Ukraine's Balance Policy between European Union and Russia

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Abstract	Having declared independence in 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained strategic importance in terms of its geographical location. It is regarded a "buffer zone" for both the European Union (EU) and Russia. There is a division within the country into the pro-Western and pro-Russian options. Ukraine's aspiration for the UE membership has faced Russia's objection since time immemorial. In the past, Ukraine preferred to pursue a balance policy between Russia and the EU. Ukraine's attempt to approach the West with the Orange Revolution, its inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy, its participation in the Eastern Partnership program were perceived as a threat by Russia. The Ukrainian crisis, in particular, brought these two countries face to face. This crisis also deeply affected both the EU's energy policy and its relations with Russia. After all the developments that followed, the issue of Ukraine's membership in the EU remains uncertain.

Introduction

Ukraine is a very important country from a geostrategic point of view. Being a "buffer zone" between Russia and the EU makes the country valuable both for the EU and Russia. Ukraine had remained under the rule of the Soviet Union until it gained independence in 1991. Although Ukraine wished to establish close relations with the European Union (EU) after becoming an independent state, the Russian factor prevented this, as for Russia, Ukraine is of particular importance, both strategically and because of the Russian population that inhabits it. Russia, one of the biggest trade partners of the EU, carries the energy supplies to the UE countries via Ukraine. While Ukraine's

foreign policy is sometimes close to that of Russia, sometimes it follows the EU preferences. Stuck between these two options, Ukraine is nearly doomed to a balance policy.

While one side of Ukraine aims to integrate with the West and develop relations with the EU, the other side wants to maintain relations with Russia. Based on this, there is a division within the country. It is possible to see this division especially during the election periods and in the foreign policy decision-making processes. With the Orange Revolution, Ukraine took steps to become a member of such international organizations as the EU and NATO. The Orange Revolution and the Ukraine crisis proved to be important for the general course of the EU–Ukraine relations. Especially with the Ukraine crisis, the EU and Russia have come face to face one on one. This crisis has affected both the EU's energy policy and its relations with Russia. Moreover, important are the Association Agreement signed between Ukraine and the EU and the Eastern Partnership realised within the scope of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Russia and Ukraine are two different nations with mutual historical and cultural ties. Ukraine, which gained independence after 1991, has since followed an unstable domestic and foreign policy in the process of becoming a nation-state. While Ukraine wants to achieve full independence, Russia sees Ukraine as a dependent post-Soviet Union territory. Ukraine sometimes has followed a pro-Western policy and sometimes a foreign policy in the orbit of Russia, thereby making effort to maintain its independence between these two balances. This balance policy caused it numerous problems with Russia. Future will show the effects of this balance policy. It should be emphasized that Russia is ready to realize its own wishes with military operations, if it deems them necessary.

This study is based on the literature review. It discusses in general terms the change and transformation of Ukraine's relations with the EU and Russia, from the past to the present. First examined are the geostrategic importance of Ukraine, the division of Ukraine, the Orange Revolution, the Ukraine crisis, the post-independence developments in the country, such as Russia's annexation of Crimea. Afterwards, the EU specific relations are analysed, including the Ukraine's EU Policy, the European Neighbourhood Policy and, finally, the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The scope of the discussion has been confined to the specific events in the triangle of Ukraine, Russia, and the EU. The main problem raised here is the balance policy followed by Ukraine, with particular emphasis on the developments which took place in 2014 and later, making Ukraine to follow pro-Western policies.

Ukraine's geostrategic importance

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared independence in 1991 and started to exist as a new actor in the international system. In addition to being one of the largest countries in Europe, with an area of 603,000 square kilometres, it is the second most important country in Eastern Europe after Russia. Due to its geographical location, it has a key importance for both Russia and Europe. Russia has always seen Ukraine as a buffer zone or an important transit area. From this point of view, it should be noted that the word 'Ukraina' in the Russian language conveys the meaning of a "border country, end country" (Bilener, 2004, p. 311). From the perspective of

the EU, the situation is not much different. The EU also sees Ukraine as a buffer zone. To summarize, the EU considers Ukraine a grey area protecting it against a possible danger from the east, while Russia regards it as a buffer zone against possible attacks from the west. It is also obvious that Ukraine, which is stuck between two powers, has no alternative but to pursue a policy of balance (Keskin, 2017, p. 105).

Ukraine has always maintained its importance, from the distant past to the present. It was its large territory and its economic potential that played a role. As it is known, during the Cold War period, while the Soviet Union was more active in the Black Sea and its coasts, the USA could not be as effective as the Soviets in that region. In the process that started after the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially the countries around the Black Sea regained their value once again. A critical period has begun for Ukraine, which Russia describes as a strategic barrier. It concerns particularly the energy transmission lines (Dural, Emiraliyev, 2015, p. 105). As far as the natural resources are concerned, it is known that approximately 5% of the mineral resources existing in the world are located in Ukraine. Especially, the reserves of the coal, oil and natural gas, iron ore, and the mineral rock deposits in the Donbas basin are very important for the country (Ukrainetreak.com, 2022).

With the independence of Ukraine as one of the best industrially developed countries of the former Soviet Union, the Donbas mines have become very important not only for Ukraine itself, but also for all the countries around it. However, it should be known that the scarcity of energy resources is one of the main problems of this country (Bilener, 2004, p. 311). Ukraine acts as an energy corridor in the eyes of Russia. Ukraine is indispensable for Russia, which has invested in the energy sector and developed its economy in this way. However, it should not be forgotten that Ukraine could not save itself from being dependent on Russia in terms of oil and natural gas. For this reason, it was inevitable to establish a relationship of interdependence between the two countries. Ukraine's dependence on Russia in terms of oil and natural gas will bring some problems for Ukraine in the future (Sonmez et al., 2015, p. 657).

While Ukraine was shaping its foreign policy with its break from the Soviet Union, it did not completely ignore its cultural, economic, political, and historical relations with the Soviet Union, while at the same time trying to establish closer ties with the western community. In this context, the EU and NATO have been important institutions for Ukraine. The balance policy that Ukraine has established between the EU and Russia has sometimes been negatively reflected in its domestic and foreign policy. It is possible to say that a transformative policy has been followed in the country on the axis of Eurasianism and Westernism (Akdemir, 2014, pp. 61–62).

Ethnic and ideological structure of Ukraine

Ukraine has a population of approximately 43 million according to 2022 data (DW, 2022). Approximately 77% of this total population is of Ukrainian origin, while 17% is of Russian origin. The remainder consists of very few Tatars, Jews, Moldovans, Belarusians, Romanians, Poles, Bulgarians, and Hungarians. There is a division within the country, mostly between Russians and

Ukrainians. As to the religious structure of this population, the Orthodoxy is dominant, but there is a social structure consisting of the Catholics (Stork, 2015, pp. 28–29).

Considering this information, it is possible to roughly distinguish two parts of Ukraine – the east and west ones. Eastern and Western Ukraine is separated by the Dnieper river. Although it is not meant to constitute a sharp border, such a distinction is made due to the country's *de facto* divided ethnic structure. While Eastern Ukraine is a predominantly Orthodox and Russian area, Western Ukraine is a predominantly ethnic Ukrainian region where the Catholics live. Another difference is that mineral resources are predominantly found in the east and its economy consists mainly of heavy industry, while the west is a complete agricultural region (Bilener, 2007, p. 116). In addition to this separation into the east and west, the Crimean peninsula constitutes a special region. More than half of the Crimea region is populated by the Russians. The Crimea region was taken from Russia in 1954 as a gift on the 300th anniversary of the Pereyaslav Treaty and also as a sign of goodwill, and became an autonomous region belonging to Ukraine (Tecer, 2014, p. 110). The country as a whole is almost entirely Slavic. When the historical evolution of the Russia and Ukraine is analyzed, it can be seen that the citizens of these two countries are two communities close to each other both in terms of culture and the language they use. Moreover, there are those who define Ukrainians as "little Russians" (Bingol, 2014, p. 18).

People of Russian origin living in the eastern part of the country introduce themselves as Eurasians. Even in the elections held in the country, the easterners vote for parties that make pro-Russian policies. However, they openly oppose he Ukraine's westward shift, that is, its membership in such organizations as the EU or NATO. On the contrary, the Western part considers themselves an indispensable part of the Eastern European tradition. In accordance with this, the inhabitants of this region fully support westernization and support parties advocating integration with the West. At the same time, they consider themselves Europeans (Bişkin, 2010, p. 45).

The main reason underlying the existence of such a polarization within the country is that one side lived under the Russian and the other under Austrian rule for a long time throughout history. The problem of reconciliation between these two separate groups constitutes one of the most complex problems that Ukraine has experienced in the postindependence nationstate forming process. As a matter of fact, the two regions supporting different political parties has been a determining factor in the shaping of political life (Bilener, 2004, pp. 333–334). In this context, the internal dynamics of the country has been an important element of power in determining the state's structural organizations and foreign policy preferences. It is an undeniable fact that the basic values of the societies living in the country have an impact on the shaping of the discourse and practices in the country's foreign policy. In this direction, western Ukraine, which identifies its core values with the West and Europe, on the one hand, and eastern Ukraine, which shares its history with Russia and Eurasia, on the othand, laid the groundwork for political polarization in the intellectual field, specific to domestic politics (Tecer-Çağri, 2014, pp. 110–111).

Russia and the EU have different views of the recognition of Ukraine's independence. First of all, since the independence of Ukraine was not immediately accepted by Russia, bilateral relations between these two countries did not become official at once. Russia accepted Ukraine as a sister

country and evaluated it as an autonomous region under Russia. The EU, on the other hand, assumed Ukraine as an independent state and pursued a policy in that direction (Keskin, 2017, p. 110).

Ukraine, which became independent in 1991, attempted to solve the problems that emerged in relations with Russia, while at the same time tried to pursue independent policy towards the West. Ukraine adopted three main lines of foreign policy: First, the Eurasian paradigm advocating the adoption of a policy around Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), second, the Euro-Atlantic paradigm aiming at Europe and the Atlantic region, and third, a policy in line with the Ukraine's basic interests. The latter is the Southeast paradigm that advocates regional cooperation with various interested countries (Turan, 2004, p. 380).

When a general analysis is made, it is possible to summarize main priorities of the Ukraine's foreign policy. It is aimed at taking various steps to strengthen the fully independent position of the country and to integrate its national identity by founding the political institutions on a democratic basis. In addition, the main priorities include: harmonizing the country with Euro-Atlantic institutions, making efforts to ensure the interests of the country in the global arena, creating a comprehensive cooperation environment with Russia, and strengthening ties with the neighbouring countries (Buyukakinci, 2004, pp. 408–409).

Turning point for independent Ukraine: The Orange Revolution

After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine's first president was the pro-Western Leonid Kravchuk. In this period Kravchuk, like many other post-Soviet state leaders, focused on liberal reforms in politics and economy. However, due to the economic and political chaos that resulted from these reforms, Leonid Kuchma, who was thought to be pro-Russian in the first place, was appointed as the new head of state in 1994 to replace Kravchuk. Despite being known as pro-Russian, Kuchma did not hesitate to implement a multi-vector policy when necessary and occasionally pursued anti-Russian policies. In the first period, therefore, a balance policy was applied towards both the West and Russia (Tezer, 2014, p. 111). During the Kuchma period, Ukraine received the third largest amount of foreign aid from the USA. In addition, Ukraine signed the Partnership for Peace Treaty with NATO and developed the relations with United Kingdom. The vision of joining the EU was for the first time put forward during the Kuchma period (Kuzio, 2006, p. 91).

The discourse and practices of Kuchma in the following periods were described as soft authoritarianism from the Soviet Union period. In this context, opposition movements have emerged in the country, corruption reduced the influence of civil society, and interventions in the media were undertaken. Finally, after the emergence of the cassette tapes containing Kuchma's statements about the murder of an opposition journalist, a political crisis arose and the Kuchma era came to an end (Sarikaya, 2010, p. 3).

The 2004 presidential elections of independent Ukraine were of critical importance for the future of Ukraine. Although the course of relations between Ukraine and Russia improved before the Orange Revolution, some difficulties were experienced during this election period. The first of the two important candidates in the election was the pro-Russian Victor Yanukovych,

while the second was the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko. The Moscow government clearly supported Yanukovych, and the governments of Western Europe supported Yushchenko. The problems experienced during the election period have been an indicator of the conflict caused by the division within the country (Keskin, 2017, pp. 98–99).

Under normal circumstances, after the second round elections, it was announced that the Russian supporter Yanukovych won the election. However, this situation was not accepted by the public. When it was announced that irregularities were discovered in the elections, the people revolted. The people, who could not accept the situation, used the color orange as a kind of symbol for themselves and their future. The analyzes revealed that the elections were devoid of justice and fairness, were not democratic and were not conducted according to current international standards. With the election results being deemed invalid, a vote was held again. The pro-Western Yushchenko won there-election (Sarikaya, 2014, pp. 55–57).

It would be very appropriate to say that the Orange Revolution is a clear artifact of the division existing in the country. The people living in the east of the country, predominantly Russians, did not support the revolution and did not show up, while those living in the west of the country were very active here. What should be emphasized is that the people's revolt and pouring into the town squares was not a bloody struggle, it was carried out with dances and music. In addition, it should be underlined that the USA had an influence on these election results. The supporters of Yushchenko were also presented with a financial aid package by the USA. Although this incident reminded the rivalry of Russia and the USA during the cold war, the West became the winner in 2004 (Erbil, 2010, pp. 151–154).

Yushchenko was considered by both the EU and the USA as a manager capable of establishing a liberal democracy system. Because of this, he succeeded in getting the support of the West. He thought that the Ukrainian language should be spoken all over the country and announced this language compulsory. Thus, Ukraine aimed at breaking away from the Russians, adopting its own national identity, and carried out policy in this direction. Yushchenko was the country's third elected head of state, serving a total of five years. After being elected president, he elected Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister. However, as a result of the unpleasant events between the two in the future, Yuriy Yekhanurov succeeded in sitting in the prime minister's seat a year later (Benli, 2016, pp. 86–88).

When Yushchenko came to power, he clearly stated that Ukraine should break away from its multi-dimensional perception of politics. Yushchenko stated that the priority for Ukraine's security and future is integration into the union, and that the foreign policy orientation in the next period is to become a member of the EU and NATO (Bajor, 2017, pp. 13–14). The Orange Revolution has been called the victory of the people's power throughout the country. The new government that came to power declared war against corruption in the country. Some work has been done to combat corruption. When the foreign policy administration of the country in the previous periods was analyzed, many inconsistent and contradictory statements and activities in this direction were revealed. Therefore, the first thing to do was to draw closer to the EU by forming a policy in a definite and determined line (Kurth, 2005, pp. 150–151).

The events that took place under the name of the Orange Revolution were written as a minus in Russia's record. Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, whom he appointed as prime minister, preferred policies aimed at the admission of Ukraine to the EU and its participation in organizations such as NATO. For these purposes, they excluded Russia. However, it is a fact that this situation activated Russia and returned to Ukraine in the form of heavy sanctions (Tuysuzoglu, 2011, p. 67). The election of Yushchenko as the head of state also negatively affected the course of relations between Ukraine and Russia. In the year Yushchenko started his presidency, Russia made a counter move and cut off the natural gas for Ukraine. As a result of the negotiations, the contract, at twice the cost of the gas purchased from Russia, was signed by Ukraine (Kerem, 2022). At this point, it is important not to forget the Ukraine's dependence on Russia when it comes to energy. Russia's use of natural gas as a power factor against Ukraine, whenever it considers it appropriate, makes Ukraine's job more difficult. Likewise, the natural gas cuts cause the trust in the pro-Western administrations to be damaged in the eyes of the public, but it also brings problems in domestic politics (Bişkin, 2010, p. 64).

To make a general assessment, in addition to the problems such as political instability, domestic problems, the economy not developing at the desired level, the reforms not being implemented as expected during Yushchenko's tenure, the interventions of foreign powers in Ukraine in line with their own interests have complicated the country's situation even more. Moreover, the fact that Yushchenko could not achieve the desired success in terms of integration with the West caused disappointment in the eyes of the public (Bişkin, 2010, p. 63).

2014 Ukraine crisis and its effects

With the new election held in Ukraine in 2010, the person who managed to sit in the chair of the president was the pro-Russian Yanukovych (Kerem, 2022). The main tools of the EU's policies to improve its relations with the surrounding countries include the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements. November 2013 was a critical period for the EU–Ukraine relations. That year, the country has almost become confused with the announcement of President Yanukovych that he will postpone the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The idea that EU values would be ignored and instead pursued different authoritarian policies worried the public. Thus, various protests began to be held in Kiev. People wanted to further their relations with the West. This event, which is also referred to as the Euromaidan Movement in the literature, was recorded as the first civil resistance mobilized against Ukraine's interest in the EU (Keskin, 2017, pp. 88–89).

Yanukovych stated that he would not sign the Association Agreement with the EU and decided to start the membership negotiations to the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia. Thereupon, the Russian leader Vladimir Putin and the Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych came together. Putin offered Ukraine a contract worth 15 billion dollars of economic aid based on the purchase of government bonds and a reduction in natural gas price, in order to solve the country's economic problems. Thus, demonstrations and protests across the country intensified (Alkan, 2015, p. 91). Before 2014, there were already some problems in the relations between Russia and Ukraine,

which included Ukraine's ties with NATO and the EU, the status of Russia's Crimea-based Black Sea Fleet, and the transit of Russian gas to Europe via Ukraine. In addition to these problems, ex-president Yanukovych's follow-up policies in favor of the Moscow government and establishing political and economic ties with it triggered the Honor Revolution (Congressional Research Service, 2021, pp. 14–15).

Citizens gathered in the capital Kiev, most of whom were Western Ukrainians, believed that the basic policy to be carried out for the future of the country should be pursued with participation in such organizations such as NATO and the EU. On the contrary, Eastern Ukrainian citizens were in favor of keeping in closer contact with Russia. As a result, these events came to an end with the dismissal of Yanukovych in 2014 (Saglam, 2014, p. 235). As a result of these developments, although Yanukovych tried to reduce the public's reaction, he was not successful. For this reason, Yanukovych had to resign and later took refuge in Russia. Subsequently, Petro Poroshenko was appointed as the new head of state, replacing Yanukovych (Keskin, 2017, pp. 88–89).

The protests, which started in Kiev, first took place after the rejection of the partnership agreement. Later on, problems such as the violation of various human rights, corruption, government repression, and violation of democracy were added. With the spread of the protests to other cities of the country, the government enacted harsh legal regulations. This situation caused the crisis to flare up from time to time. As a result, many people were injured and about 100 people died (Bingol, 2014, pp. 16–17).

In a sense, it is possible to read the Association Agreement as a move made to prevent the relations with Russia from getting worse than they were. To look at it from another perspective, there are also those who see this move as more beneficial for Ukraine. Namely, it is known that the Association Agreement, which is planned to be made between Ukraine and the EU, will not provide economic gain to the country in a short time. With this agreement, the EU has some expectations that it will be very transparent about capital and adhere to the democratic innovations along with the fight against corruption. But the Ukrainian government and the political elite are not very willing to implement these reforms (Ozdal, 2013, pp. 6–9).

While the Euromaidan event was successfully launched in the regional and global arena, things took a different turn with the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the support of some separatist forces that broke out in the east of the country. Many people were injured and many died in the conflict between the protesting groups and the Russian supporter separatists (Keskin, 2017, p. 89). The violent acts that started in the Donbas region, where the Russian population is dense, gradually turned into a serious conflict with the use of heavy weapons. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the protests spread to regions such as Donetsk and Luhansk. Some of these regions have passed under the control of the separatists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 2011). In summary, the Ukraine crisis, which emerged after the failure to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, became an international problem with the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

Russia's annexation of Crimea on the axis of Ukraine policy

To briefly analyze Russia's Ukraine policy, the Russians consider the Ukrainian people as a separate tribe of themselves. There are even those who define Ukraine as an artificial state. The Russians do not want a pro-Western administrator to come to power in Ukraine and pursue a pro-Western policy. They firmly oppose Ukraine's wishes to become a member of organizations such as NATO and the EU.

Russia is struggling to have a say over Ukraine, as in the history of the Soviet Union. Russia offers the CIS instead of NATO, and the Eurasian Economic Common Area instead of the EU. Thus, Russia is trying to include Ukraine in these projects (Bişkin, 2010, p. 80). The basic policy of Russia against Ukraine has been shaped in the context of the Near Environment Doctrine. In line with this policy, Russia aimed to be an effective power again in the former Soviet Union geography (Keskin, 2017, p. 111). However, in Russia, the desired level of success was not achieved in the context of the Near Environment Doctrine during the Boris Yeltsin period. It is possible to say that a success was achieved with the coming of Putin to the presidency in 2000. During his tenure, Putin used the energy card and the presence of the Russian minority in the former Soviet Union countries as an important tool in foreign policy. Based on this, the intervention against the Crimea, where the Russian population is in the majority, is considered a success in Russia in this sense (Oztekin, 2019, p. 77).

Ukraine experienced some problems, especially with Russia, after gaining independence. At the beginning of these problems are the status of Crimea and the ownership of the Black Sea Fleet, the control of nuclear weapons in Ukraine remaining there from the Soviet Union times and the transfer of these weapons to Russia. The development of the minority rights of the Russian population living in Ukraine, Russia's approaches towards the recognition of Ukraine's independence, and different perspectives on Ukraine's integration into the CIS are some of the other important problems (Turan, 2004, p. 369).

Crimea has lived under the domination of different civilizations from the past to the present. The last time during the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev left this region to Ukraine as an autonomous region in 1954 (Keskin, 2017, p. 92), on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Pereyaslav Treaty as a sign of friendship and brotherhood. Crimea, which was not a problem at that time, later became a very important region in the global arena (Buyukakinci, 2004, p. 405).

Ukraine's separation from the Soviet Union and gaining an independent state identity caused inevitably some problems between the two countries to occur. Crimea, where the Black Sea Fleet is located, is one of the issues that seriously confront Ukraine and Russia. More than a half of the Crimea population are Russians. Therefore, Russia wanted to take back Crimea (Turan, 2004, p. 368). Crimea is also very important from a strategic point of view. The Russian military base is located here. Sevastopol is located right in the center of the Black Sea region. The Crimean Peninsula, which is symbolic for Russia, also has an indispensable value in serving the interests of the country. Sevastopol port provides much more possibilities when compared to other ports. It can accommodate military ships of larger size (Akman, 2014, pp. 10–11).

When discussing the agreements to be made, the idea of partitioning this region, which is normally within the borders of Ukraine, between Ukraine and Russia, was put forward. The country that owns this region will gain in the long run from both the Black Sea and the oil flow to be transferred from the Caspian basin. The problem of the Black Sea Fleet includes the following details: the division of warships between the two countries, the issue of defining the sovereignty of Crimea, the clarification of the basic legal status of the Russian military base located in and around the Crimean port of Sevastopol (Buyukakinci, 2004, pp. 413–414). In 1997, Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement to clarify these issues. With this treaty, the Black Sea Fleet was divided in half between the two countries. Russia leased the ports in Sevastopol for a period of 20 years. Subsequently, it was decided to deduce the rental price from Ukraine's debts to Russia. It was agreed that Crimea is under the auspices of Ukraine (Turan, 2004, pp. 379–380). But in February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea using military force. With this incident, Russia has clearly violated its sovereignty. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, a referendum was held on the status of Crimea. As a result, Russia achieved its goal and tied Crimea to itself (Sonmez et al., 2015, p. 663).

The regional crisis, which started in the last quarter of 2013, acquired an international dimension with the occupation of Crimea by Russia. The West, especially the EU and the USA, reacted strongly to this move of Russia, announcing that various sanctions would be applied directly against Russia. In fact, the Western countries have stated that they will not recognize the treaty that includes Crimea as a protectorate of Russia. As a result, the West and Russia came face to face in this incident and a great crisis was experienced (Erol, 2014, pp. 2–3).

After the Crimean crisis, the European Council of Heads of State and Government held an extraordinary meeting. At this meeting, Council President Herman Van Rompuy declared that Russia harmed Ukraine's sovereignty as well as its territorial integrity. In addition, he said that the decision taken did not comply with the Ukrainian Constitution. At this meeting, it was stated that the visa exemption negotiations planned to be held between Russia and the EU were cancelled, and the studies for Russia's inclusion in the G-8 Summit will be carried out at a later date (Ozdal et al., 2014, p. 12). The EU could not make quick and effective decisions concerning the Ukraine crisis in the first place. There are many reasons for this. Namely, some foreign policy decisions require the approval of all member states. Therefore, the decision-making mechanism moves slowly in these situations. The approaches of the EU members differed in the Ukraine crisis. For example, while countries such as Lithuania and Poland supported the idea that severe sanctions should be imposed on Russia, countries such as Germany and England pursued a more moderate policy by supporting the idea that sanctions should not be rushed and the problems should be resolved through diplomacy (Bayrakli, 2014, pp. 3–4).

As a result, within the framework of the developments in Crimea and the events in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Russia supported the separatist groups and recognized the republics established in these regions. As it is known, Ukraine has tried to maintain a balance policy between the West and Russia for many years. As a result of the latest developments, Ukraine has abandoned this balance policy and decided to pursue a pro-Western policy (Kahraman, 2019, p. 56).

After the events in the east of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, some changes were needed in the security policy in Ukraine. In the National Security Strategy document released in 2015, Western norms and institutions were emphasized and Ukraine's desire to develop good relations in cooperation with NATO was revealed. In the continuation of the document, it is mentioned that Russia poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Therefore, the necessity of strengthening the defense of Ukraine was emphasized (Bajor, 2017, p. 14–15).

When we look at the chain of events that took place during and after the Orange Revolution, President Yanukovych's escape from Ukraine, the change of government, the occupation of Crimea and then joining Russia gave a positive impetus to the EU's Ukraine policy in general. As a result of these events, first the political part of the Association Agreement, which was planned to be made in 2014, was signed, and then it was decided that the economic part would be signed in the next period. The EU has once again become a source of hope for Ukraine and a new step towards its integration into the union has been taken (Dural, Emiraliyev, 2015, p. 123).

Ukraine's integration policy towards the European Union

After Ukraine became independent in 1991, it wanted to improve bilateral relations with the EU. First, in 1994, Ukraine declared integration with the European institutions as its first foreign policy strategy. Subsequently, the Association and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Ukraine was signed in 1998. This treaty deals with social and economic issues. Strategic partnership was mentioned at another summit held that year. While Ukraine wanted to join the EU, the EU stated that they should not act prematurely regarding the membership request, citing the main problems of the country (Bayrakli, 2014, p. 3).

While Ukraine wanted to get closer to the EU after gaining independence, the Russian factor created an obstacle to this. Therefore, it was almost inevitable for the country to adopt a policy of balance. As mentioned before, the geostrategic importance of Ukraine and its role as a buffer between Russia and the EU make this country particularly important. However, from the point of view of the EU, if Ukraine's membership request is answered positively, the buffer zone will disappear and it will join the EU. Thus, the possibility of the EU and Russia to come into conflict will increase, which will pose a major security threat to the union (Sari, 2015, pp. 38–40). In summary, the EU countries have pursued a policy of balance between Russia and Ukraine for a long time. When it comes to energy, EU countries do not want to have Russia against them because of their commitment to Russia. Therefore, it is argued that Ukraine's integration with the European Union rather than its participation in the Union is preferred, because, in order to ensure the security of the EU countries, first of all stability in Ukraine must be ensured. From this point of view, the EU is trying to create a safe buffer zone (Bişkin, 2010, p. 83).

Since its own resources are insufficient to meet its needs, the EU satisfies its energy needs by import. It is a known fact that almost half of the total energy consumed by the EU is imported and this rate will gradually increase in the future. Therefore, the need for oil and natural gas is increasing day by day. This means that the dependence on Russia will increase. In order to reduce it,

one of the energy policies developed by the EU is to improve relations with the former Soviet Union countries. Ukraine is a good example. One of the most important factors that makes Ukraine valuable is the transportation of Russian energy resources to the EU via Ukraine (Yildirim, 2010, p. 58).

Ukraine is recognized as an energy corridor by the EU. The rate of natural gas going to Europe via Ukraine is 80%. This shows that if there is a possible natural gas cut, this will put the EU in serious trouble (Saribay, 2019, pp. 105–106). For example, in 2006, the Russian company Gazprom increased the price of natural gas it transported to Ukraine. As a result of the disagreements between the two countries, Russia cut off the gas flow. The fact that the incident occurred in January had a profound effect in the winter conditions. Ukraine has tried to make up for this shortcoming by confiscating the natural gas that passes through its own country and thus reaches the EU states. The tension, at first between the two countries, later acquired an international dimension. A consensus was reached in the negotiations that followed (Bilener, 2007, pp. 125–126).

The EU has shaped its energy policies towards Ukraine with its strategies towards the former Soviet Union countries. Some of these key policies are: TRACECA (Europe–Caucasus–Asia Transport Corridor), TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), INOGATE (Interstate Transport of Oil and Gas to Europe), and ENP, which replaced TACIS in 2007 (European Neighbourhood Policy). Through such programs, the EU has aimed to accelerate Ukraine's transition to a free economy and, in addition, to democracy (Keskin, 2017, p. 107).

Ukraine on the European Union path: European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership

In 2004, 10 new members were added to the EU body. With the accession of new countries, the European Commission has presented a document titled "Wider Europe and the Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Our Relationships with Our Neighbours in the East and the South". In this document, the possible problems that the Union will face with the new members have been analyzed and therefore the need for some new effective strategies related to those regions has been emphasized. The economic problems in new places, the deficiencies in the institutional field and the prevention of conflicts were discussed. Ensuring security in neighbouring countries has been one of the main objectives of the Union (Sonmez, 2014, p. 116).

With the enlargements in 2004 and 2007, the EU expanded its borders to the East and to some CIS countries. In 2004, the EU developed the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the new neighbouring countries joining the union, because the EU is likely to be involved in the problems that neighbouring countries will experience. The main objective of this policy is to increase security, establish friendship relations, and achieve stability and prosperity between the EU, whose number of members increases and expands, with its neighbours. This policy aims at a higher level of trade liberalization as well as gradual incorporation into the single European market (Baltali, 2016, pp. 24–25). Another aim of the European Commission in 2009 within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy was to deepen the systematic cooperation between the European Union and its eastern neighbours (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova,

Georgia, and Ukraine) and to implement and support fundamental reforms in the political and economic systems of these states. (Malskyy, 2021, p. 60).

The implementation of the ENP is coordinated through the action plans prepared by the EU and the neighbouring countries in its immediate vicinity and within the framework of three principles. These principles are conditionality, differentiation, and joint ownership of the process. Action plans are not legally binding. They are prepared for a short period of several years. They include the innovations to be organized by the neighbouring countries, which are shaped by the principle of differentiation, that is, due to the different characteristics of 16 countries, which exhibit different approaches and include common interests. In summary, action plans are strategic documents prepared for particular countries (Ergan, Seyhun, 2019, p. 165).

While implementing the Neighbourhood Policy, The EU strictly adhered to the principles of democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. The Neighbourhood Policy means "more than partnership less than membership" and covers 16 countries in total (Tassinari, 2011, pp. 40–41). It is possible to list these 16 countries as follows: The southern neighbours are Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, and Libya, the eastern neighbours are Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, and finally Moldova. The point to be noted here is that although Cross-Border Cooperation within the scope of the Russian Neighbourhood Policy is involved in activities, it is not a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (European Commission, 2021). ENP supports regional cooperation initiatives such as Eastern Partnership, Mediterranean Union, and Cross-Border Cooperation (The EU Neighbourhood Portal, 2021). The Eastern Partnership is recognized as part of the ENP. It is possible to evaluate the Eastern Partnership as a special approach that includes the eastern borders developed by Europe after 2009 (Euronews, 2013).

The 6 countries included in the Eastern Partnership are the former Soviet Union states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This initiative constitutes a union based on common values. The Eastern Partnership initiative has come to the fore with the aim of economic integration, political cooperation, and strengthened sector cooperation. Here, the EU adopts approaches to increase cooperation opportunities between itself and the state it partnered, and to bring its partners closer than they are in terms of multidimensional exchange and cooperation (Keskin, 2017, p. 57–58). The Eastern Partnership, which includes Ukraine, is a policy carried out to ensure a stronger social structure, governance, and economy (The EU Neighbourhood Portal, 2021). The economic ultimate goal of the Eastern Partnership is to gradually adapt the countries to the Union economy through deep and comprehensive free trade agreements. This partnership offers visa liberalization and the opportunity to travel more easily. It envisages the cooperation in various fields, such as energy, governance, culture, transportation, environment, and economy (Ozerdem, 2012, p. 18).

In 2015, the EU renewed its Neighbourhood Policy. The reason for this is that extremism is becoming more frequent including developments such as terrorism, violations of international law, incitement to conflict, human rights violations and increase in refugee flows, significantly influenced by Russia's aggressive policy that led to the illegal annexation of Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in Donbas (Vovk, 2021, p. 72).

The EU wanted to strengthen its foreign relations by including Ukraine in the Eastern Partnership program. After all, perhaps the most important of the countries included in the program for the EU is Ukraine. The geographical importance of the country, the facts that it acts as a corridor between Russia and the EU, and that it is the largest country in the program make it valuable. This partnership was implemented in Brussels in 2008 (Senay, Kocak, 2014, p. 18).

European Union – Ukraine Association Agreement

Before the association agreement with the EU, Ukraine wanted to solve some problems in its internal affairs. They considered one of the most important of these the fight against corruption. After the 2014 Honor Revolution, the Ukrainian government included the fight against corruption among its main objectives. Ukraine's score in the NGO Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has gradually improved. According to 2020 data, it was ranked 117th among 180 countries. This was a success. Especially, the United States of America and other international stakeholders support Ukraine's anti-corruption reforms (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 8).

The Ukrainian crisis broke out when the Association Agreement with Ukraine, which was planned to be signed, was rejected by the then President Yanukovych. Ultimately, the Association Agreement with the EU was signed in 2014 under the new president Poroshenko (Keskin, 2017, pp. 88–91). This treaty provides both political and free trade opportunities. In cooperation in sectors such as energy, education, and transportation, Ukraine has been one step closer to the EU. In this direction, economic relations develop with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which is a part of the Association Agreement. This agreement also eliminates import tariffs as well as prevents other trade restrictions. Thus, Ukraine and EU markets will be integrated (European Parliament, 2014).

Thanks to DCFTA, the country's economy was expected to get closer to the EU and benefit from its renewal and development thanks to the reforms to be made. The possibility of foreign investment to come to the country could increase, business areas could be expanded and access to the Ukrainian market could be simpler (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 2016). The DCFTA section of the Association Agreement was applied provisionally from 1 January 2016. The Partnership Agreement provided a close bond of partnership based on respect for democratic principles, common values, good governance, the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and human rights. This is an arrangement that aims at political unity and economic integration. It can bring many more developments (Delegation of The European Union to Ukraine, 2016).

The Association Agreement signed between the EU and Ukraine consists of two chapters. The political part of the agreement was signed by the Prime Minister of Ukraine Arseniy Yatsenyuk at the summit meeting held on 21 March 2014. The economic part of the agreement was subsequently signed by the President of the country, Petro Poroshenko, at the meeting held on 27 June 2014. This treaty is the largest international legal document in the history of Ukraine. It is also the largest to-date agreement concluded by the EU with a third country (Government Portal, 2022).

During the Volodymyr Zelenski period, negotiations with the EU at the level of leaders began to yield positive outcome. According to the results of an analysis performed by the Ukrainian national platform, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum gave Ukrainians the opportunity to access the EU programs, participate in small and medium-sized enterprises, educational initiatives, and cultural programs, enhanced development of infrastructure of Ukrainian cities in projects aimed at developing research and innovation, increased academic mobility, supported trade and visa liberalization, and made many other positive contributions (Vovk, 2021, pp. 80–81).

As a result of these arrangements, when the latest situation of the relationship between Ukraine and the EU is examined, approximately 3 million Ukrainian citizens have travelled to the EU without a visa since June 2017. More than 15 billion euro have been spent on supporting Ukraine's reform process since 2014 (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2021). As to the trade volume between Ukraine and the EU in the recent past, there has been a decrease in export and import rates in 2020, especially due to the COVID-19 crisis. Between January 2020 and December 2021, the EU imports from Ukraine increased by around 55%, while imports increased by around 17% (Eurostat, 2022).

Conclusions

The balance policy followed by Ukraine has been instrumental in the country's rapprochement with Russia on the one hand, and with the EU on the other. The existing division of the people in the country has always been a determining factor in the elections to be held or in the determination of the policies to be carried out. The distinction between those in power who are pro-Russian or pro-EU has caused foreign policy preferences to change from time to time. For example, while the Yanukovych period was dominated by the Russian sympathies, the desire to pursue a pro-Western policy increased with the coming to power of Yushchenko. The country's desire to improve its relations with the EU or Russia has been a problem in itself. Russia responded to Ukraine's request for the EU membership by annexing Crimea. For this reason, the EU has imposed various sanctions on Russia.

Since 2014, the Ukrainian government has prioritized closer integration with the EU and NATO. The constitutional amendment of 2019 is an example. In addition, President Zelenski's first foreign visit was to Brussels. Here he made firm statements, including a statement reconfirming his strategic route to achieve full membership in the EU and NATO (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p. 25).

Ukraine has not only improved its relations with the EU, but recently also with NATO. It developed its defence plan in line with the NATO standards. An excellent example of the Ukrainian cooperation is the creation of the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade known as LITPOLUKRBRIG together with the EU member states. It is named after the Great Hetman Konstantin Ostrogsky, and includes units from the Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian armed forces. In addition, it is important to pay attention to the growth of the European countries share in regional development. The share of Ukrainian arms and military equipment exports increased from 3% in 2013 to 16% in 2020 (Vovk, 2021, p. 81).

Today, as a result of the Ukraine's pro-Western policies, and especially its desire to become a member of NATO, Russia attacked the territory of Ukraine and killed thousands of innocent people. Russia does not want a NATO member state in close vicinity to its own territory. Especially, it strongly opposes the requests to enter NATO by the countries belonging to the former Soviet Union and publicly threatens them. Such threats were made against Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition to these developments, at the Brussels Summit in June 2021 the NATO member countries announced that they are significantly concerned about the international processes related to the systematic competition of assertive and authoritarian groups for security in the Euro-Atlantic region. They aimed at drawing attention to the increasingly aggressive policies of Russia and China (Vovk, 2021, p. 70). Explaining these decisions, they especially pointed to the military exercises carried out by Russia on the Ukrainian border and to modernizing the arms industry. Nuclear weapons tests have been effective. In addition, Russia has been actively developing weapons in recent years. Belarus and the EU carried out their military exercises directly on their borders.

Shortly after this summit, an article was published in July 2021, expanding on Putin's earlier claims. He argued that Ukraine has ties to Russia and that Russians and Ukrainians are "one" (Congressional Research Services, 2021, p. 14).

Especially in the first months of 2022, the accumulation of military vehicles and equipment on the Russian-Ukrainian border, in addition to the establishment of a mobile hospital and blood center, brought serious concerns. While the European and American media talked about Russia's invasion of Ukraine being prepared, the Russian media described it as an ordinary military exercise. But the statements made by Russia were once again justified. On 24 February 2022, Russia started the war by attacking Ukraine.

Ukraine is an indispensable value for both the East and the West. Both its location and being on energy transmission lines make it valuable. Russia, one of the EU's largest trading partners, meets the EU's energy needs through Ukraine. There is a dependency on Russia, especially in the field of oil and natural gas. It seems that the energy factor constitutes one of the basic criteria that will determine the future of the country. Today, the embargoes that the big states of the EU, such as Germany and France, apply against Russia in energy and other commercial areas are deeply shaking the economic security of Russia. As a result of these embargoes, the Russian stock market remained closed for about three weeks. On the other hand, one Euro saw approximately 114–115 Russian ruble levels. In addition to all these sanctions, the EU imposes heavy economic sanctions to prevent this unfair war by confiscating the properties of various Russian oligarchs. To make a general assessment, the EU carries out more moderate policies for Ukraine. For example, it tries to attract the country to its side with the financial aid it provides in the economic sense. Russia, on the other hand, has been implementing harsher policies against Ukraine, and this has moved to the extent of war. Russia sees Ukraine as the territory of the former Soviet Union. In addition, Russia sees security according to a model of a *matryoshka* doll and wants to dominate the geographical regions close to itself.

While Ukraine aims to join the EU, the EU sees Ukraine not as a candidate country, but as a valuable neighbouring country with which it can establish close relations. As a result of this war,

Ukraine's membership process has started. The EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen delivered the same form to Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelenski during her visit to Kyiv on 8 April. In parallel, the EU includes Ukraine in the Eastern Partnership initiative according to the European Neighbourhood Policy. The EU – Ukraine Association Agreement, which was signed afterwards, is another important step. In a way, the EU's acceptance of Ukraine as a candidate country may cause it to conflict with Russia. Therefore, the reaction of the EU towards Russia's policies against Ukraine, perhaps, in the long run, will cause the EU to change its ideas for the inclusion of Ukraine in the Union. Considering all that has happened from the past to the present, it is highly uncertain where Ukraine will position itself in the future at the last stage.

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