



Original research article

The price of success, the benefit of setbacks: Alternative futures of EU-Ukraine relations



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the various futures of relations between the European Union (EU) and Ukraine. After distilling two major drivers we construct a future compass in order to conceive of four futures of relations between the EU and Ukraine. Our scenarios aim to challenge deep-rooted assumptions on the EU's neighbourhood with Ukraine: How will the politico-economic challenges in the European countries influence the EU's approach towards the East? Will more EU engagement in Ukraine contribute to enduring peace? Does peace always come with stability? Which prospects does the idea of Intermarium have? Are the pivotal transformation players in Ukraine indeed oligarchs or rather small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs? After presenting our scenarios, we propose indicators to know in the years to come, along which path future relations do develop. By unearthing surprising developments we hope to provoke innovative thoughts on Eastern Europe in times of post truth societies, confrontation between states and hybrid warfare.

1. Introduction

While European integration successfully established peace within the European Union (EU), Eastern Europe remains a source of military conflict.¹ The transformation euphoria of the early 1990s with the slogan of an “end of history” had to give way to the insight of the 21st century that semi-democratic regimes may sustain. Even the EU acknowledged that it failed to achieve the major objectives of its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), i.e. promotion of democracy and stability (European Commission, 2015:2). In the last decades we observed a variety of political change in Eastern Europe from democratic revolutions to neo-authoritarianism. The political systems have not been settled and the susceptibility of that region to external influences remains considerable. In times of great uncertainties, it is worthwhile to reflect on alternative future developments.

This contribution formulates alternative answers to the question of how the relationship between the EU and Ukraine may develop until 2030. It presents a set of scenarios that conjecture distinct ‘futures’ to provoke thoughts about possible tendencies and events. Within the neighborhood of those who ‘share’ a border with Russia, Ukraine not only tops the list as the biggest in terms of its expansive territory and large population, but also due to its having undergone the most turbulent transformation in the last decades and being torn in war. So, in a broader sense, the scenarios deal with the political shaping of Eastern Europe in the years to come.

Recently, several studies were published that projected several scenarios on the future of Eastern Europe. They focused predominantly on EU-Russia relations as Russian military power is considered to pose the greatest threat to peace in Europe. Typically,

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they offer three or four possible scenarios (Bechev & Nicolaidis, 2010; Davydchik, Kahrl, Krause, Schulz, 2016: 33–36; Forbrig, 2015; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014; Gressel, Mehlhausen, Priesmeyer-Tkocz, Solonenko, 2016: 27–31; Kinyakin, 2013; Lang & Lippert, 2015; Medvedev, 2006; Staeger, 2016; Schubert, Pollak, & Brutschin, 2014) At one end of the spectrum, they depict a gloomy confrontational dynamic that unveils the destructive effects of hostile integration competition in Eastern Europe. At the other end, they suppose a more cooperative relationship that could lead to a condominium over the shared neighbors disrespecting their sovereignty. Last but not least, one or two scenarios prepare for the recommended middle ground which might be classified as ‘cooperative confrontation’ (Lang & Lippert, 2015) or ‘co-existence’ (Kinyakin, 2013).

By focusing on Ukraine, we explicitly acknowledge the sovereignty of Ukraine being *not* simply a passive object of EU-Russia relations. This perspective has drawn barely any attention thus far, although the domestic development in Ukraine might have massive effects on EU-Russia relations, as the Maidan revolution illustrated. Moreover, the scenarios might also be instructive for studies of Moldova and Georgia, as these countries face comparable challenges of transformation, integration into the EU and economic interdependence with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

We start by sketching the methodology behind the scenarios in order to explain how we reached our ‘future compass’. Next, we present our four scenarios by starting with a short summary, characterizing the relationship between the EU and Ukraine in 2030, and describing the path from today on. Then we present indicators for the scenarios set. Finally, we summarize the major insights and thought-provoking tendencies to be taken into account for decision-making today.

2. Methodology

Scenarios serve to estimate possible future events and developments in order to be better prepared. They do not predict and they should not be measured against their probability (Heinecke & Schwager, 1995), since this would suggest that only the most likely events would occur in the future. Were 9/11, the fall of the Berlin Wall or Brexit likely events? Probably not, but you would be wise to prepare for such drastic possibilities in the future!

At least three characteristics define our scenarios (Mehlhausen, 2009): First, scenarios should be plausible. Only plausible developments deserve serious consideration, since only then can we learn something new from the simulation. Second, scenarios should be innovative. Without surprises or unexpected events, scenarios offer little to no inspiration and will fail to provoke our thoughts. The most inspiring scenarios contain qualitative changes, i.e. an unknown rationale or logic of action (Wack, 1985). Third, scenarios should have a succinct message that is easy to communicate. Even though we ought to allow for some complexity, we should be able to sum up its core message in two or three sentences.

Scenarios should be based on some ‘future knowledge’ or TINA trends (There Is No Alternative). For example, we can reliably predict the demographic trends for 2050 with only a small margin of error. On the other hand, if sufficient uncertainties prevail, we may leave the realm of prognoses and plausibly envision profound qualitative changes. For these reasons, we chose 2030 as an appropriate time frame for Eastern Europe.

Once we have determined the scenarios’ guiding question, we classify impact factors pertaining to their relevance and their direction of development (Schwartz, 1996; Meinert, 2014:14-15). Among those deemed most likely to affect the future within the area of focus, we distinguish between those that may change for the worse or the better (drivers) as opposed to the aforementioned TINAs. These make our scenarios more plausible, since they serve as markers to disqualify any scenario that is in contradiction with them. The drivers are key to the specific development of our scenarios in that we select the two most relevant drivers to span the four future spaces within all scenarios.

In most cases, the alternative directions of drivers are normative (e.g. economic growth vs. decline, democratization vs. authoritarianization, integration vs. disintegration). Thus, we are likely to produce one positive and one negative scenario, whereas the other two are usually ambivalent and embrace certain tensions between a favorable and an adverse trend. The resulting set of four scenarios provide for multifaceted inspirations. While the best-case scenario suggests viable paths to a wishful future, the worst-case scenario warns us against a hazardous or even fateful outcome. The other more nuanced ‘futures’ often contain ambivalent events, which, however, are not less thought provoking.

3. The conception of the future compass

The following section seeks to sketch the methodological path leading to the four scenarios presented below. We started by defining the guiding question, analyzing the present state of affairs and identifying the most crucial factors that shape EU-Ukraine relations. In light of the drastic changes in international relations and domestic politics, specifically in the EU and Ukraine, Russia and other countries in the East, a complex review process was inevitable for any analysis of future EU-Ukraine relations. Therefore, we asked which political, economic, social and technological factors would affect EU-Ukraine relations most in the years up to 2030.

In a first step, we singled out relevant and certain tendencies in terms of their high predictability. These TINAs constitute our potential ‘future knowledge’. As the most important one we chose (1) Russia’s foreign policy influence. We assume, on the one hand, that the amplitude of the negative development is hardly any longer stretchable, in that Russia is not likely to become even more aggressive as costs become increasingly prohibitive.² On the other hand, the pressure of conservative forces in Russia on its foreign

² The disruptive role of Russia in Eastern Europe has received broad attention in the literature (Haukkala, 2009; Popescu & Wilson, 2009; Shapovalova, 2006; Sushko, 2008). However, some contributions do find that certain incidents could even lead Russian actors to propel the democratization process (Ademmer & Börzel,

policy is expected to remain sufficiently high to guarantee a certain continuity in terms of a desire to protect perceived zones of influences in Ukraine. Therefore, we regard Russia's influence as a 'controlled variable' that is not expected to vary substantially until 2030.

In addition, we agreed on three other TINAs. We (2) do not expect any changes regarding the status of Crimea. Crimea seems likely to continue to be subject to political and territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine and to remain – as a subject of the Russian Federation – under the *de facto* control of the Kremlin. Furthermore, we assume that the EU, although it held a series of disintegration events, (3) will maintain its role as a pivotal political player. Last but not least, we presume that (4) the liberal democracy will continue to be perceived the most legitimate regime form *in spite of* the proliferation of semi-authoritarian governments who contentiously question the idea's validity.

The next step required that we conceive of critically important and very uncertain factors that are likely to shape EU-Ukrainian relations in the near future. These 'drivers' are key to the disparate developments in our scenarios. We consider following 'drivers' as relevant:

- a) regarding both EU and Ukraine
 - nationalist movements,
 - the respect for the rule of law,
 - the energy dependency of the EU and Ukraine on Russia,
 - separatism,
- b) regarding the EU
 - the coherence in its eastern policy in terms of the ability to speak with one voice,
 - the EU identity in terms of mutual solidarity,
 - EU-EAEU negotiations,
- c) regarding Ukraine
 - the Ukrainian identity in terms of solidarity,
 - the development of Ukrainian economy (e.g. innovation potential in various sectors),
 - the professionalization of Ukrainian politics and political culture.

We then discussed these drivers with regard to their crucial impact on future relations. For example, we decided that separatism and energy dependency would be important but not decisive for EU-Ukraine future relations. We also tested which set of two drivers would be independent from each other. We believe that EU coherence will be of extraordinary importance as the EU yields more leverage on Ukraine than vice versa. For the sake of parity and the need to focus on bilateral relations we then singled out a driver focusing on Ukraine. With regard to the recent history and current trends, we believe that the political culture and the quality of the political process (politics) in Ukraine are most relevant and respond best to our first driver. Therefore, we chose the following two drivers:

- (1) EU coherence in its Eastern policy and
- (2) the quality of the political process (politics) and political culture in Ukraine.

In a final step, we combined both drivers and designed a future compass (Fig. 1). In order to highlight the specific implications of our drivers, we explicated the characteristics of the possible alternative developments for each driver.

We shall refer to the quality of the political process (politics) and political culture in Ukraine as the degree to which it contributes to a common good. We associate the corresponding negative development with an authoritarian regime shaped by opportunism, a lack of rule of law and conflicting powers. This model would eventually lead to institutional failure, the sale of strategic assets and corruption, a political culture shaped by confrontation and discouragement, right-wing populism and a boom of nationalism. It would allow separatist tendencies and a 'the winner takes it all' mentality to rise following changes of power.

A positive development would witness the emergence of an inclusive national identity with people's parties in place of clientele parties and the devolution of oligarchic power. A civil society would develop within a pro-active non-governmental sector characterized by decentralization and an effective division of powers, rule of law as well as transparent and regulated changes of power. In such a political culture, we would expect the legitimation of the entire polity to be high, providing a favorable political environment for economic growth and increasing competitiveness.

On the other hand, EU coherence may also drastically increase or decrease. A deterioration of the EU's ability to speak with one voice would imply a renaissance of bilateral relations accompanied by an emergence of separate and controversial foreign policy concepts. Populism, increasing cleavages in the national polities and fragmentation of the economic areas would eventually lower the overall legitimation of the EU and its role as a global power vis-à-vis the US, Russia and China.

Progress in EU coherence, in turn, might imply that the EU member states have delegated more competences to the supranational level and even agreed on a European foreign minister who can count on increased solidarity between member states and a convergence of national interests in foreign policy. Atop this basis, the EU could adopt a consistent and coherent policy to deal with third

(footnote continued)

2013). Nonetheless, we maintain our belief that such incidents are exceptional, see Langbein (2013), Dimitrova and Dragneva (2009).

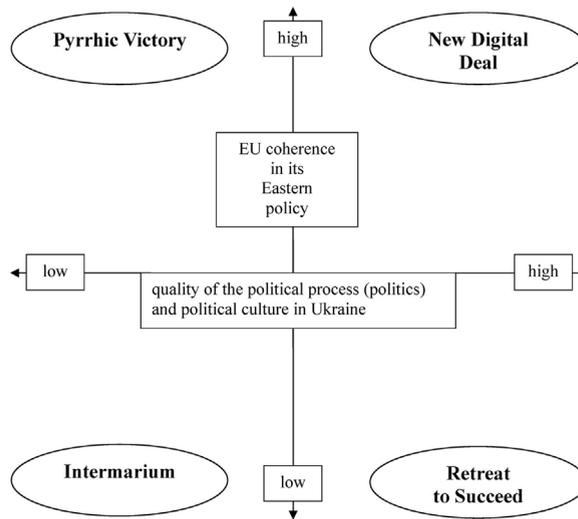


Fig. 1. Future compass on EU-Ukraine relations.

states.

These four alternative developments lead to four distinct ‘future spaces’, for which we created one scenario each. All four scenarios derive from our TINAs and differ with regard to the drivers discussed above.

4. Scenarios

4.1. New digital deal

4.1.1. EU-Ukraine relations in 2030

After years of crisis, the EU neighborhood agenda supports Ukraine and leads to more new economic structures of small and medium-sized enterprises. As most of them deliver items to larger European producers, this emerging middle class is much less prone to Russian influence and finance. While these new trade relations cannot overcome the high degree of political polarization in Ukraine, they can mitigate its effects. For the reform-minded parties, intensified trade with the EU is a source of financial support and reward for their transition achievements.

4.1.2. Failure of a ‘sovereignist’ model within the EU (2017–2020)

These years mean harsh times for the EU. In France, multiple incidents of terrorism shift the political spectrum to the right. The French far right, seconded by the German, Italian and Austrian left and Hungarian nationalists, pushes for *collaboración* with Russia within a ‘Eurasian order’ from Lisbon to Vladivostok: *détente* at any price, abandoning the Eastern neighborhood and fighting ‘antidemocratic Islam’ together. The French call for collaboration creates fierce reactions from some Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The controversies also touch core issues of the Union, such as freedom of movement (Schengen), fiscal policy (particularly the stability pact), and provisions regarding the rule of law. While generally at odds on foreign policy, Poland under the rule of Law and Justice Party (PiS) supports France’s revisionist agenda on domestic politics. In Germany, Chancellor von der Leyen, succeeding Merkel in 2020, continues the previous political course. The core purpose of Merkel’s policy was to intermediate a coalition between the Eastern and Northern neighbors that trades financial support for the South to avoid losing Eastern Europe from the agenda.

As a response to the ongoing instable situation in North Africa and the Middle East, France strengthens its military cooperation with Russia. Paris grants Moscow access to its military bases in Djibouti, Chad, and Niger, hoping to bring Moscow behind French policies. However, Russia tries to use its presence on French bases as a leverage against the US and starts meddling in the tribal and factional conflicts to put pressure on Washington to engage with Moscow. Instead of stabilizing the region, it is driven further into *snafu*.

Neither France nor Italy can ensure diplomatic weight or economic growth with their ‘sovereignist’ model. Macron becomes the president in 2022³ and engages in a course of reform and diplomatic damage control. Reforms on the domestic labor market, business regulation and taxation bring France back to a phase of economic growth and increased employment. While initially met with stiff resistance from the French radical left, the public accepts the reforms; in return, Germany expresses willingness to ease some stability pact requirements for hard-reforming countries. This policy is later emulated in Italy and other southern states. Realizing that Europe can only survive in unity, the adverse French experience triggers a new European consensus. Decreased Russian influence after the

³ The manuscript is from late February 2017 and does not consider any later political developments.

disappointing cooperation with Russia paves the way to increase assistance for Europe's direct neighbors.

In the meantime, Ukraine has had difficulties as well. Under the rule of Poroshenko and Groysman, Ukraine stagnates. Reforms passed in the Rada never get properly implemented. The Donbas remains instable but relatively calm. Russia can be deterred from escalating, not least because the Ukrainian army has gotten much stronger than in 2014. The proxies cannot gain influence in Kyiv or develop a model of governance and statehood that would inspire anyone to seek Russian protection. Only partially implemented, the Minsk agreement is used as a negotiating format to mitigate the conflict and prevent larger confrontations. At certain points in time, Russia tries to re-position itself in Ukraine and accordingly offers economic support. Again, Russia misjudges the public opinion and underestimates civil society in Ukraine. Russian-inspired corruption only increases reservation vis-à-vis the opposition block and oligarchs. When the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) opens markets beyond the EU to Ukrainian enterprises by adapting EU standards, the significance of the Eurasian market for Ukraine diminishes drastically. Instead of creating influence, Russia only strengthens the pro-European orientation of Ukraine.

4.1.3. *On the way to stabilization (2021–2025)*

After the presidential election of 2019, Block Poroshenko and Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) strike a “non-aggression” agreement in the parliamentary elections and form a government. Tymoshenko becomes Prime Minister again. Such a spin doctoring of elections left a bitter mark on Ukrainian reformers and the younger generation, who feel betrayed and manipulated. The protest movement again gains momentum. This election result continues to protract the era of stalemate. At least the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the EU and the US can apply enough pressure to prevent Ukraine from falling back into an authoritarian regime.

Beyond that, oligarchic pressure forces reform-minded politicians to unite in a genuine reform-minded centrist party. Recognizing that there is little to gain from being split institutionally, they decide to unite. Consequently, the monetary basis for the oligarchic block crumbles slowly but consistently. Constant pressure by the IMF to privatize and reform has diminished the revenues for key oligarchs. Laws on transparency are not revoked, which frequently leads to embezzlement and corruption scandals. This creates an instable equilibrium, in which neither authoritarian kleptocracy nor rule of law based on pluralism develop.

In the meantime, Europe has stabilized. France takes the lead in the South, concentrating on North Africa and the Sahel, while Germany and Sweden lead in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Poland is now back on its feet, after the 2019 parliamentary elections ousted the PiS. After recovering from the multiple budgetary, political, institutional, and administrative disasters created by the national-conservative government, Poland can again play a constructive role and reinforces the camp pushing to support Ukraine. Russia limits involvement to provocations and aggressive rhetoric, but it also suffers a constitutional crisis after Putin abolished the two-term restriction on the Russian presidency, allowing him to stay on beyond 2024. The internal tensions dissuade Russia from using military aggression.

4.1.4. *Fighting corruption in the digital era (2025–2030)*

In 2024, Grybauskaitė is elected President of the European Commission. As first head of the Commission from an Eastern European country, she is now in a unique position to push for the EU neighborhood agenda. Together with the European Foreign Minister, Juppé, she hammers out a ‘New Deal for the Eastern Neighborhood’ that offers increased assistance packages for deep reforms. The EU presence in Ukraine provides more financial assets at hand, but it does so with increased staff to evaluate implementation shortfalls. The progress reports on Ukraine become a major issue in Ukraine's domestic politics, slamming the Poroshenko-Tymoshenko government for protracting reform and carrying over inefficient governance schemes.

The 2024 Ukrainian presidential elections become a turning point. Informally, Poroshenko and Tymoshenko agree once again on a ‘non-aggression pact’, this time supporting Tymoshenko for the presidency and then arranging a government that respects both interests and protects the status quo. At first, this seems to work out with Tymoshenko winning the first round ahead of the reformist candidate Sadowyj. However, after reports on that deal surface in the local media, the anger of Ukrainian society about this scandal leads to a surprise victory of Sadowyj, even though by only a narrow margin. Subsequent parliamentary elections also bring a defeat for the established oligarchic parties. The reformists among the members of the Rada form a coalition. The new government and President Sadowyj strive to reform the judiciary and administrative system in Ukraine.

With the big bang project ‘Digital Services in the 21st century’ the new coalition, financed with the help of an extensive loan by the EU and a coalition of international donors, aims to create a Ukrainian Silicon Valley. Favorable conditions attract international specialists and provide for an inspiring intellectual environment for cyber science. In 2028, the newly founded Kyiv Centre for Cyber Technologies grants their ‘Web 3.0 Award’ to a group of young Ukrainians for their Tool ‘Fighting Against Corruption in Europe with Informational Technology’ (FACE IT). Similar to the comment function of many internet pages, an app allows for easy ratings of every state institution. The government brings in a new law to assure prosecution of every case of reported corruption. In addition, Grybauskaitė insists that the ‘New Deal’ payments will be cancelled immediately if this law is not properly enacted. In the late 2020s, optimism is spreading that Ukrainian entrepreneurship will at last bring welfare even to the ‘country on the border’.

4.2. *Retreat to succeed*

4.2.1. *EU-Ukraine relations in 2030*

Relations between the EU and Ukraine in 2030 resemble the early 1990s with regard to the approach of the European Community towards the CEE countries. The EU is too busy with internal quarrels on European integration to make effort in its Eastern policy and grants only meagre support on bilateral terms. However, there is a crucial difference: While at the beginning of the 1990s the European Community was not ready to set this focus yet, in 2030 the EU is not considered by anyone prepared to proceed forward in

the foreseeable future. The EU-27 finds it increasingly difficult to coordinate its ‘Europe à la carte’, while Ukraine adopts a direct democratic but nationalist political model. Ukraine counts only a few member states among its ‘friends’, while Russia does not perceive any systemic competition with the EU in its ‘shared neighborhood’ and is weary from the constant conflict on its Western border.

4.2.2. Rhetoric assistance (2017–2020)

The multiple crises of the European Union lead to its incremental dissolution towards a ‘Europe à la carte’. Under the flamboyant anti-Euro rhetoric of Le Pen, the conservative candidate for the French presidential elections in mid-2017 Fillon cannot resist the temptation to stage himself as the defender of French interests. Once in office, Fillon blocks a rescue package for Greece and threatens to bring the deflationary policy of the European Central Bank to the European Court of Justice on the grounds of its low interest rate policy. Since negotiations over the Brexit in early 2017 are stagnating, Fillon seizes his opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: He advocates a soft Brexit to both rescue French-British trade and to pave the path to further differentiation of European integration. Berlin concedes Fillon the bargaining success since it lacks the courage to stand up against France, while benefitting economically. Even Poland is willing to sacrifice the rule of free movement of labor for decreased integration pressure and the option for a ‘Polexit’, should the Commission attempt to activate article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty. Cherry picking based on ‘enhanced cooperation’ becomes increasingly difficult to coordinate and turns EU decision making into a complex, non-transparent process among changing coalitions of the willing. With regard to the ENP, the Commission’s White Paper ‘Setting Positive Incentives’ in late 2019 envisages a loan for Kyiv over one billion Euro and an expansion of the Erasmus Plus program to the so called ‘reformist Eastern European neighbors’ (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) to include students, pupils, youth exchange workers and other disseminators. However, most observers agree that this does not address the needs of a war-torn Ukraine in the slightest and Russian commentators make a mock of EU propaganda activity.

In the meantime, military conflict in Eastern Ukraine does not cease. Every other week, OSCE reports of dozens of casualties nurture allegations that the EU is shying away from the soaring costs of severe sanctions against Russia and that it is de facto ceding Ukraine to Russia. A weakened Europe and an isolationist US under Donald Trump embolden Russia to be even more assertive in Ukraine by enhancing military pressure. Soon thereafter, bogus incidents fabricated by Russia are used as a pretext for casual strikes. Terrorist attacks, political murders and other means of force destabilize the country. In reaction, Ukraine raises military spending and the National Security and Defense Council turns into one of the most important political bodies. Ukraine feels ever more as the David that hardly stands a chance against the Eastern Goliath.

In sum, bilateral relations are nothing than ‘rhetoric assistance’ carried out by a deeply disrupted EU to a severely destabilized Ukraine disappointed by its former allies in the West.

4.2.3. The conservative turn (2021–2025)

Given the enduring weakness of the European Union and a Trump-worn US, the Kremlin feels emboldened enough to launch a larger conventional offensive on Ukraine, making use, for the first time, of the Russian air force. After an initial success overrunning the light forces along the contact line, the offensive runs into stiff Ukrainian resistance. This minor operation costs Russia about 8000 casualties in merely two weeks. The enormous death toll comes as a shock to the Kremlin, as they had fatally misjudged the Ukrainian ability to take battle with heavy Russian formations. The Kremlin finally learns that its ‘US friend’ Trump played a double game by promising to retreat from Ukraine but de facto granting Kyiv military support. Given the already soaring costs of the Russian military involvement in Ukraine and Syria and the unpredictability of an erratic US President, Putin changes strategy and stages himself domestically as the calm peace broker who enables a new ceasefire. To be sure, he will never forgive Trump’s betrayal!

In the run-up of the 2024 Ukrainian presidential election, the incumbent Poroshenko comes under heavy fire for failing to deliver domestic reforms to prepare for proper military protection. Hence, his rival Hopko stages herself as a symbol of civil resistance. Moreover, as a new figure on the political scene and having no substantial economic assets, she accuses Poroshenko and his kind of praying water and drinking wine. With promises of far-reaching anti-corruption measures and de-oligarchisation, she scores a landslide victory and becomes the first female president in Ukrainian history. On grounds of the president’s increased powers due to the state of war, she quickly introduces state-building measures to incrementally erase the existing checks and balances under nationalist and hawk slogans leaving mixed feelings among the reform-minded European forces. Hopko embarks on a transformative path that resembles Putin’s early years in power: fighting oligarchism might prepare for liberalization or authoritarianism.

In the meantime, the frictions within the European Union are cemented as the Franco-German tandem comes to a complete halt. While Fillon promotes an islamophobic ‘neo-conservative revolution’ in the run-up of the 2022 presidential elections in order to compete with Le Pen over right wing voters, the German social democratic led coalition condemns such a rhetoric as a betrayal of the European values. After the parliamentary elections in Austria in this very same year, the new Chancellor Strache joins forces with his European ‘neo-con’ friends in Paris, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest and Bratislava. In many policy fields, their common convictions lead to a stable coalition. They oppose further European integration, deny financial aid to suffering Euro states, block a common immigration policy and reject any interference by the Commission in internal affairs pertaining to article 7 of the EU Treaty.

With regard to the Eastern Partnership, these countries endorse a pro-Russian policy as the neo-cons are predominantly interested in prosperous economic relations with Moscow. Even the Polish government succumbs to this line of argumentation compromising its previous pro-Ukraine policy for its sovereigntist European policy. The remaining supporters of the EaP – Germany, Sweden and the Baltic states – find it increasingly difficult to reach any ambitious compromise within the EU and grant Ukraine their meagre assistance merely on a bilateral basis. In the mid-2020s, the EU and Ukraine have to tackle very distinct problems and share little more than a domestic ‘conservative turn’.

4.2.4. *Scattered neighborhood (2026–2030)*

The community method slowly fades away and there is hardly a European identity among EU citizens or the political elites. Nonetheless, there are still several beacons of European integration that provide some problem-solving capacity and thus general public support of European integration. The reasons differ among the member states. France appreciates the community funds as much as its neo-con friends and celebrates the idea of being the only nuclear power within the EU that is still also a global player. London left the EU but suppress calls for independence by granting Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales autonomy rights in the area of freedom of labor. Germany, on the other hand, sticks to its foreign policy tradition of defining its national interests through European values, all the while still hoping for an integrationist window of opportunity in the near future. Paradoxically, Russia may have lost grip on Ukraine but it gained massive control over Europe through its right-wing governments.

In Ukraine, Hopko is determined to avoid the mistakes of her predecessors. She is convinced that Yushchenko was simply unable to sustain his power as long as oligarchs de facto blocked any substantial reform, while Yanukovych's re-authoritarianisation unleashed an even more devastating rent-seeking dynamic. Even Poroshenko did not change anything substantially in this regard. Hopko's master plan is ambitious: A new constitution with direct democratic procedures shall signal to its electorate that she is willing to make a real change in Ukrainian politics. She manages to attain the technological key to her plan from the EU. Back in 2018, the European Commission intended to counter falling turnouts in the European Parliament (EP) elections by introducing a new electoral technology which allows cheap and secure e-voting even from home. The EU grants Ukraine this direct democratic model with all the technological expertise including fingerprint identification for e-voting in late 2026. Every year at the symbolic 2023 reunification day of the defeat of the separatists near Mariupol, June 10th, an electronic referendum is held on all issues proposed by a citizens' initiative with at least 50,000 signatures. A vast majority of 73% of the Ukrainian electorate approves of the new constitution in late 2027. Together with the new constitution, they also approve Hopko's first initiative. Executives are allowed to be elected to a public office only if they make their assets transparent. However, the war-torn Ukrainian society tends to support a conservative political order with a strong executive, considerable power for military forces and omnipresent nationalism. It is certainly miles away from the conception of democracy in the Francis Fukuyama euphoria of the 1990s but it can still be termed a democracy. Most often, contemporary analysts compare Ukraine's newly established political model with a combination of Gaullist France and modern Switzerland.

In 2030, bilateral relations between the EU and Ukraine can at best be characterized as 'scattered neighborhood'. In retrospect, the EU's waning influence in Eastern Europe ironically 'facilitated' both peace and democratic transformation in Ukraine as the Kremlin did perceive neither the EU nor the US as a regional competitor anymore.

4.3. *The 'Illusion of intermarium'*

4.3.1. *EU-Ukraine relations in 2030*

In 2030, the European Union has loose institutional, political and economic bounds with Ukraine, the majority of them written merely on paper. The Association Agreement and the DCFTA never fully entered into force. The EU itself has undergone a dramatic transformation and copes with internal challenges and integration drawbacks. Both the ENP and the EaP are obsolete instruments of common foreign policy. Ukraine is a rather depressive place built on kleptocracy, corruption and oligarchic balance of power. Stalling reforms have led to a brain drain and brain waste. The country is poorer and more dysfunctional and dependent on its neighbours than it was two decades ago. Intergovernmental regional initiatives, such as Polish lead 'Intermarium', have not only replaced the EU-driven integration activities; they also systematically use the weakness of the Ukrainian state to maximize the informal political and economic influence of the European states in the post-soviet space.

4.3.2. *Reshaping Europe (2017–2020)*

The crisis-mode that bewildered the European Union in 2017 continues. The irreconcilable demands to pursue exclusively national interests as well as post-democratic and anti-globalization tendencies in Europe strengthened by Trump's protectionism drive the EU member states further and further apart. The 2018 re-elected Hungarian president Orbán takes the lead in a camp that pushes rapprochement with Russia. In Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and finally even Germany, the political leaders push their value and identity politics by leaning on pragmatic cooperation with Russia and the EAEU on economic, trade and security affairs. Some European states indirectly acknowledge the legitimacy of guided democracy in Russia and other post-Soviet countries as a result of Putin's promises to contribute to stabilizing the Middle East and fighting international (cyber) terrorism and (unofficially) stopping the subversive anti-democratic propaganda.

In this context, more stable and much more profitable economic and energy ties with Russia and the EAEU are used in some EU countries as arguments to strengthen industrial and agricultural production, expand services and fight nationalistic and populist movements, such as AfD in Germany. Although Russia does not deliver much to stabilize the Middle East, sanctions are progressively omitted and the support of a pro-European course of the Eastern partners is drastically reduced as a concession to Moscow. The policy remains controversial throughout the EU and the majority of CEE countries and Scandinavia reject outright the rapprochement to Russia. However, they cannot mount an effective opposition as many countries – above all Poland, Slovakia and Romania – are betting on the anti-Islam ticket themselves to foster domestic power. The 2019 EP elections lead to a formation of five almost equal in numbers parliamentary groups and subsequent long fights over candidates for the new Commission. This is widely regarded as yet another proof of Europe being divided and barely capable of acting.

In Ukraine in the meantime, progress is limited. After the suspension of the visa liberalization by the EU, justified by the inability to control the Eastern borders and first signals of the European rapprochement with Russia, the government of Groysman switches to

a slow motion modus. There are no fundamental new reforms, while the former reforms have barely been implemented. Moreover, the implementation of the DCFTA resembles cherry picking. Oligarchic stakes and bureaucratic interests call for a softening of the electronic declaration rules and new public procurement law. The politicians and oligarchs continue the kleptocratic governance. The oligarch Kolomoyskiy finally succeeds in making Groysman dismiss the Chairwoman of the National Bank, Gontaryeva, and have the largest commercial bank in Ukraine, Privatbank, remain under his control. However, Gontaryeva gets assassinated soon after by unknown perpetrators. The leaders of People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR) are quickly proclaimed responsible and military operations are taken up against them. The situation in the East gets more and more unstable as the separatists radicalize. The Antiterrorism-Operations (ATO) in Donbas again serve the ruling elite to conceal their own political and economic failures.

Unable to support Ukrainian transformation and democratization processes anymore, the reformists are compelled to dissolve the government and become more pragmatic or to seek a better future abroad. The democratization and transformation backlash strengthens the anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian trends in Europe. Ukraine enters into a period of economic decline, instability and insecurity. First foreign capital leaves Ukraine, then SME business, then labor. Ukrainian party landscape is scattered, weak and unable to cooperate. The society becomes ever more disillusioned and longs for the better conditions of the past. This regret leads to an unexpected victory in the 2019 presidential elections by Bojko, former vice Prime Minister under Yanukovich. The pro-European camp attempts to start another Maidan. Without a clear message and no real societal support or external aid, however, the protest movement fails during the cold winter months.

4.3.3. *Brother nations (2021–2025)*

The continuous squabbles about European and foreign policy would not be too grave if they had not coincided with economic problems in Southern Europe. In France, Fillon runs into increasing difficulties along his reform course. He cannot pass key legislation in parliament, but he wants to stay in office anyway. Subsequent elections in Italy cause an even greater canonicalization against the Euro and the stability pact. This effectively introduces a second split through Europe that proves irreconcilable. In Italy, a new coalition government between the Five Star Movement and the Lega Nord initiates a referendum on the Euro in 2021. The 'leave camp' wins it with 57.5% of the vote. The subsequent European debate on how Italy should leave the Monetary Union re-ignites a wave of nationalism across Europe and, in the consecutive year, clearly propels Le Pen to French presidency. Together with Italy, Hungary, Austria, and the Netherlands, Le Pen formulates a 'repair it or leave it' ultimatum to dissolve the EU if no major re-negotiation of the treaties will take place. Reluctantly, the rest of the EU has to play along.

In Ukraine, Bojko's election claim 'Have faith in the brotherhood of our nations' marks a new political and economic approach based on the traditional multi-vector policy à la Kuchma and the attempt to make Ukraine an intermediary of still attractive European technologies and know-how transfer into the Eurasian space. The new president does not deny the cooperation with the West, but he enhances it by strengthening, where possible, good political and economic relations with other post-Soviet neighbors and the EAEU. This turn seems to fit well the interest of Ukrainian oligarchs as it allows them to recreate local centers of politico-economic power and minimize the costs of economic backlash by letting exploitive corporations enter the country and export low-tech goods to Eurasia and third countries.

Also, Russian elites are interested in the slow rapprochement with Ukraine regarding the conflict in Donbas, as it becomes a growing threat to the Eurasian stability. The radicalization and rivalry of local warlords in Donetsk and Luhansk lead to escalating criminality as well as weapon and drug smuggle to and from Russia, which turn the region into a second Ichkeria. Therefore, after long negotiations Kyiv and Moscow agree that, for the time being, there will be no reintegration of the separatists regions into Ukraine. Instead, joint supervision of the failed states in Donbas is envisaged. This move allows to institutionalize and legitimate the peace process and demonstrate the Russian responsibility to the world community and simultaneously to keep the increasingly infamous OSCE outside.

At the same time, the EU focuses on its own transformation and sends less and less positive signals to Kyiv. Stocking reforms, untamable corruption, growing social inequalities and the Ukrainian flirt with the EAEU are used as flimsy excuses to halt the implementation of the DCFTA. The Association Agreement is not worth the paper it has been written on. As the severe condition of the EU becomes increasingly clear to Kyiv, new dimensions of cooperation with the Western neighbors are considered as a good politico-economic balance to its new Eurasian focus.

4.3.4. *Rescue in 'Intermarium'? (2025–2030)*

The negotiation on the future of the European Union proves messy and long as everyone puts up maximalist positions. The 'New Europe Treaty' of 2025 makes the EU a union of sovereign states that significantly cuts the size and the role of the Commission and the EP. It agrees on a core of economic integration plus further integration circles based on the principle of 'coalitions of the willing'. The more influential states go for regional cooperation structures anyway.

In the meantime, in Poland the PiS comes to power for the third time in history and pushes forward its vision of a pragmatic, historically grounded and interest-driven regional integration of CEE countries. As other Visegrád states are reluctant to endorse a structure dominated by Polish national interests, new alliances are needed. In 2025, the presidents of Poland and Ukraine meet in Przemyśl to sign a contract for an 'Intermarium', a new model of politico-economic integration stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Since the EU turned back integration to the state of 1970s there was suddenly plenty of free room to conduct independent foreign relations. The idea of 'Intermarium' grows in popularity amongst other states as well, but it also has its limits. The Baltic States join in to have some sort of re-assurance against Russia and try to involve Sweden and Finland as well. The latter, however, are reluctant to provide significant funds for various planned initiatives and infrastructure projects and take a side-on position concentrating on strengthening the Nordic integration. Slovakia and Hungary stay out on Russian demand. Romania and other South-East-European as

well as South Caucasian countries follow in, but they are haunted by economic troubles themselves. From the beginning on the project is affected by all possible stumbling blocks of loose cooperation, based on the good will and interests of the participating countries. Their economies are not complementary; they compete for investment and access to highly profiled markets amongst themselves. As the geopolitical logic trumps all considerations on common values, practices and standards, the ‘Intermarium’ proves to be an arrangement that is incapable of effectively promoting structural and administrative reforms in all countries. Hence, the strictly intergovernmental project never gained much ground.

For that reason even Russia does not perceive ‘Intermarium’ as a geopolitical or economic threat, the saber-rattling is a mere theatrical way of pretending the influence in the near neighborhood. It is a practical tool to guarantee that integration into the closer neighborhood is limited. It also prevents the European states from taking a step towards a deeper integration that could prove dangerous to Russian interests. And so, at the beginning of the 2030s, the ‘Intermarium’ project is a toothless paper tiger that addresses the specific needs of all parties involved, but the real geopolitical game is still directed out of the Kremlin.

4.4. Pyrrhic victory

4.4.1. EU-Ukraine relations in 2030

In 2030, Ukraine is consumed by domestic turmoil and civic resistance against authorities brought upon by a reunification with the DPR and LPR. Ideological, socio-economic, ethnic and language cleavages divide the country into many hostile entities loosely controlled by politicians and oligarchs. The European Union has resurged after many years of political blockade and adjusted to the needs of the 21st century by establishing a two-treaty structure. This two-speed EU addresses in a balanced way both the wish for more integration and the endeavor for more sovereignty of the member states. The new self-esteem of the EU also means more coherent foreign and trade policy. In order to boost the economic growth and balance the cancellation of the transatlantic free trade partnership with the USA, the EU forges close bonds with Russia and the EAEU. This decision garners support by the growing conviction of the European member states that it is better to keep Ukraine and other post-Soviet states in a permanent in-between stage of transformation and democratization and boost them with selected measures of external aid, e.g. towards reconstructing and modernizing infrastructure. Ukraine finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea.

4.4.2. Ukraine: let your dreams come true (2017–2022)

While the European states continue their ‘muddling through’ strategy regarding political and economic integration and focus on coping with Brexit, the developments in Ukraine again make headlines at the end of 2010s. It all starts in 2018 with massive leaks on Russian espionage techniques and extensive ways of patronizing and supporting the so-called ‘separatists’ in Eastern Ukraine. However, the leaks also show both that the DPR and LPR are actually quite weakened and that the Kremlin is fed up with the whole situation. In order to prove that this widely shared perception is wrong, the pro-Russian rebels rise up in Mariupol in autumn of the same year and proclaim the sovereignty of the region from Ukraine and its accession to ‘Novorossiya’. Kyiv fights back with all available means and puts down the attempted *coup d’état* within days. Sadly, the quick response also results in over 1500 people dead or injured within a single day. Even though Europe unanimously supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemns Russia for pulling the strings during the ‘Black Saturday’, the incompetence of political elites in Kyiv regarding the crisis management becomes subject to criticism both in Ukraine and abroad. In order to improve his image President Poroshenko plays ‘all in’ and calls for snap elections, which he ultimately wins. The key to his success is a promise of ‘healing the divided country’ by peaceful means, economic progress and stronger ties with the EU that reach beyond the DCFTA.

The latter was quickly achieved. As the EU reshaped its energy security architecture in preparation for Nord Stream 2, Baltic Pipe and a series of LNG terminals along the Baltic Sea coast a new EU-Ukraine Energy Treaty could be signed, providing massive investments in the comprehensive modernization of the Ukrainian energy sector, both in terms of exploitation as well as consumption and savings. Long-term agreements on natural gas deliveries from Europe serve to compensate for the traditional ties with Russia, which the hybrid war in the East interrupted. Regarding the other aspects, the strategy of Poroshenko proves right. The economic growth resulting from the DCFTA strengthens the multisector development and foreign trade relations in Ukraine. The general socio-economic situation improves, the inflation rate is again on a single-digit level, and investment climate in the country is stable and optimistic. The positive economic signals transfer to a stronger wish for reunification.

The peace talks within the Minsk format continue. Especially Germany is effective as it keeps all possible channels of dialogue open. An economically weakened Russia plays a supportive role as an official intermediary between the conflict parties, but unofficially the country uses Cyber-Communication-Manipulation (CCM) to maximize its influence on the negotiation outcome. In May 2021, there is a breakthrough in negotiations and the Donetsk Peace Agreement is signed. The parties agree on an integration of the ‘separatist’ republics with Ukraine as federal entities. An amnesty for the military and political leaders in the East as well as a new constitution soon follows. By spring 2022 the Ukrainian dream comes true. National unity has been restored and the new ‘All Ukrainian Constitution’ connects the East with the West.

4.4.3. European union: two is better than one (2020–2025)

In the meantime, the EU has to solve a Gordian knot on its own. In 2020, the President of the European Commission, Timmermans, proposes to make the full use of the Article 7 TEU and introduce the third step of sanctions against Poland for not obeying the democratic and rule of law standards. Warsaw questions the decision for formal reasons, but two years later, the ECJ overrules this objection. In order to prevent discussing the *causa Polonia* in the Council and to demonstrate the ‘sovereign integration’ of European states, the Visegrád Group, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania – all illiberal democracies in the meantime – sign a

memorandum to block all decisions in the Council and the Parliament. The ‘sovereignists’ proclaim solidarity with Poland and keep the whole of Europe at bay. As the blockade continues, the EU is incapable of acting for more than a year. This leads, among other things, to the failure of the renegotiation of the TTIP initiated by the new democratic administration in Washington and consequently the weakening of transatlantic ties. The ‘great deadlock’ has also negative influence on EU-Ukraine relations, as the budgetary procedure is frozen and the Commission is unable to support the country with new funding and other means within the DCFTA framework.

In order to break the deadlock, stakeholders launch negotiations about the new European integration architecture. There are two camps competing for the most suitable vision of Europe in the 21st century. On the one side, there are the ‘sovereignists’ who are aligned among the Visegrád entente aiming to bring Europe back to the people and their needs. On the other side, Germany and other progressive EU members wish to build an ever closer Union based on supranationality and consensus building. Fed up with constant fighting and cherry picking in an overstretched club, both camps agree on a practical two-treaty structure that is quickly approved by all member states. From January 2025 onwards, the EU consists of an ‘Economic Union’ with a common market and external trade as well as a ‘Solidarity Union’, for those who strive for a deeper integration into the monetary, internal, social and other dimensions and are willing to accept the former Article 7 of the EU Treaty. Further enlargement is postponed temporarily.

The foreign policy becomes a pragmatic instrument of external trade based on a neoliberal approach. ‘What is good for our business, is good for us’ is the new European motto. Interest driven politics replace the value-based rhetoric of the 20th century. In this context, the relations with Eastern neighbors are redefined and big players rich in natural resources gain the attention of Europe. Already during the Donetsk peace process a large part of sanctions against Russia were lifted. Now, even the Crimea sanctions are called obsolete and withdrawn. Like the North Stream 2, other pipelines manifest to deliver cheap gas to Europe. A first round of talks between the EU and the EAEU about a comprehensive economic cooperation takes place in Berlin.

4.4.4. *Between the devil and the deep blue sea (2025–2030)*

Three years after the reunification little remains from the European hopes and dreams of Ukrainians. The lack of financial support during the ‘great deadlock’ has a negative impact on the economy and trade. The reform of the European Union and the subsequent message, ‘You shall not enter’, even regarding the less integrated ‘Economic Union’, have disillusioned the most optimistic and progressive elites in the country. The economic restoration of the East is much more expensive than expected. The recently introduced federal system lacks checks and balances and is misused by oligarchs for their own purposes. The mental wound between East and West Ukraine is too deep to heal within a life span. Subsequently, more and more voices in Ukraine raise issue with the developments and along with the idiom “what is broken, cannot be reforged” regret the re-unification of the country and even publicly approve the loss of Crimea.

Furthermore, the 2025 introduced revision of the amnesty for the separatist leaders outrages the society in Central-West Ukraine and starts a long lasting civil conflict. Fights break out first in Dnipro, but the wave of instability quickly reaches all regions of the country. Even if the army refuses to intervene, Ukrainians use their knowledge and weapons from ATO against their brothers. Russia uses CCM to control some of the *agent provocateurs* and generate as much terror and insecurity as possible. In consequence, the civil uprisings are against the ethnic, religious and language minorities in the local entities. There are clashes between the Russian and Ukrainian speaking groups and the Orthodox Church, pro-European and pan-Slavic movements as well as between the less and better off. Last but not least, the oligarchs use the conflict to re-allocate their influence zones in the country, build local centers of power in major industrialized cities and agree on a common control of the puppet government in Kyiv. The dream of Ukrainian reunification turns into a Pyrrhic victory.

A glimpse of hope comes from the Far East. In 2027, a Russian-Chinese trade war starts because of territory fights regarding oil fields around the Khanka Lake. This costly dispute makes Russia withdraw from its CCM activities in the near neighborhood and significantly pushes EU-EAEU cooperation talks forward. In October 2029 an agreement establishing the Great Intercontinental Free Trade Zone (GIFT) from Lisbon to Vladivostok gets signed in Berlin. Along with trade liberalization, there comes comprehensive technology exchange and energy partnership. Ukraine and other buffer states have not been forgotten either. The EU and the EAEU declared a shared responsibility to modernize and integrate the failing states with the GIFT. The Euro-Eurasian future is wide open.

5. Look out while driving – indicators for the scenario set

After developing a set of alternative or even competing scenarios, we present indicators to know towards which scenario future is evolving. Based on the analysis of the two main ‘drivers’, we propose the following indicators which can help to provide an evidence-based reality check of the strategic and operational adequacy of our scenarios until 2030.

5.1. *Driver 1: EU coherence in its Eastern policy*

In order to measure the quality of the cohesion within the EU regarding its Eastern policy, the following indicators might be used:

- a) The number of EU countries with full participation rights in all policy fields (differentiation): The more differentiated European integration gets, the less likely the EU’s ability is to speak with one voice. Particularly the maintenance of the sanction scheme against Russia shall be considered to mirror EU cohesiveness regarding Russia (see [Nureev, 2016](#); [Strezhneva & Rudenkova, 2016:102–118](#)).
- b) The number of common decisions made in the CFSP (decision-making effectiveness): The more decisions, the higher the ability to

act cohesively.⁴

- c) The number of Eurosceptic and nationalist parties in EU member states (domestic cleavages): The deeper the split among the political elites in EU member states, the more difficult it is for national governments to form effective coalitions across the EU with regard to foreign policy (see Taggart & Szczesbiak, 2013).
- d) The number of bilateral agreements between European states and Russia beyond the European Union (bilateralisation): The more bilateral the ties are with Russia, the more difficult it is for Brussels to speak in the name of all EU member states.

5.2. Driver 2: quality of the political process (politics) and political culture in Ukraine

The following indicators reflect this driver's scope:

- a) The democratic quality of the political system (democratization): The more democratic the regime, the higher the economic output of the political system (Acemoglu et al., 2015). Freedom House and Polity provide convenient data.
- b) The willingness of bureaucrats and politicians to stick to procedural rules (corruption): The higher corruption the lower the output of the political system (Hanousek & Kochanová, 2015). Transparency International and TI Corruption Perception Index are appropriate sources.
- c) The willingness of foreign companies to invest in Ukraine (business environment): The more Ukrainian politics are regarded abroad as effective and reliable, the more DFI will float into the country. Of course, DFI are rather a consequence of a well-functioning political system, but we believe that an immanent implication of political progress would be an increase in economic attraction.
- d) The generosity of foreign donors (financial aid): The better the political system operates in Ukraine, the more likely are loans and financial assistance by the EU, the IMF and other large donors.

In sum, these indicators will inform us towards which scenario EU-Ukraine relations are developing until 2030.

6. Conclusion

Our analyses of the prospective EU-Ukraine relations reveal existing strong interdependencies between the EU-European and Ukrainian politics and the policy making process in the EU member states and Ukraine. EU decision makers should take into account alternative paths of development of the EU Eastern policy and their impact on bi- and multilateral relations in the region.

One of our scenarios demonstrates that Ukraine might be able to develop forces of modernization even in lack of EU support that could change the state itself as well as its administration and economy. New technologies might also serve as sources for political change. However, Ukraine's modernization might not necessarily lead to a full-fledged liberal democracy; instead, it could take a different, more conservative turn. Due to the ongoing war, there might be strong efforts to devolve the oligarchy and strengthen state structures.

Taking a different perspective, improvements in Ukraine's relations with Russia might not necessarily be traceable to a fundamental change in Russian foreign policy, but rather to a lack of European engagement in the ENP/EaP. As soon as Russia stops perceiving the EU's cooperation efforts in its 'shared neighbourhood' as a systemic competition, it loses the justification for its struggle against an 'external enemy'. Decreased EU influence in Eastern Europe might bring both peace and democratic transformation to Ukraine. Paradoxically, Russia might lose control over Ukraine, but it could gain control over Europe through its right-wing governments. Strengthening the cooperation between some European states and Russia might indirectly convey legitimacy to authoritarian systems in Russia and other post-Soviet countries. This may lead to the development of more authoritarian tendencies in the EU and further backlashes for the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe.

In yet another simulation we showed that seeking an alliance with Russia does not necessarily nurture stability; on the contrary, it might destabilize the common neighborhood. Once the EU accepts that it will only survive as a strong union, the failure of a 'sovereignist' model could possibly trigger a new European consensus. Following the disappointment in cooperation with Russia, a decline of Russian influence might pave the way to increasing assistance for Europe's direct neighbors. Russian influence in Eastern Ukraine might then create a competition with Kyiv, providing the basis for an improved business environment.

The lack of a common vision for the ENP/EaP might also encourage individual member states to instrumentalize neighborhood concepts and intergovernmental initiatives as an avenue for legitimizing their internal power. In this case, European integration might not only come to a halt but, in a way, the Ukrainian state might even be hijacked for the sake of improved internal power by some EU member states. The hopes in some illiberal countries to build a new gravitational center might prove spurious. Since the underlying geopolitical logic surpasses all considerations on common values, methods and standards, interregional initiatives such as 'Intermarium' might perform poorly in their intended function as institutional arrangements to effectively promote structural and administrative reforms among member states.

The EU's ability to act cohesively remains the most important factor for its external affairs. In case of an internal blockade, the EU might fail not only with regard to its ENP, but also in its transatlantic relations and the negotiations on TTIP. In consequence of the domestic impasse, the EU architecture might collapse into an 'Economic Union', with the common market and foreign trade, and a

⁴ Börzel and van Hüllen (2014) discuss cohesiveness as a condition for the EU's Eastern policy effectiveness.

‘Union of Solidarity’ for those who strive for deeper integration in monetary, internal, social and other dimensions. Once the common budget is barred, the Commission lacks means to provide Kyiv with financial support and to leverage Ukrainian transformation through DCFTA. The pragmatic intensification of relations with the EAEU might push Ukraine into a permanent geopolitical and economic no man’s land and boost the EAEU states rather than Ukraine with selected measures of external aid such as reconstruction and modernization of infrastructure.

These four scenarios should not be understood as explicit policy recommendations, e.g. we do not argue that the EU shall withdraw its engagement from Ukraine in order to ensure enduring peace, that reintegrating the DPR and LPR into Ukraine would unequivocally lead to civil war or even that EU member states should acknowledge the Russian annexation of Crimea. Instead, we seek to provoke the reader’s implicit assumptions on EU-Ukraine relations to be then either reaffirmed or overhauled. Especially in times of confrontation or gridlock, it is essential to overhaul presumptions in order to find viable paths towards mutually beneficial cooperation. With innovative concepts and effective measures, the chance stands good to re-establish a peaceful order in Eastern Europe and deepen the EU-Ukraine cooperation.

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