

Borders of Ukraine in the new realities of war: economic and security aspect.

After 2022, the war ceased to be only a “front line”, its impact affected the information environment, logistics and critical infrastructure of both Ukraine and all of Eastern Europe. At the same time, Ukrainian borders have undergone perhaps the greatest changes due to increased security and control, which in turn affected the mass movements of people, changed the nature of migration and the system of international protection.

There has been a change in the paradigm of the border, - from fixed territorial demarcation, to a flexible social reality in which new economic and security interactions are being formed with the participation of various stakeholders. Ukraine's experience can serve as an example of rapid transformational changes in the border, which have become a "window of opportunity" for building new logistical routes and economic approaches to cooperation. At the same time, new initiatives require transformation from temporary to permanent and long-term cooperation projects and scaling up best practices with the expansion of the geography of the countries involved.

The border today not only performs a protective function, but also forms a new economic policy based on European integration cooperation and national challenges. Can European integration become an answer to all the challenges of today and what interaction tools have the best potential for creating a new configuration of cross-border cooperation? How can the changes caused by the war be used to build fundamentally new approaches to cooperation based on security and the development of economic relations? Can the principle of integrated border management become an effective tool for interaction both with neighboring countries and in the regional dimension? What mechanisms of this communication need to be developed for horizontal interaction between a wide range of actors interested in border development and cross-border cooperation?

This and other things should be the subject of discussion in the context of forming a new border policy both in Ukraine and abroad.

Full-scale war has already led to the emergence of new formats and instruments of Ukraine-EU cooperation, which emerged as EU crisis response tools, but are gradually transforming into long-term European integration cooperation.

One of these formats of cooperation is "Solidarity lines", which Ukraine and the EU began implementing in May 2022 in response to the blockade of Ukrainian ports.

In the first months of the war, the blockade was total, causing a sharp increase in grain prices worldwide, as Ukraine fully supplied 10% of all wheat and corn to world markets (90% of these volumes were exported by sea).

According to UN estimates, the interruption in the supply of Ukrainian grain has negatively affected the food situation for 345 million people in 82 countries around the world.

The growth of the food crisis was largely prevented by the so-called "grain agreement" involving Ukraine, the UN, Turkey, and the Russian Federation, which, despite constant difficulties, lasted for a year - from July 2022 to July 2023.

The Solidarity Lines Action Plan envisaged the urgent elimination of transport delays and improvement of connectivity between the EU and Ukraine. Today, the European Commission describes "Solidarity Lines" as a key project for the export of Ukrainian agricultural products, as well as the only option for the export and import of goods of other categories.

One of the main goals of the Solidarity Lines Initiative was to reconcile the needs of the Ukrainian side and the capabilities of the EU in ensuring export-import operations across the Western borders of Ukraine. For example, the result of the first 6 months of the Initiative's implementation was an understanding of the total discrepancy in the needs and capabilities of the parties, which primarily consist in the difference in port capacities, as well as the technical parameters of the transport network and vehicles on both sides of the border.

This also led to an understanding of the necessary areas for strengthening cooperation and the possible volumes of mobilization of funds from European partners and international financial institutions to solve infrastructure problems. Separate EU measures to eliminate tariffs on Ukrainian goods and support programs for the private sector and farmers contributed to the full implementation of the initiative.

In addition to sea routes, cooperation focused on liberalization of road transport, which means the cancellation of permits for bilateral and transit road transport between Ukraine and the EU.

Later, the Road Transport Agreement with the EU was signed, which contributed to the liberalization of transportation between Ukraine and other countries in the region that are not members of the EU but are economically linked to it, for example, Norway and North Macedonia.

The introduction of the "Solidarity Routes" also gave impetus to the integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), which combines infrastructure and transport services for all modes of transport, in particular, rail, inland waterways, air and multimodal.

In general, the geography of transportation liberalization includes more than 35 countries and has had a positive impact on the development of trade between countries. A network of nine corridors is currently being developed, which means

organizational and infrastructural changes for North Baltic and Baltic-Black Sea-Aegean, Rhine-Danube and Baltic, Adriatic Sea corridors.

Transport integration remains one of the most prominent areas in the border area. Thanks to Ukraine's integration into the TEN-T network, which provides for the expansion of international transport opportunities, continues to implement digital services for carriers. Among the important decisions were the launch of digital permits ECMT digital system, which is a new instrument of permits and online recording of international routes, as well as the development of border infrastructure on routes that are part of the European transport corridors. The practical dimension of integration into the EU customs space remains the development of the NCTS and AEO common transit systems.

The customs sphere is one of the most dynamic areas of interaction since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. It was through customs that a significant part of the changes related to the adaptation of legislation to the law of the European Union, the digitalization of procedures and the development of international trade took place. Since 2025, preparations have begun for the implementation of NCTS Phase 6, which is an updated version of the common transit system, which meets the modern requirements of EU Regulations and the Multiannual Strategic Plan for e-Customs (MASP-C). It aims to improve electronic customs procedures and is the next stage of Ukraine's integration into European customs digital systems.

The reformatting of the border operation and the results obtained were based on the principle of integrated border management (hereinafter referred to as IBM), which involves the interaction of relevant authorities both within the country and with partners on both sides of the border. The EU has adopted the principles of IBM to maintain border security with the least disruption to travelers and trade. To this end, different border agencies within and across countries have to cooperate and coordinate their work.

Ukraine has implemented the IBM as a holistic border management policy focused on systemic coordination and interaction, rather than just the individual institutional capacity of individual bodies. Among the declared priorities of the IBM are the development of interagency cooperation in border protection, the fight against illegal migration, illegal trafficking of weapons and drugs, effective counteraction to international terrorism and crime, and human trafficking. A new vector of such an integrated approach has become joint projects in the field of cross-border cooperation, which provide for cultural and economic interaction between neighboring countries.

Ukraine has already begun to implement horizontal cooperation and coordination practices, which are reflected in strategic border management documents and which still need to be improved, in particular in increasing joint initiatives with neighboring countries.

An integrated approach is at the heart of the work of specialized services in the field of free movement of workers. Since obtaining a visa-free regime in 2017, Ukrainians have been able to move freely across the EU, but only now are we approaching the full implementation of the "fourth freedom" of the European Union — the right to free movement of workers.

In 2024, Ukraine began negotiations with the EU on membership, which opens up new opportunities for integration into the EU labor market. An important part of this process is not only the adaptation of national legislation to EU standards, but also active preparation to overcome possible challenges, such as anti-migrant sentiment and the protection of the internal labor market of European countries. Despite the obvious advantages of access to the EU labor market, the Ukrainian government is trying to find a balance in addressing the demographic situation caused by the war. That is why the policy of returning citizens is a priority. At the same time, the government seeks to prevent a new wave of emigration of Ukrainians after the end of martial law.

On the other hand, the government needs to make progress on the path to EU accession. In the long term, a regime of free movement of persons could facilitate both the reintegration of Ukrainians currently residing in the EU and the attraction of labor from EU countries.

Therefore, according to experts, when it comes to the free movement of workers, Ukraine is today more interested in long transitional periods established by countries than the EU states. At the same time, the Ukrainian government continues to take further steps regarding the freedom of movement of workers, which consists in the need to align legislation with the EU *acquis* in terms of access to the EU labor market.

Moving along the European integration path, Ukraine is already developing practical tools for European integration, having in its arsenal initiatives and projects that have already demonstrated their potential. At the same time, there is still room for opportunities to exchange experience and best practices. There is a need to create an "smart" platform that could operate on a systemic basis and unite all interested stakeholders and beneficiaries who seek to develop a new border policy based on the principles of integrated cooperation and joint initiatives. One of such platforms was the Panel on Integrated Border Management and Migration for the EU and Eastern Partnership countries, but it ended its activities in 2019.