



Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie:
Diritto, Istituzioni, Società

***Verkhovna Rada* towards the European Integration of Ukraine**

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Abstract

[It.] Il contributo si propone di analizzare il ruolo della *Verkhovna Rada* nel processo di integrazione europea dell'Ucraina. Si cercherà innanzitutto di fornire una panoramica sul contesto politico nel quale si sono svolte le elezioni parlamentari del 2019 e sulle caratteristiche dei partiti politici rappresentati nella *Rada*. Verrà poi indagato il ruolo dell'integrazione europea nell'agenda politica del Parlamento ucraino tra il 2019 e il 2022 (nel periodo precedente all'invasione su larga scala della Russia ai danni dell'Ucraina) e la natura delle relazioni tra Unione europea e Ucraina in questo stesso periodo di tempo. Si cercherà infine di comprendere quanto l'integrazione europea possa avere contribuito a consolidare i rapporti tra i differenti attori politici a seguito del febbraio 2022 e se l'aggressione militare russa abbia di fatto condotto il Parlamento ucraino ad unire gli sforzi per promuovere la democratizzazione del paese.

[En.] The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it aims to explain the political background of the 2019 parliamentary elections in Ukraine and the profile of the parties represented in the *Verkhovna Rada* (Ukrainian Parliament). Second, it intends to analyse the role of European integration in the political agenda of the Ukrainian Parliament in the years 2019-2022 (before the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine) and the nature of EU-Ukrainian relations in the said period. Finally, the article investigates the consolidating potential of European integration among different political actors in the Ukrainian Parliament after February 2022. By doing so, we will try to assess whether Russia's military aggression has triggered the Ukrainian Parliament to unify efforts in adopting legislation on the democratisation of Ukraine.

Parole-chiave: Ucraina – Unione europea – Parlamento ucraino – Integrazione europea.

Keywords: Ukraine – European Union – Ukrainian Parliament – European integration.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. The Issue of European Integration in the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine. 3. European Integration in the Political Agenda of the Ukrainian Parliament in 2022-2024. 4. Conclusions.

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1. Introduction

For several reasons, the parliamentary elections in Ukraine that took place on 21 July 2019 have been unprecedented in their nature and political outcomes. For the first time in Ukraine's modern history, a single political party, Servant of the People, won the majority of parliamentary seats in elections assessed by international observers as «competitive and held with respect for fundamental freedoms»¹. Furthermore, the winning party was a newly established political entity under the leadership of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who had obtained an unprecedented victory in the presidential elections three months earlier, on 21 April 2019. In such a way, the Ukrainian political scene witnessed the arrival of the new ruling elites with close to no previous political expertise. Another peculiar feature of the 2019 parliamentary campaign in Ukraine was the continuation of the political competition between leaders who had taken part in presidential elections, namely Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Petro Poroshenko, whose parties appeared to be the major rivals of the election process. It is important to emphasise that both sides focused on the issue of European integration and the democratic development of Ukraine as a critical element of their political programs during the election campaign.

This paper analyses the issue of European integration in the political agenda of the parties represented in the Ukrainian Parliament as a result of the 2019 elections. The analysis is divided into two main parts: from 2019 to 2022 and February 2022 to February 2024 to differentiate between the periods before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. By doing so, the article reflects on the role of Russia's military aggression in consolidating the Ukrainian Parliament around the democratisation reforms. In other words, an attempt is made to analyse the efficiency of the *Verkhovna Rada* in adopting legislation on democratic reforms in times of war.

Methodologically, the article employs content analysis to examine the official documentation the Ukrainian Parliament and EU institutions adopted concerning Ukraine's European integration. Drawing on these sources, this paper explains the capacity of the Ukrainian Parliament to reach a consensus on meeting the legislative requirements of the Association Agreement (AA)² with the EU.

¹ Association Implementation Report on Ukraine, www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd_2019_433_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v4_p1_1056243.pdf.

² EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was signed on 27 June 2014. On 16 September 2014 the *Verkhovna Rada* and European Parliament simultaneously ratified the agreement. The AA fully entered into force on 1 September 2017 after the ratification by all EU Member States. The document defines a new format of relations between Ukraine and the EU and serves as a strategic guideline for systematic socio-economic reforms in Ukraine aimed at integration with the EU.

2. The Issue of European Integration in the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine

As a result of the 2019 parliamentary elections, five political parties won seats in the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine, with 49,8% voter turnout. Volodymyr Zelenskyy's party, Servant of the People, received an unprecedented 43% of the proportional representation vote, resulting in obtaining 124 of 225 seats, and 130 seats in the 225 single-member districts. That gave Servant of the People 254 seats, a number higher than needed for a simple majority³. Such a result vividly illustrated the electoral success of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In contrast, the European Solidarity party of his closest political rival and former president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko received only 8,1 % of the votes in proportional representation (23 seats) and only 2 seats in the 225 single-member districts. That was a significant decrease compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections when Poroshenko's party got 22% of the proportional representation vote (63 seats) and 69 seats in the 225 single-member districts.

The other three parties that crossed the 5% electoral threshold included the Opposition Platform – For Life (13,1%), the party which consisted of former supporters of pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich who refused to sign the Association Agreement in 2013; All-Ukrainian Union “Fatherland” (8,2%), the party under the leadership of the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko; and “Voice”, a political party established by the famous Ukrainian singer Sviatoslav Vakarchuk who obtained 5,8% of the votes. Three of the five elected parties – Servant of the People, European Solidarity and Voice – included liberal postulates in their political programs⁴.

Regarding the issue of European integration, the analysis of party programs clearly illustrated a lack of a unanimous position on EU-Ukraine relations. Even though all political parties mentioned European integration in their political programs (the only exception was the pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life that had no reference to EU integration), this mention was differently articulated by different parties. For example, Servant of the People did not refer to the issue of Ukrainian accession in its program. On the other hand, the program of its foremost critic and opponent, the European Solidarity party, presented a very detailed pro-European plan for Ukraine⁵. In fact, former President Poroshenko was closely associated with the ratification of Ukraine's AA with the EU that took place during his presidency. Moreover, he repeatedly highlighted Ukraine's accession to the EU as a priority of Ukrainian foreign policy.

Actually, EU-Ukraine relations have significantly improved since the Euromaidan events in 2014. The EU increased its support for the democratisation

³ 226 seats in the Ukrainian Parliament are needed for a simple majority.

⁴ www.parties-and-elections.eu/ukraine.html.

⁵ V. Zheltovskyy, *The European Parliament as Transformational Actor toward the Reconsideration of the EU Eastern Policy*, in *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2022, 667.

processes in Ukraine, and Ukrainian authorities engaged in incorporating European integration into their political agenda.

Already before the 2019 elections, the Ukrainian Parliament approved unprecedented amendments to the Ukrainian Constitution stating that the acquisition of full membership in the EU and NATO represents a «strategic course» for Ukraine⁶. The amendments were supported by 334 deputies, showing the significant political will of Parliament members to continue the pro-EU course.

Then, following the 2019 parliamentary elections, the 2020 European Implementation Assessment Report positively evaluated the progress of the EU-Ukraine relations regarding the AA itself. The document covered the development of democracy, human rights and good governance, noting progress on these issues. Reforms of decentralisation, public administration and digitalisation were given particularly favourable reviews, as well as the engagement of civil society in monitoring and implementing the AA⁷.

At the same time, Ukrainian authorities were critical of the fact that the AA did not include a clear message on Ukraine's accession to the EU. Therefore, to make progress on accession negotiations, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia established the Association Trio in May 2021 in Kyiv – a format of cooperation to unify efforts toward EU membership.

3. European Integration in the Political Agenda of the Ukrainian Parliament in 2022-2024

Without a doubt, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to unprecedented changes in the bilateral relations between Ukraine and EU⁸. In June 2022, four months after Ukraine applied for the EU membership on 28 February 2022, the European Commission recommended granting Ukraine the status of EU candidate «on the understanding that the country would achieve seven milestones»⁹. The latter were directly connected with the requirements to adopt legislation to strengthen the rule of law and anti-corruption measures. The Ukrainian Parliament has become a critical political forum and instrumental institution for adopting laws necessary to meet the milestones. Therefore, this section draws on a qualitative analysis of key political developments between the EU and Ukraine from 2022 to 2024 to evaluate the legislative activity of *Verkhovna Rada* on democratisation reforms.

⁶ w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=64531.

⁷ European Implementation Assessment Report, europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/642844/EPRS_STU(2020)642844_EN.pdf.

⁸ Ch.R. Wise, O.Suslova, T.R.Brown, *Ukraine's Parliament in War: the Impact of Russia's Invasion on the Verkhovna Rada's Ability and Efforts to Legislate Reforms and Join the European Union*, in *The Theory and Practice of Legislation*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2024.

⁹ www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-commissions-recommendations-ukraines-eu-candidate-status_en?s=232.

From June to December 2022, six “necessary” acts were adopted, in order to meet the recommendations of the European Commission set out in its Opinion on Ukraine’s application for EU membership¹⁰. These acts aimed to improve the procedure for selecting candidates for the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, the independence of media, the protection of national minorities and the prevention and countering of money laundering¹¹. The adoption of these acts demonstrated a significant shift in the ability of the *Verkhovna Rada* to act in unity in response to Russia’s ongoing invasion of the country. As a result, on 3 February 2023, the President of the European Council recognised Ukraine’s accomplishments in judicial reform and fighting corruption¹².

Speaking about the role of personalities in the legislative activity of the Ukrainian Parliament, one could have assumed that the continuation of the political competition between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Petro Poroshenko would have blocked the process. While in the 2019 presidential campaign, Poroshenko used European integration as a critical message of his campaign, Zelenskyy used populist rhetoric against his rival. However, the Russian full-scale invasion brought significant change to the salience of European integration in the presidential political agenda. As a result, Volodymyr Zelenskyy began successfully using the EU integration rhetoric to persuade his Western allies to strengthen their support for Ukraine and move ahead with the EU membership¹³.

The analysis of voting results for the above-mentioned legislative acts shows the unifying impact of the European integration issue on the Ukrainian political scene. Regarding the laws mentioned above, the European Solidarity party abstained from voting only once – on the Law regarding the improvements of the procedure for selecting candidates for the position of judge of the Constitutional Court¹⁴.

Another platform of inter-party cooperation is the Committee of European Integration of Ukraine, a parliamentary committee consisting of nine members – representatives of political parties. The Committee consists of five members from the Servant of the People party, two members from the European Solidarity party, one member from the All-Ukrainian Union “Fatherland” and one member from Opposition platform – For Life. Interestingly enough, the head of the Committee comes from the European Solidarity party. The Committee has legislative, organisational, and oversight functions to adjust Ukrainian legislation to European standards. From 24 February to 30 June 2023, the Committee held 52 meetings, which exceeded the number of meetings from 1 January 2021 to 23 February 2022

¹⁰ eas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/eu-commissions-recommendations-ukraines-eu-candidate-status_en?s=232.

¹¹ rada.gov.ua/news/Top-novyna/231357.html.

¹² consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/03/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-press-conference-of-the-eu-ukraine-summit-in-kyiv/.

¹³ A. Khudoliy, V. Zheltovskyy, *Rhetorical Argumentation as a Public Action: Case of Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s Presidential Rhetoric*, in *Online Journal Modelling New Europe*, No. 42, 2023, 21.

¹⁴ w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/radan_gs09/ns_golos?g_id=21924.

(42 meetings respectively). During the first year of full-scale war, the Committee considered 11 draft laws as a lead committee and 594 as a non-lead committee¹⁵. This demonstrates the increased Parliament's enactment of legislative activity needed to speed Ukraine's accession to the EU.

Regarding the accomplishment of the AA, the online progress monitoring report presented by Ukrainian officials highlights constant progress in all 24 sectors of the AA. The webpage was designed by the Ukrainian government to inform the public on state of progress in the AA implementation and called «the pulse of the agreement». There are areas in which almost 100% of tasks have been completed. These areas include the following: justice, freedom, security, human rights (92%), management of state finances (90%), humanitarian policy (94%), and intellectual property (98%). The slowest progress has been made in the areas of financial cooperation and the fight against fraud (24%), customs issues (61%), science, technology and innovations and space (68%)¹⁶.

In its evaluation, the European Commission underlined the resolve of the Ukrainian Government and Parliament «in making substantial progress» on democratic reforms despite the ongoing Russian military aggression. As a result, on 8 November 2023, the Enlargement package was adopted, and the Commission recommended opening negotiations with Ukraine, stating that granting Ukraine a candidate *status* served as a trigger for accelerating reforms¹⁷.

In response to the abovementioned steps, the President of Ukraine issued Decree No. 744/2023 «On Certain Measures to Prepare for Negotiations o Ukraine's Accession to the European Union»¹⁸. The document obliged the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine to submit the draft law to the *Verkhovna Rada* to approve a new National Programme for the Adaptation of Ukrainian Legislation to the EU *acquis*. The draft should consider the recommendations of the European Commission formulated in the assessment reports. As for *Verkhovna Rada*, the legislative efforts concentrated on adopting sustainable and practical solutions in transport, energy independence and digital services¹⁹.

Last but not least, the Ukrainian Parliament has become a platform for strong political speeches delivered by top decision-makers of EU institutions and Member States. Multiple speeches highlighted the significance of Ukraine's victory for peace in the EU and delivered promises to stand with Ukraine as long as it takes to

¹⁵ internews.ua/storage/app/media/rang/VRU-under-war-conditions-ENG.pdf.

¹⁶ pulse.kmu.gov.ua.

¹⁷ neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_699%20Ukraine%20report.pdf.

¹⁸ president.gov.ua/documents/7442023-48833

¹⁹ kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/uploaded-files/EU%20Law%20and%20Legal%20Approximation%20Review%20for%20Ukraine%20-%20A4U%20II%20newsletter%20No%2063.pdf.

win²⁰. A symbolic example of such an address was the speech of the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, on Day of Europe, 9 May 2024, which confirmed the support of the European Parliament for the Ukrainian accession to the EU²¹.

In addition, since September 2021, the European Parliament has repeatedly expressed the need to transform the European Union's foreign policy and bring the enlargement issue into the focus of European debate. Many resolutions supporting Ukraine and strengthening sanctions against Russia have been adopted²². The works within the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee serve as another field for bilateral cooperation between the two Parliaments and result in joint projects on harmonising Ukraine's legislative agenda regarding the EU requirements.

The joint statements and recommendations adopted at annual EU-Ukraine inter-parliamentary meetings included a strong message of political support for Ukraine's accession to the EU and an appeal to EU institutions to implement the enlargement agenda further. At the same time, the documents included the statement on the need to monitor the realisation of democratic reforms in Ukraine as a condition for joining the EU²³.

4. Conclusions

The above analysis has focused on the unifying impact of the European integration on political parties represented in *Verkhovna Rada* following the 2019 elections. A particular focus has been placed on post-February 2022 legislative activity demonstrating that the issue of European integration has also become a central topic of parliamentary proceedings and a defining factor of legal developments in Ukraine.

The study of Ukraine's legislation activity gives ground to assert that Russian military aggression has triggered the intensification of parliamentary proceedings on democratisation reforms. Additionally, the voting results illustrated the ability of both ruling and opposition parties to unite efforts in adopting laws in line with the AA.

Despite internal tensions and ongoing competition between political rivals represented in *Verkhovna Rada*, the Ukrainian Parliament proved its capacity to become a significant institutional actor facilitating the Europeanisation in Ukraine. Members of Parliament managed to strategically consolidate efforts to adopt

²⁰ Author's summary of repeated message delivered by top EU officials in Ukrainian Parliament in years 2022-2024. See also: H. Maurer, R. Whitman, N. Wright, *The EU and the Invasion of Ukraine: a Collective Responsibility to Act?*, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 1, 2023.

²¹ multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/fi/video/address-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president-to-the-ukrainian-parliament-verkhovna-rada_I257125.

²² europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/171/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-ukraine-moldova-and-belarus.

²³ europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/273205/EU-UA%20PAC%20Statement%2006.07.2023%20FINAL.pdf.

legislation that would meet the recommendations of the European Commission and convince international allies to strengthen their assistance. Last but not least, the development of bilateral cooperation between Ukrainian and European Parliaments, at the committee level, resulted in adopting statements of support and appeals to both EU and Ukrainian counterparts to continue undertaking the steps in line with the enlargement agenda.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian Parliament has become an essential platform for debating Europeanisation reforms and the perspectives of European integration in Ukraine. Regular visits of EU institutional leaders (the president of the European Parliament in particular) in wartime sent a strong message on the vital role of the *Verkhovna Rada* in implementing reforms and EU readiness to continue the transformation of its foreign policy.

These developments highlight the growing structural potential of the Ukrainian Parliament and its instrumental role in advancing Ukraine's accession to the EU. As for the EU, there has been an unprecedented shift in the transformation of the institutional leadership and position on the need to reform common foreign policy by prioritising the enlargement issue. However, to successfully finalise the enlargement process, it is crucial to maintain the EU's support for democratic resilience in Ukraine. In this regard, the Member States' ability to achieve a long-lasting *consensus* on the announced foreign policy reform will remain an equally important factor for the success of the enlargement agenda.