a lot of hardship, and I think that today the only right decision is to become a member of NATO.¹⁹

This request, elevated tensions between Russia and Georgia, especially after April 2008, when NATO promised to consider Georgia's request to join. On 1 August 2008, the Russian-backed South Ossetian forces began shelling Georgian villages, breaking the 1992 ceasefire agreement.²⁰ In response, the Georgian army was sent to the conflict zone and, for a while, captured the regional capital Tskhinvali from Russia-backed separatists who soon received support from the Russian military. A full-scale Russian invasion followed, resulting in Russian strategic and military dominance in the country, and paralysis of Georgia caused by approximately 200 thousand refugees fleeing their homes.

In all three countries, security relations with NATO were prioritised over economic relations with the EU. Gaining independence from the former Soviet Union/Russia had caused tension and polarisation in mutual relations that, in the case of Moldova, resulted in separatist conflict and in the case of Georgia, in civil war connected with the separatist conflict. Ukraine also suffered from potential conflict owing to the unclear status of Sevastopol and Crimea; the country's politico-geographical division was reflected in their vector foreign policy of trying to approach the West without upsetting Russia. All three countries struggled to implement effective economic reforms – part of the EU normative agenda. While all three expressed interest in being part of the EU in the future, without reforms, the EU showed little to no interest in enlargement beyond its close horizon. This indicated certain disappointment. As put realistically by Leonid Kuchma: 'Nobody awaits us in Europe'.²¹

Regardless of the severity of the economic problems and issues caused by the transformation, all three countries managed to establish relations with the West or the EC/EU, which were further formalised. This later formalisation was enabled by two factors. First, the EU finished its Eastern enlargement in 2004 (in the case of Romania and Bulgaria, in 2007), and the 'Eastern dimension' gained importance as the EU's centre moved East. Second, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia managed to stabilise (at least to some degree) their economy and realised that domestic reforms might open doors to the EU, which was increasingly associated with prosperity thanks to the single market. The EU became the dominant direction in the foreign policy vector as positive rewards from EU integration outweighed the negative attitudes associated with departure from the Russian Federation.

19 Shevardnadze, 2002, cited in Radio Free Europe, 2002.

20 Agreement on Principles of Settlement of the Georgian – Ossetian Conflict. Sochi, 24 June 1992.

21 Wolczuk, 2004, p. 22.

3. From Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) to Association Agreement (AA)

In 1994, the EU initiated and concluded the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (together with other countries of the former Soviet bloc). After its entry into force (1998 in Ukraine and Moldova and 1999 in Georgia), PCA became the defining platform for development of mutual relations between the EU and individual countries. In many areas, PCA preceded a new generation of Association agreements, concluded with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia during the later stages of the approximation process (Moldova and Georgia in 2016, Ukraine in 2017).

PCA provided a platform for political dialogue between the Parties, facilitating the development of close political relations to promote trade, investment, and harmonious economic relations and to foster sustainable development. It also aimed to provide a basis for mutually advantageous economic, social, financial, civil, scientific technological, and cultural co-operation, and to support Ukrainian efforts to consolidate its democracy and develop its economy to complete the transition into a market economy.²² PCA was almost immediately reflected in the special Presidential decree 615 from 11 June 1998 on 'Strategy on Ukraine's Integration with the European Union'²³ which was followed by the special action plan, Programme for Ukraine's integration with the EU, two years later.²⁴ The enthusiastic formal implementation of the PCA in Ukraine suggests that the Ukrainian elites had high expectations for the future possibility of EU membership.

Indeed, as stated by Kataryna Wolczuk (2004), Ukraine had high expectations of the Helsinki summit, wherein members of the European Council met in December 1999 to finalise Eastern EU enlargement with 12 candidates, including Romania and Bulgaria. Ukraine had hoped to receive an invitation to the EU, but instead received only words 'welcoming' its 'European choice'.²⁵ The lack of explicit invitation and rather underwhelming reaction from the EU to proposed initiatives increased the frustration of Ukrainian diplomacy in the years following the Helsinki summit; thus, the special EU Strategy towards Ukraine that developed relationships beyond the PCA did not satisfy them.

As noted by Wolczuk (2004), after ten years of the PCA, Ukraine was hardly satisfied with its relationship with the EU. PCA emphasised the economy, which was only partially reformed in Ukraine and thus very fragile, with potential fallout for domestic enterprises. The push for liberalisation offered only limited benefits and the implementation of the *acquis* required for joining the single market led to conflicting

22 Art. 1, PCA with Ukraine.

23 Ukraine, Decree of the President no. 615 of 11 June 1998.

24 Ukraine, Decree of the President no. 1072 of 14 September 2000.

25 Wolczuk, 2004.

interpretations. Second, PCA provided a framework for cooperation without clear priorities or specific targets to be met. Third, it excluded cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs or Common Foreign and Security policy, which was of Ukrainian interest. Finally, it did not provide targeted EU support for developing administrative capacities to fulfil the requirements of the PCA, and provided a somewhat rigid framework for developmental and keeping diplomatic relations.²⁶ In summary, although the PCA contributed to better quality of relations between the EU and Ukraine, it was not a clear road map to EU membership. This led to dissatisfaction and declining cooperation under the PCA framework.

New impetus for mutual cooperation came with the European Neighbourhood policy and its Eastern Partnership initiative (EP). However, both initiatives had limited results. Original European Neighbourhood Policy, covering relations between the EU and Ukraine, had limited impact because implementation of its Action Plan was left to middle level state officials, resulting in slow, uneven and localised outcomes.²⁷ Countries participating in the European Neighbourhood policy and the EU were looking for new forms of intensified cooperation. Unsurprisingly, Eastern enlargement including Poland and the Baltic countries was followed by an increased push to create a 'ring of friends' at the eastern border of the EU. The initiative was promoted mainly by Poland's foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, and his Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt. A partnership revealed in 2008 and officially launched during the Czech presidency in 2009 represented a new platform for closer cooperation with six non-EU countries, namely Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite Polish representatives claimed that 'Eastern Partnership could lead to EU membership',²⁸ the initiative itself was met with mixed impressions.

First, for a country such as Ukraine, it was (just) another initiative promising approximation and cooperation instead of an explicit offer of EU membership. This was especially hard to accept for the Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, who presented EU membership as the top political priority of his presidency and a key promise to his voters. Moreover, his head of administration, Oleg Rybachuk had spoken about joining the EU in 'just five years'.²⁹ The impression of Ukraine's 'second order importance' was highlighted by its placement in the group with 'weaker' countries that were much less prepared for EU membership or had no membership aspiration at all.

Second, besides Ukraine's disappointment, the initiative was viewed cautiously by Russia as a tool for spreading EU influence in its neighbourhood. Russia's lack of invitation and the people behind the initiative – 'the hawk' of Polish foreign policy,

26 Ibid., p. 9.

27 Wolczuk, 2009.

28 EU Observer, 2008.

29 Korduban, 2009.

Sikorski, and loud critic of Kremlin, Bild, were critical towards Russia – led the initiative to be read as being against Russian interests and a ‘Russophobic project’.³⁰

Third, the Eastern Partnership meetings were sometimes also disappointing for EU members because despite years of the partnership, the results were sometimes questionable. Noteworthy examples include Belarus, which faded back to authoritarian hardship, Armenia, which moved closer to Russia over time, and Azerbaijan, which remained under an oppressive authoritarian regime.³¹ Moreover, partners had different expectations from the Eastern Partnership, which made the unitary attitude of the EU problematic and disconnected from the needs of individual partners. EP was seen merely as EU policy towards post-Soviet countries, rather than real partnerships.³² While countries such as Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia were open to accepting some sort of conditionality for the promise of EU membership, others refused and demanded equality in mutual relations (Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Entry conditions and expectations from the EP varied. Despite all countries departing politically and economically from the Soviet, they were economically very diverse with different reform experiences. In other words, the inclusion of countries in the EP was a political choice, disregarding economic preparedness, differentiation on a mutual basis, and the various aspirations of individual countries. As Kataryna Wolczuk stated, countries differed slightly in their attitudes of expressing aspirations. While Moldova understood the Eastern Partnership as a means to an end – which, for Moldova, was a clear vision of EU membership – it definitely did not consider EP an end in itself.³³ On the other side, Ukraine openly complained about being grouped and compared with countries without membership aspirations such as Azerbaijan, who was only seeking cooperation with the EU in some areas, and others under the EU Neighbourhood policy, such as Morocco.³⁴

Ukrainian diplomacy did not miss any opportunity to communicate the need for an EU future, and its efforts intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. For example, before the EP summit in Riga (2015), Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko spoke to the UK Prime Minister David Cameron, stressing his expectations of clear signals from the EU regarding the introduction of a visa-free regime and ‘recognition of the prospects of its European future’.³⁵ In summary, the EP had many political and economic flaws, yet, over the years, delivered some notable results, especially in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, where conditionality was accepted. The relevance of the EP increased retrospectively as the three countries received candidate status, regardless of its real results.

30 Lavrov, 2018.

31 Shumylo-Tapiola, 2011; Politico, 2015.

32 Wolczuk, 2011.

33 Ibid.

34 Wolczuk, 2011.

35 Politico, 2015.

While economic analysis show a limited effect on the EP countries and almost no convergence with the EU economies,³⁶ the EP had a noticeable impact on various areas related to democracy, governance, civil society, human rights, energy security, migration and so on. Reforms implemented in particular areas led to the introduction of EU standards or at least aspiration and approximation to these standards.³⁷ EP was a driver of Europeanisation in many areas and potentially contributed to the better preparedness of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Nonetheless, progress was very slow and the lack of *finalité* in the form of EU membership led to ongoing frustration and demotivation. Consequently, Ukraine pushed for an instrument with clearer aims – an Association Agreement (AA) – with potential EU membership as the goal, which recognised individual aspirations of the countries in the region.

In the case of Ukraine, the content of the AA was developed over four years, between 2007 and 2011, when it was subjected to 21 rounds of negotiations on its development and adoption, and another 18 rounds of negotiations on issues related to free trade.³⁸ To the Ukrainian elites' disappointment, neither the PCA nor the AA contained a provision regarding the obligation of future EU membership. Instead, AA's preamble states that: 'this Agreement will not prejudice and leaves open future developments in EU-Ukraine relations'.³⁹ Despite their disappointment with the AA, Ukrainian elites did not stop dreaming about a future in the EU. For example, former president Kravchuk mentioned: 'Heading towards the European Union and NATO is inevitable for us. Historically and practically, we are European Country'.⁴⁰

Similar statements regarding relations with the EU were placed in the AA preamble with Moldova and Georgia. While the words carry symbolic importance, it is important to mention that the AA has a strong economic dimension in Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), covering significant parts of the EU *acquis*. In other words, the due implementation of the AA – especially DCFTA – makes countries economically better prepared for EU accession without beginning the formal process.

In contrast to PCA or EP, the AA with the EU held high expectations in all three countries. However, once prepared, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the document, which led to large-scale protests in Kyiv known as Euromaidan. Yanukovich escaped the country to Russia and the temporary instability was misused by the Russian Federation to capture Crimea and destabilise Ukrainian regions, notably the Donbas, to ensure its strategic interests. The newly installed government of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and President Petr Poroshenko returned the country on the pro-Western path by signing the AA and implementing

36 Kharlamova, 2015.

37 Kerikmäe and Chochia, 2016.

38 Tragniuk, 2016, p. 55.

39 Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part, preamble.

40 Kravchuk, 2019.

reforms to limit Russian influence in the country, which was gradually violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

In the post-annexation period (from 2014 onwards), the EU was perceived to be an actor on the side of Ukraine, and thereby a biased mediator of the conflict. Elgström et al. (2018) report that Ukrainian elites were not convinced of the EU's ability to protect Ukrainian interests; the EU was seen as shortsighted and limited in its actions due to the divergent economic and security interests of its members. The lack of EU's mediation effectiveness was also explained by referring to Russia as the hurdle, having no interest in finding solutions through negotiation.⁴¹ Despite this perceived weakness, Ukraine utilised its victim role and the severe conditions caused by war to enable faster Europeanisation. This is mainly because Russia was not an alternative to the pro-Western orientation and the gradual development of democratic norms were not a consequence of a pro-European foreign policy but also its cause.⁴²

While the AA in Ukraine caused significant changes, resulting in the end of the pro-Russian Yanukovich government, the Euromaidan protests, and further hybrid Russian interventions aimed at the annexation of Crimea and promotion of separatism in Donbas, in Georgia, the rapprochement with NATO and the EU caused a Russian invasion six years earlier. The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 was a memento of Russian revisionist aspirations and willingness to intervene in its neighbourhood when necessary, providing a valuable lesson for Ukraine on what to expect from its eastern neighbour in the future.

Russia succeeded in Georgia only partially; it managed to secure the coastline of Abkhazia for the use of its navy, establish military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia close to pipelines transporting Caspian oil to Europe, and promoted internal instability in Georgia by creating over 200.000 refugees. However, it failed to delegitimise the Georgian government and install a pro-Russian ruler, create anarchy, and undermine Georgian aspiration for NATO and EU membership. On the other hand, the invasion promoted anti-Russian sentiment in the country and Georgia withdrew from the CIS, its foreign policy remaining openly pro-Western.⁴³ From one perspective, the Russian invasion of Georgia did not change the country's EU or NATO membership aspirations; from the other, it made Georgia's internal issues more complicated as approximately 20% of the country was occupied, and the country faced a crisis due to the large number of refugees. Invasion was also a signal to the EU that its eastern borders might be vulnerable to Russia and may potentially increase the political cost of possible engagement, making countries less prepared and attractive for the EU enlargement.

The EU's response to the Russian invasion of Georgia was impotent as countries failed to secure a unified position, with some even siding with Russia. As the Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said: 'We cannot create an anti-Russia

41 Elgström et al., 2018; Chaban et al., 2019.

42 Shyrokykh, 2018.

43 Kakachia, 2010.

coalition in Europe, and on this point we are close to Putin's position... This war has pushed Georgia further away'.⁴⁴ The Italian position was relatively isolated in the EU; however, the inter-governmental character of the Common Foreign and Security Policy prevented stronger condemnation of the Russian aggression. It is worth considering whether this weak position of the EU during the Georgian conflict enabled or even encouraged future Russian aggression towards Ukraine, which, similar to Georgia, was invoked due to rapprochement with the West.

The problem of Georgia and its position towards the EU is further complicated by the country's political instability. In the last 20 years (from 2004 to 2024), none of the 13 prime ministers finished his term of four years, and only Nika Gilauri stayed longer than 3 years. The attitude towards the EU is further undermined by the dominating party – Georgian Dream – being pro-Russian and after the parliament elections of 2024, it seems that pro-EU inclination will weaken.

The Moldova AA was highly anticipated and a key topic in President Nicolae Timofti's New Year speech, which presented its signature as the work of the people:

And when we, in 2014, will sign the Association Agreement and the free trade agreement, and will get the liberalised visa regime, we will know that these are going to be your achievements, of those who believe in our common success and work day by day.⁴⁵

A pro-European president highlighted that:

all the citizens of our country will benefit from these achievements, no matter the regions where they live, ethnic affiliation, political opinions they have and their social condition. Yet, to get the wished-for living, we must be united and believe in the chance to turn Moldova into a really European country.⁴⁶

However, the pro-integration course in Moldova was disrupted by the presidency of Igor Dodon (2016–2020), who made his pro-Russian stance clear. Indeed, Moldova renewed friendly relations with Russia, and Dodon recognised Crimea as a part of the Russian Federation. In contrast with the Dodon presidency, Maia Sandu renewed Moldova's pro-Western course and significantly improved relations with Romania and Ukraine by considering Crimea as a part of Ukraine.

44 International Herald Tribune, 2008.

45 Timofti, 2013a.

46 Timofti, 2013b.

4. Knocking on the EU's Door

On 28 February 2022, just four days after the full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine delivered its application to the EU. On the same day, the presidents of eight countries expressed its support for a swift candidacy:

We, the Presidents of the EU member states: the Republic of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland, the Slovak Republic, and the Republic of Slovenia strongly believe that Ukraine deserves receiving an immediate EU accession perspective. Therefore, we call on the EU Member States to consolidate highest political support to Ukraine and enable the EU institutions to conduct steps to immediately grant Ukraine a EU candidate country status and open the process of negotiations. In this critical moment, we reiterate our full solidarity with Ukraine and its People.⁴⁷

This position was quickly supported by the other EU member states. There is no doubt that the Russian invasion of Ukraine contributed to the unprecedented coherence of the positions, and the convergence of interests of the EU and the elites of Ukraine. This new historic opportunity was also used by Moldova, which applied on 3 March 2022, and by Georgia.

The application was signed by the president of Moldova, Maia Sandu, together with Igor Grosu, the President of the Moldovan Parliament, and the Prime Minister of Moldova, Natalia Gavrilita. President Sandu said

The Republic of Moldova must have a clear European path. We are ready to do everything to achieve this basic national objective. The citizens chose this European path, they see the future in the EU ... We want to be part of the free World.⁴⁸

Georgia officially followed Ukraine's application to the EU; their ruling politicians, including Irakli Kobakhidze, initially understood that the call of Ukraine for candidacy status and the sending of applications were merely political gestures.⁴⁹ However, its political opponent, former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, stressed that Georgia should not lose this historic opportunity and must 'remind the whole world that we are the first victim of the Russian aggression' and that 'The right answer to the Russian aggression is to immediately accept Georgia and Ukraine into the European family'.⁵⁰ Both the ruling party and a significant part of the opposition supported the idea of seizing the opportunity, and in this light, the Georgian government delivered its application.

47 President.pl, 2022.

48 Unimedia, 2022.

49 Civil Georgia, 2022a.

50 Civil Georgia, 2022b.

There were some critical voices regarding the new applicants. As Tomasz Żornaczuk (2023) noted, the first country to disagree was Austria, whose Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Shallenberg noted that: ‘a connection to a state like Ukraine does not necessarily have to happen through full membership’.⁵¹ Other countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark were sceptical about the status of the rule of law in the prospective candidates; France had a somewhat cold attitude and position; and Germany was silent for a long time, mainly due to intra-political disagreements.⁵² However, European politicians soon understood that submitting an application is just the beginning of a very long and problematic process. As Emanuel Macron stated:

We all know perfectly well that the process to allow Ukraine to join would take several years indeed, probably several decades. That is the truth, unless we decide to lower the standards for accession. And rethink the unity of our Europe.⁵³

At its summit on 10 March 2022, the European Council invited the European Commission to issue its opinion on the applications. In the joint statement, the urgency of action and EU commitment to help Ukraine is emphasised: ‘Pending this and without delay, we will further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path. Ukraine belongs to our European family’.⁵⁴ Following the European Council meeting, the process proceeded rapidly. Ukraine received the part of the questionnaire on political and economic criteria on 8 April 2022, and the part on status of the EU *acquis* on 13 April 2022. To the issues raised in each part, Ukraine delivered its replies on 17 April and 9 May, respectively. Georgia and Moldova received the first part of the questionnaire on the political and economic criteria on 11 April 2022 and the part on the EU *acquis* on 19 April 2022. Moldova provided its replies on 22 April and 12 May. Georgia provided its replies on 2 and 10 May.⁵⁵ In other words, the deadlines and communication were very intensive as the Commission delivered its opinions on 17 June.

The opinion of the European Commission can be considered a ‘light assessment’ of Copenhagen criteria in its conclusion that Ukraine met the political and economic requirements, and has the capacity to fulfil membership obligations. Notably, during the assessment, the European Commission highlighted the outstanding Ukrainian performance under conditions of aggression: ‘The resilience of Ukrainian institutions has been on full display since the Russian invasion, with the government continuing to function at all levels’.⁵⁶ Similarly, in the economic area, the Commission highlighted that ‘Ukraine has continued its strong macro-economic record,

51 Shallenberg, cited in Żornaczuk, 2023.

52 Żornaczuk, 2023.

53 BBC, 2022.

54 European Council, 2022b.

55 European Commission, 2022d.

56 European Commission, 2022a.

demonstrating a noteworthy resilience with macroeconomic and financial stability ensured also after Russia's invasion in February 2022. This reflects not only a very strong political determination, but also relatively well-functioning institutions'.⁵⁷ The opinion regarding EU membership was positive; however, it mentioned several steps to improve the country's performance, notably, to increase the independence of the judiciary, improve measures against corruption and money laundering, implement the anti-Oligarch law, protect minorities and media independence. Similarly, the European Commission delivered a positive position towards membership of Moldova⁵⁸ and Georgia.⁵⁹

Reading between the lines, the diplomatic language of the three opinions differed slightly – while Ukraine is mentioned as being well advanced, Moldova is mentioned as having 'solid foundations' and Georgia 'has foundations'. Comparisons of such phrases may give some idea regarding the overall impression of the preparedness of the respective countries and political will of being accepted. It is not surprising that governments are sceptical, especially regarding Georgia. As Emanuel Macron said: 'I don't think we can dissociate Moldova from Ukraine in the perspectives that we give' and added that 'Georgia does not have the same place geopolitically'.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, all of them are functioning with different set-ups and perceived heavy weaknesses. Requiring reforms in one country might be much easier to fulfil than managing a relatively small weakness perceived in another country, as political will, expertise, assistance and guidance may help to overcome serious weaknesses. From the timing and relatively similar opinions of the European Commission, it might be expected that in the future as well, all three countries will be considered together and there might be positive competition among them to finish entry requirements – a system, which is resembling the 'Regatta approach' applied to the Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007.

The opinion delivery was commented on by the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen:

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia share the strong and legitimate aspiration of joining the European Union. Today, we are sending them a clear signal of support in their aspirations, even as they face challenging circumstances. And we do so standing firm on our European values and standards, setting out the path they need to follow in order to join the EU. The Commission's opinions mark an inflection point in our relations. Indeed, this is a historic day for the people of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We are confirming that they belong, in due time, in the European Union. The next steps are now in the hands of our Member States.⁶¹

57 Ibid.

58 European Commission, 2022b.

59 European Commission, 2022c.

60 Politico, 2022.

61 European Commission, 2022d.

In other words, the European Commission accepted the call of the European Council and endorsed the application of three new countries.

Just six days after European Commission supported the awarding of candidate status to the three countries, the European Parliament voted by vast majority (515 votes to 40 against and 25 abstentions) to approve a resolution calling on the Heads of states and governments (having the European Council meeting on the same day) to grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova ‘without delay’ and to do the same with Georgia ‘once its government has delivered’.⁶² The against position among the party groups is not surprising: 29 out of 40 against were from the group ID (Identity and Democracy) bringing together euro-sceptical and often openly pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament, including those of xenophobic or neofascist parties. This is also partially the case of some Non-Inscrits (NI) members of the European Parliament (in total 6 against) and the Left (5 against).⁶³ However, some groups, including ID and NI, were divided. This might be because enlargement is always a tricky issue: widening the EU may prevent its deepening and cause political problems within, leading (potentially) to the EU’s end. Instead of a sense of pro-EU inspiration, some Eurosceptic members of the European Parliament may express support for enlargement with the intention of bringing the EU closer to its end. However, the ideological position of the groups suggests that the European Parliament, in general, endorsed the European aspiration of the three countries.

The European Council, on the same day (23 June 2022), awarded candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. It invited the Commission to report on the conditions mentioned in its opinion from 17 June.

5. Expectations From Future Membership

Awarding candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is an unprecedented milestone, with several important dimensions influencing mutual expectations.

The first meaning is geopolitical, as the intention to enlarge the EU towards East is a clear signal to Russia that the EU is going to become a real actor in its neighbourhood. President of the European Council Charles Michel commented on the decision: ‘We are sending a very strong message: it is at once a message of unity and a message of geopolitical determination’.⁶⁴ There is an inherent security dimension as, for the first time in history, the EU has awarded candidate status to a country that is at war with its neighbour. Entry to the EU may be preceded by the identification of new security guarantees for Ukraine and, possibly, new security architecture in

62 European Parliament, 2022a.

63 European Parliament, 2022b.

64 European Council, 2022a.

Europe. In other words, treaty provisions regarding solidarity with Member States that are suffering attack from another country to cover potential obligations to assist in defence.⁶⁵ The successful completion of the accession process and signature of the Accession treaty requires a stalemate in relation to Russia, guaranteeing ceasefire and peace. Peace in Ukraine is, for some EU governments, a prerequisite not only for finishing negotiations but also for starting them.⁶⁶

The second dimension is moral; the candidate status advances the relations between the EU and Ukraine, raising the morale of the Ukrainian people that EU membership is closer. Not only Ukrainian, but also Moldovan and Georgian public strongly support EU Membership. In Georgia, the share of those in favour of EU membership is, according to several surveys, above 70%.⁶⁷ Similarly, support for EU membership is strong in Moldova, and as of July 2024, approximately 64% of Moldovans support EU membership. In the case of Ukraine, public support is much stronger and experienced two important boosts. While annexation of Crimea elevated support by 11%, from 40% to 51%, and very soon to 60%, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further elevated support by another 20%.⁶⁸ This means that public support of EU membership is relatively high in Ukraine, at close to 80%.

However, it is noteworthy that candidate status is just the beginning and the process might take years or even decades. A notable example is Turkey, which applied for EC membership in 1987, received candidate status in 1999, and yet only one chapter (out of 35) has been finalised – science and research, which was closed on 12 June 2006. Moreover, receiving candidate status does not mean that negotiations will be open, as they need some preparation. While the period between candidate status and opening negotiations was relatively short in the case of well-prepared countries (less than one year for Sweden and Finland), in the case of Albania, it was six years and in case of North Macedonia, 15 years.⁶⁹ It might be, especially in the case of Georgia, that the process will last several years, similarly to the Balkan countries rather than the Nordic ones. However, the European Council, on 15 December 2023, agreed to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and with Bosnia and Herzegovina once ready.⁷⁰ The relatively quick opening of negotiations undermines the political priority of EU enlargement and its geo-political aspect.

In other words, the path to EU membership might be long and demanding, reflecting the states of preparedness and issues with negative implications for possible membership (e. g. ongoing war, violated territorial integrity, and instability) and the political will on both sides. However, the moral dimension of candidate status has implications not only for the Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian nations in the encouragement of their European future but also for the EU and its essential values.

65 Art. 42(7) TEU and Art. 222 TFEU.

66 Politico, 2022.

67 CRRC, 2024.

68 International Republican Institute, 2023.

69 Nebulishvili and Kesheleva, 2023.

70 European Council, 2023.

During his visit in Prague, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky articulated well that in the Ukraine, there is a battle being fought for the future of Europe, and that awarding the candidate status to Ukraine ‘means to proof, that the European community is real, that European values works and are not only empty words in the several documents’.⁷¹

Another dimension is political: by accepting Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into the EU in the future, the diversity of EU countries will significantly increase, which might have a serious impact on the effectiveness of EU institutions, policies and the integration project itself. Certainly, enlargement will change the Council of Ministers dynamics, with implications for qualified majority voting and decisions taken by unanimous voting.⁷² All three countries will have implications for various EU policies, notably agricultural policy, which will be a key priority for Ukraine due to similar production capacities as France. Certainly, enlarging the EU towards the East brings challenges to EU values, rule of law and quality of democracy, as newly acceding countries have weak and fragile democratic institutions and different standards of political culture.

From the perspective of the new candidates, the EU is an anchor helping promote stability and protecting national independence. As Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova, stated: ‘Moldova’s EU membership is not just a political choice, it is the only way to protect our liberty, peace and democracy’.⁷³ She further noted,

Russia will remain a source of instability. The enlargement of the EU is vital to ensure our neighbourhood continues to make democratic progress and countries like Moldova remain free to follow their own journey... For Moldova, it is a choice between protecting our democratic gains – anchored firmly in the EU – or being re-occupied.⁷⁴

Similarly to the political dimension, diversity will also increase in the economic area. Enlargement through the eastern countries will present a challenge to European solidarity, as Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia are much poorer than the EU average. According to the Eurostat, the GDP per capita of Ukraine in 2022 was at 3726 Euro, Moldova of 5428 Euro and Georgia 6318 Euro, compared to EU GDP per capita counting for 36430 Euro.⁷⁵ New countries may thus strengthen the low-income block, which acts as a laggard in capital intensive reforms, policies and projects.

This chapter does not aim to communicate pro-Kremlin propaganda. However, without the view of Moscow, the analysis would be somewhat incomplete. In 2014, Vladimir Putin claimed that ‘Russia has always respected the sovereign choice of

71 Zelensky, 2022.

72 Dionysiou, 2013, p. 12.

73 Sandu, 2023a.

74 Sandu, 2023b.

75 Eurostat, 2023.

any nation to organise its political life and make all sorts of unions, both military and economic, and we will continue to do so'.⁷⁶ Paradoxically, the statement was delivered 6 months after the annexation of Crimea and instigation of violence on Donbas, making it one of the most striking contradictions between Russian rhetoric and behaviour. In fact, the Russian Federation always viewed the rapprochement of Ukraine to the EU critically, as it did the European integration project itself. This critical attitude towards the EU has deep roots in misunderstanding its concept and the inability of Russian leaders to see the EU in a positive perspective.

This is caused by two main factors. The first is linked to the paranoid nature of authoritarian regimes and the realist paradigm, which perceives international relations as a zero-sum-game. Russian Federation, to secure its state interests, is seeking only the absolute gains at the expense of potential enemies, and Ukraine is an inseparable part of this interest. Absolute gains might be ensured only with exclusive dominance in Ukraine (for example, by imposing a pro-Russian government) or with direct control over territory gained in the war of conquest. This attitude is in sharp contrast with the natural and historic process of European integration, which occurred on a voluntary basis to secure relative gains: the security and stability of the neighbour (especially France and Germany) brought added value for one's own economy. Non-zero-sum game became a driver of European integration, and led to the establishment of the biggest economic space on Earth, marking an era of unprecedented prosperity in the European continent.

Second, the achievements of European integration would be not possible without the changed perception of EU member states and their transformation into post-modern states, which share sovereignty over some policies but accept a certain level of supra-nationality exercised by the EU. Consequently, the EU, equipped with powers previously associated only with states, is a postmodern entity created by a unique, carefully balanced historical consensus, far exceeding the nature of the classical, usually national, state. Conversely, the Russian Federation failed to create a modern or national state. Instead, its oligarchy and autocratic structure represent a clear barrier between the Russian people and state, resulting in a mafia-governed entity that is hiding beyond the facade of statehood, wherein state functions are misused for the benefit of a few chosen ones.⁷⁷ Such a problematic entity can never find mutual understanding with a postmodern entity such as the EU, and perceives enlargement as being for the sake of its own benefits. The values and systems the EU represents are in dangerously sharp contrast to the Kremlin regime.

Vladimir Putin said that the Ukrainian integration to the EU is inconsistent with its CIS orientation, which costs Ukraine billions of Euros, adding that:

As soon as Ukraine introduces zero import duty on goods from the EU, a step envisaged right after the ratification of the agreement that would apply to 98 percent

⁷⁶ Putin, 2014.

⁷⁷ Browder, 2023.

of all the goods, there will obviously be a sharp increase in the supply of European goods to the Ukrainian market. We understand our European partners; they have already developed the Ukrainian market rather well, and would like to get hold of whatever is left and squeeze out everyone else. Besides, less competitive Ukrainian produce will also be squeezed out from its own market. Where to? Primarily to Russia and the other Customs Union states, but primarily to us.⁷⁸

The quote confirms that Putin is thinking about the geo-political orientation of Ukraine as a zero-sum game, but also in economic terms: any further integration, including economic, of the EU would be at the expense of Russia. Putin was simply afraid that Ukraine would be used by EU companies to penetrate the Russian market: 'We have a strong suspicion, as I have already said, and there is a great threat that European goods will be brought in (to Russia) through Ukraine'.⁷⁹ It is evident that Ukraine being in the EU is perceived as a threat to Russian interests, despite Putin often claiming the opposite.

In 2022, after invading Ukraine, Putin did not object to Ukrainian aspirations to join the EU: 'The EU is not a military organisation or a military-political bloc, in contrast to NATO. We have always said, and I have always said that our stance is very consistent and clear in his respect. We have nothing against'.⁸⁰ The above words of Putin are in contrast with the words of Sergei Lavrov, who said that between the EU and NATO there is 'very little difference' as the EU is 'becoming militarised at a record rate'.⁸¹ Both statements came at a time, when Ukrainian critical infrastructure was under constant attack from Russian bombs in a very well-planned campaign aimed to cripple the Ukrainian economy and render the reconstruction of the country *vis-à-vis* EU membership as difficult as possible. Making Ukraine a destroyed and malfunctioning failed state may possibly prevent its integration into Western economic and military structures.

According to Nicolas Lokker and Kate Johnston (2024), the EU accession of Ukraine is very dangerous for Russia, as a prosperous democratic Ukraine in the EU might provide political, economic, and sociocultural alternatives to Russia.⁸² In other words, Ukraine might provide a good example and stimulate the country to oppose Putin's oligarchic authoritarian regime and power circles in the Kremlin. Thus, Russia perceives EU membership as a threat, regardless of the EU's economic core and thus may use its powers to prevent the EU's future in countries in its neighbourhood by supporting opposing forces. The current situation in Georgia is a good example of how Russia exerts its influence to undermine the political orientation of its neighbours.

78 Putin, 2014.

79 Ibid.

80 Putin, 2022.

81 Lavrov, 2023.

82 Lokker and Johnston, 2024.

6. Conclusion

For centuries, rulers, scholars and even children at schools have considered this seemingly simple question: where are the borders of Europe? Since 23 June 2022, when the European Council granted EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and recognised Georgia for possible EU membership, the answer is much clearer than before. However, instead of bringing joy and certainty about the future of the European continent, approaching the geographic and political maximum of the EU brings unprecedented challenges to the integration project. The brutal Russian war against Ukraine contributed to the convergence of EU member states and enabled Ukraine to open its European future.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the perspective of EU membership underwent significant development since the early 1990s. The initial position of the country was strongly influenced by the problems inherited from transformation. The slow and often problematic transition towards democratic governance, and departure from a centrally planned economy prevented realistic aspirations to EU membership, despite all three countries maintaining ‘the European choice’ as the ultimate and normative goal. Over time, this goal was more or less pursued depending on the internal conflicts between political forces, who often balanced between orientations on Europe and Russia, and challenged vector politics. Geopolitical factors and rising aggression of the Russian Federation in promoting its interests were crucial influences. Nevertheless, from a long-term perspective, Russia failed: the invasion of Georgia in 2008, aggression against Ukraine, and influence over Moldova did not suppress the pro-Western orientation of the countries, even leading to the opposite effect. While perhaps slightly exaggerated, Vladimir Putin can be credited with contributing to the convergence in the EU perspective on future enlargement, and increased efforts in this area. Nonetheless, the future of these three countries is crucial in this respect, as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova face unresolved territorial disputes and experience ongoing effects of Russian hybrid interference, best demonstrated in the severe ongoing political crisis in Georgia.

The current situation in Georgia reminds us that opting for Europe and receiving candidate status is the very beginning of a very long journey, which will certainly bring many challenges regarding the implementation of the *acquis*. Its implementation and proper early functioning may help implement reforms necessary to improve the economy and functioning of the state. However, based on experiences from the previous rounds of enlargement, the EU membership milestone should not be perceived by the candidates as a *finalité* but rather the beginning of an opportunity to benefit from EU achievements. No radical change will happen, which might be disappointing for citizens and break consensus in the countries.

Thanks to the accepted (positive) conditionality in the framework of EP and later the AA, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia achieved considerable progress in implementing economic *acquis*. Using financial instruments and conditionality as a ‘stick and carrot’ for driving candidates toward painful but necessary domestic reform

with the promise of full benefits of the EU membership seems to be an effective approach, which benefits from the emergency conditions of caused by the Russian aggression. Paradoxically, the positive conditionality associated with reforms and future EU membership combined with the clearly negative prospects of Russian occupation and created an unprecedented window of opportunity for quick and effective Europeanisation. Indeed, the launch of accession negotiations between the EU, and Ukraine and Moldova in June 2024 is another milestone that brings EU membership closer.

Europe (with some exceptions) was never as united and interconnected as it is today, and EU enlargement to include Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will likely complete enlargement in Europe and conclude the geographical aspects of the EU integration project. In the 1990s, it was totally unthinkable to start accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Similarly, it is unthinkable today that Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan may one day democratise and potentially apply for EU membership. Certainly, it would be a completely different Europe, and this substantial transformation might start with the absorption of the Western Balkans, which will change the balance in the EU. In this regard, the EU values defined in Art. 2 TEU are of much greater importance than ever before.

Despite the majority of the workload being on the side of the candidate countries, their position and fulfilment of political criteria will also be evaluated in the context of international politics. While ceasefire and later peace might enable future EU membership, they can paradoxically lead to decreasing support of the EU members for future enlargement. Moreover, the rise of populism – best illustrated by the US administration of Donald Trump – may indicate the end of an era in international politics and the start of another – unfortunately, one that is less predictable and conflicting in nature, favouring shortsighted national interests, adversity, and erosion of democratic values, at the expense of traditional partnerships, spirit of cooperation, and support of democracy. This new environment might not favour countries with unfinished economic transitions and weak institutions. From this perspective, the EU may act as a lighthouse and later provide an anchor of political and democratic stability with its full membership, as it already did in the case of the Southern enlargement, when three countries with fragile economies and institutions were met with the political priority of the European Communities. Despite the changing nature of international relations, global challenges persist. In this regard, European cooperation is not an option but a necessity, and the potential of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia shall be part of the common European effort.

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