Ukraine in light of Europe

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How to cite this publication :
Karl Haddad,
« Ukraine in light of Europe »,
Ambassadeurs de la Jeunesse, February 27, 2020.

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Ukraine has been in the spotlight for over five years following the “Maidan Revolution” of 2013-2014. Having successfully toppled former President Viktor Yanukovych, these events catalysed Kiev’s ongoing conflict with Russia after Moscow annexed the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and subsequently backed separatist forces in the East of the country.

Having officially qualified Russia as an “Aggressor State”\(^2\), Kiev has repeatedly stated its desire to integrate Euro-Atlantic organisations to further depart (and protect itself) from its Russian neighbour. To better comprehend the stakes behind such goals, it is important to first briefly recapitulate Ukraine’s geopolitical situation since its independence.

**A summary of Ukraine’s history since its independence**

Ukraine has been one of the key republics of the Soviet Union until the latter’s implosion in 1991. Among its many privileges at the time, we

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1 Taras Shevchenko, *My Testament*, (1845). Shevchenko is regarded as being a national hero of Ukraine and one of its greatest writers.

2 *Ukraine crisis: Kiev defines Russia as 'aggressor' state*, (BBC, January 18, 2018).
can mention it is a founding member of the United Nations since 1945\textsuperscript{3}. Its history with neighbouring Russia has been one of brotherhood and hatred throughout different periods, with the two countries sharing a common history, deep cultural similarities as well as for the most part a shared Eastern Slavic identity and Orthodox Christian faith\textsuperscript{4}.

Following its independence, Ukraine managed to keep a balance between opening up to the West and having close and friendly relations with Russia\textsuperscript{5}, seeking its destiny while adapting to the reality of the two countries’ deep ties, including economic ones.

Kiev has been one of the main transiting hubs for Russian natural gas towards Europe, a very strategic but often problematic position for the country\textsuperscript{6}. However, it helped Moscow maintain its influence and leverage to ensure Ukraine’s neighbouring loyalty\textsuperscript{7}.

However, economic hardships following the fall of the Soviet Union, the re-emergence of old and historical patriotic (sometimes nationalistic) anti-Russian sentiments\textsuperscript{8} as well as a rise in corruption and unemployment lead to stronger pro-Western sentiment within Ukrainian society, culminating in 2004 to what is known as the “Orange Revolution”, and afterwards to the 2013-2014 “Euromaidan” Revolution.

\textsuperscript{3} Ukraine - United Nations in Ukraine, (UN House in Ukraine, United Nations Website).
\textsuperscript{5} Andrea Chandler, Какая это дружба /what kind of friendship is this? Russia’s “Crimean Syndrome”, (European Security, vol. 27, N°2, 2018), 4.
\textsuperscript{8} Having historical reasons, among which suppression of Ukrainian cultural identity and language during the times of the Russian Empire or the great Ukrainian famine of the 1930’s known as Holodomor, orchestrated by the Soviet authorities at the time.
Understanding the “Orange Revolution”

The “Orange Revolution” goes on the same wave as other so-called “Coloured Revolutions” which took place throughout former communist countries. With their major emphasis on democracy and progressivism, these revolutions generally implied emancipation from Russia. Among them are Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” of 2003, the “Tulip Revolution” of 2005 in Kyrgyzstan, or the 2010 Kyrgyz revolution.

In Ukraine, the revolution of late 2004 was the first of its kind since the country’s independence in 1991. Different factors tend to define the causes of upheaval.

Ukraine was then led by former President Leonid Kuchma, from 1994 till 2004, the country’s second Head of State since the end of the Soviet Union. Two rival candidates faced-off to succeed Kuchma: Viktor Yanukovych, then Prime Minister of the country and considered as being close to Moscow, and Viktor Yushchenko, former Prime Minister and close to the West, leading the opposition bloc “Our Ukraine”. The rival factions are somewhat a good illustration of Ukraine’s post-independence dilemma between Russia and the West. It was, however, the Presidential elections of 2004 that proved to have catalysed the revolution: When election results had crowned Yanukovych a victory in the second round, Yushchenko and ally Yulia Timoshenko organised opposition rallies in the centre of Kiev to protest what they deemed as a rigged election, gathering up to half a million protesters. International reactions were divided between Western countries (especially the USA) praising the revolution and Russia being

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9 Which toppled former President and former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze.
10 Which toppled former President Askar Akayev.
11 Which toppled Akayev’s successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev.
12 He was preceded by Leonid Kravchuk from 1991 until 1994.
supportive of Yanukovych, the situation deteriorated rapidly, coming close to a deadlock. The following uprising was only managed thanks to a compromise between the two contenders, orchestrated by then President of the Verkhovna Rada Volodymyr Lytvyn: the organisation of a third round of elections (which was won by Yushchenko at 52%) and greater powers to the Prime Minister (which allowed Yanukovych to save face if he won the Parliamentary elections)\(^1\).

Besides the presidential candidates, key actors took part in the political turmoil of the Orange Revolution:

Andrew Wilson\(^1\) tends to focus on the role of Western-backed NGOs in fomenting pro-Western sentiment in Ukrainian society, among them the Soros-funded “New Choice 2004” and “Freedom of Choice” coalitions\(^2\). Another key NGO during the events was “Pora”, a student-led group that highly participated in the protests in favour of a Euro-Atlantic orientation for the country. Wilson also points out at what could be massive American funding for Yushchenko’s campaign, and two-year funding of the then Ukrainian opposition block amounting to about $65 million\(^3\). Wilson argues that the West had favourably supported the opposition’s side by funding and helping Yushchenko.

Taras Kuzio\(^4\), on the other hand, stresses on the interests of other actors, among them the Ukrainian oligarchs. He points out the chaos related to the oligarchy particularly in Dnepropetrovsk and Donetsk (which were then close to Yanukovych) and the numerous scandals of corruption related to both groups, linking them to the alleged electoral

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14 The Ukrainian Parliament.

15 Viatcheslav Avioutskii, La Révolution orange en tant que phénomène géopolitique, (Hérodote, vol. 129, N°2, 2008), 70-71.


17 Ibid, 23.

18 Ibid, 22.

fraud of 2004. Such illegal activities contributed to the population’s general anger against the ruling elite and desire for change and social justice embodied by Yushchenko. Moreover, Kuzio mentions the role of “social populism” and the sentiment of National Identity as driving forces behind the Orange Revolution, paving way for the rise of Ukrainian identity as opposed to the old Soviet-bred elite.

It must be noted that the divisions enlivened by this rivalry and the many actors surrounding it were a clear illustration of Ukraine’s post-soviet dilemma between East and West, and the threat of seeing the country divided was taken very seriously even then. But the Orange Revolution also fundamentally instilled a strong Pro-Western sentiment in Ukrainian Society and a profound sense of Ukrainian National identity that was to re-emerge a decade later during the “Maidan” protests.

**The Road to Maidan: Ukraine’s turn to the West**

Yushchenko’s victory strained the ties with Moscow. With Ukraine undertaking a largely Western-oriented foreign policy, with vocal claims by Kiev to join the European Union and NATO, Russia felt under no obligation to continue selling cheaper gas to Ukraine. Moreover, it must also be noted that Yushchenko took several antagonising stances towards Moscow; we could cite the commemoration of the Holodomor – the great famine of the 1930s in Ukraine – as being a Russian-led (albeit Soviet) genocide against the Ukrainian population; the clear positioning and support towards Georgia during the 2008 war between the Caucasian country and Russia, during which Yushchenko physically stood at the side of then-

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21 Ibid.


President Mikheil Saakashvili (along with other European leaders)\textsuperscript{24}; or the honouring of Nazi-collaborator Stepan Bandera, leader of the Ukrainian nationalist resistance movement UPA-OUN, as a hero of Ukraine in 2010\textsuperscript{25}.

While more powers were granted to the Prime Minister, Yanukovych failed to win the bet he made, with the title going to Yushchenko ally Yulia Tymoshenko. The relationship between the two at the highest positions of Ukraine’s political hierarchy proved, however, to be quite difficult, as Taras Kuzio points out:

“Attempts to cap petrol prices proved to be disastrous and led to an oil crisis, finally forcing Yushchenko to intervene in favour of free market policies. Although Prime Minister Tymoshenko protested Yushchenko’s calls to remove price caps, his threat to remove her as Prime Minister forced Tymoshenko to back down.”\textsuperscript{26}

While aiming for an economic policy directed towards a market economy he had to take into consideration the need for social policies to help poorer parts of the population and pensioners, creating conflicts of interests within the ruling political faction.

The oil and gas crises that erupted during Yushchenko’s time in power are notoriously synonymous with his time in power. The cooling of relations with Moscow, not forgetting Ukraine’s position as the main gas transit from Russia to Europe, played into the Kremlin’s interests.

The Kremlin was selling gas at a cheaper expense to Ukraine than to Europe, rewarding the former Soviet republic for its good ties with Russia: $50 per thousand cubic meters (TCM), as opposed to

\textsuperscript{24} Виступ Президента України Віктора Ющенка на центральному майдані Тбілісі на підтримку грузинського суверенітету, (Official Website of the Ukrainian Presidency, August 12, 2008).
\textsuperscript{25} Ivan Katchanovski, Terrorists or national heroes? Politics and perceptions of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine, (Communist and Post-Communist Studies, vol. 48, N° 2 – 3, 2015), 218.
\textsuperscript{26} Taras Kazio, Ukrainian Economic Policy after the Orange Revolution: A Commentary on Åslund's Analysis, (Eurasian Geography and Economics, vol. 46, N°5, 2005), 357.
$235/TCM for the rest of Europe. With Yushchenko’s victory, Russia unilaterally and unexpectedly decided to sell its gas to Ukraine at the same price as that of Western Europe, proving to be financially disastrous for Kiev.

Moreover, at the end of the gas contract between both countries in 2005 and a failed negotiation for a new one, Moscow cut all its gas supplies through Ukraine for three days in the middle of winter, leaving millions of Ukrainians in the cold and sparking the first gas crisis between the two countries. With a coup de force, the Kremlin managed to restart selling gas to Ukraine, but this time at a rate of $95/TCM.

Tensions followed throughout Yushchenko’s mandate, with Ukraine being sometimes forced to sell key industries to Russia, under the threat of future gas cuts.

The most damaging of such major gas crises was at the start of the year 2009 when Russia once again cut its supplies to Ukraine, forcing Kiev to seek concrete help from the European Union. This time, however, the cut lasted for three weeks and was used as a punishment for Ukraine’s stance on the conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi of August 2008. The crises ended on January 19, with Ukraine having to settle for $233/TCM in 2009, to be increased to $257/TCM by 2010 under Western prices, a punitive policy by the Kremlin. The deal was signed by then-Prime Ministers Tymoshenko and Putin.

The 2010 Presidential elections brought Viktor Yanukovych to power. Considered close to Moscow, relations between the two countries tamed during his mandate, albeit having promised the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU during his campaign. Warming of relations can be defined in several points. First, Yanukovych managed

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 119.
to renegotiate gas prices with Moscow in exchange for an extended lease of the navy base of Sevastopol to Russian troops as early as 2010\textsuperscript{30}. In the process, Yulia Tymoshenko, while being a political opponent, was jailed under the pretext of having signed the gas deal of 2009, being charged for abuse of office.

Derailing his predecessor’s policies, Yanukovych also put into law Ukraine’s “non-bloc” status, effectively putting aside any future NATO integration, and therefore reassuring Russia. While Ukrainian is the only official language in the country, Yanukovych’s Party of Regions managed to get minority languages having a local status\textsuperscript{31}, particularly Russian, which is commonly spoken in Ukraine but most importantly in the South and the East of the country.

While relations with Russia did improve under Yanukovych, the economic situation in Ukraine did not. Moreover, widespread corruption\textsuperscript{32} leads to many industries being lost to Ukrainian sovereignty. While the President was living an excessively extravagant lifestyle\textsuperscript{33}, the situation in the country worsened, paving way for an overall dissatisfaction of the population.

It was however not until late 2013, when Yanukovych refused to sign the agreement with the EU in favour of closer ties with Russia that protests started happening, leading to what is known as the “Maidan” Revolution or “Euromaidan”, named after the Independence Square in


\textsuperscript{32} Maxim Tucker, Ukraine’s fallen leader Viktor Yanukovych ‘paid bribes of $2 billion’ - or $1.4 million for every day he was president, (The Telegraph, May 31, 2016). Available on: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/31/ukraines-fallen-leader-viktor-yanukovych-paid-bribes-of-2-billion/

the centre of Kiev. Millions of protesters gathered throughout the country demanding Yanukovych’s resignation. As opposed to 2004’s revolution, “Euromaidan” proved to be a violent struggle between law enforcers and protesters. It is important to note that several key Western political figures participated in the events alongside the protesters, including among others Victoria Nuland, then US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. The situation completely degenerated on February 10, 2014, when a bloodbath occurred and more than a hundred protesters were shot by snipers (allegedly from the riot police), causing widespread condemnation from the international community and spearheading the revolt into toppling Yanukovych, who managed to escape to Russia.

With the fear of losing its key interests in the country, Russia orchestrated a referendum on the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, to determine whether or not the Russian-speaking peninsula should be reattached to Russia, as it was before 1954. While Moscow’s move proved successful, the referendum in question was neither recognised by Ukraine or the International Community, making Russia’s annexation of Crimea an act of aggression against Ukraine’s territorial integrity under International Law. With protests against Maidan happening in the Russian-speaking regions of the country, several key cities sided against the new authorities in Kiev, inspired by the events in Crimea: Kharkov, Odessa, Lugansk and Donetsk.

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37 Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian SSR to the Ukrainian SSR as a show of friendship.
revolts in Kharkov were rapidly controlled, with Ukrainian law enforcers retaking control of official buildings from pro-Russian protesters without much violence. The same cannot be said for Odessa, where far-right counter-protesters torched the House of Unions’ building, where pro-Russian protesters were gathered, and killing dozens of the latter when fleeing the fires in May 2014\textsuperscript{40}. For the oblasts of Donetsk and Lugansk, known together as the Donbas region, pro-Russian separatist forces\textsuperscript{41} started forming thanks in part to the help of the Kremlin, and this from April 2014, barely a month after the events in Crimea. Key Russian military personnel such as Igor “Strelkov” Girkin\textsuperscript{42} heavily participated in the following conflict against Ukrainian Armed Forces, which crystallised into the now frozen war we know today. While the conflict can be called a civil war, Taras Kuzio and other scholars would define it as a conflict of aggression from Russia against a supposedly unjust expansion of Western interests in its sphere of influence\textsuperscript{43}. Whatever definition is to be given to the conflict, Russia’s participation in it paved way for Kiev’s decision to fully integrate Euro-Atlantic organisations such as the European Union and NATO and distance itself from Moscow, which is officially qualified by Ukraine as an “aggressor state”.

Andrea Chandler mentions an important fact: While a friendship treaty was signed between Russia and Ukraine in 1997\textsuperscript{44}and relations between the former Soviet countries being close and “friendly”, this friendship only emerged when Kiev had a docile attitude towards Moscow. Therefore, Chandler argues that Ukraine has a “hostile” government is

\textsuperscript{40} Jack Dion, Pourquoi le massacre d’Odessa a-t-il si peu d’écho dans les médias ?, (Marianne, May 6, 2014). Available on : https://www.marianne.net/medias/pourquoi-le-massacre-d-odessa-t-il-si-peu-d-echo-dans-les-medias


\textsuperscript{42} Ray Finch, Russia’s Man in New Type War - Igor Girkin, (Open Source, Foreign Perspective, Underconsidered/Understudied Topics, 2017), 1 – 8.

\textsuperscript{43} Taras Kuzio, Euromaidan revolution, Crimea and Russia–Ukraine war: why it is time for a review of Ukrainian–Russian studies,(Eurasian Geography and Economics, 2019), 4.

\textsuperscript{44} Ending in 2019, not being renewed by Kiev.
the only reason for Moscow to intervene in Ukraine in 2014 (or to bully the country economically during the Yushchenko era). While friendship treaties were Moscow’s priority while dealing with former Soviet countries, the case of Ukraine shows “friendship” is more about the political regime than the implementation of treaties for the Kremlin\textsuperscript{45}.

Taking into account the current situation inside Ukraine and Kiev’s position towards integrating Euro-Atlantic structures to fend off military aggression from Russia and ensure economic security, it is important to look deeper as to what extent has Euro-Atlantic integration been feasible in Ukraine since the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan? The present paper will first try to detail Kiev’s ongoing achievement in its endeavour and its future perspectives. Then, we will try to focus on Kiev’s limits in accomplishing its goals, mostly taking into account Russia’s interests and weight in the International Community but also Ukraine’s shortcomings.

\textsuperscript{45} Andrea Chandler, \textit{Какая Это Дружба /What Kind of Friendship Is This?}, (European Security, vol. 27, N° 2, 2018), 6-17.
I. Ukraine at the Forefront of Euro-Atlantic Integration

Among the rest Mazeppa made,

His pillow in an old Oak’s shade,

Himself as rough and scarce less old –

The Ukraine’s Hetman, calm and bold. – Lord Byron, Mazeppa⁴⁶

Ukraine has chosen to follow the Euro-Atlantic path since Euromaidan, in the same footsteps as fellow Post-Soviet nations Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Georgia. While Tbilisi has not yet integrated neither the EU nor NATO, its intensive cooperation with these structures and its political will to integrate them have been unshakable since the war of August 2008. The Baltic States have succeeded in integrating both structures as early as 2004⁴⁷, showing a clear will since independence not to have anything to do with their Soviet past, which they consider as having been an “occupation”⁴⁸.

As opposed to both Georgia and Ukraine, the Baltic States have not been in direct conflict with Russia. Their geopolitical situation was still complicated, mainly due to their geographic location on the Baltic Sea and the considerable Russian minority in these countries⁴⁹, which they fear could cause separatist tendencies from the Kremlin.

For Ukraine, Euro-Atlantic integration would mean achieving economic and military security for the country, ensuring its survival

⁴⁶ Lord Byron, Mazeppa, (1819). Ivan Mazeppa, Hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks from 1687 till 1708 is considered a tragic Hero by many Ukrainians for seeking to emancipate the Cossacks from Russian rule. He is however considered a traitor in Russia for having betrayed the Russian Empire at the Battle of Poltava (1709) opposing Swedish King Charles XII and Russian Tsar Peter the Great.
⁴⁷ March 29, 2004 for NATO and May 1, 2004 for the EU.
after years of economic hardships, territorial separatism and war, and Russian meddling in its affairs.

_The EU’s Eastern Partnership programme: Ukraine’s gateway to Europe?
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Ukraine has shown interest to cooperate with Europe since the days of its independence, but truly decided to orient itself westwards since the Orange Revolution (not taking into account the interregnum of Viktor Yanukovych). While Russia used to be Ukraine’s main economic partner until Euromaidan, the introduction of sanctions⁵⁰ by both Ukraine and the West following Moscow’s move on Crimea and its relationship with the Donbas rebels turned the tie to Europe.

The key aspect of Kiev’s European policy is its membership in Brussels’ Eastern Partnership programme⁵¹, established in 2009 and covering six Post-Soviet States in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, namely: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its main goal is to strengthen the ties between these countries and the European Union by reinforcing the formers’ economies, developing their connectivity, helping them obtain better governance and strengthening their society.

With these objectives being part of the EU’s Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policy⁵², Russia has perceived them as an intrusion into

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⁵² The Eastern Partnership is an offspring of the European Neighbourhood Policy, created in 2004 to increase cooperation and ties between the EU and its neighbouring regions (among them Eastern Europe or even the Southern Mediterranean).
its sphere of influence and as a means to reduce its presence in the former Soviet space.

As explained before, the European orientation of Ukraine emerged during the Yushchenko era with its membership in the Neighbourhood Policy of the EU and the Eastern Partnership Programme. This came with major European technical help in different spheres of governance in Ukraine, mostly political and economical\(^5\). The Eastern Partnership pushed this trend to another level by increasing political association with the countries concerned and implementing economic integration with the EU. Other aspects of the programme include administrative reforms, as the administrative structures of Ukraine (and the other EP States) were heavily inherited by the Soviet Union, thereby further distancing these countries from their Soviet past, and therefore from Russia.

With Ukraine following this trend, the outcome of such policies would eventually lead to the signing of an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU\(^5\). Ukraine planned to push towards this objective as early as 2007, with first with an Action Plan with the EU, followed by the setting of the AA format at the EU-Ukraine summit in Paris in 2008\(^5\). This agreement, which has been also signed by Georgia and Moldova, is both political and economic, but most importantly, it guarantees a free-trade area between Kiev and the EU\(^5\) (known as a “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area”, or DCFTA).

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\(^5\) *Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine*, (Ukrainian Government Portal official website).


\(^5\) *What We Do*, (European Union External Action – EUBAM official website).

Available on : http://eubam.org/what-we-do/aa-dcfta/
Negotiations between Kiev and Brussels for the setting of the AA were held from 2007 until 2012, going even beyond Yushchenko’s mandate. The warming of relations with Moscow during Yanukovych’s mandate and the signing of the AA making non-compliance to these reforms legally sanctionable\(^{57}\) lead the former President to refrain from signing the agreement with the EU in late 2013. He argued that he saw it better for Ukraine to favour closer ties with Russia. This was the spark that initiated the Maidan Revolution, bringing to Yanukovych’s demise.

The post-Maidan government made signing the Association Agreement with the European Union one of its main priorities, guaranteeing economic security and bringing Ukraine one step closer to eventually integrate the EU. The political part was signed in March 2014 by interim former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, whereas the economic part was signed in July of the same year by then-President Petro Poroshenko.

The treaty set the DCFTA with Ukraine to come into force in 2016, leading to Moscow ending its free-trade agreements with Kiev, despite the two countries sharing very deep economic ties\(^{58}\). Despite this, the Eastern Partnership and the signing of the AA crystallised Ukraine’s European ambitions for the future, manifested by the political will of the country’s governments since Maidan. Trade turnover between the EU and Ukraine has been on the rise, from $43 487.8 million in 2017 to $49 317.1 million in 2018\(^{59}\).


The European Union as a whole is now Ukraine’s main trade partner, amounting to 41.1% of Kiev’s total trade volume in 2018\(^{60}\) (versus 40% in 2016\(^{61}\)).

It is also important to mention the end of the visa regime to the Schengen area for Ukrainians, approved on June 11, 2017\(^{62}\). This step is a major success for Ukraine’s European perspective, giving its citizens the chance to easily travel to European countries, and bringing the country closer to the European scene.

It is however still too early to predict when, or even if, full integration with the EU will start taking place, as the union is facing challenges with scepticism and populism on the rise\(^{63}\), and Ukraine is still in a very dire situation, as will be detailed later on in the present paper.

**NATO – Ukraine’s security guarantee?**

Arch enemy of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, NATO has been pushing further into its former contender’s territory since the ‘90s, much to the ire of Russia. With all non-Soviet former Warsaw Pact countries have integrated the Alliance (along with the Baltic States), Russia sees any expansion of NATO as a potential menace. Ukraine, having been one of Russia’s main partners since the implosion of the Soviet Union, is very strategic for the organisation for several reasons:

First in line is Ukraine’s geography: it’s the second biggest country in Europe (after Russia) with an area of 603 550 km\(^2\) (including Crimea)\(^{64}\)

\(^{60}\) Ibid.
\(^{61}\) European Commission, Ukraine, (European Commission’s official website).
\(^{64}\) Available on : https://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-populism/
\(^{64}\) Ukraine, (CIA World Factbook, 2019).
and with a population of about 44 million people. Most importantly, it shares a border of 1944 km with Russia, making it the biggest European border with the country. Let’s also not forget its Western border with the pro-Russian separatist Moldovan region of Transnistria, where Russian troops have been stationed since 1992. Russia has always preferred having “buffer States” to keep NATO away from its borders since the Cold War. Ukraine’s western pivot, therefore, increases Russia’s military vulnerability and weakens the strategic depth provided by its territory.

Ukraine also has large access to the Black Sea, making its position against Moscow all the more strategic for the Alliance. Until the end of the Cold War, Turkey was the only NATO member state bordering the Black Sea. The Black Sea is an important element to Russia’s Grand Strategy of accesses to warm waters, as it is its main gateway to the Mediterranean. With the Russian Black Sea Fleet based in Crimea, NATO now has a partner that has physical proximity to key Russian naval positions. With Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania all being members of the Alliance and Georgia being a close partner, the Black Sea is ever more strategic with Ukraine as a pro-NATO regional player.

Finally, NATO’s strategic interest in Ukraine is that the country is central to undermining Russian soft power in the former Soviet space,

65 Ibid.
66 Robert O’Connor, Transnistria Isn’t the Smuggler’s Paradise It Used to Be, (Foreign Policy, June 5, 2019). Available on: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/05/transnistria-isnt-the-smugglers-paradise-it-used-to-be-sheriff-moldova-ukraine-tiraspol/
70 Alexandra Kuimova & Simeon T. Wezeman, Georgia and Black Sea security, (SIPRI, december 2018), 1-16.
and the Slavic or Orthodox world. The “Russian World”\textsuperscript{71} is arguably one of the finest tools of Russian influence, focused on a shared language, history or faith. Separating Ukraine from this ideology, while bringing it in the fold of the Western Democracies, is a big blow to Russian soft power: Ukraine is considered by many Russians as being the cradle of their civilisation, as well as where their people adopted the Orthodox Christian faith\textsuperscript{72}. The Russian language is still widely spoken in the country, but the rise of patriotism and national identity has further distanced Ukrainians from speaking it as casually as before, rather reinforcing the use of the Ukrainian language. Overturning the Russian model of governance in favour of the Western one is also an ideological strike that can strongly affect the Kremlin’s Eurasian ambitions as an alternative to Western international dominance\textsuperscript{73}.

Ukraine and NATO established relations since the fall of the Soviet Union, with initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace. However, Viktor Yushchenko was the first Ukrainian leader to pursue NATO integration for Ukraine, most importantly in light of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, showing the latter’s defencelessness in the face of Moscow. With bilateral relations with the Kremlin hitting an all-time low during the post-Orange Revolution period, Kiev saw NATO integration as a legitimate military security umbrella to insure its independent stance vis-à-vis Russia. To confirm the new political orientation of Ukraine, Kiev applied to the NATO Membership Action Plan (along with Georgia) in April 2008 at the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest\textsuperscript{74}, with large support from the United States of America.


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 29-33.

The decision failed, however, due to the worries from certain members of alienating Russia\textsuperscript{75}.

Following his electoral victory in 2010, Viktor Yanukovych dropped his country’s NATO path, preferring to make Ukraine a non-aligned country\textsuperscript{76}. With this move, the former President sought to destroy his predecessor’s legacy by recreating a status-quo of good relations with both Russia and the West. The move provided many advantages to the Kremlin, guaranteeing its neighbour’s loyalty by it not seeking to go against its security interests. The military neutrality of Ukraine enshrined under Yanukovych was however swiftly pushed aside following the Maidan Revolution\textsuperscript{77}. While NATO integration was not such a popular idea before the revolution, the following events changed the trend\textsuperscript{78}. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas quickly convinced government authorities as well as a large segment of the population that seeking NATO protection was detrimental to save their country from disintegration.

Since Maidan, relations between Kiev and the Alliance have been at an all-time high. Ukraine actively cooperates with the Alliance on different topics, such as intelligence (most importantly in the Black Sea region), or even participation in NATO-lead missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans or even Somalia. On the other hand, the Alliance has staunchly stood by Ukraine’s side in condemning Russia’s actions in the country\textsuperscript{79}.


The Verkhovna Rada formally re-established NATO integration as one of the country’s main objectives in June 2017, and is in deep technical collaboration with the Alliance over a wide range of topics, among them reforms in the Defence and Security sector. Such reforms aim to bring the strategic sector to NATO standards, hitherto facilitating Ukraine’s interoperability with member States and paving way for its future integration. They also seek to boost Ukraine’s military capabilities, provide training and develop civilian control over the sector, in line with the democratic standards at the core of NATO’s principles. Several assistance packages for Defence and Security sector reform have been agreed between Kiev and NATO, most notably the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine (Warsaw Summit of 2016) and the 2018 Partnership Goal package (Vilnius, 2018).

Cooperation also includes the NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare (the type used in the war in the East), aiming to anticipate and efficiently neutralise potential nests of hybrid threats. It also aims at increasing resiliency to such threats from civil society and the government.

With Volodymyr Zelensky’s election as President of Ukraine in 2019, close ties between NATO and Kiev have remained high. With key objectives following course as confirmed by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s visit to Ukraine in late October 2019 for a Ukraine-NATO Commission meeting. Both parties reiterated their commitments to their previously agreed engagements while pursuing future cooperation. Furthermore, Stoltenberg stressed once again that NATO member states would not recognise Crimea’s annexation by

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83 Ibid.
Russia, with both parties confirming their mutual stance on Ukraine’s territorial integrity\textsuperscript{84}.

Hitherto, we can affirm that the path to NATO integration will continue with the current government in Ukraine, and will go on for the near future. However, it is still important to study Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration process compared to similar countries that have both integrated NATO and the EU, or that are also in the process of doing so.

\textit{Comparative study of Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration process with Poland}

To better understand Ukraine’s pathway towards Euro-Atlantic integration, it is important to compare it with other similar States that have managed their integration already. In this case, this part of the paper will compare relevant statistics from both Ukraine and Poland.

Ukraine and Poland share many similarities, both are large European countries, with a considerably large population. Both Poland and Ukraine were Communist countries with centralised economies until the fall of communism, as Lubba Wintzer points out\textsuperscript{85}. She also mentions that both countries have substantial differences, among them: Ukraine being part of the Soviet Union (not the case of Poland); and Warsaw adopting an economic reform plan as early as 1989 (Balcerowicz Plan)\textsuperscript{86} to turn itself into a full-fledged market economy, seeking the Euro-Atlantic path as soon as it received its emancipation from its Soviet overlord. In that regard, Poland can be seen as an


\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid}, 5; 12 – 22.
inspiration by Ukraine, as can be evaluated by the different criteria in
the following table:

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<td>n/a</td>
<td>127</td>
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<tr>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The dates were chosen are referential: 1991 marks Ukraine’s independence, 1999 marks Poland’s entry into NATO, 2004 marks Poland’s entry into the EU as well as the Orange Revolution, 2008 marks the financial crisis, 2010 marks Yanukovych’s rise to power, 2014 marks the Maidan Revolution, and 2018 is the closest year to the date of the publication of the present paper with reliable data.

It took 10 years for Poland to integrate NATO (1999) since the end of its Communist regime in 1989 and 15 years to integrate the European Union (2004). By the data provided in the table here-above, we can conclude that Poland managed to achieve all the necessary reforms conceived in its Balcerowicz Plan of 1989.

Ukraine’s GDP has had severe difficulties since 2008, increasingly falling over the years. Reforms have however been fruitful in democratic reforms as the progress in Press Freedom shows. The GDP per Capita between Poland and Ukraine are however still too far apart, showcasing the harsh state of Ukraine’s economy.

Ukraine’s Corruption Ranking has improved, showing a major step towards democratic standards. An increase in corruption can be seen


from 2010 to 2014, at the time of Yanukovych’s mandate. Although the situation is improving, it is still not in Poland’s league: Warsaw has efficiently managed to keep a two-digit ranking since the CPI was created in 1995, breaking off with a tradition of corruption that has been widespread throughout many former Communist countries.

The Human Freedom Index provided by the CATO Institute\(^\text{92}\) can also highlight progress (on a scale from 0 to 10 from the least free to the freest): its score plunged from 6.80 in 2008 to 6.04 in 2014 and rose to 6.28 in 2016, indicating an increase in freedoms for the country, going in line with the necessary reforms conditioned by both the EU and NATO. Poland’s score was higher in all three dates here mentioned: 7.98 in 2008; 8.13 in 2014 and 7.81 in 2016\(^\text{93}\). It must be mentioned that Poland’s trend matches the scores seen in its Press Freedom Index, with the country’s populist movements being on the rise.

Military expenditure is a key element for NATO integration. The Alliance requires member States to spend at least 2% of their GDP on the Defence sector\(^\text{94}\), and while most members are close to this percentage, few are actually at the level. Poland’s military expenditures in 2018 amounted to $10749 million\(^\text{95}\) (1.8 % of its GDP), whereas Ukraine’s amounted to $4401 million\(^\text{96}\) (3.3 %). From this data, we can see that Ukraine has fulfilled this particular criterion despite its relatively low GDP. The war in the Donbas is undoubtedly the reason for such expenditures. They are, however, a key component to NATO integration.

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\(^{92}\) Ian Vásquez and Tanja Porcnik, *The Human Freedom Index – 2018* (CATO Institute, 2018), 356 - 357.


Even though democratic fields such as Freedom of the Press have degraded since 2014, Poland can still be seen by Ukraine as a success story, as it has managed to make all the necessary reforms after departing from Communism. It has successfully worked to turn itself into a democratic country with an established free-market economy.

It is important to mention that over two million Ukrainian workers are currently settled in Poland\(^{97}\). Many of them have settled there after the troublesome post-Maidan situation and the general insecurity in the country.

Kiev’s path to the EU and NATO will require it to adopt similar measures like those adopted by its neighbour as early as 1989. It will also require strong political will to enforce them to pursue socio-economic stability and military security needed to ensure future integration in both organisations.

We can hereby conclude from this part that Ukraine has been at the forefront of both EU and NATO integration, with a visible commitment to implement the necessary reforms to ensure future integration. For the Ukrainian government, both of these integrations will be umbrellas for Kiev’s economic and military security, and a guarantee of independence in the face of Russia. However, while serious steps have been undertaken by Ukraine to move forward with its plan of Euro-Atlantic integration, the country is still facing multiple limits and challenges which could undermine this process. The second part of the present paper will attempt to underline them with more detail in contrast to Kiev’s geopolitical and economic ambitions.

\(^{97}\) Shaun Walker, *'A whole generation has gone': Ukrainians seek a better life in Poland*, (The Guardian, April 18, 2019).
Available on: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/18/whole-generation-has-gone-ukrainian-seek-better-life-poland-elect-president
II. Ukraine’s limits

“O hear thy Mother calling thee,
Ukraine, the land that gave thee birth!
Thy mother with tears calls for
Her best beloved son to come!” – Ivan Franko, Ivan Vyshensky⁹⁸.

While Ukraine has shown its commitment to integrate NATO and the EU in the future, the country is still facing considerable hardships, whether in the political, economic or security fields.

This part of the paper will put in light the major obstacles that Kiev is currently facing or that it will have to face in the future, taking into account its relationship with neighbouring Russia, its ruined economy and Moscow’s interests in the country.

Severe obstacles are currently jeopardising Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions. They are both economical and political, and constitute real challenges Kiev will have to overcome in the future if it wishes to pursue its geopolitical goals.

Economic crisis

While Maidan may have brought a shining light to Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions, it has also violently impacted its trade with its most important single-State economical partner, the Russian Federation. Key

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⁹⁸ Ivan Franko, Ivan Vyshensky, Selected Poems (Philosophical Library, New York, 1948), 218. Franko is regarded as Western Ukraine’s most renown poet, with the city of Ivano-Frankivsk named after him.
industries highly dependent on Russia’s importations have suffered from the sanctions both from and against Moscow.

With the war in the Donbas, Ukraine’s most industrialised part, strategic sectors of the country’s industry have collapsed. The coal-mining industry has fallen into the hands of separatist controlled areas, making coal-based energy as a substitution to Russian gas impossible 99.

In Crimea, the leisure and tourism industries, relatively meaningful to the country’s economy, have been appropriated by Russia which, despite the sanctions, has heavily invested in the peninsula 100.

Among the major Ukrainian companies that have sunk due to the post-Maidan situation is the State Aircraft Manufacturing Concern Antonov. A leading aerospace giant during the cold war, Antonov built the An-22, the World’s largest aircraft. Heavily reliant on Russia as an industrial partner and client, the post-Soviet Ukrainian company had ambitious projects to export its aircraft to countries such as China or India. However, following Maidan and the crumbling relations between Kiev and Moscow, the projects collapsed 101. In 2017, with the lack of supplies of important parts from the Russian Federation, as well as losing Moscow as a manufacturing partner, the Cabinet of Ministers decided to liquidate Antonov’s assets. The leftovers have been taken over by a State-owned conglomerate named Ukroboronprom.

The steel industry has also suffered from the crisis 102. This industrial sector is a key component of Ukraine’s economy: Ukraine was the eleventh largest steel exporter in the world in 2017, while steel made

99 Clashes over blockade of coal from eastern Ukraine, (DW, February 20, 2017).

100 Russia Approves $4.7 Bln Investment for Crimean Infrastructure and Tourism, (The Moscow Times, February 4, 2019).

101 Air Transportation: Antonov Dies In Ukraine, (StrategyPage, January 18, 2016).

102 Ukraine Steel Production, (Trading Economics, 2019).
up 18% of the total value of goods Ukraine exported in 2018 according to an official document from the U.S. Department of Commerce\textsuperscript{103}. Although exportations are still at a surplus, they have been on a steady decline of 2.3% annually since 2014. The document shows exportations fell from 23.1 million metric tons per year from 2009 to 2013 down to 13.6 million metric tons in 2018\textsuperscript{104}. With this trend continuing, it will likely have dire consequences for the country’s economy shortly.

In general, Ukraine’s GDP has plunged from $183.3 billion in 2013 to $130.8 billion in 2018\textsuperscript{105}. The country’s population has been on a steep decline, passing from 45.2 million in 2014 to 44.6 million in 2018\textsuperscript{106}. The economist Anders Aslund, from the Atlantic Council, has claimed Ukraine might face a catastrophic devaluation of its National Currency, the Hryvnia, whose exchange rate could dwindle from a rate of $1 / UAH27 to $1 / UAH40. He points out that this could make annual inflation rise from 10% to 50%\textsuperscript{107}, with serious consequences to the country’s economy and demography. Economic migration could also be a threat, as Ukraine’s most educated class is likely to emigrate\textsuperscript{108}. The same can be said for working class citizens seeking a better life in Russia or Europe\textsuperscript{109}.

**Rule of law and corruption**

Other challenges Ukraine faces are in the rule of law and corruption, the former being hard to implement while the latter is widespread.


\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 2.


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{109} Ukrainian Economic Migration, (Centre for Economic Strategy, January 24, 2019), 2-14.
throughout the country\textsuperscript{110}. Although the situation is slightly improving, as we saw earlier in this paper, it is yet to be at the standards of Western Democracies.

Rule of law and corruption are intertwined, as the latter heavily influences the former. Many examples can be observed at the official level. Hennadiy Trukhanov, mayor of Odessa and a former member of Yanukovych’s Party of Regions, was accused in 2018 of embezzling $7.5 million out of almost $40 million that was embezzled during Yanukovych’s mandate. An article from French newspaper Libération\textsuperscript{111} points out that not only were none of Yanukovych’s associates arrested, but charges against Trukhanov were also dropped simply after assurances from a Poroshenko bloc Deputy. The article also points out that a law project against illegal enrichment was dropped on March 6 2018, nullifying 65 similar potential criminal cases.

More recently, an employee from the Ukrainian presidential office and Director of the Department responsible for responding to citizens' requests was caught red handed receiving a $150 000 bribe, first part of a larger $300 000 one\textsuperscript{112}. The 45 year old Svetlana Kondzelu is accused by the anti-corruption bureau of Ukraine of illegally requesting this amount of money to influence a nomination of a particular individual in the country’s National oil and gas company Naftogaz.

Another example is also the nomination of Hunter Biden at the Administration of Burisma Holdings in 2014, the country’s largest natural gas producer. While not explicitly illegal, the nomination of the then U.S. Vice President Joe Biden’s son raised eyebrows. This


nomination also initiated the scandal\textsuperscript{113} of July 2019 when U.S. President Donald Trump reportedly pressured his Ukrainian counterpart to investigate Biden, in what seemed to be a move at undermining Joe Biden’s candidacy for the 2020 elections. This has to lead to Trump’s impeachment on December 18, 2019.

Such cases only further highlight the rule of law’s weaknesses at the hands of the country’s powerful. A relevant case study to better understand the country’s fight against corruption is Mikheil Saakashvili:

It was in May 2015 that disgraced former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili became governor of Ukraine’s Odessa Oblast (Province)\textsuperscript{114} in a move to quench corruption and apply proper rule of law in the region. Saakashvili, star of Georgia’s Rose Revolution which took the country towards the Euro-Atlantic path, made a name for himself by his successful reforms to combat corruption in his former country\textsuperscript{115}. He was also President during the 2008 war with Russia, which made him an emblematic figure for Ukraine’s post-Maidan leadership. While serving his role, he managed to reform the traffic police in the province, open access to the public property including beaches, opening traffic to the Odessa airport and forcing out key authority figures from their positions\textsuperscript{116}. But the spread of corruption at the official level was such that he quit in 2016 following a spat with then-President Poroshenko. The former governor was also regularly at odds with fellow Ukrainian officials, accusing them of undermining his attempts at making changes\textsuperscript{117}. In 2017 he was stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship,


\textsuperscript{115} Fighting Corruption in Public Services: Chronicling Georgia’s Reforms, (Directions in Development - Public Sector Governance, World Bank, 2012), 1 – 126.

\textsuperscript{116} Nicu Popescu, Saakashvili in Odessa, (European Institute for Security Studies, September 2015), 1-2.

\textsuperscript{117} Georgian Saakashvili quits as Ukraine Odessa governor, (BBC, November 7, 2016).
making him stateless\textsuperscript{118}. It was only in May 2019 that Saakashvili returned to Ukraine with his passport restored (by the new leadership of the country)\textsuperscript{119}. In his fight against corruption, Saakashvili also pointed out against the country’s oligarchs, who according to him: “(...) hold hostage the entire wealth of the wealth of the country (...)”\textsuperscript{120}.

Mentioning the power of the oligarchy is important, as it is a recurring factor in most post-Soviet States, most notoriously in Russia. A paper from the Ukrainian Institute for the Future\textsuperscript{121} points out the different spheres of influence the oligarchs hold in the country, including infrastructure, energy, media and politics. The article argues that the oligarchs and their “clans” are somewhat the kingmakers of the country, placing their people in key positions and fluctuating the country’s political balance\textsuperscript{122}. Considered among the country’s oligarchs are former President Petro Poroshenko, Donetsk businessman Rinat Akhmetov (then close to Yanukovych) and former governor of the Dnepropetrovsk oblast Ihor Kolomoysky (close to President Zelensky).

With such a situation, Ukraine is ranked 120/180 in the Corruption Ranking Index of Transparency International, along with war-torn Mali and Malawi. It will take Ukraine serious efforts to truly implement the necessary reforms needed to achieve the Western Standards in terms of rule of law and fight against corruption.

\textsuperscript{118} Georgia ex-leader Saakashvili stripped of Ukraine’s citizenship, (BBC, July 27, 2017).
\textsuperscript{119} Georgia ex-leader Saakashvili has Ukrainian citizenship restored, (BBC, May 28, 2019).
\textsuperscript{120} Mikheil Saakashvili blasts corruption in Ukraine, (Al Jazeera, February 9, 2018).
\textsuperscript{121} Victor Andrusiv, Oleg Ustenko & Yurii Romanenko, The Future of the Ukrainian Oligarchs, (Ukrainian Institute for the Future, 2018), 1 – 88.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 70.
Impasses on conflict resolution

The war in the Donbas is also a major obstacle to the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration. For NATO, having Ukraine join the Alliance in its current state would mean a direct casus belli with Russia, something it is not willing to undertake. For the European Union, having Ukraine entering with its “frozen conflict” would create another Cyprus scenario, with a member State not having full control of its sovereign space. The EU has shown to be reticent to the idea, noting that it would undermine future warming of relations with Moscow. Therefore, to fully proceed to integrate both the EU and NATO, Ukraine needs to resolve its conflict with Russia. There are however impasses that must be addressed.

While President Zelensky has vowed to solve the war peacefully, he is facing a staunch opposition, as was seen during the “Normandy Four” summit in Paris on December 9, 2019. The summit format refers to the one that happened in 2014 on the anniversary of the D-Day landing, with the participation of the Heads of State of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany. While Zelensky was making his first participation in such negotiations, the opposition, led by former President Poroshenko, gathered in thousands in Kiev. While the main argument was to show that “red lines” existed and that peace would not be accepted for the price of sovereignty, the opposition also showed its resolve to oust Zelensky in case he made too many compromises to Russia. This has led to a new deadlock in the Minsk Agreement: while the agreement stipulates that amendments to the Constitution for a special status for Donbas, along with local elections should be done...
before the Ukrainian Army could take back control of the region. This point is very interesting for Russia, as it would give it particular powers in the Rada’s decision making, including in case Ukraine decided to apply for NATO membership, therefore giving a veto right to Donbas. The opposition’s leverage pushed Zelensky to reconsider this specific part. Despite Ukraine having already agreed to all points of Minsk’s platform for conflict resolution, the opposition still holds a strong influence on what the Ukrainian President can and cannot do.

Along with the opposition, the Ukrainian Far-Right is also on the rise. Mostly popular in Western Ukraine, Far Right groups have had a considerable influence in the war. With Battalions such as Azov\(^{126}\) heavily participating in the conflict, de-escalation from the Army was often replaced by the volunteers’ taking over. Furthermore, several official political parties have a Far-Right political orientation, most notoriously the Right-Sector and Svoboda Parties. For the 2019 Presidential Elections, the Nationalists overwhelmingly sided with Poroshenko. While the then-President lost at 24.4% of the votes\(^{127}\), the weight he has in the opposition today shows that Nationalist Groups still hold influence in the country, especially during protests. The Far-Right also serves as a tool for Russia: in a narrative similar to the Second World War, Russia portrays the concerned groups as Nazis to better undermine Ukraine’s credibility.

Another impasse on conflict resolution is the treatment of minorities. In April 2019 under the initiative of Poroshenko, the Verkhovna Rada adopted a law\(^{128}\) which places the Ukrainian language at the centre of


public life, with its use mandated in all spheres such as military, government, healthcare or education. With this law effectively restraining the rights of minorities such as Russian or Hungarian speakers, it will further hamper the reconciliation needed for the Russian-Speaking regions of Donbas and Crimea to return under Ukraine’s sovereignty. The law, while criticised by Moscow, has also been the topic of a spat between Kiev and Budapest, with Hungary deciding to blockade all attempts by Ukraine to join NATO (and also very likely the EU) as long as this law will be effective\textsuperscript{129}.

The last impasse to conflict resolution from Ukraine’s side could be the church issue. Two-thirds of the country’s population identify themselves as Orthodox Christians\textsuperscript{130}. While the biggest church structure is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), two other Orthodox structures were present: the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP). While the two groups were never considered canonical by the Orthodox Church, a decision to favour their recognition was pushed by former President Petro Poroshenko. It was destined to create a single independent local Ukrainian Church, taking it away from Russian influence. The idea was appealed to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, First among Equals in the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. The appeal was heard and the Patriarch convened a council of reunification, which resulted in the creation of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine in October 2018\textsuperscript{131}. But without taking into consideration the


already present role of the UOC-MP (and the fact the two constituent groups of the new church were “anathematised”), this decision further aggravated the split within Ukrainian society over Church issue, and created a decisive fracture within the Orthodox Christian World\textsuperscript{132}. With the Russian-Speaking population of the country mostly adhering to the UOC-MP, the division within the population could have a lasting impact on conflict resolution in the Donbas and Crimea.

Conclusion

We can hereby conclude that Ukraine has undertaken a decisive turn towards Euro-Atlantic Integration since the Orange Revolution. The fall of Yankovych’s regime has been decisive in undertaking this path, as his mandate proved unpopular and Russia’s actions following the Maidan revolt turned the once close and “friendly” partner into an aggressor State.

In regards to the European Union, Kiev has pushed the Eastern Partnership to a full free-trade zone, while having its visa regime for the Schengen area removed. The EU is Ukraine’s biggest trade partner and the steps taken to further its integration process has confirmed Kiev’s ambitions. By seeking integration in the European Union, Ukraine also seeks financial security, putting aside its economic reliance on Russia.

In regards to NATO, Ukraine has also achieved much in terms of cooperation, with the Alliance wholeheartedly standing by Kiev’s side in the face of Russia’s involvement in the Donbas and Crimea. Standardisation, training and assistance on different levels have all been undergoing since the Rada’s decision to orient itself towards NATO integration, putting away Ukraine’s Non-bloc status. By seeking NATO integration, Ukraine seeks to have a security guarantee to fend-off Russian threats and aggression.

With Ukraine interested in integrating both organisations, NATO and the EU have interests in bringing Kiev further into their fold, undermining Russia’s influence in the country and the former Soviet space in general.

With Volodymyr Zelensky becoming President of the country in 2019, a tendency of a peaceful resolution to the conflict has taken place within the country, most notably by signing an agreement on gas supplies with
Russian gas giant Gazprom\textsuperscript{133} and a prisoner exchange with the Donbas rebels in December 2019\textsuperscript{134}. While his landslide victory could show that his opponent’s political moves were unpopular, he has decided to continue pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration for his country.

However, despite the big steps undertook, the country is still in a very delicate position. Ukraine’s economy is still in crisis, with a dwindling GDP and key industrial sectors collapsing. Moreover, attempts at conflict resolution have also been undermined, in big part due to the opposition’s intransigence for compromise. Finally, the country is suffering from an epidemic corruption to the highest government offices, making efficient rule of law technically impossible.

It will take tremendous efforts for Ukraine to undertake the necessary reforms it needs to pursue its Euro-Atlantic goals. But with the war in the East still ongoing, the future of the country remains uncertain. With some European countries willing to renew ties with Russia and the United States’ diminishing security engagement with NATO, Ukraine’s ambitions are likely to hold an important seat in Europe’s near geopolitical future.


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