



EU Foreign Policy Practices and Democracy Support in Ukraine

PUBLICATION #35



Funded by the
European Union



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF
KYIV-MOHYLA ACADEMY



SHAPEDEM-EU Publications

Published by the SHAPEDEM-EU Consortium. September 2025.

This publication is part of WP4, led by Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

Authors: Anna Osypchuk, Anton Suslov

To cite:

Osypchuk, Anna and Anton Suslov. EU Foreign Policy Practices and Democracy Support in Ukraine. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications, 2025.

Design: EURICE GmbH

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 4

1 Historic Turning Points in the EU-Ukraine Relations since 2013 and Potential Moments of Epiphany..... 5

 1.1 Historic turning points..... 5

 1.2 2014: Democratisation and Europeanisation..... 6

 1.3 Democracy amidst full-scale war..... 8

Conclusion: EU lessons learnt? 11

 From denial to the steady geopolitical awakening 11

 More, better, faster? 12

Bibliography 12

Abstract

This paper analyses the extent to which the EU foreign and security policy toward Ukraine reflects its declared objective of supporting democracy, alongside local demand for and perceptions of democratic governance. It also explores whether the EU learns new lessons and un-learns past inefficient practices, identifying the contextual and internal triggers that drive this process. The analysis applies the SHAPEDEM-EU framework, which conceptualises the democratic nature of EU foreign policy as a combination (but also variation) of social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability.

Key turning points in EU-Ukraine relations are examined, including the Maidan, the Russian annexation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, and the full-scale Russian military aggression in 2022.

Findings highlight how the EU has evolved as a security and democracy-support actor towards Ukraine through its collaboration with Ukrainian civil society and government, leveraging local knowledge and responding to geopolitical challenges. The paper concludes that by 2025, the EU and Ukraine are mutually dependent in security matters, and continued EU support for security and democratic transformation, particularly in the rule of law and human rights, relies on local knowledge and remains indispensable for Ukraine's resilience.

Introduction

The paper aims to reveal the role that democracy, as a practice characterised by social embeddedness, social empowerment, and social accountability, plays in EU external policies and practices towards Ukraine. Its objective is to understand the EU's ability, capacity and willingness to learn new lessons and un-learn past inefficient practices. To reach the paper's aim, the analysis is guided by the following research questions: i) What are the historical turning points that have affected the EU's behavioural practices in its cooperation with Ukraine and what was their impact on the EU's policies? ii) Which absences and presences in terms of social embeddedness, social empowerment, and social accountability can be observed in the EU's practices in the fields of 1) security and 2) democracy, good governance, and rule of law? iii) What lessons can be learned from the previous and current EU's policies towards Ukraine in terms of making them more inclusive and democracy-support-oriented? Our analysis is built on the conceptual framework developed within the SHAPEDEM-EU project. First of all, we focus on the democratic (un)learning within the EU DS practices towards Ukraine and their bilateral relations. Theoretically and methodologically this paper relies – and sometimes critically reflects – on the approach to policy learning based on the interaction between communities of practice (CoPs) related to EU DS (Achraimer & Pace, 2025). Thus, the analysis of the lessons learned will focus on the role of local CoPs, both from insiders' and outsiders' groups. Thus, we are assessing whether EU policies are inclusive and democratically accountable or inflexible, top-down, and elite-driven (Gawrich et al 2024).

Also, democraticness is understood as an interplay of three intersecting concepts: social embeddedness, social empowerment, and social accountability. *Social embeddedness* presumes that civic engagement through meaningful participation is a core element of democracy (Achraimer & Pace 2024). Thus, any EU DS actions should be aimed at all local communities and all affected groups, and not limited to the governmental organisations, CSO, and local authorities. We also include the normative orientations and values upheld by people and local communities as an integral part of the social embeddedness of democracy, particularly value orientations regarding the importance of

democracy, human rights, rule of law, prioritising of democratic regime over economic stability etc. *Social empowerment* means taking into account local knowledge and maintaining agency and ownership of the local actors, thus giving them space and opportunity to be involved in joint action within EU foreign policies practices and EU DS policies. It is also about everyday self-governance, particularly on the local level and the importance of civic action and knowledge. *Social accountability* presumes that all those affected by the EU policy action are given the opportunity to offer their feedback and are involved in its evaluation process. That includes involvement of local communities and affected groups, not just experts and decision makers. Social accountability is also about the level of trust citizens have in their politicians, institutions, and government as well as in the EU structures and initiatives. It also reflects whether people perceive their government and politicians as those who represent their interests.

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include materials from the focus groups conducted in Ukraine within Work Package 2 of the SHAPEDEM-EU project, as well as interviews and statements from Ukrainian and EU officials published in the media and on official websites, along with relevant policy documents. All focus-groups participants were informed about the purposes of the data collection and their rights as participants, and had an opportunity to read an information leaflet as well as ask questions. Thus, their consent for participation was duly obtained. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, their names had been coded. Secondary sources include policy and academic publications on EU democracy support in Ukraine and the Eastern Neighbourhood.

The paper begins with the identification and analysis of historic turning points in EU-Ukraine relations and assessment of their impact on the practices of EU engagement with Ukraine and their democraticness within two sectors: 1) security and 2) democracy, good governance, and rule of law. The analysis is concluded by the identification of lessons (un)learned by the EU.

1 Historic Turning Points in the EU-Ukraine Relations since 2013 and Potential Moments of Epiphany

1.1 Historic turning points

In reviewing the EU-Ukraine relations since 2013 we will be going over the historic critical junctures as path-altering events and moments and epiphany which combine into two notable turning points in this relations. While Ukraine has been one of the pillars and priorities of the EU foreign policies due to its geographical and geopolitical position, particularly within the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)(EEAS 2021(2023)) and an Eastern Partnership (EaP), its prospects and strategic importance have been still undergoing a dramatic change since 2013 and even more so since the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022. Thus, this paper assesses the transformation and nuances of the EU's democracy-related engagement in Ukraine since 2013 in the context of security cooperation and enhancement and support of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law.

While integration with and into the EU has been consistently supported by Ukrainian society and discursively present in its government's rhetoric, Ukraine has been offered a role of part of the EaP and an ENP by the EU. Thus, over 2007-2012 an advanced Association Agreement (AA) had been negotiated between Ukraine and the EU, which included a substantial economic integration through the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Simultaneously, Ukraine was denied political integration as formal institutional inclusion in the EU structures (Raik et al 2024). It also should be noted that at that time (and until mid-2014), Ukraine had been formally maintaining a position of neutrality, particularly within military and security spheres.

The AA/DCFTA had been scheduled for signing at the November 2013 summit in Vilnius, however, it's been suspended by Viktor Yanukovich, who bowed to Putin's pressure and made a U-turn on the AA/DCFTA and European integrations at the last moment and particularly after their meeting in Sochi earlier same month. Such a geopolitical shift triggered mass protests known as "Euromaidan" throughout the country. Within a week and after police violence it spread and evolved into a much larger people's uprising known as "Maidan" or "Revolution of Dignity" with a much broader agenda regarding not only (pro-)European choice but democracy and democratic freedoms and human rights. In February 2014, the Maidan culminated in the mass shooting of the protesters and Yanukovich's flight to Russia. The Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) took the lead and the Political Part of the AA was signed on 21.03.2014. Still, using the moment, Russia invaded Crimea in late February 2014 and tried to annex it. Russia also instigated "separatist" groups in Donbas, which was followed by Russian military aggression.

The European Union officials supported the Maidan as a democratic movement as well as condemned and sanctioned Yanukovich and his supporters. After the democratic government was re-established (also by democratic Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2014), the EU strengthened and diversified its support for Ukrainian reforms, particularly regarding democracy, good governance, and the rule of law. This support has been aimed not only at deepening European integration of Ukraine but also at enhancing Ukraine's resilience against Russian hybrid aggression.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 of February 2022 has been a dramatic game-changer and made the EU re-evaluate its "integration-but-not-accession" policy. As EU integration has been considered not only a way to intensify economic and political development of the country, but also a way to increase Ukraine's capacity to tackle security threats, the Ukrainian government applied for EU membership just four days after the full-scale invasion began. In June 2022, the EU granted the candidate status to Ukraine, opening the formal way to accession reforms including those that strengthen Ukraine's democracy. In part, the support of Ukraine has always (or at the very least, since 2005) been containing not only the support for democracy and reforms IN Ukraine, but also the support of a democratic country against authoritarianism and autocratic regimes, particularly Russia's.

In this paper, we are focusing on two dimensions - security and democracy, good governance, and the rule of law - as those that are not only outlined as priorities for cooperation by EU-Ukraine bilateral agreements and ENP, but are also of utmost importance for the existence of Ukraine as a democratic sovereign state. The strategic importance of these dimensions and long-term policy objectives for cooperation within EaP had been outlined in a list of documents and statements. For example, the EU's Joint Communication on the 'Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020- Reinforcing Resilience- an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all' states that "Good governance and democratic institutions, rule of law, successful anti-corruption policies, fight against organised crime, respect of human rights and security, including support to populations affected by conflict, are the backbone of strong and resilient states and societies" (EC, 2020, 8-9).

Let us now analyse these two historical turning points regarding the EU-Ukraine relations and the EU DS policies and democratic practices employed over them. We would also take into account the growing geopolitical tension over the past decade, particularly the growing conflict with Russia.

1.2 2014: Democratisation and Europeanisation

Following the Maidan and Yanukovich's fleeing, the new Ukrainian government signed both political and economic parts of the Association Agreement. Although the AA primarily focuses on trade and

economic cooperation, it also addresses political issues, reforms, the rule of law, freedom, and security. Thus, the Agreement had become a cornerstone of further EU's policy towards Ukraine till 2022.

Taking the AA as a legal basis and considering Ukrainian society's demand for changes, the EU both financially supported reforms and put political pressure on the Ukrainian government when it lacked the political will to implement them. The most salient example was anti-corruption reform aimed at creating an institutional framework for the prevention and investigation of corruption. Although the Ukrainian government and parliament adopted all the necessary laws and legal acts, implementation largely appeared to be window dressing. So, the EU made relevant conditions a part of the visa liberalisation process, acknowledging it as a "very powerful tool to bring about change in the area of anti-corruption" (European Commission 2016a, 11). It is noteworthy that the EU also recognised a prominent role of the local civil society in enhancing the reform, developing relevant laws, and watchdogging their implementation (European Commission 2016a, 8).

Reform of the law enforcement and judiciary was among the Maidan's demands and became one of the EU's policy priorities. To assist Ukraine in this field, the EU established an Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) in July 2014 (Council of the EU 2014). With support from the EU and MSs, the new law enforcement bodies of the National Police and the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) were introduced, the General Prosecutor's office was reformed, and changes within the judicial system, including strengthening of its independence and establishment of the new Supreme Court, were held (European Commission 2016b; European Commission 2018).

The reforms not only touched upon judges and police officers but also broader — the whole public administration sector. Within the ministries, the directorates and special "Reform Support Teams" were set up to make institutions more efficient (Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2017). To make the public sector more transparent, a new recruiting platform was created and more data on the institutions' budgets and activities became available. The EU also contributed to the transformation of public services through the development of the Administrative Service Centres and digitalisation (EU Neighbours East 2021).

A crucial reform the EU supported significantly was decentralisation. Its main idea was to amalgamate small municipalities into self-sufficient communities and transfer more power, both political and budgetary, to the local level (European Commission 2016b). The introduced changes "enhanced the development of local democracy by supporting grassroots political and civic engagement" (Romanova&Umland 2019, 11).

Within all the abovementioned reforms and measures, the EU extensively cooperated with the Ukrainian civil society, which became a significant actor both watchdogging the government and participating through consultancy in policymaking. Also, the EU facilitated media freedom through reforms and specific projects. The most prominent step was the establishment of the politically independent Public Broadcasting Service *Suspilne*, which contributed to the diversification of the Ukrainian media landscape. The EU also supported investigative journalism (European Union n.a.). Thus, acknowledging the civil society and independent media's role, the European Union provided funding to strengthen their institutional capacities and facilitate their activities, including through the European Endowment for Democracy (European Union 2025). As a consequence of the direct cooperation between the EU structures and Ukrainian civil society, the CSOs, including independent

think tanks, not only promoted their ideas to the EU institutions through the formal channels, as Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform and the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform foreseen by the Association Agreement, but also through informal advocacy visits and meetings (European Commission 2018).

Though not all reforms were immediately successful, and some of them faced opposition among the Ukrainian elites, their vector and content followed the society's demand for European integration, internal changes, and justice after the Maidan. Thus, albeit facilitated by the EU, these reforms are locally grounded and democratic by their design. Also, they contributed to strengthening democracy as a practice by enhancing social embeddedness, social empowerment and social accountability. All of them were aimed at creating institutional infrastructure for more transparent, inclusive, and efficient governance, both on the national and local levels. Decentralisation not only transferred power to the communities, but also made citizens more responsible for the local affairs and facilitated more active formation of social ties, which contributed to the country's resilience during the full-scale Russia's invasion (Rabinovych et al 2024). Increased transparency, which was among the objectives of the anti-corruption and public administration reforms, opened new opportunities for watchdogging to keep public institutions accountable.

As expected, all structural reforms need time to make a change. In 2021, 52% of respondents admitted that they could feel the reforms' consequences; only 1% estimated them positively, while 23,6% recognised both positive and negative sides of the reforms (Info Sapiens 2021). Similarly, only 24,3% of respondents (compared with 16,5% in 2017) witnessed changes for the better due to the decentralisation (Razumkov Centre 2021). Nevertheless, citizens' empowerment and enhanced civic participation, which covers not only already active and influential civil society but also other citizens, laid the foundation for deeper social embeddedness of the democratic practices and understanding of democracy as a value.

1.3 Democracy amidst full-scale war

The ground-breaking shift in the EU-Ukraine relations came within a few days of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The magnitude of it on one hand made the Ukrainian government to apply for EU membership on the fourth day of the invasion, and on another—the EU to acknowledge and support this application not just rhetorically, but also by action. Thus, in June 2022, the EU granted the candidate status to Ukraine also restarting the accession process for other candidate countries.

The EU leaders' rhetoric framed the full-scale aggression and war in terms of defending democratic and European values and democracy as such. Thus, significant attention has been paid to supporting Ukraine as a democracy against an authoritarian regime and not just to democracy support in Ukraine. As one of the reports mentioned: "...democracy and democracy support intertwined with Western efforts to buttress Ukraine and to isolate Russia" (Young et al.2023, 17). Further still, "EU reactions to the war contained some democracy support elements" (Young et al. 2023, 17).

On the day of the full-scale invasion, the martial law has been activated in Ukraine and prolonged ever since (each time for a 90-day period as prescribed by the law). Most significantly, under martial law no elections could be held in Ukraine (local or national) and certain basic freedoms could be limited—namely freedom of speech and information, and freedom of association (i.e., the right to protest) (Visit Ukraine 2024; Kyrychenko&Chyrkin 2024). In reality, the instances of protests, rallies, and gatherings being banned or forbidden are few and rare, and the limitations to freedom of speech and information

are implied mainly to information and messages that are security sensitive and could be used by the enemy in targeting and correction of its missiles, drones etc. Also, martial law presumes amendments to the community self-government structure and procedures in the areas defined as front-line as well as to the de-occupied areas (Boyko&Andriy 2025).

Still, the introduction of martial law had not stopped the democratic processes in Ukraine, including civic engagement and meaningful participation, functioning of (independent) media, functioning of government and local authorities' accountability and transparency instruments and procedures, and reform process in different sectors in Ukraine.

Considering the EU's policies in the area of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, the most notable are the following steps made by Ukraine, based on the seven recommendations to launch accession negotiations outlined by the European Commission in 2022 (EEAS 2022b):

- introduction of a competitive selection process for the Constitutional Court;
- renewal of the High Council of Justice;
- renewal of the High Commission for the Qualification of Judges;
- further insurance of an institutional independence of National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine;
- appointment of the head of the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO);
- adoption a new media law;
- implementation of the anti-oligarch law (Bulana&Holubytska 2025).

Such steps had been assessed positively by the European Commission, and based on the European Council's decision, the accession negotiations for Ukraine were formally launched on 25 June 2024.

Some experts remark that the dynamic of the EU-Ukraine relations changed and "the EU has become not just a strategic partner but also a co-architect of reforms defining both content and sequencing" (Bulana&Holubytska 2025). The principle of conditionality and implementation of clearly defined benchmarks became central-key EU support mechanisms, including the Ukraine Facility (Council of the EU 2024) are delivered in accordance with them. Also, the EU democracy support policies in Ukraine, particularly in the areas of governance and the rule of law, are now intertwined with Ukraine's accession process: passing of the screening process, opening of the negotiations on particular chapters, the fulfilment of accession criteria, harmonisation of legislation and adaptation of *acquis communautaire*.

As it has been mentioned above, the EU leaders' rhetoric in 2022 shifted from supporting democracy in Ukraine to supporting Ukraine AS a democracy. Some experts remarked that while "EU leaders' rhetorical commitments to defending democracy ... [were] more ubiquitous and high-profile than in previous years. On the other hand, it pushed the EU's immediate policy priorities away from democracy issues and toward more directly security-related concerns" (Young et al. 2023, 40). Most notably—to securitise the EU, to assist Ukraine in the military and security spheres, as well as to sanction Russia and to cut down the EU's energy dependence on Russia. Still, even though the EU support and policies towards Ukraine are lining more into supporting the security sphere, including military support, it shouldn't be juxtaposed to the democracy support. As Ukraine is fighting an existential war with Russia, the survival of democracy in Ukraine is no less dependent on its ability to fight Russia's aggression and to resist than on the conventional democratic reforms.

Looking more closely at the security dimension of the EU policies, the following initiatives and measures should be mentioned:

- adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (EEAS 2022a);

- launching of the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) and the Solidarity Lanes (EC 2007-2025);
- initiating legislation in the Common Security and Defence Policy field: on common defence procurement (EDIRPA); on ammunition production (ASAP); defence investment gap analysis (jointly with EDA)(Tyushka et al. 2023, 28-29);
- extension of the mandate of the EUAM mission and launching of the EUMAM in 2022 (EEAS 2022c);
- development and introduction of a variety of formats to include both the EU and Ukraine officials regarding cooperation in the security and defence spheres.

It should be noted here that probably none of those initiatives are “the one-way” policy of the EU towards Ukraine, unless we count the direct military assistance by delivering weaponry and ammunition. All those steps and initiatives are based on the presumption that the EU and wider European security could not be ensured without the enhancement of Ukraine’s security and strengthening its capacity to fight Russia’s aggression. Such a framework excludes considering the EU or Ukraine’s security separately and emphasises their mutual dependence. Furthermore, over the three years of Russia’s full-scale aggression and after the uncertainty and probably even undermining of old Euro-Atlantic alliances by the Trump administration, the perception of common EU-Ukraine security as well as actions and policies coming from such understanding become even more prominent and mainstream.

Still, focusing on security, defence, and resisting Russian aggression does not exclude attention to reforms and their progress either for the EU or for the Ukrainians. In a September 2024 representative survey ordered by the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM), 74% of Ukrainians defined fighting corruption as the most urgent reform, while 62% marked it as a priority for the EU support. Next ranked (with a 36% support each) were reforms of the national security and defence sectors and the judicial system reform. Respondents also emphasised that the EU should give priority to such spheres as assistance to liberated territories (43%), support in investigating war crimes (38%), and guaranteeing fair justice (31%) (Sociological Group Rating 2024).

It is noteworthy that in assessing the efficiency of the EU’s support for reforms or assistance in different spheres, the Ukrainian respondents lumped it with the assessment of the success and speed of the particular reform itself. Thus, according to the EUAM’s commissioned survey in 2024, the EU support is seen as effective in helping liberated territories (48% see it as effective) and strategic communication support (44%). While it is perceived as ineffective in the rule of law area (65% see it as ineffective) and in fighting corruption (70%) (EUAM 2024, Slide 18). These attitudes of not distinguishing the progress and speed of reforms and the role of the EU support and initiative for these reforms are both highlighting the importance of those reforms and their necessity as perceived by Ukrainians, and the emphasis and expectations that are placed on the EU in ensuring them. Particularly, ensuring the rule of law, fighting corruption, and judicial reform are seen both as the most pressing and those in which the EU’s support is crucial. Also, these results regarding particular reforms correlate with the perception of the EU’s support and aid in general. For example, according to the EUAM commissioned survey in September 2023, while 75% agree that EU aid is useful (and only 15% consider it not useful), 56% consider such aid insufficient (and only 34% consider it sufficient) (KIIS 2023, Slide 33). Here it should also be noted that such perception might also have been influenced by the dissatisfaction with the amount and speed of the military aid from the EU in 2023.

Nevertheless, in the SHAPEDEM-EU representative survey on understanding and attitudes towards democracy and the EU democracy support, 70% of Ukrainian respondents agreed with the statement

that “The EU demands our government to be more democratic” with only 7.8% disagreeing (Osypchuk&Suslov 2024, Slide 14). This underlines the importance that is placed on the EU in ensuring the reforms’ progress and success in Ukraine, particularly in the areas of democracy, governance, the rule and law, and security and defence sectors.

Looking at the EU aid and support for Ukraine as well as at its rhetoric, the following deductions should be made. First, the EU support initiatives and actions as well as its leaders’ rhetoric have been closely socially embedded with values, normative principles, and expectations of Ukrainian society—both its government and civil society as well as local communities and ordinary people. Most notable that could be seen in the support for Ukraine as a democracy against full-scale Russia’s aggression and in opening for Ukraine the accession path to EU membership. If there is any critique of the EU support here on part of particular Ukraine communities of practice, it’s about the amount and speed of the support and not about its substance or focus. Secondly, the remarkable resilience that is demonstrated by Ukraine in 2022 has been largely due to the social empowerment and the EU initiatives and its continued aid in these spheres. Finally, regarding social accountability, some local communities of practice are also insisting on the EU exercising more pressure towards the Ukrainian government to adhere to the reforms, particularly in the rule of law sphere and in reforming the law enforcement and security sectors.

Conclusion: EU lessons learnt?

From denial to the steady geopolitical awakening

During the Maidan, the EU tried to balance between a neutral position of mediator between the protesters and Yanukovich’s government and an actor who (cautiously) supported the democratic protest. Maidan’s victory and further democratic elections, along with Russia’s unprovoked aggression in Crimea and Donbas, pushed the EU to change its position from a distant observer to a political (then not security) partner both for the government and civil society. As noted in the working paper on the EU discourses regarding Ukraine (see D4.2), since 2014, the EU has framed challenges that Ukraine faces as those relating to all of Europe. Thus, it was in 2014 when the EU realised the utmost importance of its active presence in Ukraine, including support for democracy and reforms. Additionally, the military, albeit hybrid, character of the Russian invasion raised the issue of Ukraine’s resilience. Resilient Ukraine, both for the EU and local citizens, has been understood as a democratic country with efficient institutions, including those in the security sector. Though the EU denied its participation in the geopolitical competition and, consequently, aiding Ukraine militarily and granting any real prospects of membership till 2022, it invested in Ukraine’s resilience through support of democratic transformations, rule of law, and good governance enhancement showing that it learned the lessons not only from EU-Ukraine relations history but also from its previous interactions with the Eastern Neighbourhood.

In 2022, when Russia unleashed full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the international environment became more competitive, and a military threat approached the EU borders. Over the course of the last three years, there has been a growing understanding within the EU about the necessity to support Ukraine both in military and in terms of enhancing its resilience (democratic, societal, etc.), and about the fact that Russia’s aggression and the war Ukraine is fighting is a common European threat which means paying more attention to security and defence. What’s more—such understanding has been accompanied by actions and policies as well as by strategic documents: from the granting of candidate status to Ukraine to joint EU and EU-Ukraine military and defence initiatives. This is a stark contrast to

the EU's reaction to the start of Russia's aggression in 2014 and the occupation of Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and thus constitutes a lesson learned.

It also should be noted, that for decades, while many EU democracy support policies targeted Ukrainian government, state institutions, and national and local authorities, their closest ally in advocating democratisation has been the Ukrainian civil society. At the same time, the CSOs, local communities, including marginalised groups, and independent media have been among the main recipients of the EU support. The events of 2013-2014 demonstrated that there could be a strong and involved civil society to first fight authoritarian tendencies of the Yanukovich government, and then to resist the Russian aggression and outsource and watchdog weak and much distrusted state institutions. 2022 demonstrated that resilience to full-scale aggression is only possible if there is a societal unity when civil society and state institutions work as partners aided by international allies. In many ways, the EU policies towards Ukraine have been rooted and fine-tuned according to the feedback and recommendations provided by Ukrainian CSOs and experts. Thus, Ukrainian local communities of practice have been playing a crucial role in the EU's democratic support learning and policy making.

More, better, faster?

Could the EU do anything to make its policies regarding Ukraine more efficient, particularly in the case of areas of security and democracy support (rule of law, human rights, and good governance)? The key issue here is that these policies are not just about the support of Ukraine as one of the neighbouring countries of the EU. Since 2014 and even more so since 2022, Ukraine has transformed from just one of the EN countries into a geopolitical battlefield, where the EU is one of the sides—even if unwillingly. The EU does not have any choice than to oppose Russia and its allies in their quest to overturn the current world order and spread autocratic practices, if the EU wants to preserve democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Thus, the challenges the EU, along with Ukraine, is facing demand determination, flexibility, and asymmetric measures, primarily in the security and defence. Among other things, it means streamlining decision-making procedures and bureaucracy, safeguarding against autocratic tendencies within the EU MSs, and providing and maintaining a clearly defined and followed conditionality (benchmark-based) accession path for Ukraine. The latter will also enhance the ability of both the EU and the Ukrainian civil society to watchdog the Ukrainian government and ensure that there is no democratic backsliding in Ukraine under martial law, particularly in such areas as the rule of law and human rights.

Bibliography

Achrainer, Christian and Michelle Pace. (2024). Concept manual. SHAPEDEM-EU Publications. https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_2_Concept_Manual.pdf

Achrainer, Christian and Michelle Pace (2025). Non-learning Within a Constellation of Communities of Practice: The Case of the EU and Its Democracy Support in the Arab World. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 63: 385–401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13629>.

Boyko S. Yu., Andriy V. M. (2025). Legal Regime of Martial State and Its Impact on Local Self-Government. *Social Law*, (1), P. 19-25. <https://soclaw.com.ua/index.php/journal/article/view/1242>.

- Bulana O., Holubytska M. (2025) Ukraine's Path to the EU: Reform, Resilience, and the Politics of Enlargement. Schuman Papers No 796. 23 June 2025. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/796-ukraine-s-path-to-the-eu-reform-resilience-and-the-politics-of-enlargement>.
- Council of the European Union. (2014). Council Decision 2014/486/CFSP of 22 July 2014 on the European Union Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine). Document 32014D0486. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2014/486/oj/eng>.
- Council of the European Union. (2024). Explainers. The Ukraine Facility. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/ukraine-facility/>.
- European Commission. (2007-2025). Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. Ukraine. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/ukraine_en.
- European Commission. (2016a). EU Anti-Corruption Initiative in Ukraine. ANNEX 1 of the Commission Implementing Decision on the Special Measure 2016 for Anti-Corruption and Support to Key Reforms in favour of Ukraine. Action Document for EU Anti-Corruption Initiative in Ukraine. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-03/c_2016_4719_039657_anti-corruption_initiative.pdf.
- European Commission. (2016b). Association Implementation Report on Ukraine. 9.12.2016. SWD(2016). 446 final. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ukraine_v2_0.pdf.
- European Commission. (2018). Association Implementation Report on Ukraine. 7.11.2018. SWD(2018). 462 final. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2018_association_implementation_report_on_ukraine.pdf
- European Commission. (2020). Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020. JOIN(2020) 7. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7f487d0f-e04b-4d84-82ba-d75ea3601d34_en.
- European External Action Service (EEAS). 2021. European Neighbourhood Policy. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en
- European External Action Service (EEAS). (2022a). A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.
- European External Action Service (EEAS). (2022b). EU Commission's Recommendations for Ukraine's EU candidate status. 17 June 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-commissions-recommendations-ukraines-eu-candidate-status_en?s=232.
- European External Action Service (EEAS). (2022c). EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eumam-ukraine_en?s=410260.
- European Union. (n.a.) Investigative media as a tool of democratic transformation processes in Ukraine. <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en/eu-project-page-en?id=683>.
- European Union. (2025). Projects. <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/projects-en>.

- European Union Advisory Mission Ukraine (EUAM). (2024). Public Opinion Survey for the EU Advisory Mission Ukraine. October 2024. https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024_EUAM-Survey-Results_ENGFor-website.pdf.
- EU Neighbours East. (2021). 'U-LEAD with Europe' programme opens 150th Administrative Service Centre in Ukraine. February 25, 2021. <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/u-lead-with-europe-programme-opens-150th-administrative-service-centre-in-ukraine/>.
- Gawrich, Andrea et al. (2024). Ambitions for the Future of EU Democracy Support. SHAPEDEM-EU Publication. Position Paper 1. https://shapedem-eu.eu/user/pages/06.publications/SHAPEDEM-EU_Publication_1_Position_Paper_Final.pdf
- Info Sapiens. (2021). Зроби за мене: українці готові до самоорганізації, але покладають відповідальність за свій добробут на державу. 28.03.2021. <https://www.sapiens.com.ua/ua/socpol-research-single-page?id=198>.
- Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). (2023). Public Opinion Survey for the EU Advisory Mission Ukraine. September 2023. https://kiis.com.ua/materials/pr/20231026_r/AReport_PublicSurvey_EUAM_sept2023_eng_public.pdf.
- Kyrychenko J., Chyrkin A. (2024). Our Fighting Democracy: A Letter from Ukraine. Verfassungsblog. 24 February 2024. <https://verfassungsblog.de/our-fighting-democracy/>.
- Osypchuk A., Suslov A. (2024). The Case of Ukraine and Its Lessons: From ENP to EU Accession. 19 June 2024. Presentation at the SGEU Conference Lisbon 2024. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.27490.64969 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393631985_The_Case_of_Ukraine_and_Its_Lessons_From_ENP_to_EU_Accession
- Sociological Group Rating. (2024). Success or not? How Ukrainians assess law enforcement reforms and the EU's support. 28 October 2024. <https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/uspivh-chi-ni-yak-ukrayinci-ocinyuyut-reformuvannya-organiv-pravoporyadku-ta-pidtrimku-yes.html>.
- Rabinovych M. et al. (2024). Explaining Ukraine's resilience to Russia's invasion: The role of local governance. *Governance*, 37(4), 1121–1140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12827>.
- Raik, K., Blockmans, S., Osypchuk, A., & Suslov, A. (2024). EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order. *The International Spectator*, 59(1), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2296576>.
- Razumkov Centre / Разумков Центр. (2021). Оцінка громадянами України наслідків реформи децентралізації і готовність брати участь у житті місцевої громади. Бачення ролі бізнесу в розвитку громад (травень 2021р.). 15.06.2021. <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-gromadianamy-ukrainy-naslidkiv-reformy-detsentralizatsii-i-gotovnist-braty-uchast-u-zhytti-mistsevoi-gromady-bachennia-rolu-biznesu-v-rozvytku-gromad-traven-2021r>
- Romanova, V., Umland, A. (2019). Ukraine's Decentralization Reforms Since 2014 Initial Achievements and Future Challenges. *Ukraine Forum*. September 2019. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-09-24-UkraineDecentralization.pdf>.

Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine / Секретаріат Кабінету Міністрів України. (2017). Реформа державного управління. Звіт про виконання у 2016-2017 роках Стратегії реформування державного управління України на 2016-2020 роки.

<https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/uploaded-files/pro-vikonannya-u-2016-2017-rokakh-strategii-reformuvannya-derzhavnogo-upravlinnya-ukraini-na-2016-2020-roki.pdf>

Tyushka A. et al. (2023). Case Study Analysis of Conflicts and Crises in the EU's Neighbourhoods. ENGAGE. Working Paper Series No. 25, June 2023, p.28-29. <https://www.engage-eu.eu/publications/case-study-analysis-of-conflicts-and-crises-in-the-eus-neighbourhoods>.

Visit Ukraine. (2024). What rights of citizens cannot be restricted during martial law? 22 January 2024. <https://visitukraine.today/blog/3242/what-rights-of-citizens-cannot-be-restricted-during-martial-law>.

Young R. et al. (2023). European Democracy Support Annual Review 2022. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/EDH22_Annual_Review_v3_updated.pdf