

# UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 4(10), 2017



- NATION BRANDING
- SOFT POWER
- VALUES OR BUSINESS?



## Protracted Conflicts

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### Publisher:

Published by NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation" (Ukraine), Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the Representation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine, and the Black Sea Trust.

**UA: Ukraine Analytica** is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed for experts, diplomats, academics, students interested in the international relations and Ukraine in particular.

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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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# UKRAINE'S IMAGE OF "IN-BETWEEN-NESS": BAD LUCK OR LACK OF POLITICAL DETERMINATION?

Dr. Nadiia Bureiko

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

*Since gaining independence, Ukraine has been stuck between the Western and Eastern integration initiatives. This has been visible from both the multifaceted judgment employed in the foreign policy decision-making and the similar domestic multi-vector behaviour that influenced the image of Ukraine as being "split" in-between. On top of that, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which sparked the most serious crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War, has considerably affected the sensitive positioning of Ukraine in the "inbetweener" environment. The present paper inquires how Ukraine's image of "in-between-ness" has been transposed and evolved into a stereotyped image and whether this image is based upon valid explanations.*

## Introduction

Ever since gaining independence, Ukraine has undergone political, economic, and social transformations and sought to enhance its regional and international actorness. However, most of its endeavours in foreign and domestic milieu were complicated by political uncertainty, economic and social challenges of the post-Soviet legacy.

Regional differences across Ukraine ranging from spoken languages, historical memory to popular voting patterns and foreign policy preferences have fomented a persistent perception of national "in-between-ness". As such, Ukraine has found itself "self-searching" for a national identity and also foreign policy orientation. Unlike the clear European path embraced by the Central-

Eastern European countries (CEECs) of the ex-communist bloc, Ukraine has been constantly gravitating between the Western and Eastern integration initiatives without fully joining any of them. In spite of the official rhetoric favouring a "European choice", Ukraine has failed to employ efficient tools for undergoing a profound transformation "into a fully European country, measured by stability and prosperity, rather than just a country which is located in Europe".<sup>1</sup> By falling into the "trap" of a multifaceted foreign policy, Ukraine's "inbetweener" position has been equally translated in a domestic multi-vector behaviour.

The present paper inquires how Ukraine's sensitive "in-between-ness" has been transposed and evolved into a stereotyped image and whether this image is based upon

<sup>1</sup> J. Tedstrom, *The EU and Ukraine: A Transatlantic View*, [in:] A. Lewis (ed.), *The EU and Ukraine: Neighbours, Friends, Partners?*, The Federal Trust: London 2001, p. 33.

valid explanations. In particular, this paper points out under which circumstances “in-between-ness” characterizes the Ukrainian foreign policy outlook and how Ukraine’s self-assigned role of a “bridge”<sup>2</sup> is mirrored in Ukrainians’ public perceptions.

### Dual Contextuality of “In-between-ness”

Since the early 1990s, Ukraine has been captured in a dual contextuality of both space and time.<sup>3</sup> Such contextuality stems from both historical and geographical influences, which also affected the societal level. Being positioned at the junction between the East and West, which respectively nominated two centres of regional power – Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community (namely, spatial “in-between-ness”), and also between its Soviet past and desired European future (namely, temporal “in-between-ness”), Ukraine has undergone a complicated self-searching process at both the external and internal level.

According to Parker’s model<sup>4</sup>, countries positioned in-between may hold sway over much more powerful centres, sometimes by playing one centre off another or by gaining loyalty rewards (for not moving too much to the other centre). As a result, the marginal states might be constrained to follow a constant oscillation between centres, given that “inbetweeners” frequently attempt to bargain their geopolitical positions and/or follow more than one centre.



***Regional differences across Ukraine ranging from spoken languages, historical memory to popular voting patterns and foreign policy preferences have fomented a persistent perception of national “in-between-ness”***

Thus, from a spatial perspective, Ukraine’s “in-between-ness” stems from its geographical position and from an ambiguous geopolitical context. A country at the crossroads, a bridge or a buffer between the East and West, a pendulum shifting between two regional powers, etc. were notable “buzzwords” in public discourses and policy papers focusing on Ukraine. By and large, gateways, borderlands or faultlines, battlegrounds for geopolitical manoeuvring, in-between regions are portrayed “as barriers or corridors, no-man’s land or vital buffers between empires, states and spheres” where “distinct traditions coexist and/or clash”.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, they can become “a target, and the victim of power thrusts and power projections of other – be they Ottomans, Germans, Russians...”<sup>6</sup>

From the temporal perspective of dual contextuality, numerous observations have continuously portrayed Ukraine as a post-Soviet country that has been stuck in its Soviet past, while political, economic, and social reforms were hindered by Ukraine’s Soviet heritage. In this temporal

<sup>2</sup> The self-assigned definition of a “bridge” was for the first time used in the 1993 Decree of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine “On the Main Directions of Foreign Policy of Ukraine”.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ekiert, S. Hanson, *Time, Space and Institutional Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, [in:] G. Ekiert, S. Hanson (ed.), *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: Assessing the Legacy of Communist Rule*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> N. Parker, *A Theoretical Introduction: Spaces, Centers, and Margins*, [in:] N. Parker, (ed.), *The Geopolitics of Europe’s Identity: Centers, Boundaries and Margins*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. Peterson, *Regions In Between: Europe, NATO and the Geopolitics of Shifting Frontiers*, “Turkish Policy Quarterly”, 2008, 7 (2), p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> J. Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II*, Oxford University Press: New York 1993, p. 263.

“in-between-ness”, a salient role is given to the so-called turning points or crucial junctures (as Euromaidan became for Ukraine) – events that have a strong impact on the society and the state. Such events may alleviate the risk of being entrapped in-between, foster transformations and reforms, and deal with constraints on institutional, social, or cultural changes.



***Ukraine’s “inbetweenner” position persisted when both the EU and Russia developed their integrative initiatives in the common neighbourhood – Eastern Partnership (EaP, 2009), and the 2010 Eurasian Customs Union***

### **Ukraine’s Self-assigned Role of a “Bridge”**

In accordance with the 1993 Decree “On the Main Directions of Ukraine’s Foreign Policy” – the first document that defined the top priorities of the newly established Ukrainian state in the international realm, one of the objectives of Ukraine’s external policy was that of a “reliable bridge” between Russia and the CEECs/EU. Among others, the decree underlined the significance of maintaining and developing good relations with both the EU and Russia, whereby Ukraine shall “conclude a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement,

the implementation of which shall become the first step towards its association and, later, full membership in this organisation [the EU]” and concurrently “undertake all measures to translate relations with Russia into good neighbourhood”.<sup>7</sup> The official multivectorism at the level of the Ukrainian foreign policy was gradually translated into a feeling of “in-between-ness”. It also fuelled a degree of mistrust and uncertainty, which meant that externally Ukraine experienced a series of ebbs and flows in its attempt to develop good relations in its neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, such self-assigned role of a “bridge” and readiness to balance in-between was not sufficiently underpinned by a rigorous cost-benefit analysis. Subsequently, it has gradually seen Ukrainian politicians at odds with each other when seeking to justify different foreign policy choices. For instance, while the Ukraine–NATO Action Plan was strongly supported by the then President Victor Yushchenko, his successor Victor Yanukovych, on the contrary, downplayed the importance of the NATO–Ukraine partnership.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, under Yanukovych’s presidency, the 2010 Law of Ukraine “On the Foundations of Internal and Foreign Policy” excluded Ukraine’s bid for the NATO membership.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas potential membership in NATO has been generating large disputes both at the political and society level, the European Union integration has been almost unanimously

<sup>7</sup> *Постанова Верховної Ради України “Про основні напрями зовнішньої політики України” (Decree of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine “On the Main Directions of Foreign Policy of Ukraine)*, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1993 [http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/3360-12?test=4/UMfPEGznhh5tk.ZikQA0EBH14Ys80msh8Ie6 access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>8</sup> The Party of the Regions has been actively opposing Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine; consequently Ukraine was not invited into the Membership Action Plan process (NATO, 2008). Concurrently, the Ukrainian society was also significantly uncertain regarding the defence alliance and demonstrated reluctance towards membership in NATO. Thus, even in the regions strongly favouring the West, support for joining NATO was remarkably lower than support for the EU integration.

<sup>9</sup> *Закон України “Про засади внутрішньої і зовнішньої політики” (Law of Ukraine “On the Foundations of Internal and Foreign Policy”)*, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2010, [http://zakon0.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2411-17 access: 22 November 2017].  
Ukraine’s adherence to the Euroatlantic vector and public support for NATO only resumed after the annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in Donbas.

welcomed by Ukrainian leadership. As such, the 2010 law clearly defined that one of the main principles of Ukraine's foreign policy is "to ensure integration of Ukraine into the European political, economic, and legal area for the purpose of becoming the member of the European Union". In spite of the lack of consensus among politicians vis-à-vis Ukraine's foreign policy course, the European integration has never been put on the back burner and remained the key aspiration for democratization and reforms.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Ukraine's "inbetweener" position persisted when both the EU and Russia developed their integrative initiatives in the common neighbourhood – Eastern Partnership (EaP, 2009), and the 2010 Eurasian Customs Union. The EaP sought to enhance "a rule-based, future-orientated regime modelled on the European governance model, while appearing not to be engaging in rivalry with Russia within this domain".<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Russia has been actively promoting the Eurasian initiative as an immediate alternative to the EU integration initiatives. In its attempt to prevent Ukraine from moving westward, the Russian leadership aimed at symbolically reintegrating the former Soviet space and at legitimizing its power. According to this scenario, Ukraine had a pivotal role for the Russian reintegration strategy and has been transformed into "a normative battleground, with Russia trying to dissuade it [Kyiv] from

pursuing an Association Agreement with the EU containing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and to join the ECU instead".<sup>12</sup>

Against this backdrop, Ukraine's "in-between-ness" emerged with renewed force at the 2013 Vilnius EaP summit. The Association Agreement (AA) with the EU that was expected to be signed by Ukraine at the summit could have represented the end of Ukraine's external vacillation. In spite of its lack of membership perspective, the AA aimed at opening a new era for Ukraine's relations with the European community, including political association and economic integration. However, moving towards only one centre (namely, the EU) paradoxically reduced "the Ukrainian authorities' possibilities for manoeuvre, and, in the absence of a strategic decision, pushed them to hasty and unreasonable decisions".<sup>13</sup> Thus, the 2013 Vilnius EaP summit saw at the very last moment president Yanukovich withdrawing from the negotiating table. This constituted a bizarre decision at first sight, since Prime Minister Azarov, a close and loyal ally of the president, was faithfully maintaining the official line: Less than 24 hours previously he had stated that "the planned preparation of the Vilnius summit continues perfectly normally".<sup>14</sup> According to the Economist, the profound reforms demanded by the EU could have meant "breaking the very system that put Mr Yanukovich in power".<sup>15</sup> Thus, the

<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, Ukraine was the first CIS state to sign the *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA)* with the European Union in 1994, which was ratified in 1998; just after the PCA ratification, the then president Kuchma signed "Strategy on Ukraine's Integration with the European Union". The strategy defined the EU membership as Ukraine's long-term strategic goal.

<sup>11</sup> R. Dragneva, K. Wolczuk, *Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?*, "Chatham House Briefing Paper", 2012 [[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2125913](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2125913) access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> V. Chalyi, *Ukraine Between Two Paths of Integration*, "On Wider Europe, Foreign Policy and Civil Society Program", 2012 [[www.gmfus.org/file/2765/download](http://www.gmfus.org/file/2765/download) access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>14</sup> R. Dragneva, K. Wolczuk, *Ukraine between the EU and Russia: The Integration Challenge*, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> *The Eurasian Tug-of-war: The EU Is Competing with Russia for the Future of Its Eastern Neighbours*, "Economist", 30 November 2013 [<https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21580528-eu-competing-russia-future-its-eastern-neighbours-eurasian-tug-war> access: 6 July 2017].



Vilnius summit and Yanukovich's decision showed how the private interests of Ukraine's political elite take precedence over the official discourse of foreign policy.

Massive manifestations, known as Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity, immediately ignited across the country to vocally condemn Yanukovich's refusal to sign the AA and to signal Ukrainians' strong support for the EU. The newly elected Ukrainian leadership "constructed a strong link between the nation's renaissance and its historical return to Europe, on the one hand, and the country's associations with the EU, on the other... All this made the soft power of the EU stronger and provided it with some leverage in Ukrainian politics".<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Euromaidan events followed by Russia's aggression, namely the annexation of Crimea and the covert support for the pro-Russian rebels from the Donbas region, put an end to Ukraine's balancing act, since "the EU sought to prevent Ukraine from falling back into the Russian orbit and, to this end, sought to foster effective democracy and efficient markets".<sup>17</sup> The AA was signed on 21 March (the political part) and on 27 June (the economic part) 2014. Prior to the entering into force of the AA (on 1 September 2017), President Petro Poroshenko emphasized that the agreement is "a road map of reforms whereas Ukraine has one road – a wide Euro-Atlantic highway that leads to membership in the European Union...".<sup>18</sup> The answer from the

EU leadership was prompt. Just five days later at a conference of the EU ambassadors in Brussels, European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker underlined that Ukraine "is not 'European' in the sense of the European Union. I saw that my friend [Ukrainian President] Mr. Poroshenko a few days ago did say: 'Here is Ukraine, it is the European Union, and it is NATO.' But for the moment it is neither one nor the other. And I think we do need to bear that in mind".<sup>19</sup>

The international community to a great extent continues to perceive Ukraine as "inbetween", since a striking contrast still exists: On the one hand, the country strongly seeks inclusion into the European structures, but, on the other hand, it is unable to fully undertake necessary reforms and to successfully fight corruption. Thus, whilst Ukraine is expecting more incentives from the EU to carry out reforms, the European leadership has a different approach; according to the "more for more principles", the European partners are willing to support Ukraine, provided the country makes the first steps towards internal transformation. According to Lithuania's President D. Grybauskaitė, "stubbornness [to obtain the EU membership perspective] is good, but the most important thing is not guarantees on entering (the EU), but to be stubborn about reforms".<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, ahead of his visit to Ukraine in June 2017 underlined that "reforms pay

<sup>16</sup> V. Samokhvalov, Ukraine between Russia and the European Union: Triangle Revisited, "Europe-Asia Studies", 2015, 67 (9), p. 1374.

<sup>17</sup> T. Graham, R. Menon, J. Snyder, *Ukraine between Russia and the West: Buffer or Flashpoint?*, "World Policy Journal", 34 (1), 2017, pp. 113.

<sup>18</sup> *Виступ Президента під час урочистого заходу «Парад військ» з нагоди 26-ої річниці Незалежності України (President's Address during the Ceremony "Parade of Troops" on the Occasion of the 26th Anniversary of Independence of Ukraine)*, President of Ukraine, 24 August 2017 [<http://www.president.gov.ua/news/vistup-prezidenta-pid-chas-urochistogo-zahodu-parad-vijsk-z-42878> access: 24 November 2017].

<sup>19</sup> *Discours du Président Juncker à la conférence des ambassadeurs de l'UE*, "European Commission", 29 August 2017 [[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-17-3001\\_fr.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3001_fr.htm) access: 24 November 2017].

<sup>20</sup> *Ukraine's Promise of EU Membership Remains Elusive*, "Swissinfo", 24 November 2017 [<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/ukraine-s-promise-of-eu-membership-remains-elusive/43703302> access: 24 November 2017].

off, as one can see with visa-liberalisation and the Association Agreement. Those reforms have to continue, notably in the fight against corruption”.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, a report produced by the European External Action Service and the European Commission on 15 November 2017 highlighted that “evaluation of reforms in Ukraine showed considerable progress but there is still a strong need to accelerate implementation to reap full benefits”.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the process of domestic change and the pace of the reforms in Ukraine are underperforming. Moreover, the slow anti-corruption mechanisms point out that the rule of law is weak, while the political elites are still immune to judiciary pressure. For instance, the verification of electronic declarations of assets submitted nearly a year ago by public officials is still being sabotaged and, until now, a clear picture of the public incomes does not exist. Consequently, the upcoming annual meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council, scheduled on 8 December 2017, will primarily focus on anti-corruption measures and reforms of the judiciary system.

These institutional pitfalls have also been criticized by the Ukrainian civil society, which constantly objected to the lack of progress in reforms. In an open letter to the EU’s leadership, representatives of the Ukrainian civil society signalled that “the more threatening anti-corruption reform becomes to the vested interests of the

political elites, the more resistance and pressure it tends to meet”.<sup>23</sup>

All in all, the success of domestic reforms and anti-corruption mechanisms alongside with visible progress in the economic, social, and political spheres will determine Ukraine’s irrevocable departure towards the Euro-Atlantic structures and its ability to overcome the in-between position. However, unless reforms are fully implemented, Ukraine will still remain struck in-between, which could ultimately have devastating effects, challenging Ukraine’s image in the West, where the partners have already started questioning the purpose for Ukraine “to fight for its body in Donbas if it loses its soul to corruption”.<sup>24</sup>

### Regressive “In-between-ness”? The Civic Factor

The “in-between-ness” narrative has had puzzling effects also at the level of the Ukrainian society. For instance, according to data analysis from the surveys conducted by Razumkov Centre, just after the Orange Revolution in 2005, 67.3% of the population in the west and only 18% in the east were welcoming Ukraine’s enhanced cooperation with the EU. Support for closer ties with Russia experienced a reversed trend and was expressed by 57.6% of the population in the east and only 9.7% in the west. Such west-east divide across the country remained

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Hahn Visits Ukraine: Focus on Anti-corruption, Decentralisation Reforms and EU’s Assistance to the East, European Commission, 31 May 2017 [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news\_corner/news/johannes-hahn-visits-ukraine-focus-anti-corruption-decentralisation-reforms-and-eus\_en access: 22 November 2017].


<sup>22</sup> EU Report: Evaluation of Ukrainian Reforms Shows Considerable Progress but Need to Accelerate Implementation to Reap Full Benefits, European Commission, 15 November 2017 [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news\_corner/news/eu-report-evaluation-ukrainian-reforms-shows-considerable-progress-need-accelerate\_en access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>23</sup> Open Letter of the Ukrainian Civil Society to the Leadership of the European Union ahead of the Upcoming Annual Meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council on December 8, 2017, “Reanimation Package of Reforms”, December 2017 [http://rpr.org.ua/en/news/open-letter-of-the-ukrainian-civil-society-to-the-leadership-of-the-european-union-ahead-of-the-upcoming-annual-meeting-of-the-eu-ukraine-association-council-on-december-8-2017/ access: 06 December 2017].

<sup>24</sup> R. Tillerson, Remarks to NATO-Ukraine Commission, U.S. Department of State, 31 March 2017 [https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269359.htm access: 22 November 2017].

almost invariable and became even more contrasting in 2012, when 70.1% in the west and only 11.9% in the east expressed their support for cooperation with the EU, whereas only 7% in the west and 60% in the east opted for stronger cooperation with Russia. The picture had not altered significantly until the annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in Donbas. However, in 2015, cooperation with the EU reached 82.6% in the west, whilst stronger ties with Russia were only preferred by 0.5%. Even more striking was the observation that the east also showed a similar trend of increased confidence in the EU and diminished support for Russia – 35.8% and 25.9%, respectively.<sup>25</sup>

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 ***the Euromaidan events became in many regards the game changer, particularly since the change in public perceptions vis-à-vis Europe could be rather explained by the negative impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine***

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Concurrently, the self-perception as Europeans is gradually gaining salience within the Ukrainian society. According to the 2013 and 2015 surveys implemented within the international research project “Region, Nation and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconceptualization of Ukraine”, in 2013, 31.7% expressed their European self-identification, whereas in 2015, “European-ness” was reported by

38.6% of respondents.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the stronger European feelings hinge on the level of financial welfare and rule of law as well as on the enhancement of democratic values and human rights<sup>27</sup>, and therefore are linked to the success of the aforementioned reforms.

It would be difficult to assume that the increase of pro-European feelings in Ukraine either resulted from the success of the EU’s soft power or was generated by the Eastern Partnership policy. In earnest, parts of the Ukrainian political elite and society mobilised themselves in order to conclude the AA. However, the Euromaidan events became in many regards the game changer, particularly since the change in public perceptions vis-à-vis Europe could be rather explained by the negative impact of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

This has brought about a fundamental alteration also at the level of Ukraine’s national identity, which increasingly moved from an ethnic to a civic one. According to 2015 data, while being asked what it means to be Ukrainian, respondents across the entire country opted for rather civic elements composing their “Ukrainian-ness” – namely, to feel Ukrainian, to follow Ukrainian traditions, to respect political institutions and law, to help compatriots in need, to participate actively in the public life of the country were among top attributes that according to Ukrainian citizens are essential to be Ukrainian.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>25</sup> N. Bureiko, T. Moga, “Bounded Europeanisation”: *The Case of Ukraine*, [in:] M. Mannin, P. Flenley (eds.), *The European Union and Its Eastern Neighbourhood Europeanisation and Its Twenty-First-Century Contradictions*, Manchester University Press: Manchester 2018 [<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526109095/> access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>26</sup> SPSS database, “Ukrainian Regionalism”, 2017 [<http://www.uaregio.org/en/surveys/methodology/> access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>27</sup> *Як українці розуміють євроінтеграцію: очікування та настрої суспільства (How Ukrainians Understand Eurointegration: Expectations and Feelings in the Society)*, Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2016 [<http://dif.org.ua/article/yak-ukraintsi-rozumiyut-evrointegratsiyu-ochikuvannya-ta-nastroi-suspilstva> access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>28</sup> SPSS database, “Ukrainian Regionalism”, 2017 [<http://www.uaregio.org/en/surveys/methodology/> access: 22 November 2017].

it is important to underline that regardless of the ethnic origin or spoken language, Ukrainian self-identification and pro-Ukrainian sentiments are salient across all the country and do not follow anymore the east-west pattern. Thus, according to the 2015 data, 90.8% of respondents reported they felt Ukrainian and 92.5% stated they loved Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

The above-mentioned data showed an increasing “civic fibre” of the Ukrainian nation and further indicate that different language preferences or contrasting interpretations of the historical events are merely artificially exacerbated – particularly by politicians for scoring electoral points – and depict regional diversity across the country rather than the stereotyped east-west “split”.

### Whither “In-between-ness”?

The image of “in-between-ness” is, by and large, structured upon both external and internal causal chain of events and decisions. Apart from the geopolitical connotations, Ukraine’s “in-between-ness” has been long enhanced by two main factors. First, continuous discrepancy in Ukraine’s declarations of European aspirations and limited efficiency of reforms “on the ground” created a niche for Ukrainian politicians “allowing it to continue rent-seeking while balancing West and East, each of which

treated Kyiv’s integration rhetoric with a heavy dose of scepticism”.<sup>30</sup> Provided that reforms, economic progress, fight against corruption are still lagging behind, the public support for the EU can ultimately diminish considering that for Ukrainians the “idea of Europe” epitomizes first and foremost the level of financial welfare and stable prosperous development.

Second, neither the absence of the membership incentive nor the EU’s appreciation of the modest determination of the Ukrainian leadership to commit themselves to reforms played in favour of Ukraine’s attempts to ease the “in-between-ness”. Provided, that reforms are not fully implemented or Ukrainian politicians might still use the in-between narrative in their public discourses, this can negatively influence the image of Ukraine externally and will affect the societal attachments and public loyalties internally.

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<sup>29</sup> SPSS database, “Ukrainian Regionalism”, 2017 [http://www.uaregio.org/en/surveys/methodology/ access: 22 November 2017].

<sup>30</sup> R. Dragneva, K. Wolczuk, *Ukraine between the EU and Russia: the Integration Challenge*, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 30.