

The Ukraine-EU Summits as a mechanism for implementing the Association Agreement

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Abstract


This article argues that the Ukraine-EU summits have served as one of the effective political instruments of cooperation, contributing significantly to advancing the shared goals of both sides. By analyzing the evolution of these summits in the 1990s and after signing the Association Agreement, and their impact on both domestic and regional dynamics, this article will shed light on the multifaceted contributions of this institutional mechanism to the Ukraine-EU partnership. These summits serve as platforms for high-level political dialogue, setting the strategic direction for the bilateral relationship and monitoring progress in AA implementation. Examining the effectiveness of Ukraine-EU summits necessitates not only acknowledging their achievements but also critically evaluating their limitations and challenges. This article delves into these complexities, highlighting both the success stories and areas for improvement. Ultimately, it seeks to offer insights into the future of this vital partnership, considering the current geopolitical landscape and the ever-evolving needs of both Ukraine and the EU.

Keywords: EU, Ukraine, Summit, Association Agreement, implementation

Introduction

The relationship between Ukraine and the European Union (EU) stands at a pivotal juncture. The ongoing war against Ukraine, fueled by Russian aggression, requires coordinated and consistent support for Ukraine's statehood and territorial integrity. In such a multidimensional geopolitical environment, the Ukraine-EU summits serve as key venues for political dialogue, promoting cooperation in various sectors. This article aims to highlight the importance of these summits by discussing their development, efficacy as means of cooperation, and effects on the wider course of the Ukraine-EU relations.

The European aspirations of Ukraine can be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s when Ukraine signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1994. This was followed by a series of steady developments where

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the relations continued to flourish, leading to an important milestone in 2014 with the signing of an Association Agreement (AA). The latter is described as a “comprehensive” agreement that deals with political, economic, and sectoral cooperation and constitutes an expression of common principles, democratic standards, and ambitions for mutual economic benefits.

As high-level diplomatic meetings, summits play a crucial role in international relations. They provide a platform for leaders to be engaged in direct dialogue, build trust, and forge consensus on critical issues. In the context of the Ukraine-EU relations, summits go beyond symbolic meetings. They act as cooperative tools determining the framework of cooperation, shaping priorities, generating concrete results, and creating a basis for practical teamwork.

This article argues that the Ukraine-EU summits have served as effective political instruments of cooperation, contributing significantly to advancing the shared goals of both sides. By analysing the evolution of these summits, their key areas of cooperation, and their impact on both domestic and regional dynamics, this article will shed light on the multifaceted contributions of this institutional mechanism to the Ukraine-EU partnership. Examining the effectiveness of Ukraine-EU summits necessitates not only acknowledging their achievements but also critically evaluating their limitations and challenges. This article delves into these complexities, highlighting both the success stories and areas for improvement. Ultimately, it seeks to offer insights into the future of this vital partnership, considering the current geopolitical landscape and the ever-evolving needs of both Ukraine and the EU.

1. Methodology of research

Examining the impact of the Ukraine-EU summits on the implementation of the AA requires a multifaceted approach considering various factors and employing diverse methodologies. The authors have used a historical approach to researching the Ukraine-EU summits in order to examine the evolution of the relationship between the two parties over time. The historical method allows for an in-depth exploration of the evolution of the Ukraine-EU summits and of their role in the implementation of the AA. By analysing the summits within their broader historical context, this study aims to identify patterns, trends, and turning points in the Ukraine-EU relationship. This approach involves a systematic examination of primary and secondary historical sources, such as summit declarations, joint statements, press releases, official reports.

Desk research is employed to gather a comprehensive overview of the available documentation related to the Ukraine-EU summits and the AA. This method involves collecting and analysing a wide range of secondary data, including media reports, think tank publications, and academic studies. Content analysis is used to systematically examine the content of the Ukraine-EU summit documents,

focusing on the key messages, and commitments made. By analysing the evolution of discourse and the emphasis placed on different aspects of the AA, this method sheds light on the priorities and strategies employed by both parties. Content analysis also enables the identification of discrepancies between stated goals and actual implementation.

Through the integration of these research methods, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of Ukraine-EU summits in the implementation of the AA. By examining the historical development, analysing available documentation, and scrutinising the content of summit documents, this article contributes to a deeper knowledge of the factors influencing the progress and challenges encountered in the Ukraine-EU integration process.

The main research questions are: to what extent have the Ukraine-EU summits contributed to the implementation of the AA? Have they been an effective instrument in pursuing the AA implementation?

The hypothesis of this research is as follows: the Ukraine-EU summits have become a key political instrument for the implementation of the AA, which stimulated reforms in Ukraine in the context of Ukraine's fulfilment of the Association objectives and AA implementation. This research seeks to address the gap in understanding how Ukraine-EU summits function as a strategic tool for advancing the AA implementation and for fostering the European integration of Ukraine on the way to its full membership. Specifically, it aims to find out the role and effectiveness of the summits in bridging the gap between the formal provisions of the AA and their practical application, as well as in facilitating the dynamic adaptation of the AA to the evolving political, economic, and institutional medium in Ukraine and the effective adaptation of the EU legislation to the Ukrainian one.

2. Literature review

The main data sources used to analyse the topic are the official statements of the results of the Ukraine-EU Summits, mainly Joint Statements, Protocols; the AA and its provisions, official statements of Ukraine's Presidents and official representatives of the EU (Head of the EC, EU Council, etc.)

A significant body of literature examining the challenges encountered in implementing the AA between the EU and Ukraine has emerged. Van der Loo and Van Elsuwege (2022) argue that, when coupled with financial support and new sectoral integration within key EU policies, such as the green and digital transitions, the existing AAs continue to be the most effective tools for advancing these bilateral relationships. The dynamic characteristics of AAs, along with their open-ended potential for accession, suggest that both the EU and Ukraine can adapt their AA to pursue more ambitious political associations or economic integrations. This adaptability may also allow the AA to function within a pre-accession framework through a staged approach (Van der Loo & Van Elsuwege, 2022).

Dimitrova and Dragneva (2023) note that, given the comprehensive and ambitious nature of the AA between the EU and Ukraine, one might anticipate a substantial reciprocal influence on the EU. However, their analysis reveals that this influence is indirect, emerging through mechanisms and international processes accentuated by the AA. These include the power asymmetry between the parties, the politicisation of the agreement, and the geo-politicisation, driven by Russia's objections, as a form of contestation within the geopolitical context (Dimitrova & Dragneva, 2023). Duleba (2022) concludes that Ukraine's AA exhibits the most pronounced structural asymmetry when compared to other EU integration agreements with third countries. Specifically, this asymmetry is characterised by the significant disparity between the extensive body of the EU acquis that Ukraine is required to incorporate into its national legislation and the minimal level of Ukraine's institutional involvement in the EU policy-shaping processes (Duleba, 2022).

The economic challenges associated with the AA implementation have also been extensively studied. Mohilevskyi et al. (2021) describe economic security as a set of conditions essential for ensuring the country's stable economic development and for bridging the development gap relative to European countries during Ukraine's integration into the EU. Lytvyn et al. (2020) focus on the consequences of signing the Association Agreements between Ukraine and the EU, the benefits and problems, and promising directions of such cooperation in the context of the formation of the innovative economy of Ukraine (Lytvyn et al., 2020; Yatsenko et al., 2020). Yatsenko et al. assert that the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) during 2016-2017 enabled Ukraine to enhance its exports to the EU, and that the modernization of the trade provisions within the agreement has had a beneficial impact on Ukraine's economic and social development (Yatsenko et al., 2020).

While the aforementioned challenges have been extensively studied, the specific role of the Ukraine-EU summits in addressing these challenges has received less attention. This study aims to contribute to examining how the Ukraine-EU summits have responded to these challenges and supported the AA implementation. By analysing the summit outcomes, the research will assess the extent to which the summits have addressed key obstacles and facilitated progress in different policy areas.

3. A historical journey towards closer ties: Ukraine and the EU

The relationship between Ukraine and the European Union, though currently strained by conflict, boasts a long and intricate history driven by aspirations for closer ties. Understanding this historical journey is crucial to appreciating the significance of the Ukraine-EU summits as instruments of cooperation.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine proclaimed its independence, immediately setting its sight on European integration. In 1994, this ambition materialised in signing the *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)*

with the EU. This initial agreement laid the foundation for political and economic dialogue, trade cooperation, and visa facilitation (Bosse, 2020).

The 1990s marked the formative years of the Ukraine-EU relations, with summits playing a crucial role in establishing dialogue and exploring potential cooperation avenues. Summits were infrequent during the 1990s, averaging every two to three years; meetings primarily included presidents and foreign ministers, focusing on establishing political dialogue and exploring potential cooperation areas; discussions were mostly concentrated on economic cooperation, visa facilitation, and integration with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Münkler, 2006).

The early 2000s witnessed a further deepening of relations. The Orange Revolution of 2004, fuelled by public protests against electoral fraud, served as a pivotal moment for Ukraine's pro-European aspirations. Most EU member-states supported the revolution and its aftermath as it was seen as the chance to foster democratic reforms and closer cooperation. The 2004-2014 decade was an important period in the Ukraine-EU relations, marked by significant political shifts, strategic cooperation, and a growing desire for Ukraine to integrate more closely with the European Union.

However, Ukraine's path towards the EU faced a critical turning point in 2013. The then-President Yanukovich's decision to abandon the AA in favour of closer ties with Russia triggered the Euromaidan protests, demanding deeper integration with the EU. The subsequent annexation of Crimea by Russia and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine further complicated the partnership, introducing a new layer of complexity and requiring a unified response from both parties. This complicated period was, at the same time, culminated by the signing of the landmark Association Agreement in 2014, outlining a comprehensive framework for political association and economic integration (Association Agreement, 2014).

The signing of the AA in 2014 marked a significant step forward. This comprehensive agreement envisioned deep political and economic integration, encompassing areas like trade, energy, security, and justice (Association Agreement, 2014). This agreement was also closely linked to the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, aiming to strengthen ties with former Soviet republics like Ukraine (European Council, 2023c).

While the AA undoubtedly represents a significant step forward, its impact needs to be critically assessed. We may argue that its implementation has been slow and uneven, hampered by internal challenges within Ukraine and broader geopolitical tensions, but it is important to highlight the positive changes it has facilitated, such as increased trade and visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 1998).

Despite many challenges in implementation, the AA remains a crucial framework for Ukraine's integration aspirations. It serves as a roadmap for reforms

as it guides Ukraine's domestic reforms, pushing towards democratisation, good governance, and economic modernisation; as a symbol of commitment due to the fact that the AA signifies the EU's long-term commitment to Ukraine's stability, prosperity, and eventual membership in the European project, and as a platform for cooperation as it provides a structured framework for ongoing dialogue, joint initiatives, and mutual support across various sectors.

The AA continues to shape the trajectory of this complex relationship. Regular summits, effective implementation, and continued commitment from both sides is crucial in navigating the challenges and realising the shared goals enshrined in this landmark agreement.

The EU has remained a firm supporter of Ukraine throughout this turbulent period. It has imposed sanctions on Russia, provided significant financial and humanitarian assistance, and facilitated dialogue aimed at peaceful conflict resolution (European Council, 2023a). Notably, the AA, though partially suspended due to the war, remains the overarching framework guiding cooperation.

4. Historical evolution of the Ukraine-EU Summits

Since 1997, 24 regular and one extraordinary Ukraine-EU summits have taken place (EU-UA, 2020) (see Table 1).

Regular summits were held annually, except in 2012 and 2022:

- the Summit scheduled for late 2012 was postponed to early 2013 at the EU's initiative due to the political situation in Ukraine (Ukraine-EU summit postponed to next year, 2012);
- the Summit scheduled for December 2022 was postponed to early 2023 due to the lack of tangible results of the meeting on the part of the EU that could be demonstrated at the summit (Kuleba and Borrell, 2023).

An extraordinary summit was held on 21 March 2014 in Brussels to sign the political part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (Politychnu asotsiatsiyu, 2014). The Ukraine-EU summits are held on the basis of article 5 of the AA, according to which "the parties hold regular meetings in the framework of political dialogue at the summit level" (Association Agreement, 2014).

Article 460 of Chapter 1 on the Institutional framework of the AA confirmed that the highest level of political and policy dialogue between the Parties shall be at the Summit level. Summit meetings shall take place, in principle, once a year. The Summit shall provide overall guidance for the implementation of this Agreement as well as an opportunity to discuss any bilateral or international issues of mutual interest (Association Agreement, 2014).

The Summit meetings are attended by the President of Ukraine, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission. The summits address bilateral or international issues of mutual interest and provide general oversight of the implementation of the Association Agreement. Meetings

within the framework of the summits provide the parties with an opportunity to summarise the results of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU over the past year at the highest level, identify priorities for cooperation in the near future, discuss developments in Ukraine and the European Union, and coordinate positions on current international issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021).

Table 1. List of Ukraine-EU Summits

No	Date of the meeting	City	Country
1	5 September 1997	Kyiv	Ukraine
2	16 October 1998	Vienna	Austria
3	23 July 1999	Kyiv	Ukraine
4	15 September 2000	Paris	France
5	11 September 2001	Yalta	Ukraine
6	4 July 2002	Copenhagen	Denmark
7	7 October 2003	Yalta	Ukraine
8	8 July 2004	Hague	Netherlands
9	1 December 2005	Kyiv	Ukraine
10	27 October 2006	Helsinki	Finland
11	14 September 2007	Kyiv	Ukraine
12	9 September 2008	Paris	France
13	4 December 2009	Kyiv	Ukraine
14	22 November 2010	Brussels	Belgium
15	19 December 2011	Kyiv	Ukraine
16	25 February 2013	Brussels	Belgium
Extraordinary	21 March 2014	Brussels	Belgium
17	27 April 2015	Kyiv	Ukraine
18	24 November 2016	Brussels	Belgium
19	13 July 2017	Kyiv	Ukraine
20	9 July 2018	Brussels	Belgium
21	8 July 2019	Kyiv	Ukraine
22	6 October 2020	Brussels	Belgium
23	12 October 2021	Kyiv	Ukraine
24	3 February 2023	Kyiv	Ukraine

Source: authors' elaboration

The Summit meetings provide the parties with an opportunity to sum up the results of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU at the highest level over the past year, to determine priorities for cooperation in the near future, to discuss the development of the situation in Ukraine and the European Union, as well as to agree on positions on topical international issues.

Throughout the bilateral relations period, the Ukraine-EU summits have played a critical role in advancing cooperation. These high-level meetings have served as platforms for: a) setting strategic priorities: summits establish joint agendas and define key areas of collaboration, often aligning with broader developments like

the AA or responses to specific challenges (Association Agreement, 2014); b) facilitating dialogue and trust-building: leaders engage in direct discussions, exchange views, and address concerns, fostering mutual understanding and building trust, vital for navigating complex issues; c) reaching concrete agreements: summits often culminate in concrete agreements, declarations, and joint actions, translating political will into tangible progress on specific issues; d) demonstrating solidarity and commitment: the very act of convening regular summits reaffirms the shared commitment to advancing the partnership and sends a strong message of solidarity, particularly crucial during times of crisis (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The summits reflected Ukraine's initial aspirations for EU integration, coinciding with signing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994 and the AA in 2014. The summits reflected the nascent nature of the relationship and limited institutionalisation. The first Ukraine-EU summit was held in Kyiv in 1997, marking a pivotal moment in the development of its relationship with the European Union. Being not as dramatic as some later summits, it laid the foundation for decades of cooperation and served as a critical stepping stone on Ukraine's path towards closer ties with the EU. The key outcomes of that Summit were:

- Discussions focused on expanding trade relations, promoting investment, and integrating Ukraine into European markets. Signed in 1994, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) had already established a legal and institutional framework for the broad-ranging cooperation between Ukraine and the EU. It covered areas like trade, investment, political dialogue, cultural exchange, and cooperation in foreign and security policy (European Union, 1998). The PCA provided a platform for regular dialogue, joint initiatives, and mutual support, marking a significant step forward from earlier informal interactions;
- Framework for political cooperation. The summit established regular political consultations and dialogue between the EU and Ukraine, ensuring ongoing communication on key issues;
- Confirmation of Ukraine's European Aspirations. Though this and further summits did not explicitly address membership, it acknowledged Ukraine's desire for closer integration with the EU. This recognition solidified Ukraine's long-term European orientation and set the stage for future discussions on membership prospects;
- Increased economic support. The EU pledged support for Ukrainian economic reforms, including assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises and investment in infrastructure. This laid the groundwork for future free trade agreements and closer economic integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 1997).

Beyond the formal agreements, the 1997 Kyiv summit also had intangible but significant consequences. First of all, building trust and confidence, as regular summits and dialogue fostered mutual understanding and trust between Ukrainian

and EU leaders, crucial for navigating future challenges and collaborating effectively. Secondly, setting the stage for reforms, as the PCA and summit discussions implicitly encouraged Ukraine to undertake political and economic reforms to align with EU standards, paving the way for future initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and good governance.

Early summits (the 1997 Kyiv summit, the 1998 Vienna summit and others) laid the foundation for future cooperation by establishing regular political dialogue to foster mutual understanding and build trust, exploring potential areas of cooperation, including trade, investment, and visa facilitation, and discussing Ukraine's aspirations for integration with the EU, aligning with broader post-Soviet developments. Political and economic turbulence within Ukraine restricted its capacity for deeper engagement with the EU. Additionally, the EU's ability to influence internal Ukrainian reforms and progress towards integration was limited. Furthermore, the broader post-Cold War landscape, particularly Russia's stance, affected the pace and scope of the EU-Ukraine relationship (EU-Ukraine Summits, 2013).

Despite the challenges, early summits served as critical stepping stones by establishing regular interactions at the highest level, paving the way for future cooperation and trust-building. The PCA, negotiated and signed before these early meetings, provided a comprehensive framework for engagement.

Though not explicitly discussed in early summits, Ukraine's eventual EU membership aspirations began to take root during this formative period. Leaders acknowledged Ukraine's European aspirations, hinting at a possible future pathway towards eventual integration. Discussions on various topics, including trade, environment, and security, implicitly encouraged Ukraine's alignment with EU standards and regulations.

5. The Ukraine-EU Summits in the 2000s: a decade of progress and challenges

The 2000s witnessed a period of significant developments in the Ukraine-EU relations, marked by frequent summits and evolving dynamics. Regular summits fostered closer political dialogue and collaboration on various fronts, including trade, energy, and security.

The signing of the Association Agreement in 2014 marked a turning point in the EU-Ukraine relations, offering Ukraine a deeper level of political and economic integration with the EU. However, the subsequent years have been marked by significant challenges and ongoing developments.

After signing the AA, the first Ukraine-EU summit was held in Kyiv in 2015. It occurred just months after the partly signing of the landmark Association Agreement and amidst ongoing tensions in eastern Ukraine. The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine significantly impacted the political and economic climate, posing a major challenge to the relationship. Internal political instability and concerns about

democratic backsliding within Ukraine raised questions about its commitment to reforms.

The primary focus during the summit was on the steps towards the full implementation of the AA, including political reforms, economic legislation, and adjustments to align Ukraine with EU standards. The EU pledged to continue financial and technical support for Ukraine's reform efforts in areas such as justice, the rule of law, and fighting corruption. The joint statement strongly condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ongoing destabilising actions in Eastern Ukraine. The summit confirmed the granting of visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens to the Schengen zone, starting in 2017. This was a major achievement, fostering closer people-to-people ties and economic opportunities. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the AA and its goals, despite the challenging context.

Additionally, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the effective implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which went into provisional effect in 2014. This involved measures like: a) phasing out of trade barriers, particularly removing tariffs and quotas on specific goods traded between Ukraine and the EU; b) harmonisation of regulations, in particular aligning Ukrainian technical standards and regulations with those of the EU to ensure fair competition and safety of goods; c) improved market access which can simplify procedures for Ukrainian businesses to access the EU market.

Ukraine also outlined its commitment to key political reforms drafted in the AA, focusing on: strengthening the rule of law (measures included reforming the judiciary, combating corruption, and ensuring fair and transparent elections); respect for human rights and uphold fundamental rights and freedoms for all individuals within its territory; improving public administration efficiency, transparency, and accountability, and modernising the energy sector to increase efficiency, reduce reliance on Russia, and ensure energy security, etc.

The EU reaffirmed its commitment to providing financial and technical assistance to support Ukraine's implementation efforts. This included grants, loans, and technical expertise. Also, the EU and Ukrainian institutions established joint programmes and initiatives to facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and implementation of specific reforms and agreed to establish regular monitoring mechanisms to track progress on AA implementation (European Council, 2015).

This Summit, although not without its limitations, was a significant milestone in EU-Ukraine relations. It reaffirmed commitment to the AA, and fostered closer ties amidst challenging circumstances. However, the summit's long-term impact was heavily influenced by the ongoing conflict and internal challenges within Ukraine.

The 2016 Brussels Summit, held on March 24th, marked a crucial juncture in the evolving relationship between the European Union and Ukraine. The summit aimed to evaluate and accelerate the implementation of the AA and to deepen political and economic integration between the EU and Ukraine.

During the summit, the EU and Ukraine agreed to enhance cooperation in areas like cybersecurity and defence, reflecting the growing security concerns in the region. During the summit, the representatives of the EU and Ukraine also signed a financing agreement - “the EU Anti-Corruption Initiative in Ukraine” (€15 million support) and a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Energy Partnership between the EU and Ukraine (European Commission, 2016). Additionally, €104 million is earmarked for the public administration reform, and €52.5 million is designated to strengthen the rule of law later in the year. These initiatives were part of an ongoing series of reform support programmes, which had already included decentralisation and extended to public financial management. The Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, emphasised that this new funding underscores the EU’s continued commitment to supporting Ukraine’s reform process and achieving fundamental, sustained changes in governance. The EU remains dedicated to enhancing governance in Ukraine and promoting economic reforms to build a stronger, more prosperous, and resilient nation (European Commission, 2016). The discussions also focused on improving the business environment, tackling corruption, and advancing privatisation. The EU reiterated its unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, condemning Russia’s actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Particular focus during the summit was on the reforms which Ukraine conducted since the previous summit. “We highly rate the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities, including those of President Poroshenko, to implement large-scale reforms in extremely difficult conditions. Ukraine’s success will be the success of all of Europe,” said President Donald Tusk at the press conference following the summit (Belgium: Remarks by President, 2016).

While the summit acknowledged the need for further reforms, particularly in areas like rule of law and combating corruption, concrete progress remained limited. The 2016 Brussels Summit, although facing limitations, represented a significant step forward for the EU-Ukraine relations. It reaffirmed commitments to the AA, provided financial assistance, and emphasised security cooperation amidst challenging conditions.

The 19th Ukraine-EU Summit, held in Kyiv on July 12-13, 2017, was an important meeting focused on evaluating the implementation of the Association Agreement and addressing a range of strategic issues. This summit welcomed the completion of the ratification of the AA and the recent entry into force of visa liberalisation for Ukrainian citizens, both of which are fundamental steps towards reinforcing the EU-Ukraine partnership (European Council, 2017).

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the Association Agreement and its full implementation as a foundation for Ukraine’s European trajectory. The summit emphasised the need for Ukraine to maintain its reform momentum, particularly in tackling corruption and strengthening the rule of law. The EU leaders discussed the

potential disbursement of the next tranche of macro-financial assistance (MFA) to Ukraine, contingent upon the country's completion of specific reform measures.

The key areas of focus while assessing the AA implementation were: a) economic integration, particularly progress on further implementing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA); removing barriers to trade and streamlining customs procedures; aligning Ukrainian regulations and standards with those of the EU for easier market access; b) political reforms, especially evaluation of progress on judicial reform, establishing independent and trustworthy judicial institutions; fight against corruption, with a particular focus on concrete results in investigations and prosecutions; decentralisation efforts, transferring power and resources to local communities and ensuring human rights protection and fundamental freedoms; c) sector-specific cooperation, which includes ensuring reforms to enhance energy efficiency and market liberalisation; progress in transport cooperation, improving infrastructure, and harmonising regulations with EU standards and environmental protection, aligning Ukraine with EU environmental standards, and joint efforts to tackle climate change (European External Action Service, 2023).

The EU representatives acknowledged achievements such as visa liberalisation. This major milestone achieved since the last summit was highlighted along with positive assessment of other reform areas where Ukraine made visible progress (European Council, 2017).

The 2017 Kyiv Summit served as a significant halfway point in the AA implementation, making it a crucial moment for in-depth evaluation. Demonstrating the EU's watchful eye on reforms helped maintain pressure on Ukraine to keep up with commitments. The evaluation highlighted Ukraine's continued progress towards European standards despite the challenges posed by Russia's aggression.

The 20th Ukraine-EU Summit, held in Brussels on July 9, 2018, focused on furthering cooperation and evaluating the progress made on the Association Agreement's implementation. Leaders took stock of the progress achieved in various areas, especially on economic cooperation, which envisaged further integration under the DCFTA, regulatory harmonisation, addressing trade obstacles, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and political and sectoral reforms.

The EU praised the progress in specific reform areas while urging continued and accelerated efforts, particularly to combat corruption. Leaders highlighted collaboration on energy sector reforms, particularly steps to integrate Ukraine into the European energy markets and improve energy efficiency, and mentions of progress in cooperation on digital, transport, the environment, and support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (European Council, 2018) were made.

While achievements, such as laws on fighting corruption passed, anti-corruption institutions created, or progress in particularly important areas were noted, the need for an accelerated pace of reforms to ensure lasting progress and the

need for concrete results and more decisive action on corruption were also emphasised.

The Summit occurred against a backdrop of escalating tensions between Russia and the West, and the EU leaders, once again, reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. Discussions also included further sanctions against Russia and maintaining unified pressure.

The 2019 Kyiv Summit took place on the 8th of July 2019, following the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as President of Ukraine, sparking renewed hope for reform and closer ties with the EU. During this summit, the EU emphasised the importance of continued reforms in areas like rule of law, combating corruption, and improving the business climate.

The Summit reaffirmed Ukraine's role within the Eastern Partnership initiative, promoting regional cooperation and integration. It also celebrated the successful implementation of visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens to the Schengen zone. The summit sent a message to Russia, reiterating the EU's stance on Ukraine's territorial integrity and the need for peaceful resolution in eastern Ukraine. The meeting had a more hopeful and optimistic tone compared to the previous years, given the change in Ukraine's leadership and the EU's willingness to engage with President Zelenskyy's reform agenda. In the Joint Statement, it acknowledged positive developments in trade under the DCFTA, mentioning an increased trade volume and progress in addressing specific trade barriers. While acknowledging challenges, the statement emphasised the commitment to continued dialogue and collaboration to achieve the goals outlined in the AA (European Council, 2019).

Overall, the 2019 Kyiv Ukraine-EU Summit's Joint Statement reflected a cautious optimism regarding the AA implementation. While acknowledging the progress made, the EU emphasised the need for continued efforts, particularly from the new Ukrainian government, to fulfil its commitments and achieve deeper European integration.

The 22nd Ukraine-EU Summit, held in Brussels on the 6th of October 2020, took place amidst a complex and challenging landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic had significantly impacted both entities, while the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and concerns about democratic backsliding within Ukraine continued to cast a shadow. The global pandemic had caused immense economic and social disruption in both the EU and Ukraine, requiring coordinated responses and support. The 2020 Brussels summit focused on strengthening cooperation in combating the pandemic, including sharing resources and expertise, and promoting access to vaccines. The EU pledged €1.2 billion in macro-financial assistance to support Ukraine's economic recovery from the pandemic. Both sides also reaffirmed their commitment to the full implementation of the AA and its long-term goals. While the summit acknowledged the need for further reforms, concrete progress on key areas, like rule of law and combating corruption, remained limited (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021).

The 23rd Ukraine-EU Summit took place on the 12th of October 2021 in Kyiv, offering a pivotal moment in a year heavily influenced by the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and Ukrainian aspirations for closer European integration. Both sides reaffirmed their strong commitment to the full implementation of the AA, highlighting its role in strengthening political and economic ties. The EU emphasised the importance of ongoing reforms in key areas like rule of law, combating corruption, and strengthening judicial independence. The EU pledged €600 million in financial assistance to support Ukraine's economic development and reforms. One of the results of the summit was Formalization of Ukraine-EU Association with Horizon Europe. This agreement provided Ukrainian researchers and innovators with access to the EU's research and innovation programme, fostering scientific collaboration and innovation potential (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021).

The 2021 Kyiv Summit sent a message of continued EU support and recognition of Ukraine's European aspirations amidst challenging circumstances. The summit reiterated the EU's stance on Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, sending a message to Russia about its involvement in the conflict. The summit acknowledged the need for further reforms, concrete progress, particularly in areas like rule of law and combating corruption.

While there was not a dedicated Ukraine-EU Summit held in 2022, two important events involving Ukraine and the EU took place in Brussels that year:

- The EU-Ukraine Association Council meeting on September 5th, 2022. This ministerial-level meeting served as a key platform for discussing ongoing cooperation and challenges amidst the ongoing conflict. Key results included: a) reaffirmation of EU Support - the EU reiterated its unwavering support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty, condemning Russia's aggression; b) focus on economic reforms - discussions centred on supporting Ukraine's economic resilience and reforms despite the challenging wartime environment; c) addressing humanitarian crisis and d) strengthening cooperation - the meeting emphasised the importance of enhanced cooperation in various areas, including energy security, cyber security, and defence.
- Ukraine Reconstruction Conference on July 4th-5th, 2022. This high-level conference gathered international partners to discuss and pledge support for Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. While not an official EU-Ukraine summit, the EU played a major role because it committed €9 billion in grants and loans for Ukraine's reconstruction, alongside additional support from its member states. The conference established a roadmap for post-war reconstruction, focusing on rebuilding infrastructure, supporting economic recovery, and promoting reforms.

The 24th Ukraine-EU Summit, held in Kyiv on June 23rd, 2023, marked a momentous occasion in the evolving relationship as this one stands out for granting Ukraine the candidate status for EU membership, a significant step towards deeper integration. Public opinion polls within both Ukraine and the EU revealed

overwhelming support for granting Ukraine the candidate status, reflecting a shared vision for the future. The decision to grant the candidate status carried an immense symbolic and strategic weight, sending a strong message to Russia and solidifying the EU's commitment to European unity. The summit explicitly linked the progress in AA implementation to Ukraine's fulfilment of the conditions attached to its EU candidate status. Since Ukraine was granted the candidate status under special circumstances, the summit was focused on expediting reforms needed for eventual accession, which are mainly stipulated by the AA. Unlike the previous summits, the focus during the wartime setting was less on publishing a comprehensive, formal evaluation report and more on prioritising immediate support and a future strategic direction (European Council, 2023a).

The main focus areas and results of the 2023 Kyiv summit were as follows: a) continued financial and military aid-pledges of additional financial support for Ukraine's reconstruction and further military assistance for defence against Russia; b) announcements of aid packages aimed at supporting Ukraine's reforms needed for EU accession, focusing on the rule of law, anti-corruption, economic resilience, and alignment with EU policies; c) sector collaboration, particularly detailed discussions on deepening cooperation in areas like energy security, food security, infrastructure, and digital transformation, all key for aligning with EU standards; d) addressing the impact of Russia's war on global food security and acknowledging Ukraine's essential role in maintaining the supply of agricultural products; e) reaffirming the importance of extending Ukraine's access to the EU's internal market to ease transportation blockades caused by the war; f) commitments to integrating Ukraine into the EU's roaming area, reducing communication costs; g) continuation of the suspension of import duties and quotas on Ukrainian products within the EU market to support its economy (European Council, 2023c).

The Joint Statement issued after the summit highlighted sectors where Ukraine had made progress in implementing AA reforms, acknowledging the resilience shown despite the ongoing war. It underlined priority areas requiring further action, reinforcing the EU's expectations and the path forward for Ukraine's alignment with EU standards (European Council, 2023b).

The 2023 Kyiv summit was a powerful symbol of the EU's continuing solidarity with Ukraine amidst unprecedented challenges. It did not only provide material support, but also outlined a clear path for Ukraine's accelerated integration into the European Union. The emphasis on reforms and alignment with EU standards sends a message that Ukraine's future lies within the European community of nations.

6. The impact of EU-Ukraine Summits on the AA implementation: a complex relationship

The Ukraine-EU Summits have played a significant role in shaping the implementation of the Association Agreement. However, their impact has been complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors:

Positive impact: regular summits served as platforms for reaffirming commitment to the AA and keeping its implementation on the agenda; the summits facilitated the identification of specific areas requiring progress and generated concrete action plans to address them; the pledges made during summits translated into financial resources supporting reforms and infrastructure development crucial for AA implementation and bolstering Ukraine's capacity to tackle complex reforms aligned with EU standards; statements of support and warnings of potential consequences for non-compliance exerted pressure on Ukraine to move forward with reforms.

Challenges and limitations: despite the summits' focus on implementation, progress in key areas like rule of law, combating corruption, and judicial reform remained slow, often falling short of expectations set in previous summits; the internal political dynamics within Ukraine, vested interests, and societal resistance to reforms created roadblocks to implementing AA provisions; the AA lacked robust enforcement mechanisms, making it difficult to hold Ukraine accountable for delayed progress; the ongoing war against Ukraine and its impact on the Ukrainian economy and political stability further hampered the implementation process.

Conclusions

Regular summits served as platforms to reaffirm commitment, keeping the AA on the agenda and preventing stagnation. They provided crucial public reminders of the shared goal of integration. The Ukraine-EU summits have had a mixed impact on the AA implementation. They provided a platform for maintaining momentum, offering guidance and support, and exerting some pressure for reforms. However, domestic challenges, limited enforcement mechanisms, and the ongoing conflict hindered progress. While the pace has been slow, summits likely played a role in preventing even slower progress or backsliding. Moving forward, understanding these limitations and exploring alternative approaches to support the AA implementation will be crucial for achieving its long-term objectives and Ukraine's European aspirations.

The Joint Statements issued during the summits often outlined priority sectors for further reform, providing Ukraine with a clear roadmap and signalling areas where the EU expects the most progress. The discussions during the summits have accelerated the identification of remaining barriers, leading to concrete agreements on tariff reductions, harmonising regulations, addressing phytosanitary concerns,

etc. The Summits have led to the launch of joint initiatives to support Ukrainian businesses, facilitate access to EU markets, promote standardisation and mutual recognition of conformity assessment, and build capacity in relevant institutions. The EU's strong stance against corruption is a persistent theme throughout the summits. They have been a factor in the establishment of anti-corruption institutions, the adoption of relevant legislation, and the launch of investigations into high-profile corruption cases. Continued pressure from the EU via the summits has pushed Ukraine to initiate reforms aimed at ensuring judicial independence, tackling corruption within the judiciary, and improving the efficiency of courts.

The Summits have fostered ongoing cooperation in improving energy efficiency, adopting EU standards related to energy markets, and diversifying energy supply to reduce reliance on the Russian Federation. They have also led to cooperation on infrastructural projects, harmonisation of standards, and aligning Ukraine's transportation sector with the EU norms, enhancing connectivity and trade. Summit discussions have led to collaborations in improving environmental policies, addressing transboundary pollution, and adopting EU legislation on waste management, air and water quality.

External factors, particularly Russian interference, significantly impact Ukraine's ability to implement certain reforms or pursue broader economic integration with the EU. Russia's actions, including economic pressure, political destabilisation, and military aggression, have created a challenging environment that complicates Ukraine's reform efforts. Overall, the Ukraine-EU summits play a crucial role in driving the AA implementation. By setting agendas, highlighting priorities, and providing high-level political backing, they contribute to tangible progress in multiple areas outlined in the complex framework of the Association Agreement.

Therefore, the Ukraine-EU summits have proven to be important mechanisms in advancing the implementation of the Association Agreement. These summits facilitate high-level dialogue, enabling both parties to identify the priority areas for progress and to develop actionable plans that align with the developing political and economic landscape. Through the provision of technical assistance, financial resources, and policy guidance, the EU has played a crucial role in supporting Ukraine's reform agenda, particularly in areas such as governance, rule of law, and economic modernization. The ongoing dialogue and collaboration fostered by the summits underscore their importance as a strategic tool for ensuring the sustained progress of Ukraine's European integration process. As Ukraine continues to navigate its complex reform trajectory, the summits will remain integral to monitoring progress, adapting strategies, and reinforcing the mutual commitments that underpin the Association Agreement. Based on the presented analysis, several recommendations that could enhance the effectiveness of the Ukraine-EU Summits as a mechanism for implementing the Association Agreement emerge.

These recommendations can be useful for addressing existing challenges and for ensuring sustained progress in Ukraine's integration with the European Union:

- to reduce the challenges associated with the slow pace of reform implementation, it is crucial to enhance the institutional frameworks that govern the Ukraine-EU relationship. This includes establishing a system of conditionality, where progress in specific areas directly influences the provision of EU support, which could significantly improve accountability and ensure that reforms are carried out more effectively;
- given the complexity of the reforms required by the AA, the EU should prioritise expanding technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives in Ukraine. These efforts should focus on strengthening the institutional capacities of Ukrainian government agencies, particularly in areas like judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and public administration;
- to advance broader economic integration, the summits should place greater emphasis on sectoral cooperation between Ukraine and the EU. Such sectoral integration will not only enhance economic resilience but also accelerate the modernization of Ukraine's economy and its rebuilding after the end of war;
- taking into account the significant impact of external factors, particularly Russian interference and full-scale invasion, it is essential that the EU continues to provide comprehensive political and security support to Ukraine. Strengthening Ukraine's resilience to external pressures is critical for maintaining the momentum of the reform process;
- to overcome internal resistance and build widespread support for the AA, it is recommended that both the EU and Ukrainian governments increase efforts to cooperate with the public. Greater public understanding and involvement in the reform process are essential for ensuring long-term success;
- to ensure that the summits remain effective in driving progress, it is crucial to establish a systematic and adaptive approach to monitoring the implementation of summit decisions. Regular evaluations should be conducted to assess the progress of reforms, identify emerging challenges, and adapt strategies as needed. This dynamic monitoring process will help ensure that the summits continue to facilitate meaningful progress in Ukraine's European integration efforts.

By implementing these recommendations, the Ukraine-EU Summits can be further strengthened as an effective mechanism for advancing the Association Agreement, thus overcoming existing challenges, and ensuring that Ukraine's integration into the European Union proceeds effectively and sustainably.

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