



KYIV-MOHYLA  
LAW & POLITICS JOURNAL

KYIV-MOHYLA SCHOLARLY PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

## The European Union through the Eyes of Ukrainian Think Tankers: Studying EU Perceptions Post- Euromaidan

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*Source:* Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal 3 (2017): 181–200

*Published by:* National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmlpj.ukma.edu.ua/>

# The European Union through the Eyes of Ukrainian Think Tankers: Studying EU Perceptions Post-Euromaidan

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## Abstract

The European Union (EU) engagement in its Eastern neighborhood, including Ukraine, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Yet studies focusing on EU perceptions in neighboring countries have been rare, which is especially true for EU perceptions among non-governmental actors. This article examines perceptions (or images) of the EU and its initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreement, within a specific group of Ukrainian civil society organizations, namely *think tanks* (as elite opinion makers), following the Euromaidan Revolution. The study maps discursive frames used by leading think tank representatives working in the field of foreign and security policy analysis or performing the functions of watchdogs in sectors such as democratization, public administration reform, and economic liberalization. Methodologically, the study employs content analysis of policy related papers published by the organizations, as well as complementary expert interviews with representatives of the Ukrainian think tank community. The article thus contributes to understanding the civil society's views on the EU in Ukraine in the post-Euromaidan period.

**Key Words:** Ukraine, European Union, civil society, think tanks, perceptions.



## Introduction: Rationale and Main Assumptions of the Study

The 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine demonstrated the power of social mobilization in the country, which had been previously largely underestimated. Triggered by former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's refusal to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union (EU), the revolution became a pinnacle of civil engagement and led to a strengthened role of civil society in policy formulation, including its relations with the EU. While it is important to conceptualize this new role of civil society, it is just as essential to understand how Ukrainian non-state actors see Europe, and what their expectations towards the EU are in the context of

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Development Programme.

post-Euromaidan developments. In its approach towards Ukraine and other countries addressed by the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, Brussels accentuates the engagement with civil society. Yet depending on the civil society actors' perceptions of the EU, its initiatives, and expectations of what they can (or cannot) offer, they would tend to be more or less eager to associate with the EU and promote a pro-European choice in Ukrainian foreign policy. A study of civil society's perceptions of the EU can thus be a first step in understanding the suitability of Brussels' approach to non-state actors in Ukraine. At the same time, an analysis of Ukrainian civil society's views on Europe would contribute to the study of capability-expectation gap in the EU's foreign policy vis-à-vis its immediate neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

Bearing this rationale in mind, this paper seeks to examine perceptions of the European Union and its cooperation formats with Ukraine (both regional, such as the Eastern Partnership, and bilateral, such as the Association Agreement) among a specific group of civil society actors, namely think tank representatives,<sup>3</sup> in Ukraine following the Euromaidan Revolution. In doing so, the analysis draws on studies of images of the Other informed by International Relations (IR) scholarship.<sup>4</sup> In line with Robert Jervis, this study links the behavior of actors in international affairs to images and perceptions of the Other (in this case of the EU).<sup>5</sup> Yet departing from this IR approach, the paper suggests that the list of actors in question should not be limited to states, and should equally include non-state actors. The latter may themselves participate in international relations by engaging in cooperation formats offered by the EU (e. g. Civil Society Forum). They may also inform the state's foreign policy by assuming an advisory role to the government and key decision-makers, or by conducting a public advocacy campaign in certain foreign policy choices. In both instances, non-state actors' perceptions of the Other (the EU) guide their position and actions vis-à-vis the external actor. "Perceptions" are defined here as the "result of the subjective and psychological cognition of the observer rather than the objective reflection of the object that is being observed."<sup>6</sup> Applied to international actors, perceptions are "complex constellations of meaning shaped by a number of interacting factors," including by "the perceived developments

2 Cf. Stephan Keukeleire, "Lessons for the Practice and Analysis of EU Diplomacy from an 'Outside-in' Perspective," in *The Neighbours of the European Union's Neighbours: Diplomatic and Geopolitical Dimensions Beyond the European Neighbourhood Policy*, ed. Erwan Lannon and Sieglinde Gstöhl (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 227–41.

3 We are fully aware that think tanks constitute a special group within the civil society and can be regarded as part of a country's analytical and policy community. Their views are thus not necessarily representative of the whole civil society of the country. We therefore do not intend to generalise our findings to the broader civil society in Ukraine, but are rather interested in the views of actors, who are deliberately trying to influence policies in their country. See also discussion in Section 2.

4 For an overview see: Matúš Mišík, "How Can Perception Help us to Understand the Dynamic Between EU Member States? The State of the Art," *Asia Europe Journal* 11.4 (2013).

5 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

6 Fan Shiming, "Chinese Public Perceptions of Japan and the United States in the Post-Cold War era," in *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations*, ed. Gerald L. Curtis, Ryosei Kokobun and Jisi Wang (Tokyo, New York, NY: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2010), 269.

both with an international actor and outside it,” e. g. within the country in question, in this case Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

To grasp perceptions of the European Union, this paper maps discursive frames used to describe the EU by representatives of leading Ukrainian think tanks. Frames are conceived here as “narratives or mini-theories about what exists, what happens, why this matters, and what to do about it” which help reduce complex information to simple terms.<sup>8</sup> Applied to the present study, frames are analytical constructs that summarize meta-communicative messages promoting alternative understandings and conceptualizations of the EU as an international actor and its policies (or initiatives) for Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

The time span of the study covers the period from November 2013, starting with the third Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, at which the bilateral Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine was initially supposed to be signed, and the end of May 2016, signifying the 7th annual Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting. This period of two and a half years allows us to capture EU perceptions within a time frame impacted by crucial events in Ukraine (the Euromaidan Revolution, annexation of Crimea by Russia, start of a war in Eastern Ukraine, and inception of the EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine).

The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the next section turns to the essence of the term “think tank” and provides a brief review of the Ukrainian think tank community before and after the Euromaidan Revolution. Section 3 centers on the methodology used in this study and explains our case selection. In the next step, we reveal our findings with respect to views on the EU, based on content analysis of think tank publications. Finally, the concluding section contextualizes these findings, drawing on complementary expert interviews with Ukrainian think tank representatives.

## The Think Tank Community in Ukraine before and after Euromaidan

Before turning to the object of this analysis—views on the EU by Ukrainian think tankers—it is necessary to clarify what is subsumed under the term “think tanks” and why it is important to study their perceptions of the EU specifically post-Euromaidan. As suggested by Thomas

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7 Natalia Chaban, Martin Holland, and Serena Kelly, “Perceptions of ‘Normative Power Europe’ in the Shadow of the Eurozone Debt Crisis: Public Perspectives on European Integration from the Asia Pacific,” in *Importing EU Norms: Conceptual Framework and Empirical Findings*, ed. Annika Björkdahl, United Nations University Series on Regionalism 8 (Cham, s. l.: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 59.

8 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia: Competing Perspectives and Alternative Strategies* (Kentucky: The Kentucky University Press, 2015), 30.

9 On the use of the framing approach in other contexts see Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000); James N. Druckman, “Political Preference Formation: Competition, Deliberation, and the (Ir)relevance of Framing Effects,” *American Political Science Review* 98.4 (2004); Omelicheva, *Democracy in Central Asia*.

Medvetz, the term “think tank” is “fuzzy, mutable, and contentious.”<sup>10</sup> It may denote a variety of civil society organizations providing policy analyses—with different capacities for producing policy research, communicating their results to target and broader audiences, and being able to work with various sources of funding.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the origins (initial affiliation of think tankers) and relationships of think tanks with the state (or government) may vary significantly.

Donald Abelson suggests think tanks can be split into three categories: “universities without students,” whose members see themselves as nonpartisan academics working independently and providing high quality policy research, with support from various sources—foundation, corporate and individual; “government contractors,” relatively closed institutions primarily relying “on government departments and agencies to sustain their operations”; and “advocacy tanks,” institutions seeking to influence public opinion and public policy with a strong partisan or ideological bent, often associated more with “marketing and repackaging ideas than [with] generating them.”<sup>12</sup> Considering this variety, understanding think tanks requires an analysis at the intersection of political, economic, media, and academic realms; however the term will remain rather ambiguous.<sup>13</sup> This ambiguity is inevitable, as a think tank needs to be adaptable to its social and political surroundings.<sup>14</sup> This is consequently nothing characteristic of the Ukrainian think tank community and can be equally observed in the US and Western European contexts, where think tanks have an expansive history and a well-established tradition of interacting with states in the process of policy formulation.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, there are important features of the Ukrainian think tank environment which distinguish it from Western contexts and should not be overlooked. One of these features is that Ukrainian think tanks are not isolated within the national boundaries. They are part of a wider network in the Eastern European region, characterized by similar political legacies; and through this network the biggest of them are embedded in policy formulation not only at the national, but also at the EU level. In their activities, Ukrainian think tanks often address both national and international audiences.<sup>16</sup> Aiming to identify the specificity of Eastern European

10 Thomas Medvetz, *Think tanks in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 23–25 and 213–14.

11 Eric Livny, “In Search of its Voice: Assessment of Policy Relevant Research in Ukraine” (Kyiv, 2013), accessed March 12, 2017, [https://issuu.com/uniter/docs/assessment\\_of\\_policy-relevant\\_research\\_eng](https://issuu.com/uniter/docs/assessment_of_policy-relevant_research_eng).

12 Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 18–20. On an alternative typology see: Ahmad Mahmood, “US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact,” *The Political Quarterly* 79.4 (2008).

13 Paul’t Hart and Ariadne Vromen, “A New Era for Think Tanks in Public Policy? International Trends, Australian Realities,” *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 67.2 (2008).

14 Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*.

15 Cf. Kubilay Yado Arin, *Think Tanks* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2014) and Howard J. Wiarda, “The New Powerhouses: Think Tanks and Foreign Policy,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 30.2 (2008).

16 Sergiy Gerasymchuk, “Think-Tanks—the Problems of Definition and the Way to Solve Them, Think Twice UA,” 5, accessed March 11, 2017, <http://thinktwiceua.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-tank->

think tanks, Sergiy Gerasymchuk offers the following definition: a “*think tank in Eastern Europe is an independent organization, which focuses primarily on the policy research related to the public needs (mostly but not exclusively in the field of democratization, economic and market reforms, international relations etc.) and by different channels [...] makes the outcomes of this research/policy oriented solution available to the policy-makers or international organizations to be considered while elaborating the respective policies and further makes the assessment of this policy through the lens of its relevance to the initial public need.*”<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, due to the Soviet past, the very history of Ukrainian think tanks—that work independently and not as state-funded research institutes—is rather short. The first think tanks emerged as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) following Ukraine’s independence in the 1990s and were founded by former (or in fact active) representatives of academic circles. They combined advocacy work with policy monitoring and analysis, at times surveying research, often at request and with funding from abroad. Their relations with national government agencies were not institutionalized (except for think tanks organized directly by those agencies). The demand for think tank analyses was thus coming not necessarily from inside the state (i. e. from Ukraine’s own policy-makers), but from donors often based outside of the country. The agenda of think tank work could thus easily become donor-dominated, covering only selected issues of interest to those requesting the research. This trend was problematic in two ways: 1) due to donor-dependence, policy research could be abruptly interrupted if funding was no longer available or if donors’ agendas were recast; 2) in fields promoted by donors, the supply of think tank analyses could exceed the demand of Ukrainian policy-makers working on the issues, while other policy fields lacked consideration entirely.<sup>18</sup>

At the turn of the century, especially following the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004, the Ukrainian think tank community started expanding. Some of the new think tanks were established by former or active political figures,<sup>19</sup> with funding occasionally sourced from the county’s business elites.<sup>20</sup> This suggested increased informal ties with decision-makers in both political and economic spheres. However, the role of international actors in providing funding and setting the agendas of Ukrainian think tanks remained prominent during this period. At the same time, there were attempts to formalize the relationship between politics and civil society by introducing consultations between policy-makers and the public, intending to lead policy-making out of cabinets of the few.<sup>21</sup> For this purpose, government agencies established

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definition-article-SG-2.pdf.

17 Sergiy Gerasymchuk, “Think-Tanks,” 6.

18 Interview with an EaP expert, June 2016.

19 E.g. the Centre UA (United Actions Centre), currently one of the NGOs actively involved in policy analysis and formulation, was co-founded by Oleh Rybachuk, once a Member of the Parliament (2002–2005) and the Vice Prime-Minister for European Integration (2005). See: <https://centreua.org/en/about-us/>.

20 E.g. the Foundation for Effective Governance was established in 2007 under the initiative of Rinat Akhmetov, a prominent Ukrainian entrepreneur and politician. See: <http://www.feg.org.ua/en>.

21 This was based on “On Public Participation in Formulation and Implementation of Public Policy,” Decree no. 996, Ukrainian Government (3.11.2010), accessed March 16, 2017, <http://zakon3.rada.gov>.



civic councils and expert groups, however, their success and impact varied. Civic councils did not work efficiently, as they were frequently too broad in number and too narrow in expertise. Expert groups proved to be more productive in turn as they included smaller groups of officials and analysts working together on specific issues, ensuring common ownership and exchange of expertise. Yet this did not contribute to a significant boost of the overall impact of policy research on political decision-making. The general ability of Ukrainian think tanks to engage in all stages of policy-making—agenda setting, policy formulation, monitoring, evaluation, and long-term assessments—remained modest when compared to the US or Western European contexts.<sup>22</sup>

This situation started improving after the Euromaidan revolution, which opened a window of opportunity to empower civil society actors as a whole and think tanks in particular. Regarding the latter, several factors facilitated their engagement with policy-makers. By this time think tanks became highly professionalized civil society organizations with considerable experience in working during periods of political instability. In addition, as many think tanks previously established contacts with their European counterparts and were involved in monitoring reforms associated with EU approximation, they were well situated to advise the post-Euromaidan country's leadership, whose political agenda centered on the advancement of integration with the European Union.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, due to the fact that a number of post-Euromaidan reformers came to the government from civil society, business and media, the distance between analysts and think tanks on the one hand and policy-makers on the other became shorter than ever.<sup>24</sup>

Ukrainian society at large also supported the willingness of the government to cooperate with civil society actors. In the aftermath of the revolution, the vast majority of Ukrainians were united in their expectation of prompt results after promised administrative transformations. Yet the political optimism of many Ukrainians did not endure. As measured in August 2015, Ukrainians overwhelmingly trusted civil society organizations (balance of trust and distrust

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ua/laws/show/996-2010-%D0%BF.

22 Gerasymchuk, "Think-Tanks," 4–5.

23 See: Petro Poroshenko, "President's Annual Message to Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine: On the Internal and External Situation of Ukraine in 2015," accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/shorichne-poslannya-prezidenta-ukrayini-do-verhovnoyi-radi-u-35412>; "On the programme of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (11.12.2014)," accessed November 29, 2016, <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/26-19>; and "The Coalition Agreement," accessed November 29, 2016, [http://samopomich.ua/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Koalicyyna\\_uhoda\\_parafovana\\_20.11.pdf](http://samopomich.ua/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Koalicyyna_uhoda_parafovana_20.11.pdf).

24 To name just a few, Ivanna Klympush-Tsyntsadze, the Vice-Prime Minister on European Integration in the third Cabinet of Ministers following Euromaidan, worked previously with the Ukrainian Independent Center of Political Research, the Kiev Center of East-West Institute, and Yalta European Strategy; Oleksandr Lytvynenko, currently the Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, worked formerly with the National Institute for Strategic Studies and the Razumkov Centre; Svitlana Zalishchuk, currently Member of the Parliament (MP), was a co-founder of the NGO Centre UA (Centre of United Actions), MPs Serhii Leshchenko and Mustafa Nayyem were both formerly journalists of *Ukrainska Pravda*, *Kommersant* and other media and maintain very close links with civil society organizations.

was +13%) as opposed to official authorities. The latter fell dramatically; confidence in the courts and prosecutor each dropped to -67% and trust in the police to -57%. Support of the President (-33%) and Parliament (-63%) fell gradually at that time, just as after each previous election cycle. The level of trust in civil society organizations, on the contrary, marked a positive tendency, especially when compared to 2010 (-9%).<sup>25</sup> This reflected the general public's demand for more participation and a larger role for societal actors in policy-making.

Currently, the Ukrainian analytical landscape encompasses slightly over 60 (mainly Kyiv-based) think tanks,<sup>26</sup> some of which are affiliated with state institutions (e. g. universities) while others position themselves as fully independent non-governmental organizations.<sup>27</sup> Prior to Euromaidan they acted largely without much coordination. Since 2014, several initiatives were proposed to aid think tanks in coordinating their actions, including the Reanimation Package of Reforms Coalition (RPR). According to its web-site, the RPR was established "to transform the energy of protest into the energy of reforms" by bringing together (as of today) 68 NGOs, including independent policy analysts and advocates, and uniting them in 23 expert groups to facilitate the introduction of reforms in areas such as anticorruption, electoral legislation, economics, judicial sector, public administration and decentralization, among others.<sup>28</sup>

To ensure closer links with EU policy-makers, the Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office was created in Brussels to offer a platform for coordination among (currently) 18 Ukrainian think tanks.<sup>29</sup> The ability of Ukrainian think tanks to engage with the policy-making process at both national and European levels as well as consult on reforms associated with the implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU have been considerably boosted following the Euromaidan revolution. Considering the rapid transformation of think tank landscape in the post-Euromaidan period, studying its EU perceptions would be particularly relevant.

## Methodology Used in the Study

The primary data sources for this analysis are publications by leading Ukrainian think tanks working in the field of foreign and security policy analysis or performing the functions of

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25 Ilko Kucheriv, "Whom Ukrainians Trust the Most: Government, Civil Society or Media? Public Opinion of the Citizens of Ukraine: 2010–2015. What has Changed?," Democratic Initiatives Foundation, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://dif.org.ua/article/komu-bilshe-doviryayut-ukraintsi-vladi-gromadskosti-zmi>.

26 As compiled by Think Twice UA, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://thinktwiceua.org/en/think-tanks-en/ukraine/>.

27 The independence of their research and policy agendas, however, still can be questioned (just as in the case of any US American or Western European think tank), as they cannot ignore the interests of those who fund their research, and in the case of Ukrainian think tanks international organisations and foreign government agencies remain among the key donors.

28 "Our History," Reanimation Package of Reforms, accessed November 29, 2016, <http://rpr.org.ua/en/about-us/history/>.

29 "Members," Ukrainian Think Tanks Liaison Office in Brussels, accessed November 29, 2016, <https://ukraine-office.eu/en/members/>.



watchdogs in sectors such as democratization, public administration reform, and economic liberalization. The identification of admissible think tanks was accomplished via a set of criteria: (1) ranking among the top 200 think tanks in Eastern Europe according to the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report;<sup>30</sup> (2) participation in bilateral or multilateral civil society cooperation formats organized by the EU (e. g. regional EaP Civil Society Forum and bilateral civil society platforms under the Association Agreements) and involvement in the monitoring of EU engagement and related reforms;<sup>31</sup> (3) links of the think tanks to state/political elites (e. g. through prominent public figures as founding members or members of the board);<sup>32</sup> (4) at least three years of active work and involvement in the Ukrainian civil society community;<sup>33</sup> and (5) availability of publications in two languages (English and Ukrainian) on think tank websites (i. e. targeting both domestic and foreign audiences).<sup>34</sup> While the first two criteria were used as supplementary to each other, the latter three were considered essential in our think tank selection.

Overall, six think tanks were selected for our analysis: Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF); International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS); Institute for Economic Research and Political Consultations (IER); Institute of World Policy (IWP); Razumkov Centre (RC); and “Strategy XXI” Foundation (Strategy XXI). Table 1 gives an overview of the criteria met by each think tank.

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30 The Global Go To Think Tank Index provides a ranking system that allows identifying top think tanks worldwide and is therefore used as a starting point in this study. However, as our analysis revealed, the Index is not free of inconsistencies, which is why we identified a set of additional criteria to support our case selection. “2015 Index Report,” The Global Go to Think Tank, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://gotothinktank.com/2015-global-go-to-think-tank-index-report/>.

31 This criterion is supposed to help identify those think tanks with the most expertise on the EU and its initiatives. It by no means implies the EU is their primary or sole source of funding. We specifically controlled for the donor funding of think tanks to avoid any bias in the analysis of their publications.

32 This criterion suggests an existing channel for a direct transfer of policy ideas and advice from think tanks to decision-makers.

33 In our exploratory interviews with representatives of the Ukrainian analytical community, we found that younger think tanks are considered less established and hence less influential. In addition, the minimum of three years of existence (considering the time span of this analysis from November 2013 to May 2016) guarantees the selected think tanks were active throughout the period of the Euromaidan revolution and not only in the aftermath.

34 Following Euromaidan, only very few think tanks continued publishing their analyses in the Russian language. Therefore, we did not use the availability of publications in Russian as an additional criterion. Nevertheless, our selection of think tanks included those who published in all three languages: English, Ukrainian and Russian (see analysis in Section 4).

TABLE 1: THINK TANK SELECTION CRITERIA

NAME OF THINK TANK / SELECTION CRITERIA	GLOBAL GO TO THINK TANKS INDEX REPORT	EU CS FORMATS & MONITORING	LINKS TO STATE/ POLITICAL ELITES	AT LEAST 3 YEARS OF EXISTENCE	ONLINE PUBLICATIONS IN TWO LANGUAGES
Strategy XXI		x	x	x	x
DIF	x	x	x	x	x
IER	x	x	x	x	x
IWP	x	x	x	x	x
ICPS	x	x	x	x	x
RC	x		x	x	x

Source: Data compiled by authors from various sources gathered during research

The authors used the following main criteria to select relevant publications: (1) the type and length of publications (the study incorporated commentaries, interviews, policy briefs, policy papers, analytical articles, newsletters containing policy analyses, and reports published on the think tanks' websites, whereas short press releases and media statements of less than half a page were excluded); (2) the degree of centrality of the EU in relation to Ukraine (the study only included the publications directly addressing EU-Ukraine relations, EU initiatives affecting Ukraine or other Eastern Partnership countries, and bilateral relations between Ukraine and EU Member States, while publications on EU internal developments, e. g. the financial crisis, with no reference to Ukraine were not considered).<sup>35</sup>

The study draws on content analysis of the selected texts with a focus on three dimensions of the text material: (a) issue coverage or volume by category, meaning the number of publications covering certain aspects of EU policies and initiatives vis-à-vis Ukraine; (b) evaluation, which involves coding of explicit assessments (judgments) and tone of publications towards the EU; and (c) thematic frames, or narratives associated with the EU.<sup>36</sup> When examining the first dimension, the issues covered were split into 7 categories. Table 2 provides an overview of the issues covered by category. The context in which certain issues of EU policies were placed was included in the analysis. As pertaining to the second dimension, the codes were demarcated into *positive*, *negative* and *neutral* images of the EU and its initiatives. For the third dimension, an inductive approach was used, whereby thematic frames were extracted from the publication content.

To complement and contextualize the findings from the content analysis of think tank publications, occasional expert interviews were conducted with representatives of Ukrainian think tanks. The interviewed experts did not necessarily represent the think tanks selected for

35 Using this criterion implies a certain limitation as it potentially excludes publications which evaluate the role of the EU as a global actor. The latter is however not within the focus of this study, as the authors' primary objective is the exploration of think tank views on the EU in relation to Ukraine and other EaP countries.

36 Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström, "The Role of the EU in an Emerging World Order in the Eyes of the Chinese, Indian and Russian Press," *Journal of European Integration* 36.2 (2014).

content analysis. The interviews were conducted in the form of free conversations, without using a structured interview guide, which is the preferred modus for the study, as it is more conducive to creating an atmosphere of trust between interviewee and interviewer, and enables deeper insights that might have been lost in a structured or semi-structured interview modus. For the same reason, the interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity of the interviewees. The timeframe for the interviews was March 2015—November 2016.

TABLE 2: ISSUES COVERED BY CATEGORY

ISSUE CATEGORIES ANALYZED	ISSUES COVERED
Cooperation frameworks	Association Agreement (bilateral)
	Eastern Partnership (regional)
Political-diplomatic relations	Sanctions
	Visa facilitation/visa-free regime
	Visit diplomacy
	Judicial reform/corruption related reforms
Economic relations	DCFTA
	Economic reforms/standard approximation
	Energy/gas
	Economic/financial aid
Security cooperation	Conflict/crisis management
	Convergence with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)
	Security Sector Reform
	EU Advisory Mission (EUAM)
Socio-cultural aspects	Social welfare reforms related to EU engagement
	Education exchange/research support
Individual Member States	Member States' activities
EU integration	Process of European integration

Source: Own compilation

## Uncovering Perceptions of the EU

Overall, 204 publications by Ukrainian think tanks were analyzed for this study; of them, 148 were in Ukrainian (and Russian) and 56 in English (see Table 3).<sup>37</sup> The difference in number reflects

37 Of the selected think tanks, only DIF and Strategy XXI published in Russian alongside Ukrainian and English. Yet, even these think tanks had a limited number of publications in Russian: two by DIF (in 2014 and in 2015) and another two by Strategy XXI (in 2014 and in 2016). With such a small

the actual proportion of publications in Ukrainian and English available on the websites of the selected think tanks. The latter can be explained by the fact that Ukrainian is the primary working language of the think tanks and the Ukrainian speaking audience remains their key target. A much smaller number of materials are prepared in English (usually by English speaking experts working at or associated with the think tanks). Some materials are initially written in Ukrainian and then translated into English; yet the resources for translation are limited.

TABLE 3: THE NUMBER OF EU RELATED PUBLICATIONS ANALYZED, BY THINK TANK AND YEAR (NOVEMBER 2013-MAY 2016)

THINK TANK	LANGUAGE	2016	2015	2014	2013	TOTAL BY	TOTAL BY THINK
						LANGUAGE	TANK
DIF	English	-	2	3	4	9	22
	Ukr./Russ.	4	4	4	1	13	
ICPS	English	1	5	2	-	8	22
	Ukrainian	2	6	6	-	14	
IER	English	-	3	1	-	4	25
	Ukrainian	2	6	10	3	21	
IWP	English	7	9	3	-	19	73
	Ukrainian	13	28	11	2	54	
RC	English	1	1	3	-	5	39
	Ukrainian	11	6	12	5	34	
Strategy XXI	English	2	5	4	-	11	23
	Ukr./Russ.	2	4	6	-	12	
Total		45	79	65	15		204

Source: Own compilation

As summarized in Table 3, we can observe a general increase in attention towards the EU and its initiatives within the period from November 2013 to May 2016. The overall difference in number of EU related publications between 2014 (65) and 2015 (79) is not significant. Although in 2016 the number is expected to grow, as we identified 45 publications covering the EU within the first five months of the calendar year. This trend is however ensured primarily by one think tank, the IWP, that produced a lion's share of EU related publications, while the intensity of EU coverage varies greatly between the think tanks. In 2015, for instance, we observed fewer EU related publications (compared to 2014) by DIF, IER, Strategy XXI, and Razumkov Centre (the last one increased its coverage again in 2016). As concerns the intensity of EU coverage over the span of 2.5 years, the IWP is a clear frontrunner with a total of 73 publications, followed by

sample, it was impossible to identify trends based on a differentiation between publications in Russian and Ukrainian. Therefore, publications in the two languages were analysed together, as they all were expected to target domestic audiences (in contrast to the publications in English aiming instead at European and/or international audiences).

the Razumkov Centre with 39. The other four think tanks published each between 22 and 25 documents covering the EU within this period. Their ability or readiness to publish in English also varies greatly. Here, the IWP is again at the top, considering the overall number of 19 publications in the English language, whereas Razumkov Centre seems to be aiming primarily at the domestic audience (34 publications in Ukrainian vs. 5 publications in English). DIF, ICPS, and Strategy XXI are trying to keep a relative balance in numbers of their publications in the two languages.

In terms of issue coverage/volume by category (the first dimension of text material identified above), the vast majority of analyzed publications concentrated on the implications of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (37% and 64% of the overall number of publications in Ukrainian and English respectively). The difference in percentages between the publications in English and Ukrainian is notable (not only for the AA, but also for other issues covered; cf. Figures 1 and 2 below). This difference is however less relevant for the interpretation of the results than it might initially seem. It is primarily rooted in the different characters of the texts in English and those in Ukrainian. The latter are more often specialized and concentrate on deliberating one or two specific issues, whereas the English texts are more general, covering a broad set of issues across identified categories. This peculiarity resulted in percentage differences in coverage in the two languages. Yet the overall trends, e. g. the dominance of AA coverage, are similar in both English and Ukrainian texts.

More extensive coverage of the AA is not surprising considering the timeframe of the study (starting with the Vilnius Summit of November 2013, when the Association Agreement with Ukraine was to be signed). In contrast, cooperation within the multilateral Eastern Partnership framework attracted considerably less attention, especially in the case of Ukrainian publications (a meager 9%). In English language publications, the coverage of EaP reached 37% (still much fewer than that of the AA). This reflects the general trend of the regional EaP and ENP formats losing their appeal in the countries covered by these policies, while bilateral approaches are clearly gaining momentum and seen as more appropriate.<sup>38</sup>

The coverage of the Association Agreement and its implications is followed by a discussion of the general process of European integration and of the EU Member States: 32% and 29% in Ukrainian and 63% and 57% in English language publications respectively.<sup>39</sup> The interest in EU Member States' activities is largely explained by frequent visits of EU states' leaders and other high-ranking officials to the country related to negotiations between Ukraine and Russia regarding the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Apart from that, several publications addressed the

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38 Interviews with EaP experts, March 2015, July 2016. Cf. Kateryna Malyhina, "EU Membership Ambitions: What Alternative Approaches Exist and how is the European Foreign Policy Perceived in Ukraine?," in *The EU member States and the Eastern Neighbourhood—From Composite to Consistent EU Foreign Policy?*, ed. Sebastian Schäffer and Dominik Tolksdorf, special issue, *CAP Policy Analysis* 1 (2009): 26–27, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://www.cap.uni-muenchen.de/download/2009/CAP-Policy-Analysis-2009-01.pdf>.

39 In most of publications there is an overlap in issues covered as the same publication may discuss the Association Agreement and its implications, the Eastern Partnership, the general process of European integration, EU Member States' activities, and/or other thematic issues. The sum of the percentages for each of the issues covered thus does not equal 100% (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

context and possible consequences of the Dutch referendum concerning the ratification of the Association Agreement. A number of reports also focused on the analysis of bilateral relations between Ukraine and selected Member States, whereas Eastern European Member States, especially Poland, Slovakia and Romania, were presented as a model to follow for Ukraine on the way towards EU membership.

Concerning specific issues covered under the categories of political-diplomatic, economic, security and socio-cultural aspects of cooperation between the EU and Ukraine, the issues of conflict and crisis management, judicial reform and anti-corruption measures, and sanctions against Russia dominate in Ukrainian language publications (see Figure 1). Economic cooperation, including DCFTA implementation, economic reforms and standard approximation, energy supplies and economic aid to Ukraine are also very present issues, as is visa facilitation. Perhaps not surprisingly, less attention is devoted to social welfare reforms (related to EU engagement) and research and education. What is more unexpected—in view of the prioritization of conflict related issues—is the limited coverage of security sector reform, convergence with the CFSP, and activities of the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Ukraine. The latter two issues were in fact addressed solely in 3 and 2 Ukrainian language publications respectively throughout the entire period of 2.5 years.

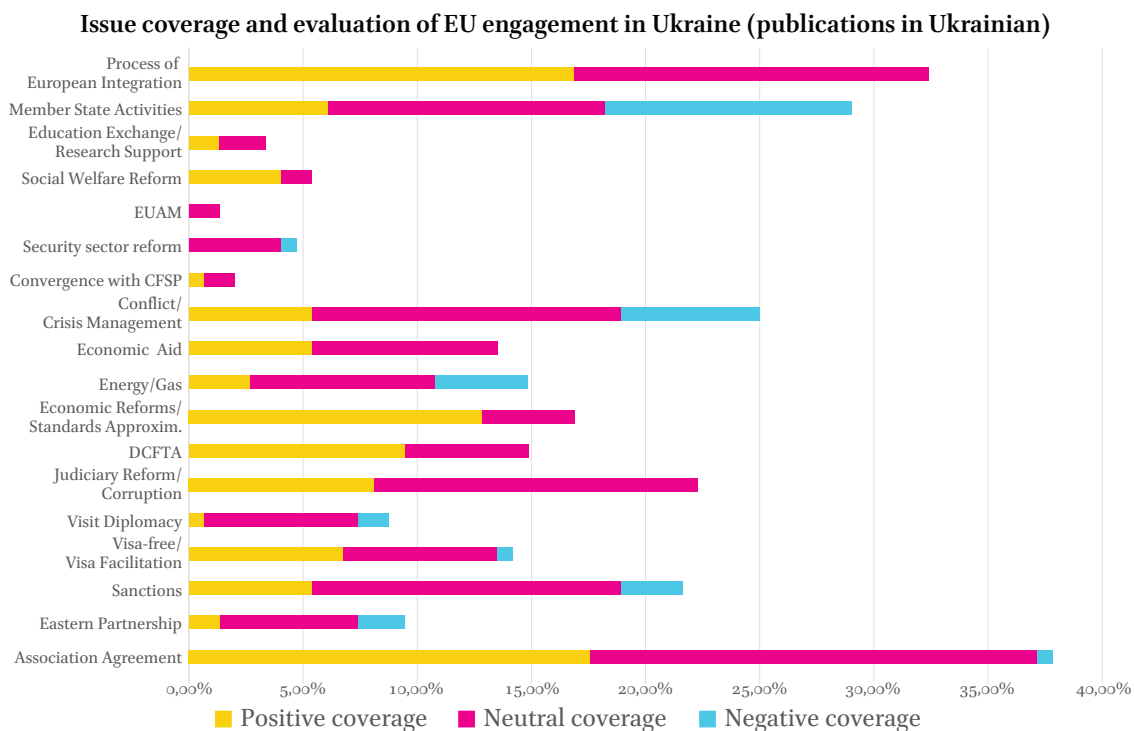
In English language publications, political-diplomatic and economic aspects of cooperation are also among the most recurrent (except for visit diplomacy). At 41% of coverage, judiciary reforms and anti-corruption measures are frequently mentioned. Issues of visa facilitation, conflict and crisis management, DCFTA, economic reforms, aid and energy all feature in over 25% of the total number of publications (see Figure 2). Similar to the Ukrainian language texts, social welfare, education and research support, approximation with the CFSP, and EUAM activities are the least present issues. Importantly, while the publications covering EUAM are very few, they fully concentrate on evaluating the Mission's performance. EUAM is thus their primary focus. This is quite different in the cases of CFSP approximation, social welfare reforms, and research and education, which are simply referred to in the respective texts without being thoroughly analyzed. The latter issues are thus clearly not prioritized by Ukrainian think tankers. Interestingly, sanctions against Russia attracted almost equal attention in Ukrainian and English texts: roughly 23% in English and 22% in Ukrainian. The main differences in coverage in the two languages concern visa facilitation (14% in Ukrainian and 37% in English) and security sector reform (under 5% in Ukrainian and over 20% in English).

Overall, analyzed publications maintain a positive image of the EU and the process of European integration. Many publications explicitly promote a pro-European choice for the country, whereas accession to the EU is presented as a natural way forwards for Ukraine, which is associated with positive changes resulting in more effective public administration, economic growth and diminished corruption levels. One often maintained argument in these texts (and especially in the publications by ICPS) is that if someone were to blame for the lack of progress on the way to the EU, it is Ukrainian policy-makers and not Brussels.

A large number of publications (particularly analytical articles and reports) maintain a more neutral tone, especially when focusing on the need for reform implementation in Ukraine resulting from the AA, analysis of the effects of the DCFTA, or when addressing several aspects

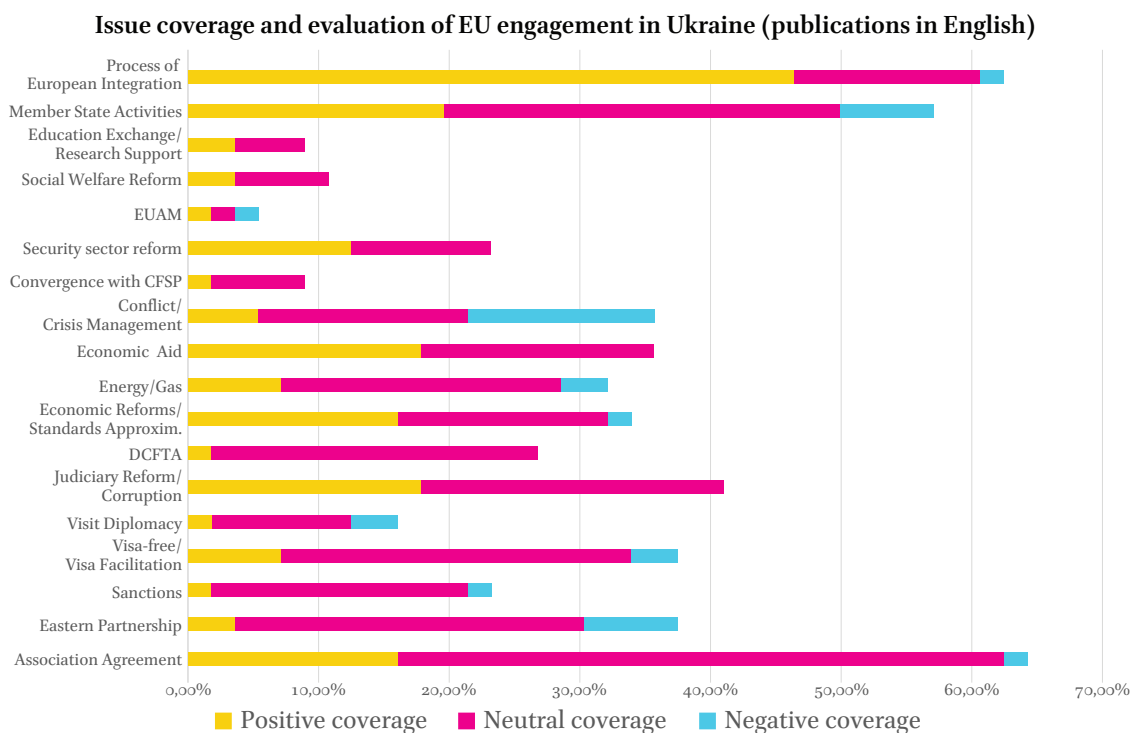


FIGURE 1.



Source: Own compilation

FIGURE 2.



Source: Own compilation

of EU-Ukraine relations in lieu of concentrating on a single issue. Notably, the EU engagement in conflict and crisis management in Ukraine is assessed negatively in many publications. While the larger number of publications in both languages maintains a relatively balanced picture, highlighting both the necessity of the EU engagement and its shortcomings, the number of negative assessments of the EU conflict management is still comparatively high. In English texts, the negative tone even prevails over positive assessments (8 negative vs. 3 positive). To quote one IWP publication representative of many critical voices, the EU contribution to the resolution of the crisis in Ukraine is “too late and too little.”<sup>40</sup> In addition, a noteworthy number of texts (especially in Ukrainian) criticize EU Member States, highlighting their lack of political will in pushing for a resolution of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, their vulnerability to corruption when it comes to energy security (mostly Strategy XXI publications), and disapprove of the Dutch referendum results on the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. A number of publications tend to negatively assess the Eastern Partnership initiative as an amorphous and ineffective approach in need of reconsideration.

In terms of the third dimension of analyzed text material, one needs to differentiate between thematic frames (or narratives) used to characterize European integration as such (which does not have an agency but is viewed as a process and end goal for Ukraine), the EU as a separate entity and international actor, and EU Member States as individual actors within the EU (see Table 4). As concerns the former, the frame of *opportunity* (as opposed to the frame of *possible risks*) clearly dominates the publications. Integration with the EU is narrated as a chance to end economic and political hardships and improve almost all aspects of life in Ukraine. In this context, the European Union is often portrayed as a *transformative power*, which through its insistence on political and economic reforms could trigger a positive change in the country. Authors argue EU membership prospects hasten transformation processes and highlight Ukraine’s European identity. At the same time, they stress that a successful transformation would be only possible if the Ukrainian government fulfilled its own commitments with regard to political reforms. Authors further agree the prospect of visa-free regime should be used by the EU as a lever to enhance the fight against corruption in Ukraine.

TABLE 4: THEMATIC FRAMES IDENTIFIED

ACTOR/PROCESS	FRAME
European Union as an actor	Transformative power
	Donor
	Security actor
EU Member States as actors	Model to follow
	Supporter
	Spoiler
Process of European integration	Opportunity
	Risk

Source: Own compilation

40 Alyona Getmanchuk and Segiy Solodkyy, “A Call for the EU—Time to Step In: Ukraine’s Expectations from the European Union,” Institute of World Policy, 20–21, accessed March 12, 2017, [http://iwp.org.ua/img/EU\\_exp\\_01.pdf](http://iwp.org.ua/img/EU_exp_01.pdf).

Furthermore, the EU is framed as a key provider of economic assistance (a *donor* frame), whose role is essential in overcoming the present crisis in Ukraine. In this context, some authors call for creating a European “Marshall Plan for Ukraine,” whereas others argue for the EU to use a “more-for-more” approach, i. e. making the provision of economic support dependent on the Ukrainian government’s commitment to reforms.

While the EU is often discussed in the context of the current security situation in Ukraine and the ongoing conflict, it is hardly ever framed as a strong security provider. Instead, the EU is presented as an actor “with limited military potential.” Its role in the process of conflict resolution in Eastern Ukraine is often met with skepticism due to the EU’s reactive (rather than proactive) policy, hesitation, and disunity in approaching “the Russian aggression.” Nevertheless, the EU is viewed as Ukraine’s ally and a counter-pole to Russia. Moreover, there is an understanding that the conflict cannot be resolved without mediation and the most likely mediator is the EU.

Finally, with respect to individual EU Member States, frames range from *spoilers* to *supporters* and *role models*. The former is used to characterize e. g. the Netherlands in the context of the Dutch referendum concerning the AA. France, Italy, Spain, and Germany are also portrayed as spoilers due to their soft position vis-à-vis Moscow and unwillingness to “mess with the bear.” Germany is simultaneously seen as a central supporter and key cooperation partner for Ukraine in the EU. The role model frame is mainly applied to the Eastern European Member States (Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), who joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 and are illustrated as a positive example for political and economic reforms in the process of European integration. In this context, several publications explicitly mention the Visegrad Group, which includes Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and whose experiences in approximating the EU in the spheres of the CFSP and energy policy are considered valuable for Ukraine’s own path.

### Conclusion: Contextualizing the Findings

The above results of the content analysis demonstrate that Ukrainian think tanks generally maintain a very positive image of the EU in the post-Euromaidan period. While a systematic analysis of earlier publications has not been part of this study, our interviews with think tank representatives allow us to assume this image was similarly positive before 2013, albeit expectations of the EU and what it can (and should) accomplish for stabilizing Ukraine have grown.<sup>41</sup> The role of the EU in promoting and sustaining reforms is not questioned, but is rather seen as naturally given, especially in the sphere of anticorruption. Ukrainian think tankers and civil society leaders publicly appeal to the EU (both in official letters and via media statements)

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41 Interviews with EaP experts, November-December 2015 and June 2016. Cf. Kateryna Malyhina, “EU Membership Ambitions: What Alternative Approaches Exist and How is the European Foreign Policy Perceived in Ukraine?,” in *The EU Member States and the Eastern Neighbourhood—From Composite to Consistent EU Foreign Policy?*; Vit Dostal, Nikola Karasova, and Vaclav Lidl, “Trends of Eastern Partnership,” Association for International Affairs, accessed March 27, 2017, [https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/trends\\_of\\_eastern\\_partnership.pdf](https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/trends_of_eastern_partnership.pdf); and Hrant Kostanyan, *Assessing European Neighbourhood Policy: Perspectives from the Literature* (Brussels: CEPS, 2017), 79–88.

when national decision-making mechanics fail to comply with long awaited commitments.<sup>42</sup> The firm position of EU officials in reaction to such appeals supports the image of the EU as a transformative power, as demonstrated in spring 2016 during the troubled election of members of the National Agency for Corruption Prevention (NACP) and later in August-September 2016 with the official start of the NACP and launch of the unified electronic register to submit, store and provide access to all asset declarations of public officials (e-asset declaration system).<sup>43</sup>

Three years after the Vilnius summit of November 2013, there is no longer a debate on Ukraine's geopolitical choice. Instead, gradual integration with the European Union is perceived as a natural progression and the only option for Ukraine to overcome the crisis. Approximation with EU legislation, in accordance with the Association Agreement, is portrayed as the first step on this way and to some extent a guarantor of reform implementation. This is also reflected in the Roadmap for Reforms in Ukraine (2016–2017), which states the intent “to adapt the Ukrainian legislation to the EU law and promote the consistent implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU in order to implement key economic and sectoral reforms.”<sup>44</sup> At the moment, the process of these reforms is rather intensive in scope, but ambiguous in its flow. The political and financial support promised by the EU at the Ukraine-EU summit in late November 2016 feeds into the expectation that European partners will continue to back these reforms, thus ensuring positive change in the country.

Yet in addition to supporting reforms, the increased expectations towards the EU also include hopes for a greater role for the Union in guaranteeing the security of Ukraine, especially in the context of the ongoing conflict in the East. As a perceived counter-pole of Russia, the EU is called upon to act more vigorously in resolving the conflict and putting more pressure on Moscow. And it is this area in which the EU repeatedly becomes a target of criticism for its overly cautious and reserved approach. Along with the long expected and still undelivered visa liberalization, the inability of Brussels to settle the conflict with Russia risks affecting the EU's credibility in the eyes of both the Ukrainian analytical community and society at large.<sup>45</sup> In the long run, its credibility will be most affected if the reforms and legal approximation do not lead to an offer of EU membership, and if Brussels policy-makers fail to respond to Ukrainian analysts' demands to adapt existing cooperation formats, e. g. the often criticized Eastern Partnership,

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42 E.g. Civil Society Organisation, “Public Lustration Committee: Disruption of the Full Launch of E-declaring is a Demonstration of the Unwillingness of the Authorities to Fight Corruption,” news release, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, [http://lku.org.ua/press\\_articles/582](http://lku.org.ua/press_articles/582).

43 Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, “Statement by the EU Delegation and the Embassies of EU Member States in Kyiv on the Launch of an E-declaration System without Certification in Ukraine,” news release, August 17, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/ukraine/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2016/2016\\_08\\_17\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/ukraine/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/2016_08_17_en.htm).

44 Center for Democracy and Rule of Law, *Roadmap of Reforms for Ukraine, Reanimation Package of Reforms (2016–2017)*, accessed December 4, 2016, <http://rpr.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RPR-Roadmap-of-Reforms-for-Ukraine.pdf>.

45 Cf. Gwendolyn Sasse, “Ukraine's Visa Liberalization Saga,” *Carnegie Europe*, November 28, 2016, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/66262>.

in the way that would meet increased expectations of the EaP states that are most advanced in their approximation with the EU.

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### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Sergiy Gerasymchuk for his advice and contribution to the development of the initial concept of this paper, as well as Fabian Schöppner for his assistance with data management and coding.

This research is funded by the Loewe-Consortium ‘Conflicts in Eastern Europe’ at the JLU Giessen.