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Regional leadership as an element of Ukraine's geopolitical strategy

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Abstract

The aim of the article was to identify the current status and problems of Ukraine's regional associations, and discuss them in the context of supranational challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic. Observation, the comparative method and the neo-institutional approach were the main methodological tools involved. The investigation found that Ukraine intends to establish various coalitions, blocs and alliances to develop the foreign policy vector. Countries that thrive to be regional actors, as well as NATO and EU Member States, engage in this type of cooperation. A gradual intensification of the growth of the country's regional leadership was revealed through a comparative study of Ukraine's cooperation with different countries and their partnerships. The authors of the research supported the point of view of adherents to the concept that Ukraine is interested in the political discourse of regional leadership. It is concluded that expanding the country's political and economic opportunities is an appropriate context for

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reforming the Western vectors of Ukraine's foreign policy. It demonstrated the great potential of regional partnerships, of which Ukraine is a member, to improve democracy.

Keywords: political risks; geopolitical transformations; regional leadership; consolidation of states; political platforms.

El liderazgo regional como elemento de la estrategia geopolítica de Ucrania

Resumen

El objetivo del artículo fue identificar el estado actual y los problemas de las asociaciones regionales de Ucrania, y discutirlos en el contexto de los desafíos supranacionales y la pandemia de COVID-19. La observación, el método comparativo y el enfoque neoinstitucional fueron las principales herramientas metodológicas involucradas. La investigación encontró que Ucrania tiene la intención de establecer varias coaliciones, bloques y alianzas para desarrollar el vector de política exterior. Los países que prosperan para ser actores regionales, así como la OTAN y los Estados miembros de la UE, participan en este tipo de cooperación. Se reveló una intensificación gradual del crecimiento del liderazgo regional del país a través de un estudio comparativo de la cooperación de Ucrania con diferentes países y sus asociaciones. Los autores de la investigación apoyaron el punto de vista de los adherentes al concepto de que Ucrania está interesada en el discurso político del liderazgo regional. Se concluye que expandir las oportunidades políticas y económicas del país es un contexto apropiado para reformar los vectores occidentales de la política exterior de Ucrania. Se demostró un gran potencial de las asociaciones regionales, de las que Ucrania es miembro, para mejorar la democracia.

Palabras clave: riesgos políticos; transformaciones geopolíticas; liderazgo regional; consolidación de los estados; plataformas políticas.

Introduction

In the current context, any event that is related to international relations and the interaction of political power between different states and territories is referred to as geopolitics. The evolving scope of geopolitics is undergoing major changes in the new environment. The world has also faced the most

difficult recent challenge of offering a consistent, collective and adequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other things, this also entailed profound changes in the global order, and countries began to struggle with the influence of new regional and global players. All regional and global states are counting on the emerging geographical regions, such as the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia and the Arctic, which requires new norms, institutions and partnerships.

The political, economic, technological and regulatory multipolarity is the world's target, where each "pole" implements the necessary policies by involving the traditional tools of power in different ways (Cont, 2020). A new era requires countries which have different conflicts on their territories to succeed in resolving them in the short term, while states that invest in stability may well determine the future of globalization and the new world order (Saran and Tirkey, 2021).

The regions of the world play a crucial role in the context of global policy trends. The regions that have multiple conflicts, which are mainly overlapped between regional competitors capable of influencing the global security architecture, undergo particularly noticeable transformations (Heibach, 2021). Not only by the membership in the integrational institutional association, but also its commitment to the transformational path play an important role in modern international relations (Dnistryansky, 2021). In fact, a legal regime emerges between the member countries of the association, and between the latter and third countries.

The global struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism set in at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century is very likely to be one of the decisive conflicts in the short and medium run (Freudenstein, 2021). The global geopolitical discourse suggests that the Euro-Atlantic space covered by NATO and the Eurasian space covered by the SCO are the two main areas of stability in the world which move towards conflicts and growing uncertainty. These "sustainability islands" can be threatened by unstable political relations between these two groups, fragmented conflicts and threats to security ((Kukartseva) and Thomann, 2021). It is extremely important to contain geopolitical threats that come from crisis zones with due regard to political processes and phenomena of the past.

The geopolitical picture of the world has been significantly changed by the collapse of the USSR and the communist system. The states with a similar political and legal system, which was inherited from the previous government, emerged in the post-Soviet space. The newly established countries attempted to promote public solidarity, while opposing Moscow's rule and seeking support from Europe and Asia. But Russia, which has still been a huge nation and tried to remain the strongest player in the post-Soviet space, had none of these options available (Weir, 2021). Nevertheless, Russia's influence on the former Soviet republics has steadily

been declining at different speed in different subregions and sectors. This process became part of the multidimensional disintegration of the post-Soviet space (Moshes and Racz, 2019). The newly established states did not have a wide range of government institutions and inherited a distorted command economy system. In addition to numerous unresolved internal challenges, those countries also faced challenges posed by the globalization, because of their lack of independence experience.

They established regional associations of states with similar interests to achieve common goals through collective efforts. Numerous unsuccessful attempts were made in the post-Soviet period to arrange the space around Russia through regional integration projects. Russia initiated many regional organizations having one distinctive feature: they provided a very limited delegation of powers to intergovernmental agencies (Libman, 2020). The geographical location of post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, where Ukraine was a fundamentally important geopolitical centre, contributed to strengthening of the associations. Associations also served the purposes of improving economic and political relations, special partnerships and broad cooperation at the regional level in solving international problems. Those countries could be a kind of bridge between Europe and Asia, the foundation for external opportunities to improve transport and communication ties (Rud, 2018).

Ukraine has played a significant but often ignored role in the global security system for a long time. This region is currently involved in the rivalry between major powers. According to many analysts, the rivalry trend will dominate international relations in the decades to come (Masters, 2021). Ukrainians have clearly determined their position about their future in Europe, but serious corruption and deep regional splits could impede them from following this way (Feore, 2021). The 2021 European Court of Auditors Report stated that the EU is ineffective in the fight against corruption among the high-ranking government officials in Ukraine (Deutsche Welle, 2021). Besides, Russia's policy line in relation to Ukraine has caused the biggest security crisis in Europe since the Cold War. Ukraine's European path and the support of the majority of Ukraine's population for NATO membership was reaffirmed by Russia's military aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine of the early 2014, which followed the Euromaidan revolution.

The strategies that state use to gain regional leadership entail serious real consequences both in the respective regions and beyond. So, the case of Ukraine testifies to the need for in-depth research on the state of regional leadership as an element of the country's geopolitical strategy.

In view of the foregoing, the aim of the article was to identify the current state and current issues of regional formats and alliances of Ukraine and elaborate them in greater detail. The aim involved the following objectives:

- 1) identify current trends in Ukraine's geopolitical strategy that affect the establishment of formats and alliances intended to promote Ukraine's regional leadership;
- 2) reveal the current state of Ukraine's advances in relation to the state's aspirations on its path to regional leadership, the main problems peculiar to the relevant regional interstate cooperation, and possible ways to solve them.

1. Literature Review

Globalization and qualitative systemic transformations of the recent decades have prompted scholars to search for more reasoned arguments for intensifying the process of internationalization and convergence of political and economic interests of most countries. Some of their studies provided the definitions of "political risks", "regional partnership" and "economic security", while leaving aside the prospects of the post-Soviet states for regional leadership. Scientific schools of political science, economics, sociology, philosophy, international law and others partially studied the above issues. The study found a lack of fundamental research in the field of regional leadership in Ukraine. Dnistryansky (2021) made one of the newest attempts to study this problem in his work entitled *Exacerbation of Geopolitical Relations in the Postmodern Period and the Situation in Ukraine*, which was taken into account in shaping the author's position based on the results of the study of the selected subject matter.

Cont (2020) reveals the relationship between political risks in international relations and political and strategic transformations in the EU. The author focused on modern geopolitical relations in the pandemic context.

The findings of Feore (2021) on forecasting the political risks of strategic planning of public policy in Ukraine in the context of globalization were taken into account in this article. Cadier (2019) made a special contribution to the study of this issue by detailing the prospects of Ukraine in the field of cooperation with the European Union. The works on the realities of Ukraine's participation in various associations were of particular importance for the results obtained in this study. Kapoor (2020) accurately revealed the prospects of Ukraine in the Lublin Triangle.

In turn, Kovalchuk (2021) in his article *GUAM: Promising or Insolvent?* criticized the realities of cooperation of GUAM member states providing appropriate grounds, and emphasized the reasonability of reforming the union. The scholar's position was also reflected in this work. The Master's (2021) position on the atypical geopolitical situation of Ukraine in the

context of the aggression of the Russian Federation and the prospects of this negative impact on the status of Ukraine as the regional leader were also taken into account.

The review of the scientific literature, which fully or partially covers the subject matter under research, gives grounds to state that the political science has not comprehensively studied the phenomenon of regional leadership of Ukraine, thus madding to the topicality of this research. Moreover, the historiographical analysis of Ukraine's political leadership also demonstrates that its regional aspect is inadequately studied.

2. Methods

The author has previously made a qualitative selection of the original units for observation, study and analysis. The empirical background of the study consists of official documents, including reports of national information agencies, articles in print and electronic media, analytical articles on selected topics, collections of scientific papers. A total of 48 sources were studied. The latest studies on political science conducted by researchers and practitioners, as well as the latest trends in regional international transformations in the context of globalization challenges were the core of the research. Figure 1 shows the structure and stages of the author's scientific research on the selected topic.

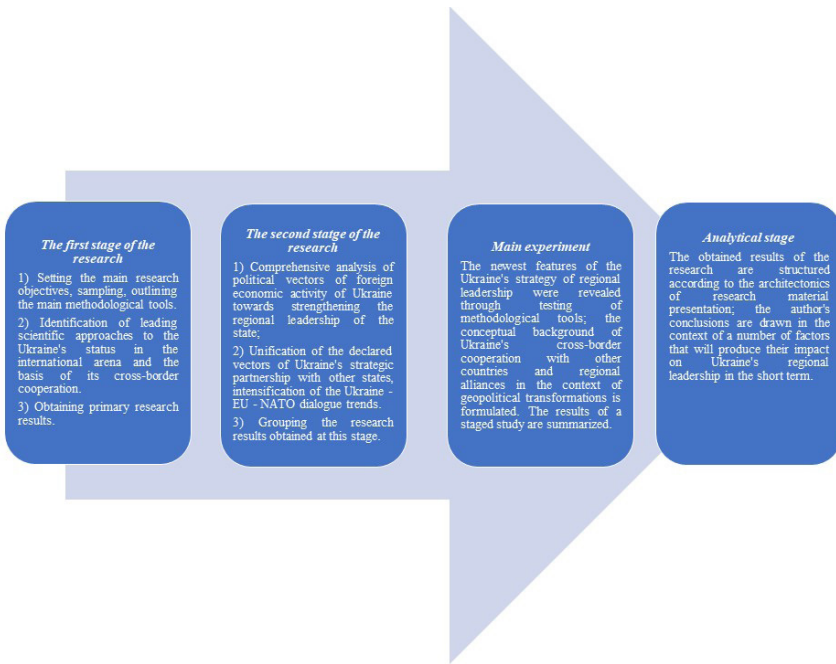


Figure 1. Staged research design (Own creation).

The main methodological tools were selected in view of the need to consider the problem through the prism of basic research approaches, concepts of political leadership and political processes in Ukraine and on the world stage.

The method of observation in combination with the comparative method constituted the methodological background of the article. They were used to reveal the general features of Ukraine's political strategy and the specifics of its transformation in connection with geopolitical changes and the state's aspirations to become a regional leader. The study of Ukraine's regional political leadership is based on the principles of universals and particulars in the Ukraine's political process. The general tendencies of Ukraine's regional leadership were identified through the comparative method. The said methods allowed combining macro and micro analysis, showing the multidimensionality of this phenomenon.

The research also involved a neo-institutional approach to the problem of political regional leadership. The neo-institutional analysis was conducted at the organizational and individual levels in order to answer

the following interrelated questions: on the patterns of development, selection and change of different strategies of Ukraine in the context of political discourse; on the choice of certain organizational measures and mechanisms for implementing strategies depending on the existing geopolitical environment; on the peculiarities of the practices of states in different regional associations.

The historical method was another method applied for drawing prognostic conclusions about the prospects for further implementation of the declared strategies of Ukraine. This method was used to consider the genesis of Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union and entry into the international political space. The gradual entry of Ukraine into regional formats and alliances was considered, as well as an idea of the transformation of state policy in view of these processes was formulated through this method.

The principles of dialectics, empirical and comparative political science, ethnopolitics, sociology of politics, theory and sociology of management also underlie the research methodology of the article. In general, the research objectives were fulfilled in full due to the methods, techniques and approaches used.

3. Results

Ukraine has been doing its best to follow its own path as a sovereign state for almost three decades of independence. The country is focusing its efforts on closer cooperation with Western institutions, including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The collapse of the USSR entailed an urgent need for Ukraine to achieve a high level of regional leadership. As the rest of the post-Soviet states, it needed the tools to counter Russia's efforts to concentrate the countries of the former Soviet Union around Moscow.

Besides, Ukraine needed alternative ways of energy supply, the establishment of the state as a territory that has influence not only in the geographical, but also in the geopolitical context. Ukraine placed a strong emphasis on strengthening international cooperation, as it had its own areas of interest related to energy transportation and the transport corridor development. It had to maintain security, expand markets for its products and diversify the ways to deliver critical imports. So, Ukraine gradually aspired to the regional leader's position.

At the same time, the United States has never hidden its interest in uniting post-Soviet states in order to make them come out of Russia's influence. The interests of this state ranged from strengthening its own influence

in the post-Soviet space, implementing energy and transport projects, to promoting democracy and human rights as the officially proclaimed goals of US foreign policy.

Russia has developed several effective tools for its strategy of soft domination in the post-Soviet space. First and foremost, Russia has used a combination of economic concessions and sanctions to limit Western influence in post-Soviet countries. The second tool that Russia used was the so-called “frozen conflicts” — internal territorial conflicts between sovereign states and unrecognized separatist regions (for example, in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine). Third, Russia tried to launch several integration projects with fewer participants (for example, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Customs Union) when they understood that the CIS as an integration platform was too weak. For example, Azerbaijan was searching for allies in its confrontation with Armenia supported by Russia; Uzbekistan has fought against an extremist movement attempting to overthrow the government. Georgia and Moldova have requested international support to restore their own territorial integrity as the countries that were dramatically affected by pro-Russian separatist groups.

These states also tried to find allies to defend their positions on resolving internal controversies. Those problems went beyond national borders. With the exception of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine remained dependent on oil and gas supplied from or through Russia. Azerbaijan had significant oil and gas reserves, having all its exports going either through the Russian territory or through countries that Russia could destabilize. A strategic and an economic issue was Moscow’s key role in meeting the region’s energy needs. Russia successfully manipulated the foreign and domestic policies of the former Soviet republics through threats to cut off supplies or redirect export routes.

The geopolitical location of Ukraine is an integral part of the European and Euro-Atlantic security frameworks, being an important energy and logistics hub in this area (Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 448/2021, 2021). Russia — Black Sea — Turkey is the main geopolitical division line of Eurasia. A border between Europe and Asia is considered to pass through these territories. For Ukraine, the border is in the Azov and Black Sea, as well as the Kerch Strait. Poland — Ukraine — Turkey is the next substantial geopolitical consolidation, which crosses the majority of transport corridors connecting North and Central Asia, Western Europe. Figure 2 presents the main directions of geospatial and transboundary ties of Ukraine summarized through the analysis of modern trends.

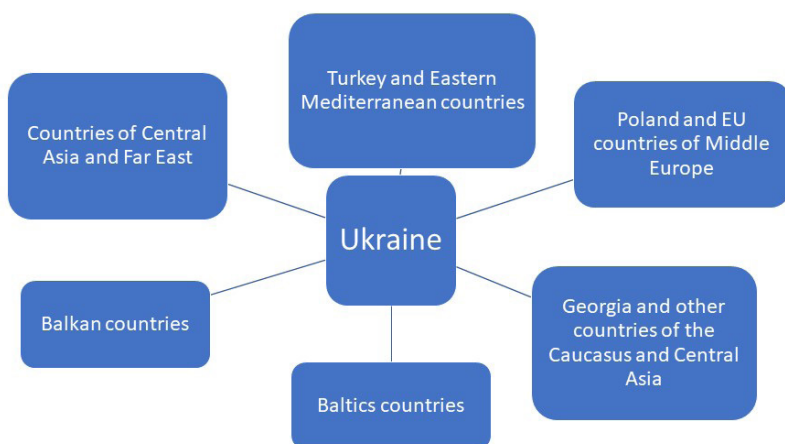


Figure 2. Ukraine's modern geospatial and cross-border ties (generalized by the author based on the observation testing results).

Ukraine is actively creating regional formats and join alliances in the current realities. On October 10, 1997, at the Summit in Strasbourg (France) Presidents of Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova signed an agreement on the establishment of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM, which was based on the idea of cooperation in the political, military and economic spheres. The need for the development of four-sided cooperation was emphasized in joint communiqué in order to improve stability and safety in Europe based on the principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders, democracy, supremacy of law and respect for human rights (GUAM, 1997).

The interests of the members did not always coincide in full. At the onset of Organization, its members simply wanted to use each other and the Organization to protect their national interests. The key to explaining many GUAM problems, including political ones, is unresolved economic problems of the poorest countries in Europe multiplied by the global financial crisis. For example, limited resources of Georgia hampered its economic growth. Ukraine's economy was more developed compared to Georgian one, but this situation also resulted in increasing uncontrolled “oligarchizing” of the state's economic and political system.

The organization was recreated in May 2006 at the GUAM Kyiv Summit (GUAM, 2006). In 2010, when V. Yanukovych came to power, Ukraine

intensified its cooperation with the Russian Federation significantly, thus reducing Ukraine's interest in GUAM. The association experienced a surge of its activity after the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of the Crimea and the Donbas conflict, because Ukraine decided to depart from the Russian Federation policy and restore the GUAM platform.

The problem was lack of coordination of actions between members of the organization. One priorities of cooperation were often changed by others, and regrouping of forces and vectors caused serious contradictions, thus hindering the implementation of very profitable programmes. It is also necessary to take into account mostly declarative assistance of the countries that were not members of this organization, and their material support was insufficient. GUAM developed several programmes during this period, that could be implemented in a particular situation provided the interest of the EU Member States. As a consequence, external partners didn't support those energy transit programmes, or they proved to be uncompetitive.

The adoption of the Development Concept for the GUAM Transport Corridor in 2013 at the 8th GUAM Working Group on Transport meeting attended by GUAM member states in Tbilisi was a major result of the joint work (Liga Law, 2013). The development of partnerships with other countries, including the United States, Japan, but more importantly — with neighbouring European countries — members of the Visegrad Group (Poland and the Czech Republic) was also of great importance in the organization's activities. The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development still depends heavily on the support of non-regional players and the domestic political situation in the member states.

In 2017, Prime Minister V. Hroisman promised to reanimate the GUAM (Government Portal of Ukraine, 2017a). The first GUAM Summit in nine years was held at the Ukraine's initiative, where goals for a free trade zone were set and the solution of transport corridor issues were suggested (Government Portal of Ukraine, 2017b). The issues of cooperation between GUAM member states in the context of new issues — counteraction to the COVID-19 pandemic; conflicts in the GUAM region — were raised at the 13th session of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly in February 2021 (Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

The current areas of partnership, including the growth of inter-parliamentary cooperation, the partnership of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly with the Baltic Assembly were given special consideration. The member states consider the prospects of GUAM in the context of the platform for the fulfilment of trade goals and its transit potential. The establishment of the GUAM International Center for Innovation and Technology Transfer can be noted as a very positive step in this regard (Ministry for Strategic Industries of Ukraine, 2021). The Center will be part of the future GUAM and Partners International Innovation Development Corporation.

This context determines the main direction of the Foreign Policy Strategy of Ukraine (Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 448/2021, 2021), including the creation of regional alliances in Ukraine to improve security and gain a foothold as a strong and influential state of the Central Europe (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Reformation vectors of achieving regional leadership by Ukraine (based on the results of document analysis and observation).

Ukraine has made steady progress in the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership within the framework of its stable European course. Traditionally, European integration has been one of the most intensive segments of Ukraine's foreign policy. The Ukrainian government, as other Eastern Partnership countries, is focused on the implementation of the Association Agreement and on the fulfilment of other commitments.

In May 2021, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia signed a memorandum that formalizes their cooperation on a joint path towards EU membership, which documented a number of goals, including joint diplomatic activities and trilateral consultations (Association Trio, 2021). The Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine met for the first time as the Association Trio in Brussels on June 24, 2021. They identified the priorities under the Eastern Partnership, including integration into the EU internal market, closer cooperation with the EU in the transport, energy sectors, digital market, green economy, healthcare, and improving security cooperation.

In July 2021, the Heads of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, as the Association Trio, took part in the Summit held in Batumi in order to improve trilateral cooperation on European integration between the countries (Batumi Summit Declaration, 2021). On December 15, 2021, the Joint Declaration was adopted at the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Brussels, which documented that the EU recognizes the aspirations

and choice of three associated partners — Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine — to enhance cooperation with the EU adhering to the differentiation and inclusion principles (Agenda.ge, 2021; Crimea Platform, 2020).

The Lublin Triangle consisting of Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania was established on July 28, 2020, which initiated a new format of regional cooperation. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, heads of national security agencies, and representatives of the high-ranking legislative bodies of Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania held a number of meetings within a relatively short period of time. The initiated Youth Lublin Triangle Forum also showed to good advantage. The Declaration on Joint European Heritage, the Lublin Triangle Roadmap for Cooperation and the Action Plan against Disinformation were signed in Vilnius on July 6, 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2021a).

The Lublin Triangle was primarily aimed at countering Russia's aggressive policy in the region; military and defence cooperation through the involvement of NATO and EU; cybersecurity and tackling disinformation. Eliminating the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is a very serious objective for this organization. Another focus is economic and energy cooperation, including halting the Nord Stream-2 project. The Lublin Triangle is also intended to expand the scope of cooperation in the field of culture, science and education, cooperation between security agencies, etc.

The EU- and US-led Three Seas Initiative is directly mentioned in the joint declaration. It covers 12 EU Member States between the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea intending to develop the cooperation in the energy, transport and digital sectors. The Initiative focuses on creating the North-South Corridor in order to reduce the dependence of post-Soviet states in the region on Russian energy pipelines.

Another initiative, which will also help strengthen Ukraine's regional leadership, is also worth mentioning. The working visit of the President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyi to the Republic of Turkey on October 16, 2020 resulted in an agreement establishing a new — Quadriga (2 + 2) — format of political and security consultations with the involvement of Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers of Ukraine and Turkey. Kyiv hosted the inaugural meeting in a new format on December 18, 2020.

The quadriga format to be held annually is intended for the discussion of the most pressing policy and regional security issues, coordinating joint actions, and developing new politics, security, economic and defence projects. It is worth mentioning that Turkey is recognized one of Ukraine's most important trading partners. For 9 months of 2021, the trade volume between Ukraine and Turkey amounted to \$5.00 milliard (↑49.9%), exports — \$2.75 milliard (↑65.8%), imports — \$2.25 milliard (↑34.2%).

The main commodity items distributed as follows: exports — ferrous metals (53.4%), cereals (15.9%), ores, slag and ash (7.1%); imports — nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery (10.4%), mineral fuels; oil and refined products (8.9%), ferrous metals (6.9%). The Ukraine's positive balance for this period amounted to \$495.84 million (Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Turkey, 2021).

Ukraine's integration into the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which was established in 1992 at the initiative of Russia and Turkey, is a very important indicator of its aspiration for regional leadership. This organization consists of twelve member states: Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine. The aim of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC) is to provide support for the parliamentary dimension in attaining the goals the BSEC organization, as well as to consolidate the legal framework for multilateral economic, trade, social, cultural and political cooperation in the Black Sea region.

The importance of access to the Black Sea and its resources in order to create an economic and logistical hub between Europe, Asia and Africa determines Ukraine's interest in the BSEC. The Crimean Platform initiated by the President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyi to restore sovereignty over Crimea was officially launched in September 2021 (Crimean Platform, 2021). The Crimean Platform is a consultation format aimed at improving the effectiveness of the international response to the occupation of the peninsula by the Russian Federation, having deoccupation as its ultimate goal. The platform will operate at three main levels: intergovernmental, parliamentary and expert.

In 2020, the election of the Ukrainian Ambassador to Hungary, Lyubov Nepop, as President of the Danube Commission, an international intergovernmental organization established for the development of free navigation on the Danube, strengthened Ukraine's regional leadership. The members of the Danube Commission are Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Moldova, Russia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Croatia. It was the first time in 70 years when the representative of Ukraine was appointed responsible for policy development in this influential Central European organization (Embassy of Ukraine in Hungary, 2021).

Centuries-old foreign relations of Ukraine with Latvia are the example of the development of bilateral relations. In 2019, the volume of bilateral trade amounted to \$564 million, trade growth was over 2% with a surplus of \$136 million (Government Portal of Ukraine, 2020; The presidential office of Ukraine, 2021). The 2020 pandemic caused a 17.3% decrease in trade in goods and services between Ukraine and Latvia, which amounted to \$470.3 (Embassy of Ukraine in the Republic of Latvia, 2021).

The expansion of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries despite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is especially noteworthy. The development of an interactive electronic platform – Trade House Ukraina – launched in 2020 proves the productive work of the Intergovernmental Ukrainian-Latvian Commission on Economic, Industrial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation. Latvia has consistently supported Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Presidents of Ukraine and Latvia signed a joint Declaration on the European Perspective of Ukraine in May 2021 (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2021). Latvia also aspires for regional leadership. It has been a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) since 1991, the Council of the Baltic Sea States since 1992, the Council of Europe since 1995, NATO and the EU since 2004. It is a member of the Baltic Assembly established in 1991 – an advisory body on cooperation between the parliaments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The analysis identified the main regional formats and alliances that promote Ukraine’s movement towards regional leadership (Figure 4).

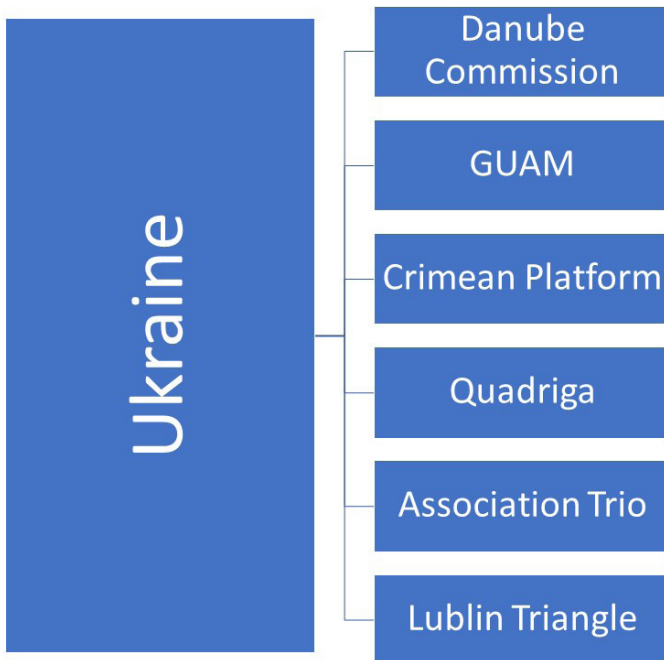


Figure 4. Ukraine’s membership in the regional formats and alliances (based on the results of the author’s analysis).

It is reasonable to emphasize the results of the outlined cooperation of Ukraine with other states. As regards the Danube Commission, a remarkable point was the election of the Ambassador of Ukraine to Hungary, L. Nepop, as the President of the Danube Commission. The 13th session of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly decided on cooperation between the states in responding the Covid-19 pandemic and extending the transit capacity. The Crimean Platform is a consultative format initiated to increase the effectiveness of the international response to Russian occupation of the peninsula.

Quadrige established the foundation for a new format of consultations with the Republic of Turkey on political and security issues. The Association Trio has established a trilateral enhanced cooperation between Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on European integration. In turn, the Lublin Triangle became an effective format for regional cooperation with Poland and Lithuania. The intensified Ukraine's interstate cooperation shows the positive trend of implementing reformational changes in the country on the its path to a sustainable status as a regional leader.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis point to the potential for a “cross-border closed globalization” that will be less free and open than before. Strategic considerations, political trust, climate threats, technological threats and health damage justify state political and economic transformations. Saran and Turkey Supported the author's position. The researchers provided that countries tend to create smaller groups in order to establish flexible partnerships on particular issues that promote cooperation between like-minded countries (Saran and Tirkey, 2021; Milli Majlis of the Azerbaijan Republic, 2021).

The inefficient multilateralism and globalization within the ongoing restructuring require new correctional mechanisms which would not compromise the benefits that these processes offer. The intensifying competition between major powers makes medium-sized states more persistent in pursuing their interests (Thompson *et al.*, 2021; Official website of the president of Ukraine, 2021).

It was found that the regional leadership can be an ancillary goal for the regional state within its comprehensive foreign policy strategy. But there may be specific situations where regional leadership will not be perceived as a desirable goal, as Nolte and Schenoni (2021) state. Proper regard shall be paid to the fact that a restrictive international environment can obstruct regional leadership, make larger states apprehend regional states, thus preventing the delegation of functions.

The government's ability to obtain and mobilize resources for regional leadership can be adversely affected by unfavourable domestic events, such as economic crises and corruption scandals (Nolte and Schenoni, 2021). Regions are still important for understanding the complex evolution and the change of the nation-state worldwide system. When territories become "geopolitical units", they mostly belong to the part of economic or political systems. Sometimes they show synergy and integration, and sometimes conflict and fragmentation. States that often belong to economic, political or cultural systems at the global and regional levels are the most advanced "geopolitical units" (Puntigliano, 2021).

The difficult international situation implies synergies between different players with the purpose of achieving geopolitical stability on the Eurasian continent. In the long run, a new Eurasian geopolitical architecture based on the new doctrine of international organizations' overlapping circles would be a significant factor in the development and enhancement of Eurasian security. In a multicentre world, will be difficult to coordinate competing geopolitical projects and stabilizing the friction between the poles of power that oscillate between hidden rivalry and cooperation in the way other than through the balance of power (Thomann, 2020).

In this context, involving the international partnership in solving security problems, eliminating obstacles to Ukraine's path to regional leadership are the most important things for Ukraine's leaders (Trenin, 2021; Ministry of strategic industries of Ukraine, 2021). In particular, concerns about a relationship between the presence of Russian forces and the risk of military escalation were caused by a build-up of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine in late 2021 (Mînzărari, 2021).

In 2021, rapidly changing global challenges have made Ukraine to formulate its geopolitical strategy clearer than ever. The position of the President of Ukraine V. Zelenskyi is a striking example of the above — he considers that Ukrainian diplomacy should fight off the "poor relative complex" and feel like a regional leader (European, 2021). In 2020, the Secretary General of GUAM addressed the participating countries and called on them to focus their efforts on finding serious prospects for cooperation with the OSCE and NATO.

In the same year, the Secretary General of GUAM addressed the member states urging them to focus their efforts on finding serious prospects for cooperation with the OSCE and NATO. Efendiev (2020) emphasized that such cooperation will affect the security process at a later time, and will become an important component of territorial parliamentarism.

We can conclude that Ukraine can have a serious support on its way to regional leadership on the part of such an organization as GUAM. For this purpose, it is necessary to give consideration to the extensive experience

of GUAM, as well as relevant mistakes and ways to solve them. In 2020, V. Zelenskyi stated that GUAM can be made a serious union by breathing new life into it (Office of the President of Ukraine, 2020). At the same time, the evaluation of GUAM's effectiveness gives grounds to state that there have been no significant or even small achievements so far (Kovalchuk, 2021). Despite GUAM's failure to achieve its goal, its member states can easily join other entities and adapt by finding new ways of economic integration and further development (Pincu *et al.*, 2020).

In turn, the main goal of the Eastern Partnership as a component of the European Neighbourhood Policy is designed to reinforce political association and expand economic integration between the EU and its eastern neighbours (Cadier, 2019). The Eastern Partnership initiative did not provide for the expected stimulus from the EU – the membership prospect (Mirel, 2021). The imitative focuses on reforming not only the Eastern Partnership but also the EU's policy towards Eastern Europe as a whole (Blewett-Mundy, 2020; European Truth, 2021). So, we can conclude that the Association Trio was the first regional initiative of the Eastern Partnership to clearly set its own priorities. The Association Trio cleared the way for a more active phase of the Eastern Partnership (Sheiko, 2021).

According to N. Kapoor, the success of the ambitions of the Lublin Triangle will depend on several factors, some of which are out of control of its members (Kapoor, 2020). The possible level of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU/NATO will have an impact on the destination of this organization. Ukraine's accession to the Lublin Triangle clearly demonstrated its intention to adhere to the Western direction in its foreign policy with the support of other like-minded states. The strategic importance of partnerships, such as the UAE with Central and Eastern Europe, should also be taken into account in this context. A close alliance with the United Arab Emirates will enhance the influence of the Lublin Triangle member states on transatlantic partners (Krzymowski, 2020).

Therefore, we can argue that the author's position on the prospects of Ukraine's future regional leadership and its impact on the geopolitical situation in the world is properly justified. Moreover, it found support of the representatives of both theory and practice. Further scientific research in this area is also substantiated by the active actions of the Government of Ukraine.

Conclusion

International cooperation will retain its core place in the international system for the next decade. States are currently considering new multilateral cooperation scenarios, although they are arbitrary and variable in nature.

Regional entities which thrive for the solution of common security issues, apart from economic, trade and humanitarian cooperation, are a distinguishing feature of the current international relations.

This situation promotes the development of qualitatively new forms of regional leadership as a component of geopolitical strategy. The establishment of various intergovernmental associations indicates that the countries consider all types of cooperation through the prism of security. The current realities dictate that only a comprehensive view of threats and the ways to eliminate them makes it possible to create a single organization and institutionalize ways to respond to security challenges. This once again testifies to the fact that current geopolitical trends are dominated by increasing regionalism and creation of blocks.

Ukraine's aspirations for regional leadership as part of its geopolitical strategy is expressed through the transformation of formats of interaction with government entities and associations of different levels. In turn, Ukraine-EU-NATO relations are being intensified. The current state of regional formats and alliances indicates Ukraine's adherence to the European vector of reforms and its significant progress in this area. Reformatting and structuring of mutually beneficial cross-border partnerships with other leaders of the global political arena is still the main objective of Ukraine's geopolitical strategy.

The main risk of declarative Ness of gradual implementation of the outlined strategy is Russia's aggression on the territory of Ukraine remains. Ukraine needs regional and global support in this matter. In its turn, the European Union commits to strengthen dialogue and partnership with Ukraine in the context of its possible membership. The author's further research will deal with foregrounding the results of the implementation of Ukraine's declared regional leadership strategy in the short term.

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