

## CHAPTER 4

# Cha(lle)nging Peripherality

### **‘Critical Expectation Gaps’ and EU–Ukraine Relations in the Post-Euromaidan Perceptions of Ukrainian Political Elites**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing primarily on political elite interviews, this chapter enquires into Ukrainian parliamentarians’ discourse and framings of EU–Ukraine integration dynamics over the past three decades and their joint response to the continued Russian war of aggression since 2014, as well as the handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Analytically framed using the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, this study explores how wide or narrow the perceived gap is between Ukrainian political elites’ hopes and expectations of EU engagement and the actual dynamics

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of the EU's performance – and why. To determine whether and how the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has impacted strategically critical issues (Ukraine's EU accession and defence against Russian aggression) and Ukraine's hopes and expectations of the EU's performance, this research also incorporates insights from Ukraine's official discourse and relevant scholarly analyses.

**Keywords:** EU–Ukraine integration, strategic marginality, Russian war of aggression, EU war response, critical expectation gaps

## Introduction

Ukraine's pro-European drive has long been a truism, born out of the country's three democratic revolutions since regaining independence. The 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution cemented this position as a widely accepted belief among policy-makers and academia alike. However, the political elites' stance on the matter has remained less straightforward and certainly under-researched, which is unexpected given that EU integration has always been an elite-driven process. Prior to the onset of the full-scale Russian aggression and Ukraine's fast bid for EU membership, it was often assumed – if not taken for granted – that there was a political consensus on Ukraine's European integration. Despite the constitutionalizing of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations in mid-2019, the political scene in Ukraine's parliament has displayed indications of anything but solid consensual pursuit of the charted integration course. Partly, this can be attributed to the country's vibrant political pluralism and internal power struggles; partly, and arguably, this ambiguity and suspicion (if not contestation) vis-à-vis EU institutions and their politics has been the result of mounting challenges (from Russian hybrid aggression to the COVID-19 health pandemic) and the 'critical expectation gaps' (or 'hope–performance gap', as put by Chaban & Elgström, 2022) that has opened up, stemming from the mismatch between Ukraine's EU accession ambitions and the EU's hesitant (if not reluctant) reaction. Seeing Ukraine as part and parcel of Europe, one of its many centres, Ukraine's political elites found it difficult to remain on the political and institutional periphery of the EU for long, while strongly manifesting identitarian centrality. The more Ukraine had to struggle on its way to the cherished EU membership, the less EUphoric – and more Euro-realist (if

not Eurosceptic) – would become their stance vis-à-vis EU institutions and politics.

Drawing on this observable hypothesis and the edited volume's overall focus on changing perceptions of the EU and a reconceptualization of the 'EU periphery', this chapter enquires into Ukraine's elite perceptions of the EU, the wider Europe, and Ukraine's place within them over the past decade following the 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution. Using the concepts of peripherality and marginality as reference points in discourse analysis, the chapter pursues a qualitative narrative enquiry into the official political discourse in Ukraine since 2014, also drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of the full spectrum of political forces in the then-current parliament of September 2021 to February 2022. Particular attention will be paid to possible discursive and narrative shifts since 24 February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of the country began, followed within a matter of days by Ukraine's EU membership bid. This dynamic perspective is intended to capture the evolving and undoubtedly challenging – or cha(lle)nging – peripherality status of the country, as well as related shifts in patterns of contestation-during-integration on Ukraine's way from peripherality to centrality in EU integration (geo) politics.

In what follows, the chapter first presents the analytical and methodological framework and contextualizes Ukraine's political scene, focusing on the post-Euromaidan parliamentary forces and their manifestos on the country's European integration. Then, after conceptually rethinking the notions of peripherality and marginality, the chapter provides a parliamentary discourse analysis of Ukraine's place in Europe (including its stance on the idea of being an EU/European 'periphery'). Finally, the concluding part of the chapter contrasts Ukrainian MPs' discourse on the country's hopes/expectations and the EU's performance in three critical cases: Russia's continued war in Ukraine; the COVID-19 crisis; and Ukraine's EU accession.

## **Analytical and Methodological Framework**

Our analysis of Ukrainian political elites' post-Euromaidan perceptions of the EU, the EU's relations with Ukraine, and crucially, the Union's performance in responding to various crises – and the Russian continued war of aggression against Ukraine – is designed as a

qualitative study framed by the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, which essentially draws on political elite interviews and discourse analysis, as presented below.

*‘Critical Expectation Gaps’: Hope, Performance, and the  
Perceived Gap In Between*

The (hi)story of the EU’s relations with its Eastern neighbours centres on the discussion of (persisting, even if sometimes false) expectations, (mis)perceptions, and (dis)enchantments. More than in any other ‘EU periphery’, the EU’s engagement is often expected – even invited – by its Eastern European neighbours, especially at the level of civil society. At the political level, too, Eastern European elites (especially in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) often expect EU engagement, especially in crisis or conflict situations – that is, (regional) security matters in the broadest sense (see, for example, Chaban & Lucarelli, 2021; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2021; Maurer et al., 2023). Bilateral EU–Eastern neighbours’ relations, and EU–Ukraine relations in particular, are also fraught with many expectations, some of which arise from misperceptions and not always rational (pragmatic) endeavours (Molchanov, 2004; Vieira, 2021). Hopes and expectations, on the one hand, and performance, on the other, define much of EU–Eastern neighbours dynamics and can also form a seminal (synthetic) analytical approach for the current study. Having added the focus on the ‘gap’ (between hopes/expectations and performance) as a bridging element and a variable on its own, Chaban and Elgström (2022) developed a compound analytical framework that captures this ‘trinity’ of factors. In their ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, which is a twist on (or shaping of) the famous ‘capability–expectations gap’ advanced by Christofer Hill in the early 1990s (Hill, 1993), Chaban and Elgström (2022, pp. 3–5) conceptualize critical expectation gaps as a cumulative ‘indicator’ of the depth and intensity of the rupture between hopes/expectations and the perceived performance of the EU, also fine-tuning thereby an understanding of external actors’ perceptions vis-à-vis the EU – that is, self-perceptions and those of the EU as part of their ‘we’ or indeed their significant ‘Other’. This compound perceptual approach to foreign policy analysis and discourse analysis fits perfectly with the research agenda of this chapter, as it allows the disclosure of Ukrainian political elites’ self-perceptions (ideas of Ukraine’s Europeanness, belongingness to

European/Western civilization, and eagerness for political inclusion in Europe's political union), those of the EU, and EU–Ukraine relations at large (Ukraine as the EU's 'periphery', neighbour, or member in the making) as well as in more specific contexts (Ukraine's hopes for/expectations of EU accession perspective as well as the EU's crisis/war response). In what follows, this chapter will probe for the existence of 'critical expectation gaps' across the dimensions mentioned.

*Methodology: Political Manifestos, Elite Interviews, and  
Discourse Analysis*

Methodologically, the study draws on a qualitative research strategy involving content and discourse analysis of manifold primary sources, including Ukrainian political parties' electoral programmes or manifestos, publicly available interviews, and op-eds by Ukrainian elite representatives, as well as representative semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian parliament (MPs). Political discourse analysis and narrative enquiry are deployed as key methods for text processing and mining data from the recorded interviews. On selected (quantifiable) aspects of the study, content analysis also involved the use of CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software), namely [Atlas.ti](https://atlas.ti.com/), to enable both computer-assisted coding of the text and primary analysis of the quantitative data mined from the studied texts.

We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> with identical questions, with a purposive and largely representative sample of parliamentarians from all of the political parties represented in the ninth parliamentary convocation: Holos ('The Voice'), Sluga Narodu (SN, or 'The Servant of the People'), Yevropeyska Solidarnist (YES, or 'European Solidarity'), Opozytsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia (OPZZH, or 'Oppositional Platform – For Life'), and the All-Ukrainian Association Batkivshchyna ('Fatherland'). This sample allowed us to capture the views of elites that have largely (except the newly formed Sluga Narodu) remained in power as Ukraine's lawmakers since the 2013–2014 revolution, albeit some of them entered the new term of the parliament under renamed party-political forces. Therefore, our sampling method is purposive in that we sought to (1) interview three members of each political party from both the ruling and the opposition forces (thereby controlling for bias and divergent views of party members),

and (2) include in the sample only those Ukrainian MPs who are directly involved in European and Euro-Atlantic affairs *ex officio* (as chairs or members of respective parliamentary committees, including EU–Ukraine joint bodies, or wider European inter-parliamentary formations).

All interviews were recorded from 24 September 2021 to 7 February 2022, shortly before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion on 24 February 2022 (for the detailed list of interviews conducted, see Appendix, [Table A4.1](#)). Evidently, the war factor has altered both domestic and international constellations, affecting not only the views of MPs but also their presence, as some factions (namely the OPZZH party) were ousted from political life. Ukraine's status vis-à-vis the EU also formally changed, as the country applied for EU membership immediately after the outbreak of the war and was granted the status of 'EU candidate' on 23 June 2022. Thus, there has been a noticeable shift in both Ukraine's domestic environment and its relations with the EU. Nonetheless, or perhaps particularly because of this swift change of the milieu and the increasing politicization of the issues at stake, the rhetoric and positions adopted by Ukrainian MPs before the start of the full-scale war are a valuable source of information on whether EU membership was a consensual (or contentious) matter in Ukraine, whether there was any predisposition to Euroscepticism in the country, and whether all this was related to how the EU responded to manifold crises and the war it faced.

In other words, the wealth of qualitative primary data collected through elite interviews provides valuable insights into the state of political perceptions, hopes, and expectations of the EU and EU–Ukraine relations among Ukrainian lawmakers before the war drums sounded and wartime electoral dramas began to unwind.

Political discourse and narrative analysis were also used, to uncover political elite perceptions (attitudes, hopes, expectations, evaluative assessments) of the EU, Ukraine's European integration dynamics, and the EU's crisis/war responses to date. Not only interviews but also party manifestos and publicly available interviews with or publications of Ukraine's wider political elites (president, government, foreign ministers) served as primary sources for discourse and narrative inquiry. Recent analyses showed that parties' political manifestos are a good starting point for studying discourse on Europe and European integration (Kiratli, 2016; Raunio & Wagner, 2020). CAQDAS-based analysis

helped to reinforce the discourse and narrative inquiry by quantifying qualitative textual data, allowing for original insights into cross-inter-view political positions, as well as comparative and clustered analyses of inter- and intra-party views on the issues studied herein.

## **Ukraine's Post-Euromaidan Political Landscape through the Prism of European Integration**

Ukraine's dynamic and pluralistic political milieu (Way, 2015) has garnered widespread recognition for its role in sustaining the country's functioning democracy. The Ukrainian parliament is largely credited for this achievement. Despite Ukraine's semi-presidential form of government (shifting between president-parliamentarism in 1996–2005 and 2010–2014 and premier-presidentialism in 2006–2010 and since 2014; for details, see Tyushka, 2018), the parliament has been instrumental in maintaining the legitimacy of power during some of the country's most turbulent times. Its dedication to legalism was crucial in ensuring free and fair presidential elections in 2004. It acted as a resolute defender of legal and institutional continuity when President V. Yanukovych fled the country and Russia seized Crimea, followed by the hybrid invasion of Donbas. Even amid Russia's ruthless aggression, the parliament ensured the state's smooth functioning and cemented its role as a safeguard of democracy.

The vibrancy and dynamism of the political landscape, characterized by the participation of a wide range of political parties in regular parliamentary elections, are considered key factors contributing to the robustness of the democratic governance system and the emergence of a pluralistic society (Karmazina, 2020). This dynamic has been seen as an essential component of Ukraine's European path, setting it apart from many other post-Soviet states. While the European choice has, until recently, been loosely and variably defined, its core element has consistently been the pursuit of full membership in the EU.

Importantly, the matter of European integration has not been a contested subject in Ukraine, in contrast to the issue of NATO membership (Larrabee, 2007; Lieven & Trenin, 2013). There has been a broad consensus among the major political parties, except for the Communists, on the need to foster closer ties with the EU and on Ukraine's eventual accession to it. Moreover, President V. Yanukovych and his political force, the Party of Regions, played an instrumental role in preparing

and completing the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU. The Party of Regions articulated its clear stance on Ukraine's accession to the EU in its 2010 election manifesto, and it maintained this position until the autumn of 2013 (Party of Regions, 2010).

The AA, while seen by the EU as an alternative to full membership, was perceived in Ukraine as a significant step towards EU accession. This development provoked an aggressive response from Russia, which saw it as a point of no return for Ukraine's participation in any of the post-Soviet integration projects. The Kremlin resorted to pressure tactics which resulted in President V. Yanukovych's decision to back out of the EU–Ukraine Agreement in November 2013, triggering a fierce backlash in Ukrainian society that eventually coalesced into the Euromaidan revolution, a resounding rejection of post-Soviet authoritarianism and a definitive choice for Europe (Zelinska, 2017; Oliynyk & Kuzio, 2021).

The 2013–2014 revolutionary period marked a critical juncture in Ukraine's history and left a deep and lasting impact on the country's subsequent development, as evidenced by the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Despite having over three hundred political parties, Ukraine is dominated by a relatively small number of political forces that have managed to pass the electoral threshold, the number of which changes over time. For example, in the 2014 parliamentary elections, only six political forces passed the 5 per cent threshold. As Klymenko notes, the then swiftly formed parliamentary coalition 'declared itself as being pro-European, pro-Western, and reform-oriented' (Klymenko, 2018, p. 444).

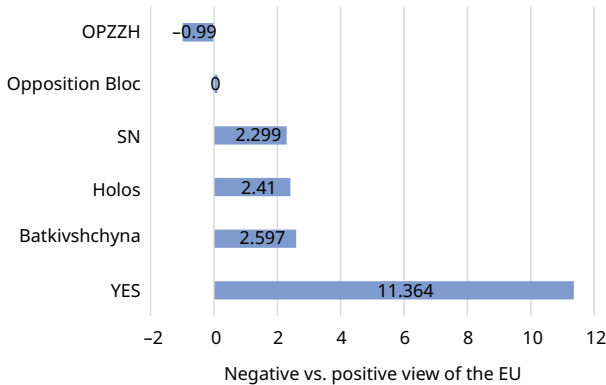
One of the features of the post-Euromaidan period was the dominance of centrist political parties supporting EU membership (Gardner, 2014), with a conspicuous absence of far-right or far-left factions in the legislature. The omission of the Communist Party was particularly notable, as it was the only parliamentary force that consistently opposed European integration (Tost, 2014) and advocated Ukraine's participation in Russia-led integration projects.<sup>2</sup>

The 2019 parliamentary elections marked a significant moment in the country's history, as Ukrainians decisively rejected the traditional political elites by supporting a new political force aligned with President V. Zelensky. Of the five parties that secured parliamentary representation, four became opposition parties. The Holos faction emerged as the smallest among the parliamentary parties, with representation



of just 5.83 per cent. The faction pledged its unconditional support for Ukraine's eventual membership in the EU, stressing the tangible benefits of such a step for development and modernization (Politychna Partiya Holos, 2019). YES, led by former president P. Poroshenko, became the fourth-largest force (8.11 per cent). The party emphasizes its contributions to signing and implementing the AA, facilitating visa-free travel with the EU, and enshrining provisions on EU membership in the constitution (Politychna Partiya Yevropeyska Solidarnist, 2019). Batkivshchyna, led by the iconic figure of Y. Tymoshenko, Ukraine's first female prime minister, secured the third-largest number of votes (8.19 per cent). Like the two previous factions, the party strongly supports the European integration agenda, with a particular focus on social policies, citing European standards (Vseukrayinske Obyednannia Batkivshchyna, 2019). The OPZZH emerged as the sole force to oppose European integration, securing second place with 13.06 per cent of the votes. Its electoral base was mainly located in the industrial cities of the south east, where it attracted a diverse conglomerate of voters, including former president Yanukovich's supporters, communists, and pro-Kremlin sympathizers. This inclination is reflected in the party's ideology, which revolves around a confluence of populism, ambiguous Euroscepticism, and pro-Russian sentiments. Although a significant number of its members had been affiliated with the Party of Regions, which had previously supported EU accession, the party's ideology shifted fundamentally towards Euroscepticism (Politychna Partiya Opozytsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia, 2019). The true winner of the elections was the political force of President V. Zelensky, Sluga Narodu or SN. With a majority of the votes (43.16 per cent) in most regions, it secured the ability to unilaterally form a government. The party was formed shortly before the elections and has a rather nebulous and vague ideology, making it difficult to classify, but it can be regarded as a centrist political force (Chaisty and Whitefield, 2022). Its pre-election manifesto offered limited information on European integration, mentioning the need to implement the AA and expand cooperation with the EU (Politychna Partiya Sluga Narodu, 2019). However, the party has since adopted an explicitly pro-European stance.

Overall, the issue (and promise) of European integration is positively framed – albeit with varying degrees of prominence and salience – in the political programmes of all but one of the current political forces in parliament (see [Figure 4.1](#)).



**Figure 4.1:** Ukraine's Political Parties: Perceptions of the EU in 2019 National Election Manifestos

Source: Authors' illustration based on data from Manifesto Project (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>).

The only ambiguously 'Eurosceptic' party in the Ukrainian parliament, therefore, was OPZZH, the offspring of the former Party of Regions and its ex-leader/ex-president V. Yanukovych. Following the start of Russia's aggression, the faction dissolved amid allegations that some members had committed acts of state treason favouring Russia, while others simply fled Ukraine.

Russia's full-scale military invasion in February 2022 substantially, slowed down, if not completely halted, the previously vibrant and sometimes turbulent political life in Ukraine. All political forces, including some members of the OPZZH party who had stayed in Ukraine rather than fleeing to Russia, united in their efforts to defend the nation from Russia's threats. The Ukrainian parliament began its work under martial law, and the current members are expected to remain in office until the state of war is lifted, during which time parliamentary elections are forbidden.

### Defining and Defying 'Peripherality'

The notion of 'periphery' is both deceptively simple, as it is intuitively comprehensible, and analytically complex, as it denotes various constellations and forms of interrelationships, often also being

normatively loaded. As Özçelik et al. posit in [the introductory chapter](#) to this edited volume, ‘periphery’ is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept which, moreover, finds itself in flux in times of significant political shifts and shocks of various sorts, including crises and wars, and can entail core–periphery relationships (economic peripherality), insider–outsider relationships (political peripherality), differences in development more generally (politico-economic or developmental peripherality), and, more conventionally, the symbolic belongingness to a geographic area or entity – that is, core/margin/otherness relationships (geographical peripherality). Using the EU as a reference point for identifying and assessing the state of ‘peripherality’, it is quite challenging to speak of fixed meanings and understandings, not least as the political and economic dynamics shift within the EU (as does the centre of gravity and power, moving from west to east, thus changing the perception of peripherality), and the EU’s borders or margins have also seen changes in the past few decades and is expected to see more in the future. Thus, what is classified as a periphery in the present or past may not retain that classification in the future.

Though they are often used interchangeably, there is a slight, often neglected, difference between the notions of ‘periphery’ and ‘margins’. Whereas a ‘periphery’ can be both inside and outside a larger political entity or a (geo)economic formation (in Wallerstein’s sense of world-systemic core–periphery relations), ‘margins’ usually connotes the idea of belongingness to an entity or formation, be it a state or a regional organization, albeit at the external borders or ends of that entity. The term ‘margins’ (or ‘marches’) has been used to denote highly militarized regions at an empire’s frontier, or territories ‘from whence various shadowy dangers threatened a feudal order’ (Parker and Armstrong, 2000, p. 7). In this sense, the notion of margins resonates well with the contemporary idea of a ‘frontier state’ or an outpost. It is increasingly relevant in border(land) studies, where both territory-bound social-constructivist and socio-economic approaches have emerged to describe, on the one hand, the state of differing – but mutually constitutive – power relationships between the centre and the periphery within a given political entity, and, on the other hand, the (more objectively assessable) disparity in socio-economic power and development levels (Cullen & Pretes, 2000, p. 217). In this reading, peripheries-as-margins can be found in domestic (national), regional, and wider international relations, as even continents (not only countries or regions) can be

perceived as margins. The notion of margins also allows us to better analyse within-entity relations, as, for example, Dooley (2019) does in his take on the Eurozone crisis in the 'European periphery', primarily comprising South European countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The idea of peripherality, thus, describes a factual situation of (power and development) asymmetry and 'exhibits features arising passively from being on the edge – dependency, perhaps, or feelings of inferiority', while marginality implies the possibility of 'autonomous [and] active effects beyond the marginal space' (Parker, 2008, p. 9). Recent studies focusing on the European integration dynamics of Ukraine and Georgia, for example, also show the utility of 'margins' thinking when analysing the countries' asymmetrical – but evolving – relationships with the EU, as they attempt to 'reshape' power and identitarian relationships with the EU by moving from being a periphery of Europe to becoming part of it (Kakachia et al., 2019).

Not least importantly, imagining the periphery is also a (social-constructivist) process of mental mapping – not just an exercise in geographical or economic measurement and line-drawing. It takes courage, time, and turning points to configure mental maps – and even more so to reconfigure them. Ukraine's former ambassador to Austria, O. Scherba, laments that, while attending many public debates on post-2014 Ukraine, Russia, and security held in the diplomatic heart of Europe, he was 'stunned to realize how many people did not see Ukraine as a part of Europe in the political and cultural senses of this word', '[l]et alone a part of Europe inhabited by the same kind of people wanting the same things in life as the rest of the continent: peace, freedom, prosperity, democracy, justice, respect' (Scherba, 2021, p. 37). Not all the blame can be placed on the Russian propaganda in the region that promoted the post/neocolonial narrative and imagery of Ukraine – ignorance, arrogance, and misconceptions about Ukraine and the idea of Europe certainly played a role. On the other hand, the perceptions of Ukrainian publics and political elites of the country's place in Europe, including in EU-Europe (i.e., EUrope), present a contrasting picture of a firmly articulated civilizational and identitarian belongingness under conditions of (temporary) political and institutional exclusion from Europe.

Given the potency of the notion of 'margins' in capturing both negative and positive features of being-at-an-edge, as well as in better

accommodating the identitarian dimension of a studied relationship, this chapter tightly embraces the reading of ‘periphery’ as a ‘margin’.

## **Whose (and Who Is) Periphery Anyway? Ukraine and Its Place in Europe and the European Union**

The relationship between Europe, the EU, and European identity is truly multifaceted and multidimensional. When Schilde (2014, p. 650) examined the first Eurobarometer surveys in 1997 measuring citizens’ identification with ‘Europe’ in the acceding Central and Eastern European countries, he found that, contrary to conventional wisdom and expectations, the results were puzzling, as ‘more people, not less, identified with Europe [in EU-acceding CEE countries] than in existing EU states. Similarly, it might be ‘surprising’ that many people outside the EU identify themselves with Europe. When it comes to public support for the EU and European integration in general, Ukraine is in many ways – and especially in the eyes of the Ukrainian public – the epicentre, rather than the periphery, of sensing and making Europe.

Nowadays, Ukraine’s, Georgia’s, and Moldova’s drive towards Europe is triggered not only by their decolonial turn away from Russian hegemony but, more importantly, by their own ideational orientations, with Europe as their civilizational choice, in that ‘Our’ feelings vis-à-vis Europe are much stronger than perceptions of the EU as their significant ‘Other’ (Vieira, 2021). The evolution of Ukraine’s European identity discourses and the ‘restructuring of belonging’ among political elites are well captured in Minesashvili’s (2022, pp. 163–250) comparative study. Faced with accommodating their European identity discourses in a highly contested identity space, which is also a space of incremental great-power competition, Ukraine and Georgia found themselves in a position where self-assertive (nativist) identity formation appeared possible only in the European (geo)political context, even if the EU meant a certain loss of sovereignty, a struggle both countries have faced since regaining their independence.

While citizens, elites, and scholars from both Ukraine and Georgia are confident about their countries’ Europeanness<sup>3</sup> and thus their identitarian and soon-to-be-accomplished political belongingness to Europe,<sup>4</sup> questions of what constitutes Europe and where its boundaries lie keep boggling minds in wider academic debates (see Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2023, p. 129).

Amid ongoing scholarly discussions about what defines Europe – and what does not – it is striking to discover a remarkable unity (save a few cases – that is, ‘unity in diversity’, to use the well-known EU slogan) among the interviewed MPs from across the political spectrum as to how they see Europe and Ukraine’s place within it. First and foremost, Europe is recurrently seen as ‘home’, Ukraine’s ‘native home’ (Interviews YES\_1; YES\_2; SN\_3):

It’s home. Home. Well, look, I think that Ukraine *is* Europe – no matter how banal it sounds; and I firmly believe that we belong to the European space given all our historical, mentality-related, and cultural characteristics. (Interview YES\_2)

From that perspective, a certain axiom emerges among the MPs: ‘Europe is Ukraine’ and ‘Ukraine is Europe’, respectively (Interview SN\_1).

Europe is also perceived as a ‘certain cradle of civilizations’, with Ukraine being part of it: ... for me, Europe is a certain cradle of civilizations ... the cradle of the world that I know, that I like, that I feel comfortable living in and that I see myself a part of. (Interview SN\_1)

Third, and related to the above, from the MPs’ point of view, Europe is associated with certain standards of civilization that Ukraine already cherishes (or, in the view of some, still aspires to), a certain way of life or lifestyle:

Europe for Ukrainians is the highest standard of life and interaction, to which we still have to strive. (Interview YES\_1)

Hence, these shared ways of life and standards extend far beyond mere grandiose declarations, as they are intertwined with the everyday life of Ukrainians-as-Europeans (Interview SN\_2).

Fourth, there is a widely shared understanding<sup>5</sup> among the interviewed MPs that Europe is essentially a historically formed space of shared values, European values, including all of the freedoms, as demonstrated here:

For me, Europe is about European values, for one, all the freedoms, starting with the freedom of movement of people, services, capital, and the quality of democracy. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2)

Fifth, there is a clear view as well that this area of shared values in Europe is today governed institutionally and politically by the EU:

[Europe is] ... the space of certain values, beliefs, and views, which are already expressed in a certain system of structure, regulation, priorities, activities, and so on. (Interview Holos\_3)

Finally, and perhaps of lesser importance, Ukrainian MPs perceive Europe as a distinct geographical entity with conceivable contours. Except for two interviews with OPZZH members, geographical associations with Europe did not feature prominently in interviewees' takes. Notably, in the eyes of the interviewed OPZZH MPs, Ukraine is primarily considered part of 'Europe as a continent', Europe as a 'territory', rather than as a community of values (Interviews OPZZH\_1; OPZZH\_2).

In EU-versus-Europe juxtapositions, however, there is a consensus that the notion of Europe extends beyond the borders of the EU, particularly as some European states (like Norway or Switzerland and now the UK – but also Ukraine and Moldova) are outside the EU.

Definitions and understandings of the EU vary, depending on which face(t) of European integration the interviewed MPs value most. Quite a few refer to the EU as a (super-)structure, a political institution, or a bureaucratic entity; sometimes the EU is even seen as a 'crazy bureaucracy' (Interview YES\_1). Others relate to the EU as a harbinger of peace (Interview YES\_1), a 'super-club that managed not to fight for more than 70 years' (Interview SN\_2), a prosperous association of states, and, in fact, the 'most successful project' in the history of Europe (Interviews Batkivshchyna\_3; YES\_1) – some even dare to say, 'in the history of humankind' (Interview SN\_3):

The EU is, above all, a unique phenomenon in world history, when, in fact, after World War II, European countries realized they had much more in common than what divided them ... In my opinion, the creation of the EU was the most successful project in the history of Europe in the 20th century. When the EU as an institution, as such a specific subject of international law, was able to unite countries not only politically, but mainly economically, and to give a very serious drive to the development of countries that were trying to recover after World War II. Later, it gave a unique chance to achieve a high standard of living for the countries of the post-Soviet space that became EU members, some of

which were even part of the Soviet Union as Baltic states. I think that for these countries the EU has become a place for increasing their wellbeing and economic growth, but also for strengthening their statehood. Thus, for me, the strategic goal of EU membership for Ukraine means, first, the preservation and strengthening of Ukrainian statehood, but also a significant increase in the economic development of Ukraine and social standards for Ukrainian citizens. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3)

It is quite telling that, according to the conviction of the interviewed MPs, the success and prosperity of the EU as an integration project are intrinsically linked to the opportunities for state-building and national development within the EU. This aspect is often overshadowed by the 'sad story' of the transfer of sovereignty from nation states to EU institutions.<sup>6</sup>

the EU is the Maastricht Treaty, the Copenhagen Criteria, and these are all things that, in my opinion, give both the market and the community of EU member states the opportunity to develop and move forward. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2)

it is a geographical union of different states, a geographical, political union, where they give up part of their sovereignty for the sake of some common goals, common priorities, for the sake of some harmonious, balanced development of their states, societies, people, and improvement of their wellbeing, quality of life, security, well, and many other areas. (Interview Holos\_3)

Finally, when it comes to characterizing the EU – in contrast to Europe as a more inclusive concept – the interviewed MPs could not help but lament the geographical and political-institutional limits of the EU – that is, EU-Europe (or EUrope), as here:

The European Union is a concrete political entity, and it is somewhat limited now, especially after Brexit. But this [Brexit] does not unmake Great Britain as part of Europe. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1)

Given the above rather coherent (save for sporadic deviation in one or two cases) conceptions of Europe and the EU among Ukrainian MPs, it comes as no surprise that there seems to be general inter-party agreement as to what Ukraine's place in Europe and the EU is (and should be): Ukraine is/should be part of – not apart from – EUrope. Significantly, this stance is almost unanimously shared by all of the



interviewed MPs, including those from the opposition party OPZZH. Some of the more illustrative takes on the matter follow below:

I believe that we've never ceased to be part of Europe, and that we have a deep history together, one that is connected by blood, and this is no joke. The most famous, known father-in-law of Europe was Yaroslav the Wise, who married his daughters to the ruling dynasties of the West at that time. To this day, a small part of this European blood still flows in the monarchies of Great Britain, Norway, and in the former monarchies of Europe. Thus, in this context, historically, I believe we've never been anything other than Europe. The other thing is that we didn't articulate this well. Secondly, for too long we've allowed ourselves to be the object of, let's say, *a slightly different narrative*. Thus, for me, *Ukraine's place is not simply in Europe. I can't imagine Europe without Ukraine. In a sense, we are part of one organism*. (Interview SN\_1)

Ukraine is a part of Europe in terms of values, mentality, as well as in historical, cultural, and geographical meanings. As for the EU, I think that we have every reason to apply for membership in the EU there, in order not only to follow the rules that someone worked out before us but to be able to influence those rules, which are already being formed for the future. (Interview YES\_2)

In my opinion, Ukraine was, is and will be in Europe. Both geographically and politically. (Interview OPZZH\_1)

The historical, system-related value, and to some extent political unity, of Ukraine with Europe, as perceived by Ukrainian lawmakers, all but negates any contemplation, from the Ukrainian standpoint, of its alleged peripheral role or status in European affairs. Consequently, the subsequent section delves into the peripherality hypothesis.

### Ukraine as EUrope's Periphery?

Even though Ukraine – like other Eastern neighbours of the EU – is in marginal constellations, the geostrategic relevance of Georgia and Ukraine, in particular, allows the countries to somehow mitigate and leverage their 'peripherality', as they are at the epicentre of strong geo-political and geo-economic contestation. Ukraine and Georgia's long-sought integration into the EU, too, encompasses a strategy of defying their 'marginality' while becoming politically and institutionally part

of Europe (Kakachia et al., 2019). Thus, Ukraine's strategic efforts to *deny* and *defy* peripherality can be observed both in its foreign policy practices and in relevant (albeit scarce) scholarly analyses. This was largely confirmed by the interviewed MPs – at a time when Ukraine's EU candidate status was not even on the agenda.

The interviews reveal a truly varied and colourful palette of MPs' views on the very notion of peripherality or marginality and its applicability to Ukraine's relations with the EU. Outright rejection and conditional acceptance (in terms of 'periphery' connoting different levels of development) are the most popular choices, with the opposite argument (that Ukraine is, instead, an emerging leader and not a periphery) also gaining a fair share of popularity.

All three Batkivshchyna MPs rejected the idea of Ukraine being perceived as an EU periphery; they were joined by one interviewee each from YES and Sluga Narodu. Given its status as the largest country in Europe and its huge population (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2), its ability to also teach something to Europeans (Interview YES\_1, 2021), and its closeness to European values that surpasses that of some existing EU countries (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1), Ukraine cannot be regarded as a periphery of Europe. Moreover, when discussing the EU – and not Europe – as a point of reference, it is crucial to consider a foundational principle of the Union that all member states are equal; accordingly, Ukraine's position as a membership-seeking state is that of a partner aspiring to join a community of equals (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1). The perspective taken – locally or more globally – also seems to matter, as topics such as the 'periphery of the EU' do not even appear in global discussions. They might appear in 'local' discussions where more powerful states take pride in their authority and ability to influence others. If one considers a more global realm, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Ukraine is seen as part of Europe, not as its margin:

To be sure, they see us as a part of Europe and, also, they do not distinguish between us and Portuguese, for example, or us and Italians and Spaniards, as we are very close, we are close, we share the same religion, and so on and so forth. For them, we are that piece of Europe in the world as seen on the map. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1)

Moreover, in the opinion of Ukrainian lawmakers there seems to be a serious problem with notions or framings, such as those of marginality or peripherality, that, according to them, seem to connote 'the end of

something', deceptively suggesting that Ukraine would arguably not be a part of Europe, which is both untrue and subjective (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3). Instead, if a label were to be applied to Ukraine's position towards the EU, some MPs suggest that it should be the notion of a 'frontier' (that is, being at the edge of distinct patterns of interaction or transition rather than at the end of something) (Interview SN\_1).

Yet another group of the interviewed MPs (mainly from the SN and one from the OPZZH) firmly perceives Ukraine as an emerging leader and a new centre of gravity in Europe, the centre of 'New Europe', and rejects the idea of seeing the country as an EU periphery. Such a vision rests on the most recent apparent shift in power within the EU from Old Europe, that is, Western Europe, eastwards. As such, Ukraine – along with Poland, the Baltic states, and Czechia – is emerging as part of the 'New Europe' (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1), as the geopolitical divide between New and Old Europe gets inevitably etched (Interview SN\_2). While sharing the premise that Ukraine has such potential, one opposition MP laments that the train has already left, and that Ukraine may no longer be able to play such a leading role:

in any case, from the point of view of Ukraine's geographical position, from the point of view of resources, from the point of view of the level of education, the number of people, the potential of the country, we could be such a serious powerful regional leader. The post-Soviet countries and the nearest candidates for the EU and NATO could have revolved around Ukraine, and Ukraine could have acted as their centre of gravity and leader. But we lost this chance after 2005. Unfortunately. (Interview OPZZH\_1)

On the other hand, YES and Holos MPs are more inclined to agree that the core–periphery distinction is quite relative and depends on one's point of view and understanding of 'periphery' in the first place:

It depends on one's point of view, whether [Ukraine can be seen as] a margin or not. I think that someone might want us to be on the margins, on the fringes of Europe, but at the same time, I believe that without considering the interests of those countries that are in the east of Europe as a continent, in the south of Europe as a continent, there cannot be a successful and progressive development of the European project as such. I believe that it is wrong to talk about margins, and it is right to talk about an *outpost*. And, if you want, there are outposts of this

Europeanness and European civilization as such all along the borders of the EU. (Interview YES\_2)

The matter of who invokes the discourse of peripherality, too, seems to be of importance, as this may be acceptable in some cases but not in others:

But who says it?! Some European politicians? Well, I understand that they can do that and such, you know, arrogance occurs, and I have come across it repeatedly ... (Interview YES\_3)

Importantly, while some MPs have been exposed to the discourse of the periphery by their European counterparts, others appear not to have been part of such a situation, which also casts doubt on how widespread – and officially used (if at all) – the rhetoric of the periphery is:

[The term] periphery may indeed sound somewhat offensive to some. I haven't heard that exact notion being applied, at least, well, in any of these formal, or even informal, relations. But we understand very well that it is impossible to claim the same role played by powerful European countries, EU member states, which act as the main unifying nations in this political union. (Interview SN\_3)

This conditional acceptance of peripherality is mostly rooted in an understanding of the periphery as an expression of difference in the level and speed of (socio-economic, technological, and political) development (Interviews SN\_3; Holos\_3). Thus, a core-periphery relationship is seen not as something alien to the EU's own functioning or offensive but indeed as a strength that unites diverse states with diverse potentials, all within the so-called 'multi-speed Europe':

One of the strengths of the EU is precisely that this format can unite different peoples, different countries with different levels of economic development. It is not surprising that there are differences in how certain European countries develop economically and how their institutions are built, how long it takes for a country to fully build the institutions required by the EU accession treaties. So, we do understand that this is the reality that has developed today, that there are more developed countries and there are less developed countries. Thus, relations are built accordingly – both [external] between [more and less developed countries themselves] and within the EU in general. The notion of a multi-speed Europe can well be recalled in this regard. (Interview SN\_3)

Most interviewees in this cohort agree that the fact that Ukraine was held back in its development for a long time can be explained by the fact that the country was cut off from Europe for a long time and is now a 'traumatized,' temporarily 'sick' relative of Europe:

[Ukraine's current lower level of development and issues like corruption] do not mean that we are on the fringes/margins of Europe, because a thousand years ago Ukraine was one of the most culturally developed countries, then it could be called Kyivan Rus, if you look at the princely era and Anna Yaroslavivna brought culture to France, not the other way around. Therefore, Ukraine cannot be called a margin, it is, let's say, a temporarily sick relative. (Interview YES\_3)

More critical voices, while agreeing that who is and is not a periphery is relative and conditional, argue that it is not position or location that counts but performance:

Well, it's all relative, really. In truth, the position of the country in no way affects the attitude towards it. The attitude towards the state, regardless of its, let's say, territory, and population, is determined exclusively by how it behaves, whether it commands respect or not. It's possible to be a member of the EU and not be a country that is treated with, let's say, excessive respect, or at least with sufficient courtesy. It's possible to be a country that is not formally part of any union and still be a country that is reckoned with, whose opinion is considered ... But in truth, formal tangentiality or non-tangentiality to this or that union is not so important. A country is only peripheral if it perceives itself as a periphery and behaves with other countries as a peripheral, provincial country. If a country commands attention and respect, it will not be treated as a periphery. (Interview Holos\_2)

Remarkably, out of all interviewed MPs, only two – one from Holos and another from the OPZZH – perceive their country as a clear-cut periphery of the EU. The reasoning behind this and the actual understanding of what it means to be an EU periphery differed between these two accounts, however. While the OPZZH MP doubted any possibility for Ukraine to be a non-periphery (citing its location as a periphery to both Europe and Asia, 'the most Western of the Eastern and the most Eastern of the Western countries'; Interview OPZZH\_2), the Holos deputy called for an acknowledgement of the reality (that Ukraine is at

the edge of Europe) without invoking any normative meanings of the term:

Well, it's clear why that is the case, isn't it? Because Ukraine is a geographical margin of Europe. Here, obviously, there are dividing lines, including those related to values, yes. And this map of values tells us about it, and everything else. That is, here the element of margins is not in the normative sense, but in the factual sense that it is indeed margins, and that it is the edge of Europe. Well, this must be admitted. Obviously, this is one of the reasons why we fall into the role of those who protect this border because we are on it. The border passes through us, by and large. (Interview Holos\_1)

Thus, all in all, a genuine pluralism on the issue at stake defines the views and positions of the interviewed MPs. Whereas some normatively loaded and pejorative associations with peripherality, such as being 'Europe's backyard' or a 'buffer' between the EU and Russia, were overwhelmingly rejected, and the idea of Ukraine being the EU's periphery also lacked large-scale support, a fair share of middle-ground takes on the matter (that is, conditional acceptance of the term, in developmental aspects) crystalized. These call for coming to terms with a multifaceted reality that reflects such a peripherality constellation. Unconditional acceptance of the peripherality argument is all too seldom and sporadic. Overall, the political elites' discourse has it that whether Ukraine is or is not (to be seen as) EUrope's periphery essentially depends on the meanings vested in the term, the reasons for invoking it, and, finally, its uses and abuses in both the rhetoric and the practice of the EU–Ukraine bilateralism.

Finally, it should be added that after the start of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the EU's political and intellectual elites, as well as its citizens in general, also saw a change in their perceptions of Ukraine. As Vermeersh (2023) neatly observes:

The perception of Ukraine has changed a lot across the EU. Though it is hard to generalize, Ukraine was largely unknown as a country before the invasion. It was a faraway piece of Eastern Europe – or, perhaps more clearly, the western edge of Eastern Europe. However, since the escalated invasion a lot of Europeans, and specifically Belgians, have started perceiving Ukraine as the *eastern* edge of *Western* Europe.

## Looking beyond Peripherality: Asymmetry as an Issue in EU–Ukraine Relations

A recurring topic in ‘peripherality’ discussions, the problem of asymmetry in EU–Ukraine relations seems to be more central to the discourse of the MPs interviewed than the peripheral status per se. This topic also recurs in scholarly discussions of the EU’s relations with its wider neighbourhood, where a ‘top-down’ rather than ‘eye-level’ relationship has been practised (Happ & Bruns, 2017), or in particular with the six countries that are part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, where there seems to be a lot of European rhetoric about ‘partners’ but still scant evidence of everyday ‘partnering practice’ (Tyushka, 2022a, p. 270).

As the interviews with MPs revealed, the EU–Ukraine asymmetry (and the problem of it) comes in all possible shapes, including a substantial difference in power potentials, bargaining positions, normative hegemony/subordination relationship, and, not least importantly, expectations.

Hence, admitting that there is a problem of asymmetry has two sides: the realists and the fatalists. While the former point to the obvious and enumerate examples that illustrate such a disparity in practice (Interviews Holos\_3; SN\_1; SN\_1), the latter cannot help but point to asymmetry as the ‘default’ fate of Ukraine in relation to a big player like the EU (Interview Holos\_1):

Yes. I have discussed this asymmetry many times, and it seems to me that it is one of the key and critical factors in Euroscepticism as a trend in Ukraine. (Interview SN\_1)

Yes, I completely agree. Absolutely asymmetrical relations, unequal. We talk a lot about us being partners and friends, but ... it is not so. For example, the NorthStream2 showed that the EU doesn’t treat us as an equal partner. Moreover, sometimes they don’t treat us even as a younger brother, they treat us as someone in the room with whom it isn’t worth discussing at all. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1)

Well, it would be naïve to deny it. It would be naïve to say ‘no, we are equal partners’ and so on. We depend on the EU geopolitically. (Interview Holos\_1)

A fine line seems to run through the words/deeds asymmetry, or (un) ethical approaches to promises and commitments:

I rather agree. I see this as a problem ... there is a certain distance between declarations and real actions. Therefore, it is necessary to watch one's hands very carefully and one would understand, which of those declarations correspond to reality, and which remain only declarations. (Interview Holos\_3)

By contrast, a decent-sized group of interviewed MPs hold the view that, like many things in a socially constructed world, asymmetry is what states make of it. This is to say, asymmetry might or might not be a problem, depending on whether one comes to terms with the reality out there that rarely, if at all, features symmetrical relationships in international affairs:

Well, it's logical that [this relationship] is asymmetrical, as, first, the EU is a multi-state structure; Ukraine is just one country. The EU is a financially powerful structure; Ukraine isn't a financially powerful state. The EU itself, as an institution, has a lot of leverage and pressure; in turn, Ukraine doesn't have much leverage and pressure on the EU. Yet, it seems to me that we can take more from the EU than we expect. So, for me, the asymmetry is entirely normal, Ukraine needs to evolve. (Interview YES\_1)

I don't understand what it is about. I'll explain because the term 'asymmetrical' itself can be perceived in different ways. I would tell you that the relations between some countries that are inside the EU are also asymmetrical ... Is this a problem? In my opinion, it isn't ... Symmetrical relations between countries ... don't exist in nature. All unions are political formations, all countries are asymmetrical in their actions, they can't be identical or symmetrical. (Interview Holos\_2)

More narrowly, with the EU–Ukraine association relationship in focus, asymmetries of sorts abound in how the agreement was designed (after all, it was an EU template agreement offered to Ukraine for negotiations) and is implemented (with the EU regularly pressing for effective execution). As some MPs underscore, there are many dimensions to this asymmetry: in lawmaking, Ukraine is obliged to approximate its legislation to the EU's legislation, not the other way around; in the economy, Ukraine displays a negative trade balance with the EU; the



EU retains full control over the quotas set out in the AA, while Ukraine does not set any; finally, Ukraine is a state seeking EU accession, not vice versa, and this already predefines who has the upper hand (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3). This asymmetry, this MP continues, could be reversed if the EU were more interested in Ukraine's accession than Ukraine was in joining the EU (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3).

Importantly, some MPs – rightly – see the EU–Ukraine AA as an ‘equalizer’ of this apparent and default asymmetry between the EU and Ukraine: first and foremost, the AA is meant to bring the two parties closer to each other, to approximate Ukraine's and the EU's regulatory standards; it also provides for dialogue and joint decision-making (Interview SN\_3). Recent studies on the power and performance of joint bodies formed under the EU's bilateral agreements (Tyushka et al. 2022), and the ‘association bodies’ operating under the EU–Ukraine AA (Tyushka 2022b) in particular, unveil that such joint institutions do indeed allow for the ‘levelling up’ of asymmetries in bilateral relations, not least as the parties enjoy parity status in decision-making and agenda-setting more generally. The decisions adopted by the EU–Ukraine association bodies are binding for both Ukraine and the EU and they become part of both actors' legal systems.

As with peripherality, the issue of asymmetry may or may not be seen as a problem depending on how the EU uses it in its relations with Ukraine, as stated by four interviewed MPs. Honesty in the relationship and the ethical component of asymmetry, too, appear to play a role – not just the factual state of disparity in power potentials or the like:

No, [it's not a problem per se] – it's natural, because there, the European Union is a union of many countries, and financially, organizationally, institutionally, they are, of course ... stronger and more powerful than Ukraine. So, this asymmetry is natural, there is nothing bad or good about it. It is such a natural story. The only question is the honesty of the relationship in this asymmetry. (Interview OPZZH\_1)

Curiously, what is mostly seen in the academic world as an unfair (hegemonic) constellation of EU-favouring asymmetry – that is, the EU's conditionality principles (Sasse, 2008; Lavenex, 2008; Casier, 2011) – some Ukrainian MPs see as quite a fair and honest cooperation scheme:

There is this [conditionality] principle of ‘more for more’ meaning ‘greater performance – greater support’. I think, this principle is the [fair] answer. (Interview SN\_2)

Moreover, emerging scholarly accounts confirm that, despite all the conditionality-inherent asymmetry in EU policy design vis-à-vis particular neighbours, such as Ukraine, or the Union’s neighbourhood at large, in practice enforcing conditionality is not always feasible for the EU (Burlyuk and Shapovalova, 2017). At the same time, EU-associated neighbours, first and foremost Ukraine, dispose of multiple diplomatic and joint institutional possibilities to offset the negative effects of asymmetry in bilateral agenda-setting: whether through negotiating the modalities of compliance with the dictum of legislative approximation under the EU–Ukraine AA (Rabinovych and Pintsch, 2023), or through joint decision-making on both strategic and operational issues within the EU–Ukraine association bodies (Tyushka et al., 2022).

Finally, and rather surprisingly, the interviews with Ukrainian MPs reveal an unexpected aspect: asymmetry that may arise from Ukraine’s own insincerity towards the EU and the commitments undertaken, which may then push the EU to exercise asymmetrical power. This effectively presupposes that there is no default asymmetrical relationship in principle – it just becomes such under certain conditions, not necessarily EU-driven ones:

No, I don’t believe it’s an asymmetrical relationship ... However, asymmetry arises when corruption, bureaucracy, imitation of integration with the European Union, and so on, arise on the Ukrainian side. This, in my opinion, is the only real reason for possible asymmetries or asymmetry as such in relations with the European Union. Insincerity, unprofessionalism and, in some places, corruption that arises from the Ukrainian side. That’s about it, in short. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2)

To sum up, there is hardly any unity among the interviewed MPs on whether asymmetry exists as such, and if so, whether it is a problem by default. While the majority agree that an asymmetrical relationship may be problematic, they also admit that it is more about the uses (or abuse) of asymmetry than about power differentials per se.

## Ukrainian Hopes, EU Performance as Crisis/War Responder, and ‘Critical Expectation Gaps’: The Importance of Perception Checking

In international psychology and communications, perception checking is a strategy and tool to help one ascertain whether one’s interpretations of situations, events, or the actions of others are accurate – all for the sake of managing impressions or expectations. Framed by the ‘critical expectation gaps’ approach, this study further probes into three cases of critical situations (crisis, war, and strategic foreign policy choice) in order to find out whether there is a case for closing, or indeed widening, the gap between Ukrainian political elites’ hopes/expectations and the EU’s performance in responding to: (1) Russia’s continuing aggression against Ukraine since 2014, (2) the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and (3) Ukraine’s lasting (tri-decadal) striving for EU membership.

### *The EU’s Ukraine ‘Crisis’/War Response in 2014–2022 and the Narrowing of the Hopes/Performance Gap?*

In his address to the people of Europe, delivered on the second day of Russia’s full-scale invasion, President V. Zelensky stated that it was ‘not merely Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’ but ‘the beginning of a war against Europe’, and called for a decisive response from the EU:

I know Europe can see this. But what we do not see – at least not fully – is what you are going to do about it. How are you going to protect yourselves when you have been so slow to protect Ukraine? (Zelensky, 2022a, pp. 57–58)

Thereby, Ukraine’s president lamented the largely unfulfilled hopes and expectations for a swift and decisive EU response to Russia’s (first covert and later increasingly overt) aggression against Ukraine since February 2014. In academia, too, the EU’s ‘crisis’ response since 2014 had largely been seen as too slow and too soft (Nováky, 2015).

The EU’s war response following February 2022 massively differed from the previous stance vis-à-vis the qualification of the conflict itself, the strategic stance against Russia, and the responsibility it embraced to act in support of Ukraine and the restoration of the violated rules-based order. As Europe’s ‘9/11 moment’, the brutal Russian

war of aggression against Ukraine awakened the EU's sense of 'collective responsibility to act' (Maurer et al., 2023).

In the first week of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's foreign minister D. Kuleba acknowledged the EU's forceful response against a bleak prospect of NATO engagement:

Before the [full-scale] war with Russia, Ukrainians considered NATO to be a real force, and the EU to be weak and undecided. After the start of the [full-scale] war, the Ukrainian people saw that everything was the other way around. (Kuleba, 2022)

The introduction of massive sanctions, the deployment of the European Peace Facility to finance Ukraine's arms purchase and military assistance, and other unprecedented steps taken by the EU represented a divergent break from the Union's past posture and politics of hesitant response to Russia's first hybrid, then full-scale and overt aggression in Ukraine, which had continued since 2014. Indeed, until the early 2020s, the EU referred to Russia's war in Ukraine as the so-called 'Ukraine crisis', as did a vast share of international players. This created fertile ground for ambiguous perceptions among Ukraine's political elites of the EU as a security actor, as the EU seemed to misread the war (treating it as a sort of domestic but internationalized 'crisis') and, even more worrisome, the perception emerged that 'the EU does not understand Ukraine properly' either (Chaban & Lucarelli, 2021, p. 182).

The conducted interviews largely confirm the ambiguous stance of Ukrainian political elites towards the EU as a crisis/war responder in 2014–2021. On the one hand, a good share of the MPs expressed the view that the EU could and should have provided more to support Ukraine to end the (armed, albeit hybrid) conflict with Russia. Thus, not only the deterrence of Russia is mentioned as a priority, but also the provision of military aid to Ukraine (some even go as far as to suggest that the EU's military contingent should have been considered, with a Common Security and Defence Policy mission in Crimea and Donbas), swift(er) and sharp(er) sanctions, the closure of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline project and less of a 'business as usual' politics towards Russia:

The [EU's] response was weak, very weak. I think the EU should have acted more decisively against Russia, at least in self-defence. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3)

I would say [the EU scored] three on a scale of ten. In other words ... sanctions were imposed, but they were not such as to give the most real effect in a short time. Declarations of support for Ukraine were made, but real actions showed that, while supporting Ukraine, 'business as usual' [with Russia] continued. (Interview YES\_3)

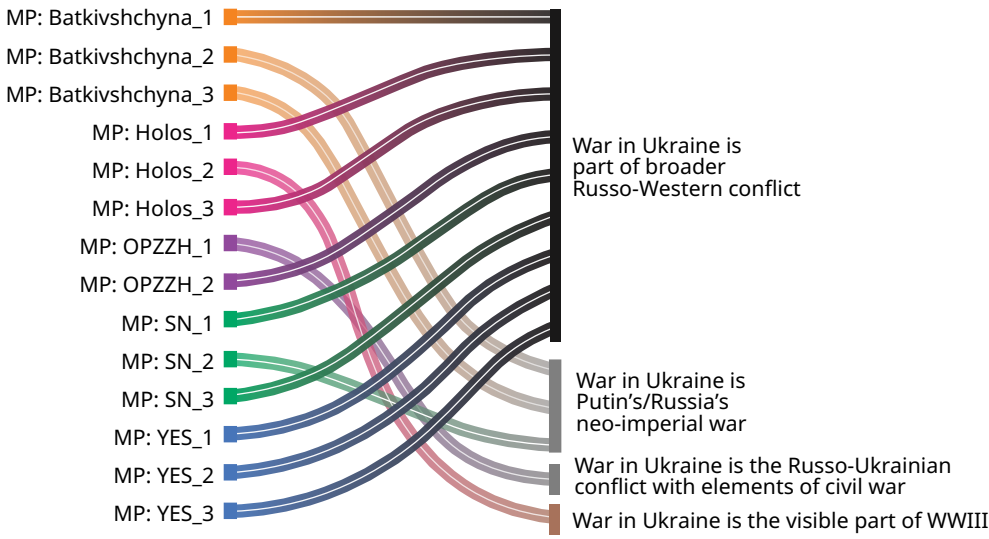
Yes, I think [the EU response] should have been different. I think that in matters of military support, the EU should have done more. Even if they cannot provide their military (well, it was clear why it was impossible, and so on), but the logistical support of the army, the immediate imposition of sanctions [on Russia] ... I think the EU could do more. And we would expect that they could do more. (Interview Holos\_1)

On the other hand, nearly an equal share did not hold high hopes for the EU's engagement, emphasizing the manifold weaknesses of the EU as a (security) actor that had 'tamed' their expectations. Many responses channelled an understanding of the EU's constraints in decision-making (slow, complex, bureaucratic) and security policy-making (the dictum of unanimity, fear of Russia, and an unclear stance on Ukraine's relevance and future in the European context):

First, I think that it was not an adequate a response. Second, given the complexity and specificity of the functioning of such a structure as the European Union, it could not be otherwise. Everything is simple here. (Interview Holos\_2)

the reaction was commensurate with the capabilities that the EU had at that time. (Interview SN\_3)

Ukraine's expectations of the EU's engagement were based not only on the assumption that the EU *could* help but, more importantly, on the conviction that the EU *should* help, as Russia's war against Ukraine was part of a wider geopolitical struggle.<sup>7</sup> It is striking that 9 out of 14 MPs (or around 65 per cent) defined Russia's war against Ukraine as part of the broader Russo-Western conflict, of which the EU was a part or a party. Yet the other three MPs defined the war as a manifestation of Russia's renewed imperial (neocolonial) gambit. One Holos MP even saw it as part of the unfolding World War III, whereas one OPZZH MP



**Figure 4.2a:** Definitions of the continued Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014–2021, by individual members of parliament (MP).

Source: authors' illustration based on [Atlas.ti](#)-supported content analysis of elite interviews.



**Figure 4.2b:** Definitions of the continued Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014–2021, by political party (PP).

Source: authors' illustration based on [Atlas.ti](#)-supported content analysis of elite interviews.

classified it as a bilateral conflict with ‘elements of civil war’ (see Sankey diagrams in Figures 4.2a and 4.2b).

A handful of takes were also presented that appreciate and praise what the EU had been able to provide – against all odds – as part of its response to Russian aggression:

I think [the EU] has done a lot. I’ve talked about sanctions; I want to mention them again. But we also did a lot ourselves. I believe that the response is adequate ... One can always do more, but I don’t agree with those who say that nothing was done. Sorry, but the EU is not NATO, and we are not members of any of these organizations; so yes, we relied on our own strength. But I think that the EU has done a lot. (Interview SN\_2)

Rather surprisingly, just a single lonely voice among the interviewed MPs embraced an inward-looking criticism, stating that it was challenging for the EU to act together when contradictory signals were coming from Ukraine, including the failure to call – at the legal level – Russia’s war what it was (rather than naming Ukraine’s defensive efforts in Donbas as an ‘anti-terrorist operation’) (Interview Holos\_3).

All in all, there was hardly a consensual stance – either positive or negative – regarding the EU’s Ukraine ‘crisis’/war response from early 2014 up until late 2021. While quite a few elite representatives had high(er) expectations in this regard, it is notable that many more had rather hopes for the EU’s engagement in principle. In a way, the gap arose from both.

### *The EU’s COVID-19 Pandemic Response and Ukraine: No Hope, No Sorrow – Or Solidarity by Surprise?*

While the COVID-19 pandemic shook the entire world, assessments of the EU’s handling of the coronavirus crisis were more pragmatic, albeit concerned. First and foremost, there was a realization that this kind of global crisis returns the international community towards the stage of ‘everyone for themselves’ thinking, which hugely surpasses the confines of European politics alone. In Ukraine, however, there was great hope for EU-made vaccines, not least as the country legally banned the registration of Sputnik V in February 2021, calling it a ‘hybrid weapon of Russia against Ukraine’ (Euractiv & Reuters, 2021), and faced difficulties in accessing Chinese vaccines due to a diplomatic

spat. A few months earlier, Ukraine's President V. Zelensky had said that '[b]y the way, the EU confirmed it would help Ukraine receive the true vaccine once it is released and will not raise any suspicions among scientists' (Zelensky, 2020), explicitly stating that the country trusted the EU. In general, the official Ukrainian discourse was supportive of the EU's health diplomacy, although there was no shortage of criticism (Zelensky, 2021).

In May 2020, the EU approved a €3 billion aid package to support 'neighbouring partners'. The EU's 'COVID-19 Solidarity Program for the Eastern Partnership', as of January 2021, included, for instance, €202 million for Ukraine alone; Ukraine was even invited to join the EU's Health Security Committee as an observer in pursuit of closer cooperation in the context of the fight against the virus (Tyushka & Schumacher, 2022, pp. 247–249). In May 2021, the EU's health diplomacy was not extensive, and vaccine support was just beginning. Once more, there was a sense of 'too little, too late' among the Ukrainian public and political elites, but with the understanding that solidarity could not trump everyone's survivalism, including the EU's. This ambiguous duality is well captured in the interviews.

On the one hand, it is evident that there was little consideration for the perspectives of others in this situation, both within the EU and in its external relations:

No, of course there was no solidarity, and they understand it perfectly ... during the pandemic, I believe that the European Union showed itself very selfishly, but they behaved selfishly, let's say, egocentrically, in relation to each other as well. You remember how they closed each other's borders and intercepted each other's medicine. And the vaccine. So, the pandemic is not at all the moment when humanity shows great solidarity ... Everyone for themselves. (Interview OPZZH\_2)

Despite the harsh criticism, chiefly coming from among OPZZH MPs, some parliamentary voices also raised the issue that, rather than the EU's 'so-so' COVID-19 response itself, a bigger concern for Ukrainian elites was that because of the pandemic, Ukraine fatigue grew: 'Europe has become a bit out of our way [*Yevropi bulo ne do nas*]' (Interview Holos\_2), and 'we became some issue no. 10 on the EU's agenda list' (Interview Holos\_1). Rather unorthodox (due to its straightforward and blunt framing) and singular opinion 'normalized' the self-help constellation in international affairs, thus urging against naïve hopes



for some external problem-solver, as Ukraine needed to solve its problems – naturally – on its own:

You know, I wouldn't say that, in my opinion, relations between Ukraine and the EU have changed in connection with COVID-19 ... In principle, I would not say that they often burdened themselves with solving our problems. This is not surprising, because we must solve our problems ourselves ... It's just that Europe has a little bit more problems because of COVID, and Ukraine has moved even lower on the agenda than it was. Everything is natural, there is nothing unusual about it. (Interview Holos\_2)

A much wider shared perspective, however, turned out to be a moderate and pragmatic view that the EU's COVID-19 response entailed both (natural or 'healthy') selfishness and (some) solidarity, which was, of course, hoped for but not rationally expected:

It is difficult to talk about excessive solidarity at a time when countries are facing problems at home ... Therefore, one should not expect that someone owes something to someone, and someone should always be a magician or benefactor. I think that when you are faced with something of force majeure, as it happened with COVID, it does not guarantee that you will think about yourself half the day, half the day about your neighbour. It's a bit of ... influence of the circumstances from the outside ... Thus, I do not overestimate expectations here. I cannot say that this is something that can be called selfishness, and so on, because selfishness is also healthy. (Interview Holos\_3)

Quite quickly, the European Union mobilized funds that were used primarily to help those EU member states that needed that help. Ukraine received substantial assistance, both financial and technical. And the main thing that managed to be preserved, despite the scepticism that existed both in Ukraine and in the European Union, was to preserve these basic freedoms – freedom of movement, people, capital. (Interview SN\_3)

we must give credit to the European Union for it positively and repeatedly helped Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens with vaccines. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2)

Notably, while looking back on the pandemic crisis, there seem to be other positive sides of the EU's response beyond its support for vaccine

procurement. The EU's will and skill to maintain trade in goods with Ukraine is also noted by a Ukrainian MP:

But it seems to me that now [after the pandemic], many countries are on their knees economically, and the economy comes before politics. We must always remember this. Despite this, Ukraine managed, with the support of some EU customs instruments, to exceed the budget in the third quarter of the current fiscal year due to new verification technology – we did not expect this, it is very positive. (Interview SN\_2)

Overall, despite the serious threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges arising from the unfolding 'vaccine geopolitics', the EU has generally managed to maintain a moderately positive attitude among Ukraine's political elites, marked by pragmatism in assessing the situation, minimal expectations of EU support, and surprising displays of solidarity.

### *Ukraine's European Dreams, War Drums, and EU Accession Dramas*

Ukraine's European dreams have a long history, with the first signs of a willingness to 'return home' emerging over three decades ago when the country regained its independence. Ukraine's 'return to Europe', albeit an axiom, has seen varied interpretations and policy formulations, but it has remained one of the key foreign-political and state-building endeavours to date.

The 2003 Athens European convention sought to chart new contours of an enlarging Europe and, as Ukraine's foreign minister (1990–1994 and 2000–2003) A. Zlenko argues, it 'succeeded in giving conclusive answers to nearly all pending questions but the Ukrainian one' (Zlenko, 2021, p. 135). The 2004 Orange revolution reconfirmed Ukraine's popular drive towards Europe, but after 2007, it fled into an unwinding, half-hearted story of 'association' with the EU rather than wholehearted, full-fledged accession to it. Nor did the 2014 Euro-maidan revolution change the course of action, even after Ukraine signed the unprecedentedly encompassing AA with the EU in 2014. A clear and explicit European perspective for Ukraine was absent in the text of the Agreement and subsequent declarations. At the same time, the implementation of the AA and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) imposed profound domestic reforms

on Ukraine, including far-reaching legislative approximation with the EU. Quite aware of the fact that such European-style state-(re)building in Ukraine is a result of a voluntary bilateral agreement with the EU and, most of all, the direction in which the Ukrainian public increasingly wanted to see the Ukrainian state(hood) developing, domestic political elites in Kyiv had not all too overwhelmingly subscribed to such an idea or its implementation. The opponents' key argument had consistently been 'What for?' as the country repeatedly failed to receive a credible membership perspective from the EU. This 'mildly negative dynamic' in Ukraine's elite perceptions of the EU (Chaban & Knodt, 2021) emerged shortly after the positive upheaval of the 2013–2014 revolutionary times and can also be seen as a confounding effect of the EU's perceived underperformance in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent hybrid war in Ukraine's Donbas since mid-2014. The perceived dim prospects of EU membership have not, however, weakened the popular and political drive towards European integration. For example, a corpus-based discourse analysis of debates in parliament from 2000 to 2017 reveals that the collocation of 'desire'/'aspiration'/'striving'/'path' with 'European integration' saliently (consistently and incrementally, albeit irregularly) feature in parliamentary discourse, peaking in 2004, 2008, 2011, and 2013–2014 (Kryvenko, 2018, pp. 65–69). As the issue of Ukraine's 'European perspective' remained intact in Brussels' official speech, Ukraine's political elites' own growing hopes and narrative of 'Ukraine's European path' opened a 'critical expectation gap', fraught with recurring moments of disenchantment and resentment while still maintaining a firm pro-EU foreign policy course.

The interviews with Ukrainian MPs of the ninth convocation revealed this ambiguous (love/hate) dynamics in several respects.

First, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, there is quite a consensual understanding of Ukraine's belonging to the European space and the vision of its future as an EU member state. Approaches differ, however, as to when, how, and under what conditions this should occur. When asked about the existence of a tacit or explicit consensus on Ukraine's EU accession, most MPs agreed that there is one – although only four firmly stated that there is an unequivocal and uncompromising explicit consensus among political elites and within society, whereas five attributed it to the 'majority's position' *now*, the current domestic constellation, also noting that this consensus is essentially

public-driven in Ukraine. Another group of three MPs subscribed to the view that consensus exists but felt that the nuance – the difference between words (declarations) and deeds (implementation of EU integration-driven reforms) – needs to be taken into account as to how workable or effective such a consensus has been so far. Unsurprisingly, two OPZZH MPs expressed doubts about the existence of a consensus, with one questioning whether there is a real agreement even within those parties that declare a pro-EU stance (Interview OPZZH\_1) and another stating that such a more tacit consensus could be said to exist only ‘if there is such an understanding that is popular among most citizens’ (Interview OPZZH\_2). On the other hand, the interviewed MPs also noted that even among opposition forces that publicly criticize – though they do not refuse to support – Ukraine’s EU integration course, there is no united ‘anti-EU’ stance or front:

This issue is [simple but] also complex at the same time. Because, mostly, many Ukrainian politicians understand European integration as the way forward. That is, they hold somewhat different attitudes, there are nuances in the acceptance of the very phrase, the very definition of European integration. But, if we are talking about consensus, I think that with a high probability we can say that ... even representatives of the elite who deny it and criticize the EU, in fact, they’re ready to embrace it ... It’s just, let’s say, from a political perspective, it’s not advantageous [for them] to talk about it out loud. Well, for example, the only political force, the parliamentary one, that allows itself to critique the course towards the EU and, even more so, towards NATO, is the OPZZH, even within this force – at least within the party-political faction and its leadership – a large number of people lean towards the EU. With their nuances, with a slightly skewed attitude, however, they want to join the EU. Surprisingly, they support a certain set of demands presented by the EU. So, we can talk about the almost complete consensus of the elites today. (Interview Holos\_2)

Second, given that there appears to be both tacit and explicit consensus about Ukraine’s EU membership even before the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the constellations of EU–Ukraine association naturally seem to be too insufficient and do not meet the expectations of the majority (nine) of the 14 interviewed MPs. When asked whether the AA-based format of the relationship with the EU was suitable for Ukraine, nine MPs stated that it was not, justifying such a stance by the

Agreement's unfit as an EU accession tool, the insufficient rewards offered in exchange for Ukraine's already compromised sovereignty, or the failure to account for growing trade dynamics (not least due to the imposed tariff-rate quotas); for example:

No, no, no, of course it is not [sufficient]! Again, going back to what I already voiced, a very strange thing happened in 2014. We, an independent sovereign state, willingly agreed to the fact that a structure outside our territory makes decisions that are binding on us, and we, in return, don't participate in the discussion of these decisions. That is, I could call it – and I will call it – a partial concession of sovereignty ... If we're talking about a clear understanding of the date of [Ukraine's] accession to the EU, then fine, I'm ready to consider it all [i.e., the obligations under AA], I'm ready to give it a go. But announce the date first. Thus, if we don't understand the end-state, and we continue to play the 'you pass the legislation first, and then we'll see' – well, sorry, but why do we need all of this? ... At the same time, we don't receive systematic, regular assistance, financial or institutional, as Poland did. (Interview SN\_1)

No, of course, I consider it insufficient ... Yes, of course, I believe that this is not enough, that these [especially economic] conditions must be revised, they must be substantially revised. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1)

While agreeing that there might be a need to revise and update the AA, a handful of interviewed MPs, nonetheless, consider it to be 'just the right tool' for Ukraine's European integration, as well as corresponding to the reality on both sides in terms of the EU's enlargement fatigue and Ukraine's institutional (in)capacity to handle, at the moment, the greater challenges and requirements that are applicable for an EU candidate state:

In my opinion, and this is actually the policy of the Ukrainian government today, the association – the Association Agreement that we have – is an excellent tool for the full integration of Ukraine into the EU. (Interview SN\_3)

Frankly speaking, I think that now [the AA] is such a signpost that tells us where to go and what to do. Can we talk about deepening cooperation? Well, I'll tell you honestly, I'm not sure whether the Ukrainian state, with its capacity – be it institutional, political, or the like – could achieve a deeper level of integration. With this Ukrainian inability to

implement any difficult decisions or make difficult reforms if they are not popular ... Any deepening of cooperation implies additional obligations on the part of Ukraine. Is Ukraine ready to implement them? Well, frankly, I have a lot of questions here. It's not so much an issue from the side of the EU, as it is much on our side, whether we are able to do something more difficult. (Interview Holos\_1)

You understand that it is more than 600 pages ... it is an agreement that is spelled out clearly. The challenge is to implement it and then move on to another stage – as I earlier said (that is, to the Copenhagen Criteria). Until we have done our homework on the association (and there, I understand, there is still a little more than half left to start and finish), we cannot talk about anything else. (Interview YES\_3)

Just as with the varied party reasonings above about why the format of EU–Ukraine association was the only feasible option back then (even if not the most desirable one), little agreement exists even among the single-party representatives – that is, the OPZZH – as to how to assess the EU–Ukraine AA in the wider context of EU–Ukraine relations. Whereas one OPZZH MP points to economic imbalances and the AA's insufficiency as 'the most effective tool for our European integration' (Interview OPZZH\_1), another MP presents the following perspective:

First of all, if you do not endow this agreement with what it cannot be, that is, an instrument of Ukraine's direct accession to the EU (and it was never supposed to be such an instrument), ... [then] from a technical point of view regarding the implementation of technical regulations, food safety, European production standards, it is a good document. (Interview OPZZH\_2)

Furthermore, and related to the above, at least five interviewed MPs mentioned that the lack of clarity about the 'point of destination' or a credible EU membership perspective for Ukraine impacts both the perception and the implementation of EU- or AA-'imposed' reforms in Ukraine:

Yes of course [the EU-imposed reforms are not fully legitimate]. We aren't ashamed to say that it isn't fair to Ukraine, when the lack of a clear [EU accession] perspective becomes, among other things, a challenge for any ruling team that pursues the path of European integration, as it is politically difficult to explain to voters the need to adopt certain

European standards, which to a certain extent will burden Ukrainian business ... That is why we seek clear recognition [of Ukraine's European perspective] and here, on the example of the last of these events that we mentioned today, the Ukraine–EU Summit, we see a willingness to go to meetings and speak more clearly about Ukraine's European perspective. (Interview SN\_3)

This is not even [*ne parytetno*]. (Interview SN\_1)

On the other hand, at least four MPs explicitly stated that the perspective on reforms is relevant, pointing to the constellation in which Ukraine's society – not the EU – is a key *demandeur* of European-style reforms and saying that it is Ukraine's political choice for Europe as a model of state-building and development:

But whose desire has been to accede to the EU? Was it our very own desire or is it the European Union that is pushing us there?! We wanted to be in the European Union! ... Therefore, I think that we simply have no option to meet those expectations if we are serious about joining the EU. (Interview YES\_2)

It's all very simple: the EU is an already established community ... In my professional opinion, integration into such a community means changes – real, sincere changes within the country. Without them, it's impossible to become a member of the EU. Therefore, I consider it a disingenuous and unprofessional position to say that 'the EU prevents us from integrating into the EU'. Moreover, it sounds like such a Moscow narrative. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2)

Thereby, and overwhelmingly so, the interviewed MPs agreed that nuances – that is, differentiation between various reforms rather than generalizations – matter. As an ironic take on these – apparently mutual for the EU and Ukraine – gaps between hope/expectation performance gaps has it:

You know, I'd like to joke here that we implement these requirements, that is reforms, just as good as they give us the prospect of membership. There is such an element of mutual deception here ... Well, if you are serious, then look: Ukraine has made a commitment by signing the commitment and Association Agreement. Europeans take signed agreements seriously. Ukrainians should also take this seriously. We have to say that, yes, this is part of our commitment. The fact that someone from

the outside must remind us that we ourselves have taken on those obligations, promised something is actually a shame. But I'll tell you frankly that I have been working in the administrative and political sphere of Ukraine for some time, I don't believe that there are any things that we will do without a magical push from the outside. (Interview Holos\_1)

Third, Ukrainian MPs are also split regarding why Ukraine has not joined the EU yet and whether it should have done so by now. While some cited (1) lost opportunities and time (Interviews YES\_1; YES\_2; OPZZH\_1), especially during the Yanukovych period (Interview SN\_2), and (2) domestic political and economic obstacles (Interviews SN\_1; YES\_3; Holos\_3; Batkivshchyna\_2; Batkivshchyna\_3), including Ukraine's 'multi-vector' foreign policy (Interview Holos\_3), others were keen to appeal to Ukraine-exogenous factors – that is, the (3) Russia factor (namely, the EU's fear of Russian reaction to Ukraine's EU accession) (Interviews SN\_1; YES\_3; Holos\_3; Batkivshchyna\_3), including (4) Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine as a deterrent factor (Interviews SN\_2; SN\_3), (5) the lack of a coherent position on the issue among EU member states (Interview SN\_1), and (6) fear of the greater competition between 'old' Western and 'new' Eastern Europe that would ensue with Ukraine's accession to the EU (Interview SN\_1). Several MPs agreed that there was what one interviewee termed an 'element of artificial deterrence' of Ukraine from EU accession (Interview YES\_3).

Fourth, and most significantly, despite divergences in parliamentarians' perspectives on the issues and challenges regarding Ukraine's EU accession, most of them remained hopeful of the prospects thereof, not least because of the positive assessment of the progress made by Ukraine on its European integration path.

Well, it is certain that Ukraine is gradually, progressively, albeit very difficult, becoming closer to the EU than it was before. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_3)

Look, if we get to act together and 'plough' persistently for 10 years, then 10–15 years is a realistic timeline [for Ukraine's EU accession]. (Interview Holos\_1)

Rare pessimistic accounts of the infeasible 10–15-year time horizon for Ukraine's EU accession were also identified – and not only from among the OPZZH members:

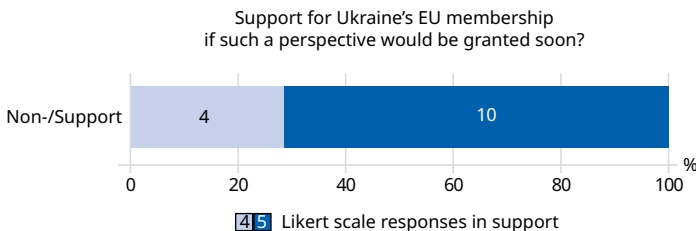


I don't think we can say anything about prospects and their dynamics. We can only say something from the point of view of the rhetoric indeed: from the EU side, just as 20 years ago they talked about the 20-year perspective of Ukraine in the EU, and now, in the latest statements, it is again a 20-year perspective. (Interview OPZZH\_1)

There is no prospect of Ukraine joining the EU. I talk enough off-the-record with our colleagues from European countries to know that in the next 15 years ... they won't consider Ukraine's accession to the EU. They've also closed themselves off so much that they won't even think about it, they don't want to increase the members of the EU and enlarge. This is their policy; this is their mistake. (Interview Batkivshchyna\_1)

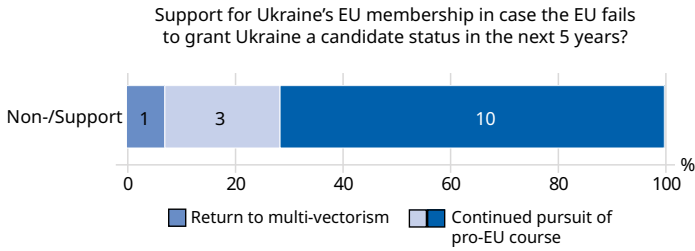
Nonetheless, when asked directly whether they would support Ukraine's EU accession if the EU granted Ukraine the status of candidate, the interviewed MPs unanimously confirmed that they would. Ten MPs expressed a resolute yes, and a further four stated they would 'rather support' such a move (see the cumulative result on the Likert scale in Figure 4.3).

A similar unity, save one compromising (and quite literally compromise-based) response, can be observed in Ukrainian MPs' responses to a provocative question on whether they still would hold pro-EU accession views should the EU fail to grant Ukraine candidate status within the next five years (see the cumulative result on the Likert scale in Figure 4.4).



**Figure 4.3:** Ukrainian MPs' stance on Ukraine's EU accession if the EU were to support it in the coming years

Source: authors' illustration based on interview data.



**Figure 4.4:** Ukrainian MPs' stance on Ukraine's EU accession should the EU fail to grant Ukraine candidate status in the next five years

Source: authors' illustration based on interview data.

These focused survey results vividly confirm the repeated assertions of the interviewed MPs about the existence of a consensus on Ukraine's European integration and EU accession course – despite sporadically differing approaches of parliamentary political forces on how to pursue it. The disagreements centred mainly on whether Russian interests should be accommodated at all. When asked whether they would prioritize Ukraine's EU accession even if it risked making it impossible to normalize relations with Russia, 12 MPs (86 per cent) cast no doubt this was the way forward, with just two (14 per cent) – notably both OPZZH MPs – opining that both EU accession and normalization of relations with Russia should be pursued simultaneously (albeit with one of them doubting any normalization is possible at all given the conflict in Donbas).

Finally, fifth, and perhaps most importantly, many of the issues raised by the interviewed MPs regarding the ills and challenges of managing Ukraine's EU membership dreams and the Union's policy solutions were 'solved' by Ukraine's bold action. On the fifth day of Russia's full-scale invasion on 28 February 2022, Ukraine submitted its EU membership application. This unprecedented move was met with an equally unprecedented swift and positive response from the EU. On 23 June 2023, Ukraine was granted the status of EU candidate. Although there has been a considerable narrowing of the critical expectation gap (at least in this context), it is uncertain whether this gap will not widen in the future, given Ukraine's massive suffering of war and sacrifice in the name of Europe. Naturally, new hopes and expectations will emerge. For now, Ukraine's EU accession talks

are progressing swiftly. In his statement on 1 July 2022 at the signing ceremony of the joint declaration of the president, the prime minister, and the speaker of the parliament on Ukraine's strategic course towards full-fledged EU membership, President V. Zelensky expressed his appreciation for the handling of Ukraine's application for membership by the EU in a record 115 days and was expressly hopeful that 'Ukraine's path to full-fledged membership in the EU should, too, be rapid rather than lasting for years or decades' (Zelensky, 2022b). With new hopes and expectations, there is naturally a risk of a performance gap (re)opening in EU–Ukraine integration dynamics.

## Conclusions

There is a truism in the making that the Russian war in Ukraine changes everything. It has undoubtedly altered the perceptions of both Ukraine – its strength, resilience, and ability to resist Russia's brutal (if not barbaric) invasion – and those of the EU as an actor, including in the security and defence areas. Remarkably – and paradoxically – the war has changed the depth and dynamics of EU–Ukraine integration, which now proceeds at an unheard-of pace despite the war (as some analysts are inclined to believe, thanks to war too). Importantly, Ukraine's course on 'European integration 2.0' commenced shortly before the war, as in 2020 Ukraine started preparing an evaluation of AA implementation as a step towards opening its EU accession negotiations. Thereby, Ukraine's role and status have gradually transformed: from a junior partner and an associated country that was expected to download EU rules and procedures (especially in DCFTA matters) to a co-shaper of certain EU policy undertakings (such as the European Green Deal). With this, Ukraine has begun to accomplish a firm move away from the position of a symbolically perceived 'EU periphery' to the both symbolically and substantially practised status of a partner and EU member in the making. Thereby, it attempts to alleviate not so much the periphery issue but, more importantly, a much more bothersome (and perceived as existing) asymmetry challenge in Ukraine–EU relations.

The interviews conducted with Ukrainian MPs, as well as other primary sources and secondary literature, revealed that critical expectation gaps exist(ed) in several issue areas, revolving chiefly around Ukraine's lasting – but moderately successful – pursuit of EU mem-

bership and the EU's response to Russian aggression in Ukraine since 2014, with the EU's performance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic being an area with narrow and short-lived critical expectation gaps.

Ukraine is *not* a Eurosceptic country by any account (or measurement approach). However, the EU's more than three decades of not acknowledging Ukraine's membership perspective gave rise to – marginal – voices that have sporadically employed anti-EU and anti-reform rhetoric. A certain credibility–expectations gap is also engrained in broader frameworks of Ukraine's perception of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its relations with the EU's aspiring Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, the EU's perceivably insufficient engagement in crisis and conflict resolution in and around Ukraine since early 2014 has also left its mark on the public and political perception of the EU's credibility as a partner and a geopolitical power.

The interviews also demonstrated that a political elite consensus has emerged regarding Ukraine's EU accession – and did so well before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is an important added value of the study, as this issue had been (and still is now) highly politicized, and the swift developments on both the battlefields and Ukraine's EU accession trajectory only amplify such politicization and mythification of the process. This, in turn, risks fostering the proliferation of misperceptions and skewed expectations and, as a result, widening the gap.

## Notes

- 1 The 15th interview (with an OPZZH party member) was cancelled due to the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion.
- 2 Electoral Program of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 2010, <http://www.kpu.ua/programmakpu/>
- 3 Importantly, this 'ideational choice for Europe' is not only a publicly shared view but also a stance widely shared by political elites in both Georgia and Ukraine (Kakachia et al., 2019, p. 457).
- 4 Hnatiuk (2017) neatly captures this state of mind and hope in Ukraine (among both regular citizens and political and intellectual elites) as a 'waiting for Europe' kind of condition.
- 5 For instance, in Interviews SN\_2; SN\_3; YES\_1; YES\_3; Holos\_1; Holos\_3; Batkivshchyna\_1, etc.
- 6 The scholarly literature on European integration and state-building reflects on the similarity between the state-building processes of EU members and those of their neighbours, where the adoption of EU rules complements rather than

contradicts the building of European-style societies and public institutions in countries that identify themselves as part of Europe (whether inside or outside the EU); see, for instance, Tyushka (2017; 2020) and Wolczuk (2019).

- 7 The EU was not blamed for the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014. Eight MPs attributed the blame to Putin's 'sick mind' (Interview SN\_2), Russian elites' chauvinism, and post-Soviet Russia's neo-imperialism. Six MPs blamed Yanukovych and 'all pro-Russian and Russian forces in the country' (Interview Batkivshchyna\_2).

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Includes only political parties that won in the 2019 elections and are currently legislative parties in the Ukrainian parliament

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*Interviews (anonymized, as cited in text) with Members of the  
Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine*

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 Interview SN\_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, SN Party.  
 Interview SN\_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, SN Party.  
 Interview YES\_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.  
 Interview YES\_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.  
 Interview YES\_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, YES Party.  
 Interview Holos\_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.  
 Interview Holos\_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.  
 Interview Holos\_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Holos Party.  
 Interview Batkivshchyna\_1: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.  
 Interview Batkivshchyna\_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.  
 Interview Batkivshchyna\_3: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, Batkivshchyna Party.  
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 Interview OPZZH\_2: Interview with a Ukrainian MP, OPZZH Party.

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## Appendix

**Table A4.1:** Interviews with Members of the Ninth Convocation of the Ukrainian Parliament. Interviews were conducted jointly by Roman Kalytchak and Nataliya Shalenna from the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (IFNUL) between 24 September 2021 and 7 February 2022.

No.	Inter- view date	MP	Party	Position(s)
1	24.09.21	Mezentseva, Mariya Serhiyivna (Мезенцева Марія Сергіївна)	Sluga Narodu (SN)	Deputy chair of the Committee, and chair of the Sub-Committee on Approximation of Ukrainian Legislation to EU Legislation of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); head of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe <sup>1</sup>
2	05.10.21	Ariev, Volodymyr Igorovych (Ар'єв Володимир Ігорович)	Yevropeyska Solidarnist (YES)	Member of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Digital Transformation <sup>2</sup>
3	12.10.21	Krulko, Ivan Ivanovych (Крулько Іван Іванович)	Batkivshchyna	Head of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); first deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Budget Issues <sup>3</sup>
4	18.10.21	Fedyna, Sofiya Romanivna (Федина Софія Романівна)	YES	Deputy head of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly (EURONEST PA); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy <sup>4</sup>
5	18.10.21	Sovsun, Inna Romanivna (Совсун Інна Романівна)	Holos	Member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Energy and Housing and Communal Services <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мезенцева\\_Марія\\_Сергіївна](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мезенцева_Марія_Сергіївна)

<sup>2</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ар%27єв\\_Володимир\\_Ігорович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ар%27єв_Володимир_Ігорович)

<sup>3</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Крулько\\_Іван\\_Іванович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Крулько_Іван_Іванович)

<sup>4</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Федина\\_Софія\\_Романівна](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Федина_Софія_Романівна)

No.	Interview date	MP	Party	Position(s)
6	27.10.21	Halaychuk, Vadym Serhiyovych (Галайчук Вадим Сергійович)	SN	First deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe <sup>6</sup>
7	08.11.21	Lozynskyy, Roman Mykhaïlovych (Лозинський Роман Михайлович)	Holos	Member of the Permanent Delegation of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the EU-Eastern Neighbors Parliamentary Assembly ( <i>EURONEST</i> PA); deputy member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); first deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on the Organization of State Power, Local Self-Government, Regional Development and Urban Planning <sup>7</sup>
8	09.11.21	Nalyvaichenko, Oleksandr Valentynovych (Наливайченко Валентин Олександрович)	Batkivshchyna	Secretary of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; member of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC) <sup>8</sup>
9	13.11.21	Voloshyn, Oleh Anatoliyovych (Волошин Олег Анатолійович)	Opozitsiyna Platforma – Za Zhyttia (OPZZH)	Deputy chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the EU; deputy chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); deputy member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe <sup>9</sup>
10	20.11.21	Shkrum, Alyona Ivanivna (Шкрум Альона Іванівна)	Batkivshchyna	Member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Finance, Tax and Customs Policy; international law specialist <sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Совсун\\_Інна\\_Романівна](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Совсун_Інна_Романівна)

<sup>6</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Галайчук\\_Вадим\\_Сергійович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Галайчук_Вадим_Сергійович)

<sup>7</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Лозинський\\_Роман\\_Михайлович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Лозинський_Роман_Михайлович)

<sup>8</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наливайченко\\_Валентин\\_Олександрович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наливайченко_Валентин_Олександрович)

<sup>9</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Волошин\\_Олег\\_Анатолійович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Волошин_Олег_Анатолійович)

<sup>10</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Шкрум\\_Альона\\_Іванівна](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Шкрум_Альона_Іванівна)

No.	Inter- view date	MP	Party	Position(s)
11	24.11.21	Klympush-Tsynt-sadze, Ivanna Orestivna (Климпуш-Цинцадзе Іванна Орестівна)	YES	Chair of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union; First Deputy Chair of the Ukrainian part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); member of the Ukraine-NATO Inter-Parliamentary Council <sup>11</sup>
12	25.11.21	Pavlenko, Yuriy Oleksandrovych (Павленко Юрій Олексійович)	OPZZH	Deputy member of the Ukrainian Part of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (EU-Ukraine PAC); deputy chair of the Counting Commission of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of the Ninth Convocation <sup>12</sup>
13	09.12.21	Rakhmanin, Serhiy Ivanovych (Рахманін Сергій Іванович)	Holos	Chair of the Temporary Special Commission of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on the Formation and Implementation of State Policy Regarding the Restoration of Territorial Integrity and Ensuring the Sovereignty of Ukraine; member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on National Security, Defense, and Intelligence; member of the Ukrainian part of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania and of the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland; member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe <sup>13</sup>
14	07.02.22	Natalukha, Dmytro Andriyovych (Наталуха Дмитро Андрійович)	SN	Chair of the Committee on Economic Development; deputy member of the Permanent Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; co-chair of the Parliamentary Group on Inter-Parliamentary Relations with the UK and Northern Ireland <sup>14</sup>
15	Cancelled <sup>15</sup>	Kachnyy Oleksandr Stalinolevych (Качний Олександр Сталіноленович)	OPZZH	Member of the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy

<sup>11</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Климпуш-Цинцадзе\\_Іванна\\_Орестівна](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Климпуш-Цинцадзе_Іванна_Орестівна)

<sup>12</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Павленко\\_Юрій\\_Олексійович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Павленко_Юрій_Олексійович)

<sup>13</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Рахманін\\_Сергій\\_Іванович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Рахманін_Сергій_Іванович)

<sup>14</sup> [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наталуха\\_Дмитро\\_Андрійович](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Наталуха_Дмитро_Андрійович)

<sup>15</sup> The interview was confirmed but was eventually cancelled due to the onset of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.