How to Progress Ukraine’s Western Integration as a Prelude to Accession to the EU and NATO

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Summary

As the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and their member states become increasingly absorbed by internal challenges, the friends of Ukraine need to seek new paths to increase Ukrainian security, resilience and growth before its accession to the West’s two major organizations. An alternative way to reduce Ukraine’s current institutional isolation would be to develop more intense bilateral relations with friendly states across the globe, notably the United States. In Eastern Europe, moreover, countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova should try to create multilateral networks with post-communist member-countries of NATO and the EU.

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Introduction

The various political effects and multiple repercussions of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic for the international system will be especially far-reaching for weak states located in geopolitical grey zones. Countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which are neither military nor economic great powers and not embedded in security alliances or trading blocs, are at special risk. For Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the evolving world crisis will have the unpleasant consequence that their nations’ already stalling integration with the West may be further slowed. In as far as the European Union and NATO will be consumed by their various internal challenges and external threats, they will become more inward-looking and even less prone than before to consider accession of new members.

It is certainly true that some of the existing special outreach programmes in which Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are included, such as the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative or NATO’s Individual Partnership Action Plan scheme, will probably remain in place and may even be strengthened. In 2019, moreover, Ukraine very publicly put the aim of full membership of NATO and the EU into its constitution. These organizations will probably turn ever more introverted, however, as international and national instability increase throughout the year. As a minimum, it seems unlikely that the ongoing crisis will reduce scepticism about further EU and NATO enlargement, especially in Western Europe.

Ukraine’s Ambivalent Relationship with Western Europe

In 2019, Ukrainian politicians and experts were already dismayed by a number of what they saw as scandalous decisions and signals coming from West European. These included the unjustified readmission of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary...
Assembly of the Council of Europe, from which it had been excluded following the attack on Ukraine in 2014; and a strangely conciliatory turn in French President Emmanuel Macron’s rhetoric vis-à-vis Moscow. Moreover, as became clear following Macron’s unexpected advances, the French President has numerous supporters in Western Europe in his stated intention to change the current character of EU-Russia relations and begin a new security partnership.

Germany has in many ways been supportive of Ukraine since 2014. The Federal Republic will probably continue or may even strengthen its support for Ukraine in the future. Nonetheless, Berlin continues to irritate Kyiv with its myopic insistence on the completion of Gazprom’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea. The German and Austrian governments have not changed their strong support for the controversial underwater conduit even in the light of growing resistance to the Russian project in East-Central Europe and the United States.

The geopolitical climate for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova seems likely to deteriorate further during 2020. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, world politics is becoming more complicated with every passing week. The EU and its member states are today confronted with the pandemic and its uncertain economic repercussions. At the same time, they face a new refugee crisis in the South, complicated situations in the Middle East and Africa, increasingly difficult relations with Turkey and an awkward US president with a different understanding of transatlantic solidarity than previous inhabitants of the White House.

**Russia’s Weakening as Result of COVID-19**

It is true that not all recent foreign trends have been disadvantageous for Ukraine. The currently multiplying economic and social repercussions of the pandemic in Russia are likely to dampen the Kremlin’s

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6 Givi Gigitashvili, Russia’s Return to PACE. Irrational Compromise or Defending Russian Citizens from Their Government? New Eastern Europe, 10 July 2019. neweasterneurope.eu/2019/07/10/russias-return-to-pace/.
foreign adventurism. Moscow made an ill-conceived attempt to push back against – especially US – producers of shale oil and gas in the world’s energy markets. Russia’s refusal to agree to an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries proposal to cut oil production in order to prop up the oil price may also have been intended as the Kremlin’s rebuttal to the US sanctions placed on Gazprom’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project via the Baltic Sea in December 2019.

As of May 2020, however, it looks as if this attempted Russian manipulation is backfiring. The recent decline in the world market prices for crude oil seems to have been much deeper and may last much longer than the Kremlin probably intended. If recent research on a causal link between economic well-being – largely determined in Russia by world energy prices – and a Russian inclination towards foreign military interventions is to be believed, this should be good news for Ukraine. There is, moreover, an increasing likelihood of a disruption to the Putin regime at some point in the future. Such a scenario would arguably have positive rather than negative repercussions for Ukraine.

Moreover, some domestic political developments in the West may also – at least indirectly – be to Ukraine’s advantage. Both Russia and Ukraine will apparently be topics in the US election campaign throughout the summer and autumn of 2020. Kyiv may well also, as in the case of the December 2019 decision to sanction Nord Stream 2, benefit from further discussion of Moscow’s continuing malevolent actions – for instance, in the cyber space – against the United States and its allies. Various details on and a better understanding of Russia’s past, current and possible future covert intrusion into US and European electoral and other political affairs are also accumulating in Western societies.

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16 Maria Snegovaya, What Factors Contribute to the Aggressive Foreign Policy of Russian Leaders? Problèmes of Post-Communism, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2020, S. 93-110; Maria Snegovaya, Guns to Butter: Sociotropic Concerns and Foreign Policy Preferences in Russia, Post-Soviet Affairs, 12 April 2020. DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2020.1750912.
Moreover, certain purely domestic current and future developments in a number of EU and NATO states might be to the advantage of Ukraine. In October 2021, for instance, Germany’s parliamentary elections may result in the entry into the Federal Republic’s new government of the relatively pro-Ukraine Green Party. In the spring of 2020, however, these and other possible positive developments abroad and their presumably benevolent effects on Ukraine remain uncertain.

The Distant Prospect of EU and NATO Accession

The prospects today for Ukraine’s two major foreign political targets – accession to NATO and the EU – look gloomier than before the start of the ongoing worldwide crisis. Since the victories of the 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine’s political and intellectual elite has repeatedly been disappointed. During the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, for instance, Kyiv’s and Tbilisi’s official applications for membership were not rejected. The summit’s final declaration even stated that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members. Yet, curiously the actual admission of the two countries to the Alliance was postponed to an uncertain later date. No Membership Action Plan or any other road map for accession was adopted in response to Ukraine’s and Georgia’s formal requests for entry into NATO.

In 2014, the conclusion following the victory of the Revolution of Dignity of a far-reaching EU Association Agreement did not lead to a formal change in the EU’s traditionally noncommittal position on the possibility of Ukraine’s future membership. Accession has never been excluded by the Union’s Council and Commission, and an official membership perspective has repeatedly been demanded by the European Parliament. However, the texts of Ukraine’s, Georgia’s and Moldova’s lengthy Association Agreements do not make any reference to the option of future admission to the EU.

It is true that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are currently far from the standards required for EU accession in terms of the quality of their governmental, administrative and economic systems. However, the Western Balkan states, which either have been granted an official membership perspective or are already negotiating their accession, are no more – or certainly not significantly more – advanced than Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia. The latter three countries certainly continue to be hampered by their inability to move beyond a post-Soviet oligarchic form of governance to a more modern model. Yet, it is the lack of a long-term strategy and an absence of political will in Brussels, as well as excessive fear of Russia
in Western Europe, that provide the main explanations for the dearth of clear language in the decisions of the European Council or Commission concerning a future accession of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.24

The current accumulation of domestic issues in the NATO and EU member states, as well as the mounting tensions within these international organizations, are bad news for aspiring applicants such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The ongoing NATO and EU enlargements in the Western Balkans may proceed more or less unhindered, as North Macedonia’s recent accession to NATO illustrates, but this is because the former Yugoslav republics and Albania are already - if not yet parts, then - surrounded by members of NATO and the EU. With the partial exception of Serbia, they therefore have more or less clear membership prospects.25 A current or future successful Western integration of the Balkan states may therefore have few implications for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, while any future setbacks there could have negative repercussions for the chances of former Soviet republics joining NATO and the EU.

A Reboot of US-Ukrainian Relations

All this means that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova need a tactical rethink of their short- and medium-term foreign policy priorities and the means of their implementation. Achieving EU and/or NATO membership will certainly remain their primary aim. In the light of growing geopolitical instability, however, these targets should be acknowledged as achievable only in the long term. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova might instead need to make plans on what to do during a more or less prolonged interregnum, during which their current lack of international embeddedness and grey zone status will continue.

The most obvious interim solution for Ukraine will be to deepen as quickly and as far as possible its bilateral ties with those states that already or might soon have pro-Ukraine leaderships. Thus, Ukraine could seek an upgrade of the little-known 2008 Charter on Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and the United States. Kyiv could refer Washington to the US respect for Ukrainian borders, sovereignty and integrity expressed in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine’s accession to the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.26 The content of an updated text of the 2008 bilateral charter could give clear US security guarantees for Ukraine prior to NATO membership and contain a new package on US-Ukrainian defence cooperation.

An upgrade of the 2008 charter could lead to a new type of agreement between the two states. (It might also include the UK, as another signatory of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, or Canada and other especially pro-Ukraine Western states.) Ideally, a newly defined pact between Kyiv and Washington would contain provisions

26 Mariana Budjeryn, The Breach: Ukraine’s Territorial Integrity and the Budapest Memorandum. NPIHP Issues Brief, No. 3, 2014; Andreas Umland, The

approaching those in the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea, or similar security guarantees given by Washington to its closest non-NATO allies around the world.

While the prospects for such a fundamental change in Ukraine’s international embeddedness are not entirely clear, other avenues for improving Ukrainian foreign affairs are less uncertain. Above all, there may be ways to improve Ukraine’s relations with several Eastern European countries with pro-Ukrainian and/or Russia-sceptic governments. This would involve both smaller states such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia, as well as larger ones such as Poland and Romania.

Towards an Intermarium Alliance

Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova should not just be seeking closer bilateral ties with the above partners. They should also try to build multilateral networks that transcend the borders of NATO and the EU. This has already been tried, when Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine founded the Community of Democratic Choice in Kyiv in December 2005. Some of these nine states were then already members of the EU and/or NATO, others were not and are still not. The Community never really got off the ground, however, and today is largely forgotten.

A different strategy for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova would be to seek to participate in existing regional multilateral projects, in particular the Three Seas Initiative started in 2016 by twelve Central and East European EU member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), and the so-called Bucharest Nine group of nine countries constituting NATO’s Eastern European flank (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria), founded in Bucharest in 2015.27 While the Three Seas Initiative focuses on infrastructure and transportation, the Bucharest Nine group is about security and defence. Both networks therefore touch on issues that are central to the geopolitics and -economics of Eastern Europe, and that are of crucial relevance to the protection, resilience and development of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. An Eastern enlargement of the Three Seas Initiative can be accomplished with the support of the EU and United States, while an extension of the Bucharest Nine could be envisaged within NATO’s existing special partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia.28

A further alternative for Georgia and Ukraine, as NATO applicants, and also perhaps for Azerbaijan and Moldova, which have no such ambitions, would be to persuade the United States to support more intensely the four states’ Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM), which was founded in 1997. The US administration might be even persuaded to create with these four states an equivalent to the 1988 US Baltic Charter with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, or the

2003 US Adriatic Charter with Albania, Croatia and North Macedonia. A US-GUAM Charter would upgrade the existing bilateral Strategic Partnership charters with Ukraine and Georgia, and provide the four former Soviet republics with at least a modicum of international security. 29

Conclusions

The possible scenarios mentioned above do not exclude the possibility that completely new formats of interaction in East-Central Europe might emerge. They should all make better use of the region’s human and economic potential by relying on a common Central European identity as a subset of all-European society. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, along with their international friends, can and should think today more than before the Corona crisis about new schemes to strengthen their international embeddedness. There are a number of alternative avenues through which Ukraine might pursue its Western integration, even before the commencement of accession negotiations with NATO and the EU.

In 2020, the effects of the spread of COVID-19 mean that geopolitical uncertainty is increasing rapidly. Even before the pandemic, domestic developments in a number of states, among them the United Kingdom, the United States, Hungary and France, were creating uncertainty about the identity and future of NATO and the EU. In such circumstances, the two major Western organizations were already becoming less rather than more open to new applicants, and this trend is likely to continue. In the years to come, increasing Ukraine’s international security and deepening her ties with the community of the world’s liberal democracies will be a moving target. Ukraine and its partners will require creativity, resolution and flexibility in exploring novel paths to cross-border cooperation and all-European integration.

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