

# UKRAINE'S RELATIONS WITH ITS REGIONAL NEIGHBOURS

PARTNERSHIPS THAT DON'T COME EASY

Ryhor Nizhnikau



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- The Russian aggression has drastically reshaped Ukraine's neighbourhoods. The war ruptured Ukraine's ties with Belarus, but brought about much closer cooperation to its west and south.
- Yet Ukraine's relations with its Central European and Black Sea partners are far from straightforward today. Path dependencies and diverging interests impede the further upgrading of bilateral ties.
- Specifically, Ukraine's neighbourhood policy suffers from a neglect of the regional context, strategic miscommunications, and impaired foreign policy decision-making. The proliferation of initiatives and declarations often outweighs their realisation in practice.
- Kyiv should rethink its regional strategy and treat the ties with its neighbours as vital. The inability to overcome old and new grievances will hamper Ukraine's key interests, including the longer-term prospects of EU integration.



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## PARTNERSHIPS THAT DON'T COME EASY

### INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion has significantly reshaped Ukraine's immediate geopolitical environment. While Belarusian leader Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who had long posed as a trustworthy partner of Kyiv, enabled Russian aggression, Ukraine's western neighbours have shown unwavering support for the country. Andriy Sybiha's first foreign visit as Ukraine's foreign minister to Slovakia, Romania, Moldova and Hungary in September 2024 was intended to demonstrate Kyiv's commitment to "developing a pragmatic and predictable neighbourhood policy". Indeed, the importance of Ukraine's neighbourhood cannot be underestimated: Ukraine's dependence goes beyond economic and military support. Strong public solidarity as well as shared concerns over security and peace in the region have created the conditions for much closer relations. The Central European states of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic, as well as the Black Sea countries of Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, have become the bulwark of European support.

However, the partners have failed to turn a completely new page. Over the past two years, the re-emergence of old structural problems in bilateral relations has raised concerns over both the fragmentation of Ukraine's own neighbourhood policy and attitudes towards Ukraine. Unnecessary recriminations and political friction occasionally overshadow security cooperation. The restrictions jointly imposed in summer 2023 by Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria on Ukraine's exports of four agricultural products epitomised the growing divergence between Kyiv and its western neighbours.

This Briefing Paper outlines the main developments in Ukraine's regional relations over the past two years in policy areas such as security, politics and the economy. It points to a growing divergence in policy responses both within the region and between Kyiv and its Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Black Sea partners. The paper argues that the war has underlined the inherent conflict between security and

domestic politics in Ukraine's neighbourhoods, as the commonality of security interests is increasingly side-tracked by conflicting interests and pragmatic economic and foreign policy choices.

### NEW BEGINNINGS

Fostering strategic partnerships in its multiple neighbourhoods (post-Soviet, Central Europe and the Black Sea) has traditionally been a focal point of Ukrainian foreign policy. Relations with Belarus, Poland and Romania were all dubbed strategic, even if the bilateral relationships were riddled with tensions. In August 2021, Zelenskyy's foreign policy strategy specifically laid out Ukraine's ambition to create a space of security, freedom and prosperity between the Baltic and Black Seas through intensified regional cooperation and multilateral initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Even if security and defence were cited as an important element of the strategy, in practice it was the economy and people-to-people contacts that the relations were traditionally built upon. In turn, Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Black Sea countries have traditionally underlined common strategic interests regarding Ukraine, citing in particular economic ties and border security.<sup>2</sup> Non-EU states, Moldova and Georgia, formed the Association Trio with Ukraine to combine efforts in the common quest for EU integration.

The Russia-Ukraine war gave a new impetus to Ukraine's relations with its neighbours. The shock of the political elite and popular outrage in neighbouring countries triggered broad solidarity with Ukraine and a set of novel policy reactions across Ukraine's western and southern neighbourhoods. Relations improved both bilaterally and multilaterally across policy domains.

1 Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 448/2021 On the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, 30 July 2021, "On the Strategy of Ukraine's Foreign Policy Activity", <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017>.

2 Andras Racz, "Divided Stands the Visegrad? The V4 have been united towards the Ukraine crisis but remain split concerning Russia", FIIA Briefing Paper 158, 24 June 2014, <https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/divided-stands-the-visegrad?read>.

Ukraine was offered substantial political, military and humanitarian support, and its interests were lobbied in Western institutions.

Political ties expanded significantly. Every country in the CEE and Black Sea regions offered strong diplomatic support, denounced Russia and largely supported Ukraine's narrative on the war. In 2022, even Hungary, which has had a long list of unresolved issues with Ukraine, voted in favour of all UN resolutions in support of Ukraine and condemned Russia's aggression. Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó has consistently emphasised support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. High-level bilateral contacts and visits between Kyiv, CEE and Black Sea countries proliferated. Heads of state frequently travelled to Kyiv to highlight the extent of their support for Ukraine. Naturally, everyone supported EU sanctions against Russia.

Ukraine proclaimed a new set of strategic partnerships in the region. Initially, the assistance to Ukraine was depoliticised and provided as part and parcel of state policies and programmes. A case in point from Poland was the Action Programme of newly elected Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government. Most partners supported the opening of the EU membership process for Ukraine, sharing experiences and building capacities to accelerate the EU accession process. For instance, in October 2024, the Slovak government agreed to establish training programmes for local and regional authorities in Ukraine to prepare them for working with EU structural funds.<sup>3</sup>

Economic ties, and particularly bilateral trade, expanded rapidly. In 2021–2023, Ukrainian trade with Poland and Slovakia grew by more than 80% and 40% respectively, and more than doubled with Romania. Poland has played a key role as an energy bridge between Ukraine and the EU. Romania replaced Belarus as the main fuel supplier in 2022, covering about 40% of Ukraine's fuel needs. CEE countries became central to connecting Ukrainian electricity providers with the European market, even though a Hungarian electricity grid operator delayed the process. Similarly, the initial success of the EU Solidarity Lanes, which allowed grain exports through the EU, depended on the commitment of Ukraine's neighbours, which was initially provided. Ukraine's logistical ties with its neighbours actively expanded through modernisation of border infrastructure and improved transport links. Hungary

signed an agreement to expand bilateral cross-border cooperation and opened a new transport terminal for Ukrainian grain. Even Budapest declared its readiness to contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction, including the rebuilding of schools in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, which had suffered during the Russian occupation in 2022.

Most importantly, Ukraine's western and southern neighbours became its key military supporters. Ukraine signed ten-year security agreements with the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania. The Czech Republic and Slovakia spearheaded international initiatives, such as the procurement of artillery shells and demining equipment. Poland transferred more than 300 tanks and 72 Krab howitzers to Ukraine and trained 10,000 Ukrainian military personnel as part of the EUMAM military training mission by the end of 2023.

Cooperation in various multilateral formats also increased. Once again, Ukraine's neighbourhood became the primary support base for each of Ukraine's international initiatives.<sup>4</sup> Poland chaired the G7+ Coordination Group in support of Ukraine's energy system and co-chaired the working group on energy security within the framework of the Peace Formula. Hungary facilitated the lifting of the Black Sea blockade. Reinvigorated old formats and new initiatives rebooted the discussions on regional security cooperation. One of the new formats expressing the new era of cooperation was the Kyiv Initiative, which institutionalised the security cooperation at the level of foreign policy advisers to the heads of state and government of Eastern European countries.<sup>5</sup>

## INERTIA AND FRAGMENTATION OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The breakthrough in bilateral relations soon faced a setback, however. First, domestic political processes – specifically elections in Slovakia (2023), Poland (2023), and to a certain degree Hungary (2022) – signalled the rise of “Ukraine-sceptic” or “pro-peace” parties and dredged up bilateral issues, such as disputes regarding minority rights in Romania and Hungary, territorial issues in Romania, and historical questions in Poland. In July 2024, Polish Minister of Defence Władysław

3 Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, “Ukraine and Slovakia deepen cooperation”, 8 October 2024, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukraina-ta-slovachchy-na-pohlybliuiut-spivpratsiu-na-rivni-hromad-u-sferi-enerhetyky-infrastruktury-ta-biznesu>.

4 They include the Peace Formula (2022) and the Peace Summit (2024) – the key diplomatic initiatives to achieve a just end to the Russo-Ukrainian War; the Crimea Platform (2021) – a new international consultation and coordination format to restore Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea; and Grain from Ukraine (2022) – a humanitarian food programme presented during the first inaugural International Food Security Summit in Kyiv.

5 These formats include the Bucharest Nine, Ukraine-Poland-Romania, Ukraine-Romania-Moldova triangles, and the Three Seas Initiative.



Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Donald Tusk met in Kyiv in January 2024.

Source: The Presidential Office of Ukraine. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Kosiniak-Kamysz reiterated that without “resolving” the mass killings of Poles in Volyn in 1943–1945, Ukraine would not join the EU.

One obvious challenge has been the changing position of Hungary. Overtures to Moscow and Minsk and blackmailing both Brussels and Kyiv have become a thorn in the side of Ukraine and its allies. Orban’s advocacy for a ceasefire and peace talks, along with his push for removal of the sanctions against Russia, was coupled with opposition to Western military and economic aid to Ukraine. The election of Robert Fico, who largely shares Orban’s views on the role of the West in the Russia-Ukraine war, as Prime Minister of Slovakia in October 2023, only strengthened “Ukraine-sceptic” positions in the EU.

Second, the economic interests of Ukraine and its neighbours have diverged. The grain dispute was a major sign of a misalignment of interests between the political leadership of the countries. The suspension of duties and quotas on Ukraine’s agricultural exports to the EU in 2022 as a part of pan-European economic solidarity provoked massive protests by local farmers and was eventually replaced by coordinated restrictive

measures against Ukraine’s exporters. As a result, Kyiv faced protectionist measures regarding its agricultural products, despite the intervention of the European Commission. These included the introduction of quotas, increased phytosanitary inspections and a ban on the export and transit of Ukrainian products. Soon after, the Polish transport sector protested against the EU-Ukraine transport liberalisation, leading to temporary blockades at the Bulgarian-Ukrainian (March 2023) and Polish-Ukrainian (November 2023) borders. Hungary and Slovakia clashed with Kyiv over the transit of Russian gas and oil through Ukraine, as the respective agreement was set to expire in 2024. Hungary also pressed Kyiv over its sanctions against OTP Bank, the largest commercial bank in Hungary,<sup>6</sup> which was still operating in Russia.

Third, the multilateral cooperation remained loose and fell short of Ukrainian expectations. Ukraine has realised that while regional cooperation might bring temporary and non-binding commitments on

<sup>6</sup> In May 2023, Ukraine’s National Agency on Corruption Prevention designated OTP Bank an “international sponsor of war” to encourage its exit from the Russian market, which Budapest then used as justification to block EU defence aid to Ukraine. Kyiv provisionally removed OTP Bank from the blacklist in September 2023.

economic or soft security issues, it cannot meet Kyiv's hard security needs. At the same time, while support for Euro-Atlantic integration is an integral part of the bilateral agendas, its terms and practical implementation have inevitably sparked conflicts between Kyiv and its EU neighbours. Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU and NATO during the war have encountered strong resistance. Robert Fico declined to support Ukraine's NATO bid, while the Hungarian government compiled a list of 11 requirements for the Ukrainian government. In September 2024, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's insistence on Kyiv's readiness to join the EU by the end of 2025 caused a clash with Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, who quickly deflated such expectations.

## EXPLAINING THE NEW PATTERNS OF CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

There are several reasons why a sustainable breakthrough in bilateral relations has not been achieved. The most obvious reason is the resurfaced clash of national interests between Ukraine and its partners. Shared security interests and solidarity, in turn, are at odds with a variety of political, economic and ideational factors in the Ukrainian neighbourhood, which have traditionally limited the potential of bilateral relations. The war sidelined them for a time, but unresolved bilateral issues gradually returned to the main agenda.

Furthermore, the focus of new strategic partnerships – the common security consensus – started to be misaligned. The mutual interest in supporting Ukraine's military efforts underpins the enhanced security cooperation. However, the evaluation of the war's trajectory, its ultimate goals and how to achieve them are beginning to diverge. While Ukraine's official stance remains unchanged – victory in the war and holding Russia accountable for the crimes it has committed – Ukraine's partners are increasingly calling for realism in assessing the prospects.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, the narrative on Ukraine is no longer a shared consensus within the region. Whereas original policy responses were the subject of broad societal agreement, national elections and public debates indicate increasing fragmentation of societal attitudes and growing contestation of government policies towards Ukraine. The urgency to support Ukraine has subsided; public opinion in the neighbourhood is becoming more

polarised, which has opened space for the politicisation of the war for domestic purposes. This trend has been evident in Poland, where 72% consider that Poland should prioritise its own interests, including agricultural exports, and where support for continuing to help Ukraine halved from 62% in January 2023 to 31% in May 2024.<sup>8</sup> Another poll indicated 10.2% support for sending Polish and/or NATO troops to Ukraine in April 2024.<sup>9</sup> In this environment, "pro-peace" or even pro-Russian narratives and societal groups, which were tacit and inert in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, have re-surfaced in public debates.

Ukraine's neighbourhood policy has its own structural ills. Kyiv has paid less attention to the regional context, which has shaped relations since 1991. Ukraine's ties with its neighbours were always subject to a complex interplay of historical legacies, domestic politics and strategic culture. Kyiv relied too heavily on its moral triumph in the aftermath of the invasion, to the detriment of working with the environment on which to build the bilateral ties. This now creates tensions due to a mismatch between Kyiv's demands and an evolving reality on the ground in the region.

Frequent and increasingly emotional statements by Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his top officials do nothing to help the situation. Even when Kyiv's points are valid and appropriate, they fuel unnecessary political tensions at a critical moment. Zelenskyy's accusations of an inadequate military or other support undermine mutual trust and contribute to further politicisation of the issue of assistance to Ukraine. If Ukraine wants to join the EU and NATO, Kyiv must be prepared to make concessions to its neighbours in the future, as Romania did, for instance, in its dispute with Ukraine in 1997 on its path towards NATO.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, decision-making in Ukraine is not as streamlined and transparent as it needs to be. The division of responsibilities between Zelenskyy and his Head of Office Andriy Yermak, as well as between the Office of the President and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is not always clear. Even less comprehensible is the role played by unofficial foreign policy advisors. There is a lack of both a tailor-made strategy for the neighbourhood and agile public communication with relevant audiences in the region. Zelenskyy's own

7 Andrew Higgins, "Ukraine Needs to Be Realistic About Its Goals, Czech President Says", *New York Times*, 23 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/world/europe/ukraine-war-goals-russia-czech-president.html>.

8 Izabela Kacprzak, "W Polsce rośnie liczba osób negatywnie nastawionych do uchodźców z Ukrainy. Dlaczego?", *Rzeczpospolita*, 18 June 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art40648561-w-polsce-rosnie-liczba-osob-negatywnie-nastawionych-do-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-dlaczego>.

9 "Most Poles against army involvement in Russia-Ukraine war", *EurActiv*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/most-poles-against-army-involvement-in-russia-ukraine-war/>.

10 Territorial issues included the resolved disagreement over Snake Island and its surroundings, the Bystre channel dispute, and Northern Bukovina (a traditionally Romanian region, now part of Ukraine's Chernivtsi Oblast).

style of governing through grand initiatives is often problematic from the point of view of their implementation and substance, whether in domestic or foreign policy. As participation in a plethora of formats and initiatives shows, summits and joint declarations are an added value, but should not be seen as an end in themselves.

Inconsistent implementation undermines the policy. The idea of a set of bilateral, non-binding security guarantees – a significant step forward in peacetime – proved to be closer to another “Budapest Memorandum”<sup>11</sup> than “NATO-lite”. As a result, Kyiv vehemently criticised Poland for its non-commitment to a non-binding agreement just weeks after its conclusion in July 2024. The initiative itself, which appeared on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023 after Ukraine failed to secure an invitation to NATO, has been replaced by the demand for a NATO invitation in Zelenskyy’s Victory Plan, unveiled in September 2024.

Finally, Ukraine’s communications have fallen out of sync with the new reality. To a certain degree, Kyiv has become a double victim of its early successes. Continued attempts to ride on Zelenskyy’s extremely successful public communications campaign of 2022 have fallen short of the expectations of the elites and societies in the region. The government’s arguments to “give way/persevere because we are at war” or that partners “owe Ukraine for their security” are no longer resonating in the neighbourhood. At the same time, Ukraine’s key narrative of “Europe is next if Ukraine falls” is no longer convincing. A distorted perception of the Russian threat is not only politically manipulative, but also creates a detrimental dichotomy between investing in Ukraine’s military capacity and prioritizing one’s own.

11 “Memorandum on security assurances in connection with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000280401fbb>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conflicting economic and political preferences between Ukraine and some of its Western neighbours, a political backlash in Hungary and Slovakia, and Ukraine’s own diplomatic miscalculations have undermined the momentum for support that emerged after the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, the current pattern of cooperation, in which common security interests coincide with unresolved political and economic disputes, will continue for the foreseeable future. The re-emergence of political tensions is a cause for concern, however. The politicisation of bilateral ties and the inability to break path dependencies will not ruin existing partnerships, but they will prevent the relationship from moving forward.

The existing status quo is not in Kyiv’s interest. Whatever the policy towards Ukraine under a new US administration, Ukraine will need reliable security and economic partners. The decline of the US commitment to Ukraine can only increase the value of developing strategic partnerships in its own neighbourhoods.

Despite the existing tensions, it is Kyiv that needs to be most proactive in searching for a way out, as it is Ukraine’s future and not that of its NATO member-state neighbours that is at stake. The existing bilateral issues, including economic disputes, are not an insoluble conundrum, but their resolution requires a consistent and coherent effort. The best results are likely to be achieved through official channels and legal institutions, including national courts, and through dialogue with societies. Ukraine’s civil society can play an important role in the latter. But it could also help the Ukrainian authorities to understand the nuances of communication within the region. Removing unnecessary political tensions will enhance the existing potential to build new cooperation frameworks and anchor Ukraine in the European future. /