

European integration course of Ukraine: implementation of national interests and current challenges

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This article examines Ukraine's European integration course as one of the main directions of contemporary foreign policy and a crucial mechanism for strengthening national security, ensuring sustainable development, and modernizing the state. It traces the historical evolution of Ukraine–EU relations, starting with the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty, the 1993 Verkhovna Rada Resolution “On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy,” and the signing of the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and culminating in the granting of EU candidate status in 2022. The paper reviews key legal and institutional frameworks, including the Ukraine–EU Action Plan, the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership initiative, the Association Agreement, and the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of European integration following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which turned EU accession from a political and economic project into a strategy for survival, recovery, and security consolidation. The study analyzes the economic, political, and security dimensions of integration, focusing on the harmonization of Ukrainian legislation with EU law, modernization of state institutions, promotion of democratic reforms, and the prospects for accession negotiations in 2025. Key obstacles to integration are identified, including insufficient competitiveness of certain economic sectors, difficulties in meeting financial obligations, and the need to improve the professional capacity of civil servants. The article highlights the EU's role as a strategic partner in security cooperation, including Ukraine's participation in PESCO and EUMAM initiatives and the signing of bilateral security agreements. The findings emphasize that Ukraine's European integration course is a comprehensive strategy aimed at establishing the country as an integral part of the European political, economic, and security space, strengthening its international position, and improving citizens' quality of life.

KEYWORDS

*European integration,
Ukraine's foreign policy,
national security,
EU–Ukraine relations,
international relations,
reforms,
Association Agreement*

Introduction

The European Union occupies a strategic position in the modern system of international relations, serving as one of the key integration models of global development and an example of successfully overcoming historical contradictions on the continent. Its uniqueness lies in the ability of member states to harmoniously combine national priorities with collective interests in the political, economic, social, and security spheres within a single legal and institutional framework. The EU represents the institutionalized embodiment of the idea of European unity, which has become an effective mechanism for coordinating interstate policy, addressing global and regional challenges, and promoting democratic values. The success of European integration is evidenced by stable economic growth, high social standards, and the capacity to respond swiftly to international security challenges.

For a long time, Ukraine remained in a state of strategic choice between two alternative integration vectors – European and Eurasian. The European direction was associated with modernization, the development of a market economy, the building of democratic institutions, and the

implementation of the rule of law standards. In contrast, the Eurasian vector implied maintaining close economic and political ties with the post-Soviet space but did not guarantee the necessary pace of reforms and could increase dependence on external influences. Discussions about the feasibility of joining the EU or acceding to the Customs Union were actively conducted in academic, expert, and political circles, while public opinion periodically polarized depending on the socio-economic situation and the influence of external actors.

A thorough analysis of the advantages and risks of both models contributed to the gradual formation of a national consensus in favor of European integration as a priority direction of foreign policy. The European course opened new opportunities for the development of trade and economic relations with developed countries, the attraction of investments, the stimulation of innovation processes, and the expansion of international partnerships. In addition, it provided impetus for the modernization of key social institutions, the introduction of transparency and accountability principles in public administration, decentralization, and the digitalization of public services.



Ukraine's European integration strategy is the result of a deliberate political choice made both by civil society and by state authorities. Its implementation aims not only to promote internal consolidation and create a favorable environment for socio-economic development but also to enhance national security, strengthen state sovereignty, and preserve territorial integrity. This is particularly relevant in the context of current geopolitical challenges, when Russian aggression has threatened the European security system and demonstrated the need for deeper integration of Ukraine into European political and security structures. In this situation, the European integration course is being transformed from a foreign policy choice into a strategy of survival and state recovery, which must ensure not only post-war reconstruction but also sustainable long-term development.

The issue of Ukraine's European integration course has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with researchers examining both the historical preconditions and the current challenges of integration. Yu. Lavrenko (2017) explores the legal foundations of European integration, outlining key problems of harmonizing national legislation and prospects for further approximation to the EU acquis. I. Matyushenko, S. Berenda, and V. Reznikov analyze Ukraine's position within the system of international economic integration, focusing on modeling the economic effects of deepened integration (Matyushenko et al., 2015).

S. Roshko and O. Rivis examine Ukraine's current European integration strategy in the context of political and legal transformations triggered by Russian aggression, emphasizing the role of integration as a tool for security and recovery (Roshko, Rivis, 2024). The monograph edited by Yu. Saienko and O. Lytvynenko investigates current transformations in public policy and their impact on the European course, with particular attention to institutional capacity and public governance (Saienko, Lytvynenko, 2022).

The research of Y. Horiunova concentrates on the reconfiguration of Ukraine's foreign policy priorities amid the full-scale war, while N. Pipchenko and co-authors consider European and Euro-Atlantic integration as key factors in transforming state institutions and security policy (Horiunova, 2022). A significant contribution to the study of economic aspects has been made by V. Khudaverdieva, who systematized the stages of implementing the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and identified the risks to the domestic economy (Khudaverdieva, 2022).

I. Klymenko models alternative scenarios of integration processes in the post-Soviet space, highlighting the advantages of the European development vector for Ukraine (Klymenko et al., 2013). N. Stepanenko and V. Stepanenko analyze the benefits and drawbacks of EU integration, focusing on the socio-economic consequences of membership. Official documents, including the Strategy for Ukraine's Integration into the European Union and materials of the Mission of Ukraine to the EU, serve as key sources for studying the legal and institutional mechanisms of cooperation (Stepanenko N., Stepanenko V., 2018).

Specific studies and reports, such as Ukraine: Nations in Transit 2024 Country Report and analytical papers from SSRN, reveal the dynamics of democratic reforms and problematic aspects of implementing European standards. I. Yu. Pavlenko (2022) explores the institutional capacity of public authorities, identifying human capital and digitalization as key success factors in the integration process.

Thus, the current academic debate encompasses a wide range of issues – from legal and economic to institutional-governance and security dimensions of integration. Nevertheless, many scholars emphasize the need for further research, particularly in assessing the socio-economic effects of Ukraine's EU accession, developing mechanisms for sustaining reforms, and ensuring effective implementation of the *acquis communautaire*.

The **purpose of this study** is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Ukraine's European integration course as a key direction of its foreign policy, aimed at ensuring national security, modernizing social institutions, and fostering economic development amid global instability. The study seeks to identify the interconnection between legal, economic, and political factors that determine the effectiveness of integration processes, as well as to assess their impact on strengthening state sovereignty, achieving Ukraine's strategic interests, and shaping its place within the European security space. Special attention is given to evaluating the prospects of launching accession negotiations in 2025 and the role of the EU as Ukraine's strategic partner during the ongoing war.

Research objectives:

1. To identify the historical stages of the formation of Ukraine's European integration course and trace the evolution of the legal framework of cooperation with the EU.
2. To analyze key political and legal documents (Association Agreement, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, Ukraine–EU Action Plan) and their impact on domestic reforms.
3. To assess the economic, political, and security consequences of European integration for Ukraine in the long term.
4. To identify the main challenges hindering the integration process, including institutional, economic, and social barriers.
5. To examine the role of the European Union as a partner in Ukraine's post-war recovery, particularly in financing, energy modernization, and digitalization.
6. To formulate recommendations for strengthening the institutional capacity of the state to ensure effective implementation of the *acquis communautaire* and further approximation to EU standards.

Research methods

In addressing the above objectives, a combination of general scientific and specialized research methods was applied to provide a comprehensive analysis of Ukraine's national interests in the context of its European integration course. The analytical method enabled the assessment of scientific concepts, approaches, and practices of European integration through detailed analysis of political documents, government statements, and foreign policy strategies. The historical-logical approach allowed tracing the evolution of Ukraine's European integration strategy from the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty (1990) to the granting of candidate status in 2022.

Document analysis was employed to study the European integration course as a foreign policy priority of the state, as well as to examine legal acts, international agreements, and analytical reports forming the basis of integration. The systems approach facilitated the consideration of European integration as a multidimensional process encompassing economic, political, security, and social factors. The political-analytical method was applied to identify contradictions between national interests and obligations

to the EU, systematize issues of harmonizing domestic policy with European standards, and analyze Ukraine's foreign policy strategies. The forecasting method made it possible to formulate potential scenarios for the development of integration processes, anticipate challenges, and identify ways to enhance the effectiveness of national interest's implementation within the European integration course.

Results and Discussion

International policy plays a decisive role in ensuring stable development, safeguarding national security, and strengthening the sovereignty of any state. It encompasses a wide range of tasks – from maintaining peace and conflict resolution to developing economic cooperation and shaping a positive international image. One of the main objectives of foreign policy is the realization of national interests and the development of political and economic relations between states, which requires a balanced combination of domestic needs and global challenges. Ukraine's foreign policy strategy is shaped based on key national priorities and geopolitical orientations aimed at strengthening state independence, ensuring security, improving public welfare, and integrating into global economic and political structures (Lavrenko, 2017: 64).

The contemporary international system is characterized by increasing efforts of states toward integration and multilateral cooperation, which is a natural consequence of the deepening international division of labor, growing economic interdependence, and global internationalization of production and financial markets. In these conditions, integration associations become primary tools for strengthening regional stability, enhancing the competitiveness of economies, and creating joint mechanisms to respond to global challenges. The concept of "integration" is understood as a process of mutual adaptation and unification of states into a single economic and political system, which involves the harmonization of legislative, economic, social, and security mechanisms. Its essence lies in the creation of structures within which autonomous elements are transformed into interconnected components of a unified whole, ensuring greater efficiency of collective development and governance (Matyushenko et al., 2015).

For Ukraine, European integration is not only one of the main directions of foreign policy but also a strategic framework for modernization reforms encompassing political, legal, economic, and social spheres. Its implementation is carried out through the adoption of relevant legal acts, the adaptation of legislation to the EU *acquis*, reforming the public administration system, implementing anti-corruption policies, and strengthening the institutional capacity of the state. The strategic goal of this course is to achieve full EU membership, enshrined at the constitutional level, as well as to ensure sustainable development and integration into the European security space. At the same time, European integration for Ukraine implies not merely formal accession to the EU but also a gradual convergence of socio-economic standards with European norms, the preservation of national identity, the development of legal culture and democratic institutions, and the strengthening of geopolitical positions on the international stage (Roshko, Rivis, 2024: 131).

The contemporary geopolitical environment in which Ukraine's European integration takes place has undergone profound changes since February 2022 – the onset of the full-scale Russian aggression. This event marked a turning point not only for Ukrainian statehood but also for the entire system of international relations in Europe. The war has

altered security priorities and the nature of integration processes in Eastern Europe. For Ukraine, EU accession has transformed from a political and economic task into a comprehensive strategy of survival, reconstruction, and modernization. Simultaneously, the European Union adjusted its foreign policy by increasing support for candidate countries for whom integration has become a stabilizing factor (Sayenko, Lytvynenko, 2022).

Among the key global factors shaping Ukraine's European integration course are the following:

1. Russian aggression as a catalyst for integration processes. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 became a turning point for Ukraine's foreign policy course. European integration acquired not only the character of a political and economic choice but also a strategy for survival and security. EU accession is seen as a long-term guarantee of national and regional stability, as well as a response to threats posed by Russian revisionism.

2. Implementation of European Commission recommendations and preparation for negotiations. Ukraine is systematically working on the implementation of seven European Commission recommendations concerning the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, judicial reform, protection of minority rights, and increased transparency in public administration. A significant component of this support is the launch of the multiannual financial instrument, the Ukraine Facility, with a volume of €50 billion, aimed at macroeconomic stabilization, infrastructure recovery, and reform support.

3. Deepening cooperation in the field of security and defense. Ukraine's participation in joint European initiatives, such as PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation in Security and Defense) and the EU's EUMAM mission (European Union Military Advisory Mission for training Ukrainian forces), demonstrates its integration into the EU's common security and defense policy. Additionally, bilateral security agreements with EU member states have been concluded to strengthen guarantees of military-technical cooperation.

4. Shifts in the global balance of power and the strengthening role of the EU. Against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence, including US foreign policy instability, conflicts in the Middle East, and economic challenges in China, the European Union is compelled to actively develop its own security strategy and independent policy of support for partner countries. This creates additional opportunities for Ukraine, as integration is viewed as an investment in strengthening Europe's eastern flank.

5. Political prospects for integration. Despite the growing influence of Eurosceptic and right-wing populist forces in some EU countries, the overall enlargement strategy remains relevant.

Under the new geopolitical conditions, Ukraine is not only a candidate for EU accession but also a key element of the security architecture of the EU's eastern flank. This is evidenced by the intensification of the integration dialogue, Ukraine's candidate status granted in 2022, and the beginning of the assessment of its readiness for accession negotiations.

The contemporary international system is experiencing a re-evaluation of priorities in response to new challenges. Traditional multilateral diplomatic mechanisms are losing effectiveness, while regional alliances gain importance, where economic interests are intertwined with political, security, and shared values. In this context, EU enlargement

serves as a tool for stabilization and consolidation of European identity, with particular attention to Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries (*Horiunova, 2022*).

Ukraine's European integration strategy has two key dimensions: economic and political. The economic dimension encompasses deep integration in trade, customs, and monetary policy, as well as the formation of a single market. Two conceptual approaches dominate here: liberalism, which focuses on the development of free trade, and institutionalism, which envisages the creation of supranational bodies to regulate integration processes (*Matyushenko et al., 2015:12*).

Political integration is a more complex and multifaceted process, encompassing cooperation in foreign policy, security, and defense. One of the earliest conceptual approaches was federalism, which proposed the unification of Western European countries on a federal principle, delegating powers to supranational bodies and ensuring collective security (*Pipchenko et al., 2021: 274*).

With the declaration of European integration as a leading foreign policy priority in 1993, Ukraine consistently adhered to this course over the following decades. On 7 February 2019, the country's strategic choice was finally enshrined at the constitutional level (*Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019*). During this period, Ukraine implemented a series of domestic reforms aimed at gradually approaching the "Copenhagen criteria." At the same time, the development of relations with the European Union, which began immediately after independence, was contradictory and uneven.

In 1994, Ukraine became the first post-Soviet state to sign a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU, opening prospects for economic cooperation. However, the practical implementation of the agreement's provisions proved limited. Key obstacles included the declarative nature of administrative decisions, insufficient institutional and legal frameworks to support the integration process, low levels of civil servant preparedness, and a shortage of specialized knowledge in European integration (*European Union External Action, 2021*).

For a long time, negotiations between Ukraine and the EU, including annual summits and Cooperation Council meetings, yielded little tangible progress. The European side consistently presented new demands and remarks. Despite repeated appeals from Ukraine for associated membership, in 2004-2005 the European Commission offered only the "EU Neighbourhood" format (*Klimenko et al., 2013*). While it did not envisage membership, it provided opportunities for access to the single market and participation in investment programs.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian experts highlighted a number of systemic problems in trade and economic cooperation with the EU. Among the main issues were persistently low trade volumes, limited structural changes in trade, constrained prospects for export growth, and import difficulties. Key barriers to integration include:

1. Misalignment of the national legal system with EU standards, necessitating extensive harmonization;
2. Risks to strategic sectors of the economy, particularly metallurgy and agriculture, due to the low competitiveness of Ukrainian products in the EU market;
3. Difficulties in meeting financial obligations to the EU amid the country's economic instability.

The European integration process acts as a catalyst for the reform of Ukrainian state institutions, as it requires harmonization of national legislation and administrative practices with European standards. The EU provides not only

financial and technical assistance but also acts as a partner in the country's modernization (*Roshko, Rivis, 2024:131*).

Among the main factors influencing Ukraine's choice in favor of European integration are its geographical location, historical and cultural affinity with EU countries, and the internal political need for modernization and democratization of state institutions (*Stepanenko, Stepanenko, 2018: 10*). The European vector defines Ukraine's strategic participation in global political and economic processes, including security matters (*Lavrenko, 2017: 65*).

Since gaining independence, Ukraine has consistently built a legal foundation for relations with the EU, starting with the Declaration of State Sovereignty (1990) and the Verkhovna Rada's Address "To the Parliaments and Peoples of the World" (1991), in which the country first declared its aspiration to become a European democratic state. Subsequent documents, including the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1994), the EU-Ukraine Action Plan (1996-2001), the Eastern Partnership initiative (2009), and the Association Agreement (2014), represented important milestones in Ukraine's approximation to the EU (*Representation of Ukraine to the European Union; President of Ukraine, 1998; Suspilne, 2025*).

Despite periodic difficulties and slowdowns in the reform process, European integration gradually became a leading foreign policy priority, formally enshrined at the constitutional level in 2019. This reflects the strategic choice of Ukrainian society in favor of integration into the European political, economic, and security space.

Successful European integration of Ukraine requires a clear strategic vision, political unity, and coordinated action at all levels. Consistency in decision-making, transparency, and a focus on long-term objectives form the foundation of transformative processes, while adequate institutional capacity is a key factor in addressing multidirectional challenges. Effective institutional capacity is essential for advancing Ukraine's path toward European integration. Implementing reforms and aligning standards with EU requirements demand not only political will but also a capable public administration system that can ensure stability, consistency, and efficiency in decision-making.

Institutional support for European integration encompasses not only the existence of specialized bodies but also the quality of their performance: a clear division of powers, effective coordination between branches of government, personnel capacity, institutional memory, and adaptability. This requires a systemic approach that includes modernizing public administration, continuous training, digitalization, and openness to external expertise (*Freedom House, 2024*).

Human resources represent a crucial element of institutional effectiveness. Building a competent administration is possible through continuous professional development of civil servants – modern training programs, international internships, and exchanges with the EU. At the same time, continuity and professionalism within integration teams are essential, as excessive staff turnover hinders the accumulation of experience (*SSRN, 2017*).

The development of digital technologies opens new opportunities for enhancing institutional capacity. E-governance, procedural automation, and decision-making transparency increase efficiency, reduce corruption, and strengthen public trust. Simultaneously, digital transformation requires investment in cybersecurity, data protection, and improving the digital literacy of personnel.

Institutional capacity is not merely a technical ability to implement policies; it is also an integral part of public administration culture, forming the foundation for achieving strategic objectives, including EU integration. As previously noted, to enhance the effectiveness of European integration, Ukraine should consider the experience of Central and Eastern European countries. Firstly, a coordination platform should be established involving ministries, parliament, civil society, business, and experts to align priorities and strengthen communication. Secondly, the capacity of state institutions in legislative adaptation must be reinforced – through training, internships, engagement with EU experts, and digitalization (specialized positions and departments have already been created). Thirdly, cooperation with EU institutions should be intensified: participation in European Commission, European Parliament, and agency programs will help adapt standards and demonstrate readiness for membership.

It is also necessary to systematically inform citizens about the benefits and challenges of European integration, which will foster trust in institutions and stimulate reforms (European Commission). Local communities play a significant role in the integration process, implementing EU policies in infrastructure, energy efficiency, education, healthcare, and development. For effective change, they require additional resources and professional support.

Institutional continuity, strategic planning, and access to resources do not arise automatically – they are the result of coordinated decisions and fulfillment of obligations. Ukraine has the potential for success, but it requires a clear vision, a new governance model, and inclusive engagement with partners (Pavlenko, 2022). Table 1 outlines the main challenges and opportunities of Ukraine's European integration in the current geopolitical context, illustrating how barriers can be transformed into growth points given strategic vision, political will, and cooperation with the EU.

Table 1. Key Areas of Challenges and Opportunities in European Integration

Category	Key Challenges	Potential Opportunities
Economy	High inflation, budget deficit, dependence on external financing	Export growth, FDI, access to the EU internal market
Energy	Infrastructure destruction, energy instability	Synchronization with ENTSO-E, green transformation
Institutions	Insufficient implementation of the <i>acquis</i> , weak coordination	Capacity building, creation of European-style governance
Social Sphere	Migration, loss of human capital	Return of specialists, development of education and digital skills
International Assistance	Bureaucracy, low efficiency in fund utilization	Mechanisms for strategic reconstruction and modernization
Innovation and Digitalization	Insufficient awareness, lack of specialists	Participation in EU programs, IT exports, digital services

Source based on: (European Commission, 2025)

During the war, European integration has become for Ukraine not only a strategic goal but also a matter of survival and development. In the future, it should serve not merely as a foreign policy course but as a foundation for profound internal transformations, ensuring the creation of a modern, strong, and open Ukraine capable not only of joining the EU but also of making a significant contribution to its development.

Conclusion

The results of the study confirm that Ukraine's European integration course is a strategically balanced and irreversible choice, promoting economic modernization, strengthening democratic institutions, and shaping a new model of national security. Harmonization of legislation with EU law, enhancement of institutional capacity, and development of public administration are decisive factors for successful integration. At the same time, significant challenges remain in the areas of financial stability, economic competitiveness, infrastructure restoration, and the return of human capital.

Further research should focus on developing mechanisms for institutional sustainability, assessing the socio-economic impacts of Ukraine's EU accession, modeling effects on the domestic market, and analyzing the influence of European integration on regional development. A promising direction is the study of the experience of Central and Eastern European countries that successfully adapted the *acquis communautaire*, as well as the development of

management models for wartime and post-war reconstruction within the framework of European recovery programs.

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Євроінтеграційний курс України: реалізація національних інтересів та актуальні виклики

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У статті досліджується євроінтеграційний курс України як один із ключових напрямів сучасної зовнішньої політики та інструмент забезпечення національної безпеки, сталого розвитку й модернізації держави. Висвітлено історичні етапи становлення європейського вектора інтеграції, починаючи від Декларації про державний суверенітет України (1990 р.), постанови Верховної Ради «Про головні напрями зовнішньої політики України» (1993 р.) та підписання Угоди про партнерство і співробітництво з ЄС (1994 р.) до набуття Україною статусу кандидата на членство у 2022 році. Розглянуто політико-правові документи та ініціативи, що формували нормативно-правову базу співробітництва: План дій Україна–ЄС, Європейську політику сусідства, програму «Східне партнерство», Угоду про асоціацію та створення поглибленої і всеохоплюючої зони вільної торгівлі. Особливий акцент зроблено на трансформації євроінтеграційного процесу після початку повномасштабної війни росії проти України у 2022 р., коли європейський курс набув характеру стратегії виживання, відновлення та оборонної консолідації. Детально проаналізовано економічні, політичні та безпекові аспекти інтеграції, включаючи гармонізацію законодавства з правом ЄС, модернізацію державних інституцій, розвиток демократичних процедур, а також перспективи початку переговорів про членство у 2025 р. Визначено ключові проблеми євроінтеграції: низьку конкурентоспроможність окремих галузей економіки, складнощі із фінансовими зобов'язаннями та потребу в системній підготовці державних службовців. Окремо наголошується на ролі ЄС як стратегічного партнера у сфері безпеки: розширення військово-технічної співпраці, участь України в ініціативах PESCO та EUMAM, укладення двосторонніх безпекових угод. Зроблено висновки, що євроінтеграційний курс України є комплексною стратегією, спрямованою на утвердження держави як невід'ємної частини європейського політичного, економічного та безпекового простору, посилення її міжнародного авторитету й підвищення рівня життя громадян.

Ключові слова: євроінтеграція, зовнішня політика України, національна безпека, європейська інтеграція, міжнародні відносини, реформи, Угода про асоціацію.

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