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### **The Eastern Partnership for Ukraine: a New Dimension of European Integration or Substitution of Membership Perspective?**

*У статті досліджується політика “Східного партнерства” як один з пріоритетних напрямів співробітництва пострадянських країн з ЄС на сучасному етапі. Особлива увага приділяється особливостям та перспективам участі України в цьому проекті.*

*Ключові слова: Європейський Союз, Європейська політика сусідства, Східне партнерство, угода про асоціацію, розширення ЄС, перспектива членства.*

*В статье исследуется “Восточное партнёрство” как одно из приоритетных направлений сотрудничества постсоветских стран с ЕС на современном этапе. Особое внимание уделяется особенностям и перспективам участия Украины в этом проекте.*

*Ключевые слова: Европейский Союз, Европейская политика соседства, Восточное партнёрство, договор об асоциации, расширение ЕС, перспектива членства.*

*The article analyzes Eastern Partnership as one of the priorities of cooperation between post-Soviet countries and the EU today. Specifics and perspectives of Ukraine’s participation in this project are emphasized.*

*Key words: European Union, European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership (EP), Association Agreement, EU Enlargement, Membership Perspective.*

*Eastern Partnership* EU strategy launched in 2009 has opened new horizons in relationship between Ukraine and the European Union. The project was aimed at promoting stability and prosperity of the EU eastern partners, and its result should be the deepening of bilateral agreements and the creation of new multilateral framework for cooperation involving the EU, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Special relationship within the *Eastern Partnership* are built on mutual recognition of common values, achieving the rule of law, effective governance, human rights, principles of market economy and sustainable development but do not imply EU membership prospects.

No wonder that the *Eastern Partnership* as a new dimension of regional cooperation in Europe is in the focus of scholars’ attention.

A number of publications have appeared, and numerous discussions, theoretical seminars, conferences and round tables have been organized at national and community levels. Most of materials are designed in the context of conceptual generalization of the *Eastern Partnership*' content and nature as one of the lines of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The publication of the Ukrainian Independent Center for Political Research, edited by V. Martynyuk [12] analyzes views on the possibility of using *Eastern Partnership* for further European integration of Ukraine in bilateral and multilateral dimension. A. Veselovskiy [1], S. Hutsal [4], Yeliseyev [5], S. Pavlenko [6] V. Samohvalov [8] A. Sushko [11] A. Chumachenko [14], O. Shapovalova [15] and other scholars and experts also study those problems. Analyzing the prospects of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU within the framework of *Eastern Partnership*, A. Goncharuk considers the project "as a tool to achieve membership in the EU" [3]. T. Sidoruk emphasizes the *Eastern Partnership* as a model for gradual and partial integration with the EU [9; 10]. N. Hnydyuk focuses on the tools of the *Eastern Partnership* and the EU financial support to member countries [2]. However, despite significant scientific achievements in this area more detailed research of trends of Ukraine – EU cooperation within the framework of *Eastern Partnership* is required.

The purpose of this article is to define the specifics of the Ukraine's participation in the *Eastern Partnership* and prospects of its use for approaching EU membership.

The initial reason of Ukraine's critical reaction on *Eastern Partnership* was the fact that Ukraine's expectations from the new EU eastern policy far exceeded European offers. EP did not contain fundamentally new approaches toward the development of relations between the EU and Ukraine. In the adopted format the *Eastern Partnership* indicated that the EU has chosen the role of an observer for the development of political processes in the region and refused, at least at that stage, to play an active role as a counterweight to Russian regional presence. The EU, not presenting completed Eastern strategy, has applied "successful precedent" strategy to partner countries at the bilateral relations level. Ukraine should play the role of "flagship", i.e. the European Union based on Ukrainian experience would produce its approaches toward cooperation with other partner countries in the *Eastern Partnership* [19, p. 6]. On the one hand, it imposes a responsibility and creates some risks, on the other hand, it promises deeper integration with the EU.

*Eastern Partnership* is a new dimension of regional cooperation, which should involve improving relations not only between the EU and

neighboring countries, but also among neighbors. However, there are serious doubts on the productivity of such cooperation. The EP participants are countries with different potential in the EU integration and the various aspirations on European integration: some of them are interested in the EU for the stabilization in areas of frozen conflicts, others emphasize the priority of transport corridors, energy supply, promoting common trade and contacts between people. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are those countries that declared their seeking further integration with the EU from participating in the *Eastern Partnership*. Moldova is the only one that has received clear signals and approval from the European Union. Ukraine and Georgia continue to expect the support of Europe. However, the EP demands to us require regular investment of significant funds, while the Ukraine's motivation is weakening.

The Riga Summit (2015) clearly demonstrated multi-speed dynamics within the framework of the Eastern Partnership among the three partners who have signed an association agreement (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) and the rest of the partners who have chosen a different path of development of relations with the EU. The growing differences on the objectives and priorities of cooperation with the EU between the initiative's participants sharply raise the issue of further deepening of differentiation within the Eastern Partnership. In this context, Riga Summit should be seen as an important step in the ongoing review of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

*Eastern Partnership* policy for Ukraine has two dimensions: bilateral and multilateral. The value of the bilateral dimension seems to be weak because at this level the initiative did not provide new instruments (except "Comprehensive Institution Building"). Therefore we can say that Ukraine could achieve the same progress within the *Eastern Partnership* and without it either. As for the multilateral dimension, the results are more tangible. In particular, the creation of the Civil Society Forum as a mechanism for communication between NGOs and representatives of the European Commission could be mentioned. Regular meetings of ministers as well as local and regional authorities' representatives take place.

As for the development of civil society, which is one of the *Eastern Partnership* priorities, most experts suggest that it does not meet expectations. That direction operates inefficiently. Ukrainian representative in the European Union in Brussels published quite shocking statistics according to which more than 80 % of the ENP from 2007 to 2010 has been allocated for projects led by organizations in the EU Member States and less than 20 % for support of Ukrainian organizations. There are no data on

the development of these funds, as well as civil society involvement in relevant planning and costs. Moreover, most of funds are directed to government agencies but not to NGOs.

Most experts tend to believe that visa liberalization can become a stimulus that, on the one hand, would pushed the authorities toward more active reforms, and on the other hand, facilitate the formation loyal attitude of the population to the EU. The Agreement on visa facilitation was signed, but it has not come up to expectations. Citizens did not feel real simplification of visa regime, but the Ukrainian budget got additional burden (because, together with the agreement on visa facilitation the readmission agreement was signed).

It is Ukraine's strategic course toward integration into the EU that was a crucial factor, which allowed Brussels to assume the role of a center of regional attraction for all of the *Eastern Partnership* countries and thus to form the EP in its present format. The current political and economic situation in the EU is not favorable for the further enlargement of the European Union. However, the EU needs to expand its political and economic presence in the Eastern European region. That would not only strengthen the EU influence, but could also provide a greater level of stability and security in Europe. That problem could be solved through political association and economic integration of the partner countries with the EU. Political association in this case would mean unilateral association of partner countries within the legal framework of the European Union. Economic integration should be implemented through the introduction of a deep and comprehensive free trade association between the *Eastern Partnership* and the EU.

The inability of the EU to enlargement at current stage does not preclude such an opportunity in the future. According to the political statements of the EU officials, the European Neighbourhood Policy "does not close the door for European countries, which may wish to join the EU in the future" [16]. An indirect evidence of the probability of the EU enlargement (under favorable conditions) by means of *Eastern Partnership* countries could be a reference to Article 49 of the EU Treaty in *A New Response to Changing Neighborhood* Joint Communique of the European Commission and the EU High Representative in Foreign Affairs and Security Policy [17]. That thesis reflects the EU approach toward the perspective of membership for EP countries, including Ukraine.

As it's known, Ukrainian diplomacy has tried to agree with the EU in principle on declaring the possibility of future EU membership for Ukraine in the Association Agreement (AA). In this context it should be borne in mind

that there is no direct legal connection between the associated relations and the membership prospects. In the EU legal practice there is no such type of association like the preparation for EU membership. In all cases, signing of Association Agreement had limited impact on the procedure of joining the EU. Formal recognition by the EU the “candidate” status of the country and its submitting an official request for membership seems to be much more important. Thus, in the legal plane inclusion of thesis about the membership perspective in the AA does not bear any consequences for neither Ukraine nor the EU. In fact, the recent Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU does not guarantee accession and does not provide the perspective of membership, but also does not deny such a possibility.

An issue of introducing the paragraph on the European perspective for Ukraine into the Association Agreement has rather political importance for both the EU and Ukraine. First of all, it has to change the perception of Ukraine in the European Union not only among political elites, but also among the wider social strata. Similarly, it will have a powerful impact on the content of political process in Ukraine and practice of its foreign policy.

Officially, today the EU justifies impossibility to provide Ukraine membership perspective by the “enlargement fatigue”, the problems of convergence of the EU member states, political and economic problems within the EU. However, the strategy of sectoral integration of *Eastern Partnership* is aimed at building a common political and economic space that will contribute to the complete integration of Eastern European countries into the EU in the future if they have such a desire. This position, which contains both affirmation of an opportunity of integration to the EU and unwillingness to provide Ukraine a membership perspective, has, in experts’ opinion, the following reasons:

- First, the EU is interested in the integration of East Europe, but currently is not ready to invest necessary resources into that process. Due to the unconditional commitment to European integration that Ukraine demonstrates, the European Union prefers to take waiting attitude using minimal incentives (including financial ones) to a necessary series of reforms in EP countries that would facilitate their convergence with the EU;

- Second, providing Eastern European countries a membership perspective seems to be a great geopolitical burden since it should mean the EU willingness to assume greater allied commitments to those countries. Considering the full range of challenges for EU foreign policy at the Post-Soviet space and, above all, in its relations with Russia, providing Ukraine a membership perspective could break shaky international balance, which the European Union has reached by the present.

As a result, lack of political component in the *Eastern Partnership* currently fully satisfies Brussels but makes it conceptually incomplete as well as functionally unattractive in terms of Central and Eastern Europe.

2011 was a milestone in the development of the EU's Eastern policy. However, if Ukraine and other supporters of strengthening the political component of the *Eastern Partnership* realized the need for its conceptual renewal, Brussels and countries of Old Europe insisted on evaluating primary results of *EP* activities and making necessary adjustments in order to improve it.

The "improvement" of the *Eastern Partnership* seems to be as important for Ukraine as for the EU. The first step is to realize that the *Eastern Partnership* is not a complementary format to the bilateral relations between Ukraine and the European Union. Today *Eastern Partnership* is the EU policy towards countries of Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus, which includes all areas of relations between those countries and the EU. Obviously, Ukraine can play only indirect role in the *EP* reforming since that deals with the formation of foreign policy strategy of the European Union. However, a significant sensitivity of the process of the EU foreign policy design to external influences provides Ukraine with additional opportunities.

Evaluating the processes of developing Eastern dimension of the EU foreign policy, we should focus on the challenges facing the European Union and causing permanent transformation of the EU approaches:

- the need to combine positions of all Member States of the European Union;
- specifics of Eastern European and South Caucasus directions that require balancing strategy for EU relations with the countries of those regions on the one hand and Russia on the other hand;
- dynamics of political processes in the East Europe and the South Caucasus regions.

First of all, we must understand that the *Eastern Partnership* is correlated with other areas of the EU foreign police, including the strategic partnership with Russia. Therefore, it has essential impact on Europe activity, especially on relations with Ukraine. However, according to most experts, the EU – Russia partnership is just words. It is determined by pragmatic interest, but rather by energy dependence. So between energy security and efficiency of EU *Eastern Partnership* policy Europe chooses the first one.

The Russian factor in bilateral relations forces European Union to behave distantly and indefinitely, i.e. it does not make specific promises and

does not establish clear conditions. Mostly, the EU officials tell and write about “long-term prospects”. Accordingly, such a policy is not a sufficient incentive for reform in Ukraine (as well as in other countries). So the question is: either Europe provides “second wind” to the *Eastern Partnership*, offering real prospects, or Russia restores its dominance in the region gradually.

The Russian factor affects also the relations between the countries in the region. It means that the political and energy dependence from Moscow forces most of governments act circumspectly. Besides that, in the meanwhile, none of the member countries is not ready to assume leadership roles. Therefore, Europe must finally realize that without its concrete proposals the *Eastern Partnership* will not be successful project. Unfortunately, only countries with direct borders in the east, especially Poland, realize this. After all, in addition to economic interests in Ukraine it is an issue of security.

Moscow initially considers the *Eastern Partnership* as a threat to its interests in the countries covered by that program. The Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that “some countries make attempts to use that structure as a partnership against Russia.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the EU “do not force those countries to choose: either you are with us or against us.” In response the EU has assured Moscow that it does not seek to create any “zone of influence” [7].

In May 2015, President of the European Council Donald Tusk stated that Russia was “compensating for its shortcomings by destructive, aggressive and bullying tactics against its neighbors,” while German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that “the EU makes a crystal clear difference with Russia. We accept that the different *Eastern Partnership* nations can go their own way and we accept these different ways” [13].

In this context, now the key challenge for the EU is the balancing of two directions in its eastern policy – *Eastern Partnership* and relations with Russia [15, p. 14]. The success of Ukraine's foreign policy depends on solving the similar problem – a combination of European and Russian directions. The key toward solving that problem could be the EU's decision to fill *Eastern Partnership* with the political component and strengthen its political and security presence in the Black Sea region. This would affect the balance of power and would enable the EU to achieve the essential balance in its Eastern policy. For Ukraine this would facilitate the search of ways to combine European integration vector with relations with Russia.

Since strengthening security and stability in the Black Sea region is a strategic goal of the *Eastern Partnership*, lack of the security dimension in

the initiative looks rather surprising, although reasons of avoiding that sensitive subject are quite clear. Realizing the EP's inadequacy without this dimension of cooperation, the EU declared the need to supplement of the *Eastern Partnership* with cooperation within the framework of another EU's initiative – *Black Sea Synergy*. However, the combination of the two initiatives is now improbable, although adding dimension of political and security cooperation to the *Eastern Partnership* format would be very useful for all its participants. That can be done through the launch of a new platform called "Cooperation in Politics and Security" or through reformatting the platform 1 by means of changing its name from the "Democracy, Effective Governance and Stability" to the "Cooperation in Politics and Security" [18]. Incidentally, such a platform was offered in the Swedish-Polish initiative on introduction of *Eastern Partnership*.

Increasing of the European Union's political presence in the Black Sea region is an important step toward the strategic filling the EU's Eastern policy. However, the European Union must also be ready to a gradual increasing political and functional opportunities of the *Eastern Partnership* and the granting limited integration formats. In particular, the EU could offer membership perspective through the mechanism of performance evaluation, i.e. the achievement of relevant criteria and stages as a conceptual complement to the *Eastern Partnership* [1]. The criteria remain the Copenhagen criteria; steps could be defined (for example) as the functioning of the Association Agreement and Free Trade Association, visa-free regime, effective integration into the European educational and humanitarian space etc.

Due to the complexity of modern political processes in the EU and in the Mediterranean region, it is rather difficult to talk about possible time of making qualitative changes in EU policy toward the Eastern direction. The only way to speed up this process could be uniting efforts of the interested parties. Therefore, Ukraine should consider the possibility of bilateral diplomacy both to develop a common vision of the *Eastern Partnership* and to promote the necessary changes at the EU level.

Thus, the *Eastern Partnership* policy seems to be one of the most controversial initiatives of the European Union. From the very beginning it had a quite low level of support from the EU and its purpose was not understandable for participating countries. One of the problems impeding the development of the initiative is a lack of funds and clear mechanisms to monitor their use.

*Eastern Partnership* seems to be a successful attempt of diversified approach in order to divide the eastern and southern neighbors. However,



it is not well thought-out project to ensure effective cooperation within the Eastern region and meet the expectations of its members.

Although the *Eastern Partnership* format of cooperation is not a new “breakthrough” in the EU – Ukraine relations, it is a certain step forward towards European integration for our country. Despite several weaknesses, which both Ukrainian and foreign experts emphasize, in particular, the fact that the format of the *Eastern Partnership* has postponed discussions about the possibility of Ukraine's EU membership for a while, the *EP* project has been evaluated positively and means additional opportunities for Ukraine to ensure its interest in cooperation with the EU. Obviously, there are certain limits of the *Eastern Partnership*. This program is a supplementary tool that complements existing international instruments and is an additional lever of influence to the reform process in Ukraine and Ukraine's positioning in this part of the world. The basis remained bilateral relations between Ukraine and the EU, which have achieved a lot and are progressing in recent years, although not at a pace that we would like.

Riga Summit, 2015 took place in the new geo-political and security context in the *Eastern Partnership* region marked by the ongoing aggression of Russia against Ukraine and pressure on other EP countries. At the same time, it was the first event of the highest level within the framework of the *Eastern Partnership* since signing and beginning of implementation of Association agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The Summit confirmed the EU's commitment to further development of the *Eastern Partnership*, support of the reform in the EP's member countries, the sovereign right of the Eastern European partners to choose the level of ambitions in relationship with the EU and the way of their development.

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