

BULLETIN

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Perception of European Integration in Ukraine

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Support for the idea of European integration amongst Ukrainians is uncertain. Due to a poorly-developed network of contacts between the societies of Ukraine and the European Union Member States, the need for information about the Union in Ukraine's public arena is growing. It is important to use the Eastern Partnership to publicise information about the benefits of European integration for Ukraine and to stimulate open public debate on this topic. The active use of modern Internet communications technologies may be helpful in achieving this goal.

The European Union's policy towards Ukraine in recent years has not resulted in an increase in the attractiveness of the European integration process in the eyes of the country's public. Support for the idea of joining the EU has over the last 10 years remained at an average level of 50%. However, research allowing respondents to choose the eligible direction of foreign policy shows that only one third of society is in favour of the quickest possible EU accession path. The same proportion simultaneously supports integration with the EU and participation in Russian integration projects. One should note that widening regional disparities are an important problem. In 2010, the number of hard supporters of accession to the EU amounted to 40% in the western regions of the country, 15% in the central regions, and 4% in the east and south of the country (in 2000, the number of supporters of European integration was 33%, 12% and 14% accordingly).

Reasons for Low Support for European Integration. The relatively small number of Ukrainian supporters of the country's rapid accession to the EU is primarily the result of limited opportunities to form an opinion regarding the benefits and risks associated with the process of European integration based on personal experiences. Only about 20% of Ukrainian citizens have a valid passport allowing travel abroad. EU visa policy towards Ukraine additionally reduces the number of persons able to enter the territory of the Union. In 2010, about million Schengen visas were issued to Ukrainians, which corresponds to about 2% of the population. In such a situation, the perception of European integration depends significantly on existing social stereotypes about it. Integration is regarded in terms of foreign policy, not as a process associated primarily with domestic reforms. In discussing the potential benefits of integration, Ukrainians mention the freedom to travel and increasing prosperity as the most beneficial points to them. Only about 13% of the population associates this process with democratisation and economic development. Therefore, Ukrainian authorities do not feel social pressure directed at carrying out reforms in line with the declared pro-European course of the country's foreign policy. Furthermore, European integration is increasingly associated with the fear that a large part of society would emigrate and a breach of the traditional links with the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The limited network of social contacts between Ukrainian and EU citizens increases the importance of information coming through media. Mass media in Ukraine are highly susceptible to political influence by authorities. Along with the worsening of relations between Ukraine and the EU due to problems with Ukrainian authorities lacking respect for democratic values, EU topics have begun to be less frequently mentioned in Ukrainian media. Only about 7% of TV news concerns the EU, while approximately 13% of the news is devoted to Russia. News about the EU is often served in the context of the current debt crisis, which fosters the negative image of the Union. The Ukrainian authorities also emphasise the partial responsibility of the EU for the current deterioration of bilateral

relations. In particular, they cite the lack of will and resources on the EU's side to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine as well as Member States focusing on the Community's internal problems.

Possibilities to Increase Support for European Integration. Progress in the development of the Internet in Ukraine constitutes an important factor that contributes to a better perception of the process of European integration in this country. By the end of 2011, as many as one third of Ukrainians over age 18 have used this means of communication. The Internet is a source of news about national and international events and processes for about one third of users. At the same time, there is a lack of laws regulating the functioning of online media, which are increasingly popular but do not have all the privileges of traditional media. This status limits their operations, thus adversely affecting the quality of the information they distribute to the public. There is a rapidly growing number of people using social networking sites (46% of Internet users), which are increasingly becoming a tool for socio-political mobilisation. Internet access creates the opportunity to familiarise oneself with various opinions and also those from foreign sources. A picture of the EU's internal situation created on the basis of diverse sources supports a more positive perception of European integration. This is evidenced by the fact that the percentage of supporters of EU accession is the highest (60%) among young people (18–29). This social group is also the most active users of the Internet, and in particular of the newest communications technologies.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The EU should enhance its activity aimed at increasing the degree of understanding of the nature of European integration in the societies of neighbouring countries as a priority of the Eastern Partnership in the coming years. In order to improve the perception of European integration in Ukraine, actions aimed at increasing the amount of direct people-to-people contacts are needed. The implementation of a roadmap for visa-free travel adopted in 2010 will foster an increase in the mobility of Ukrainian citizens. However, taking into account their generally low level of interest in travelling abroad, it is important to develop initiatives that allow for an expansion of the range of people with experience living in the EU in the long run. In particular, Youth In Action programs should be developed and the idea of opening the Erasmus program to Eastern Partnership countries should be further promoted. The development of independent media and free access to information should remain important priorities for EU financial support to Ukraine. Special attention should be paid to a favourable legal framework for online media, which plays an important role as one of the most objective opinion-makers in Ukraine.

Taking into account the increasing importance of the Internet as a source of information, one should consider supporting Ukrainian- and Russian-language online resources specialising in EU issues through the means of development assistance. In order to increase the range of such projects, one should take maximum advantage of the possibilities of new media, including social networks (VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, Live Journal). As one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership, Poland should actively promote such actions amongst EU Member States. The creation of a system for coordinating existing and emerging programs supporting mobility and spreading information among the societies of the Eastern Partnership countries should also be considered.

Poland plays an important role in shaping Ukrainians' opinions about the EU. In 2011, trips to Poland accounted for more than half of all trips made to the EU. Direct contact with Polish society and public administration is one of the most important sources of forming opinions about the EU amongst the citizens of Ukraine. It is in the Polish interest to use the existing potential of social contacts for promoting the idea of European integration in Ukraine. In this context, it is important to facilitate and simplify procedures for border crossing. In particular, a monitoring operation of joint border and customs controls, introduced for the upcoming European football championship, should be carried out. On the basis of this experience, Poland should consider a continuation of this cooperation.