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The EU Eastern Partnership Initiative as a Tool for Supporting Local Government Reform in the Countries of the “Associated Trio”

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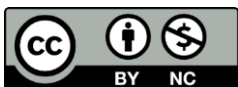
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The article analyzes the role of the EU Eastern Partnership Initiative in supporting local self-government and decentralization reforms in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. It examines the peculiarities of implementing local government reforms in the “Associated Trio” countries. The Eastern Partnership Index is used to examine the dynamics of the country’s convergence with EU standards in the field of local self-government. It has been found that Ukraine and Moldova are showing positive dynamics in the implementation of EU standards and norms in this area in 2021–2025, while Georgia is seeing a slowdown in reforms. The features of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Initiative were analyzed, and it was noted that this Eastern policy is aimed at bringing the countries of the region closer to the EU, their democratization, economic development, implementation of reforms, strengthening economic stability, good governance, and strengthening people-to-people contacts. The internal and external challenges that hinder EU support for decentralization reforms in the “Associated Trio” countries are identified. In particular, the biggest challenges include the lack of a unified EU position on the countries of the region, the slowdown of local self-government reforms by the countries themselves, corruption, geopolitical challenges in the region, the factor of the Russian Federation, and the decline in the level of democracy. The level of local self-government reforms implementation in the countries of the “Associated Trio” was studied, and it was found that Ukraine is the most reformed in this area, while Georgia has the lowest level of implementation. Recommendations are made on strengthening the role of the EU and its Eastern Partnership instrument in the implementation of local self-government reforms in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The prospects for the integration of the “Associated Trio” countries into EU standards in the field of local self-government are highlighted and three scenarios are identified.



KEYWORDS

Eastern Partnership, Associated Trio, local self-government, decentralisation, EU, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia.



Ініціатива ЄС «Східне партнерство» як інструмент підтримки реформи місцевого самоврядування в державах «Асоційованого тріо»

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У статті аналізується роль Ініціативи Східного партнерства ЄС у підтримці реформ місцевого самоврядування та децентралізації в Україні, Молдові та Грузії. Розглядаються особливості впровадження реформ місцевого самоврядування в країнах «Асоційованого тріо». Для вивчення динаміки наближення країн до стандартів ЄС у сфері місцевого самоврядування використовується Індекс Східного партнерства. Встановлено, що Україна та Молдова демонструють позитивну динаміку у впровадженні стандартів і норм ЄС у цій сфері у 2021–2025 роках, тоді як Грузія спостерігає уповільнення реформ. Проаналізовано особливості ініціативи ЄС «Східне партнерство» та зазначено, що ця східна політика спрямована на зближення країн регіону з ЄС, їх демократизацію, економічний розвиток, впровадження реформ, зміцнення економічної стабільності, належне врядування та посилення міжлюдських контактів. Визначено внутрішні та зовнішні виклики, які перешкоджають підтримці ЄС реформ децентралізації в країнах «Асоційованого тріо». Зокрема, до найбільших викликів належать відсутність єдиної позиції ЄС щодо країн регіону, уповільнення реформ місцевого самоврядування самими країнами, корупція, геополітичні виклики в регіоні, фактор Російської Федерації та зниження рівня демократії. Було досліджено рівень впровадження реформ місцевого самоврядування в країнах «Асоційованого тріо» і встановлено, що Україна є найбільш реформованою в цій сфері, а Грузія має найнижчий рівень впровадження. Надано рекомендації щодо посилення ролі ЄС та його інструменту Східного партнерства у впровадженні реформ місцевого самоврядування в Україні, Грузії та Молдові. Висвітлено перспективи інтеграції країн «Асоційованого тріо» до стандартів ЄС у сфері місцевого самоврядування та визначено три сценарії.



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

Східне партнерство, Асоційоване тріо, місцеве самоврядування, децентралізація, ЄС, Україна, Молдова, Грузія.

1. Introduction

The priority of the EU's common foreign and security policy is to promote European values, democracy, peace, and security in the world. Cooperation with neighboring countries is one of the key priorities for the EU, helping it to strengthen its own security and bring them closer to itself. According to this goal, the EU has launched instruments such as the European Neighborhood Policy and the EU Eastern Partnership Initiative, which aim to deepen political, economic, energy and security cooperation with neighboring countries. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have the status of associated members, and in 2022, Kyiv and Chisinau received the status of candidates for EU membership. The reform of state authorities and local self-government is one of the EU's priorities. Through the Eastern Partnership, the EU supports the implementation of this reform in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The EU provides financial, resource, regulatory, expert, and institutional support to these countries in implementing decentralization reforms, which are important on their path to democratization and European integration. The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of the Eastern Partnership on the processes of local self-government reform in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, to identify key challenges, and to formulate recommendations for strengthening the role of this EU initiative as an instrument for supporting reforms in the countries of the region.

2. Literature Review

The role of the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative in supporting local government reforms in the Associated Trio countries is the subject of contemporary academic research in the field of international relations. In contemporary academic literature, this topic is considered part of the European integration of the Eastern Partnership countries.

T. Astramovych-Leyk and Ya. Turchyn have made a significant contribution to the study of the evolution and transformation of the Eastern Partnership Initiative, analyzing the functioning of this policy in the context of the Russian Federation's polyhybrid aggression, which has helped us to identify the key challenges and obstacles to the functioning of this instrument. C. Kaunert [12] and C. Kaunert and J. Deus Pereir [13] look at the Eastern Partnership through the lens of hybrid warfare and geopolitical confrontation, emphasizing the need to strengthen the resilience of partner countries through institutional reforms. The monograph by Ya. Turchyn et al. [19] provide a comprehensive analysis of the prospects for the development of the Initiative in the context of geopolitical challenges, emphasizing its role as an instrument of democratic transformation and integration of Eastern European states into the EU.

The conceptual foundations for the development of the Eastern Partnership are revealed in a study by N. Bentzen and J. Przetacznik [4], which outlines the prospects for the Initiative after 2020. The authors emphasize the importance of supporting the rule of law and democracy in the countries of the region. M. Gahler [10] focuses on the EU's 'soft power' in the Eastern Partnership countries, considering support for public administration reforms and local democracy as an instrument of the Union's long-term influence. In turn, A. Madyarbekova et al. [15] analyze the mechanisms for implementing the Eastern Partnership policy, pointing to the problems of implementing reforms and the unevenness of their results in different partner countries.

The issues of decentralization and the development of local self-government in Ukraine as one of the Associated Trio countries are thoroughly researched in the works of Ukrainian scholars. M. Baimuratov et al. [3] analyze the practical aspects of the functioning of territorial communities in Ukraine, focusing on the institutional mechanisms for the implementation of local self-government powers. O. Bilotserkivska [5] directly links the decentralization reform in Ukraine with the Eastern Partnership Initiative, emphasizing its importance for the development of local democracies and the approximation of management practices to European standards. M. Zaitseva [21] considers the decentralization of public authority in the context of European integration processes, emphasizing the adaptation of Ukrainian legislation and institutional models to the EU *acquis*. T. Kustova and T. Palamarchuk [14] emphasize that strengthening local self-government is a key vector for reforming Ukraine's regional policy in the context of European integration.

Studies of local self-government reforms in other countries of the Associated Trio are also presented in scientific literature. B. Chichinadze [6] and K. Hoffman [11] analyze the peculiarities of local

self-government development in Georgia, in particular the impact of reforms on relations between the state and society. A. Ermurachi [8] examines administrative reform in the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing the systemic difficulties of its implementation and the need for consistent political will to bring about change. The study by A. Shantl et al. [16] offers a comparative analysis of the processes of decentralization and public administration reforms in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which allows identifying common trends and differences in the implementation of European approaches to local governance.

Despite the significant achievements of researchers, the scientific literature shows a certain fragmentation of analysis. Some works focus on the overall evolution of the Eastern Partnership Initiative, others on national decentralization reforms, but a comprehensive study of the role of the Eastern Partnership as an institutional and political mechanism for supporting local self-government reform in the Associated Trio countries remains underdeveloped. Thus, existing studies provide a theoretical and empirical basis for analyzing the relationship between EU policy within the Eastern Partnership and local self-government reforms in the Associated Trio countries.

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of the EU Eastern Partnership Initiative in supporting local government reform in the countries of the "Associated Trio". The main focus is on assessing the level of implementation of decentralization reform in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, identifying key challenges and formulating recommendations for strengthening the role of the Eastern Partnership as an instrument for supporting this reform.

4. Methods and Materials

In order to thoroughly analyze the topic of support for local self-government reforms in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova within the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative, a number of general scientific and specialized research methods were used. The comparative method helped to compare the results of local self-government reform implementation in the countries studied. It was also possible to compare the EU's involvement in supporting local self-government reforms in the countries of the "Associated Trio". To analyze the mechanisms of support for local self-government reform within the EU Eastern Partnership initiative, we used the institutional method of scientific research. The historical method was used to establish the evolution of decentralization reform in the countries of the region. Analysis of the Eastern Partnership Index helped to assess the proximity of the countries under study to EU standards in the field of local self-government reform. Using case studies, we examined the peculiarities of local self-government reform in each of the countries of the "Associated Trio". Methods of analysis and synthesis were used to identify the peculiarities of cooperation between the EU and Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova in reforming local self-government, as well as to form conclusions for the article. Using the forecasting method, we presented three scenarios for the prospects of the Eastern Partnership as an instrument for supporting reforms of government bodies in the countries under study.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Features of local government reform implementation in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova

Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are implementing several reforms necessary for EU accession on their path to European integration. One of the most important reforms is changes in state authorities, including at the local level. The local government reform in Ukraine, which began in 2014, is one of the most ambitious transformations in the field of public administration. It is based on the concept of decentralization of power, which provides for the expansion of the powers of local self-government bodies, ensuring the financial autonomy of communities, and improving the efficiency of territorial management. The main achievement of the reform was the creation of united territorial communities, which made it possible to optimize the country's administrative-territorial structure. In 2020, a key stage of administrative-territorial reform was completed, resulting in the formation of a new system of territorial structure at the community and district levels. The European Union provided significant support for the implementation of the reform, in particular through the Eastern Partnership programs and initiatives [21]. Thanks to them, it was possible to strengthen the institutional capacity of

communities, expand access to quality administrative services, and improve local infrastructure. At the same time, the reform faces several challenges, including the need to further improve legislation, increase the financial independence of local budgets, ensure effective control over the activities of local authorities, and develop human resources. An additional complication is the war, which affects the ability of communities to develop sustainably and manage their resources independently. We assess the level of implementation of local self-government reform in Ukraine as high [3; 5; 14].

The process of local self-government reform in Moldova has a long history, but its implementation has been uneven. Despite the adoption of a number of legislative acts providing for greater autonomy for local communities, the reform has not been able to achieve full decentralization of power. One of the main problems remains the high level of centralization of financial resources, which limits the ability of municipalities to exercise their powers. A significant part of local budgets is formed by transfers from the central budget, which makes communities financially dependent on the government. The European Union actively supports the reform of local self-government in Moldova through Eastern Partnership programs and initiatives that promote the development of the administrative capacity of municipalities and stimulate the local economy. However, the lack of a comprehensive reform strategy, political instability, and low levels of citizen involvement in decision-making are hindering the development of local self-government. An important task for Moldova remains the further improvement of financial decentralization mechanisms, the involvement of local self-government representatives in the reform process, and the improvement of the efficiency of local authorities. The decentralization process in Moldova remains incomplete and requires a comprehensive approach aimed at expanding the financial autonomy of local communities, improving inter-municipal coordination and strengthening the administrative capacity of municipalities. Further implementation of the reform is only possible with consistent political will and the integration of European standards into local governance. We assess the level of implementation of local self-government reform in Moldova as below medium [1; 8].

Georgia began local government reform in the early 2000s, and this process has not been as consistent as in other countries of the "Associated Trio". The problem is the frequent change in Georgia's foreign policy priorities, despite its declaration of a path toward European integration. One of the key achievements was the adoption in 2014 of a new law on local self-government, which enshrined the status of municipalities as the main administrative-territorial units and provided for an increase in their financial independence. Significant progress has been made in the area of fiscal decentralization, which has enabled municipalities to obtain stable sources of income and increase their budgetary autonomy. The European Union supports reforms through Eastern Partnership programs and initiatives that contribute to improving municipal governance and local infrastructure development. Despite this, weak coordination between the central government and local authorities, as well as the uneven distribution of resources between regions, remains a problem. Another challenge is the need to strengthen the role of citizens in decision-making processes and ensure greater transparency in the work of local authorities. We assess the level of reform implementation in Georgia as average [6; 11].

Comparing the process of implementing local self-government reform in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, we can note that all states have begun to actively implement it at the legislative and practical levels. Ukraine has achieved the greatest success in this area, where decentralization reform is one of the most successful. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova have achieved significantly worse results, where the processes are being slowed down for political and economic reasons. Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of the development of decentralization reform in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (Table 1).

Table 1. Development of decentralization reform in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova

State	Criterion				
	Start of decentralization reform	Level of reform implementation	Financial autonomy of communities	Existence of legislation in the field of decentralization	Role of citizens in decision-making
Ukraine	2014	High	High	Exists	Medium
Moldova	2012	Below Medium	Medium	Exists (insufficient)	Medium
Georgia	2006	Medium	Medium	Exists (insufficient)	Medium

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [1].

5.2. The EU Eastern Partnership Initiative and its role in supporting local government reform

The EU Eastern Partnership Initiative was established in 2009 as an EU instrument to deepen the European integration of six Eastern European countries, support their economic and sustainable development, democratization, and reforms [9]. Since its inception, the EU has provided significant financial, institutional, and resource support to the target countries. The priority areas for reform and support within this instrument are people-to-people contacts, energy and the environment, economic development, and public administration and democracy. The EU's priority in the countries of the region is stable and democratic state institutions. Within the first platform of the Eastern Partnership, "Democracy, Good Governance and Stability", the EU prioritizes reforming the system of government, empowering local communities, developing local democracy, and introducing e-governance [17; 19].

Key mechanisms for supporting local government reform within the EU Eastern Partnership initiative:

1. Democracy, good governance and a stability platform;
2. Cooperation within the framework of cross-border projects and Euroregions;
3. Financial support from the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development;
4. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum;
5. EU project "Sustainable, Open and Accountable Democracies for the Eastern Partnership" (Road4EaP);
6. Joint EU and UNDP initiative "Mayors for Economic Growth" (M4EG);
7. EU4ResilientRegions program;
8. U-LEAD program;
9. Interreg, Twinning, and TAIEX programs;
10. Covenant of Mayors East initiative [5; 9; 18].

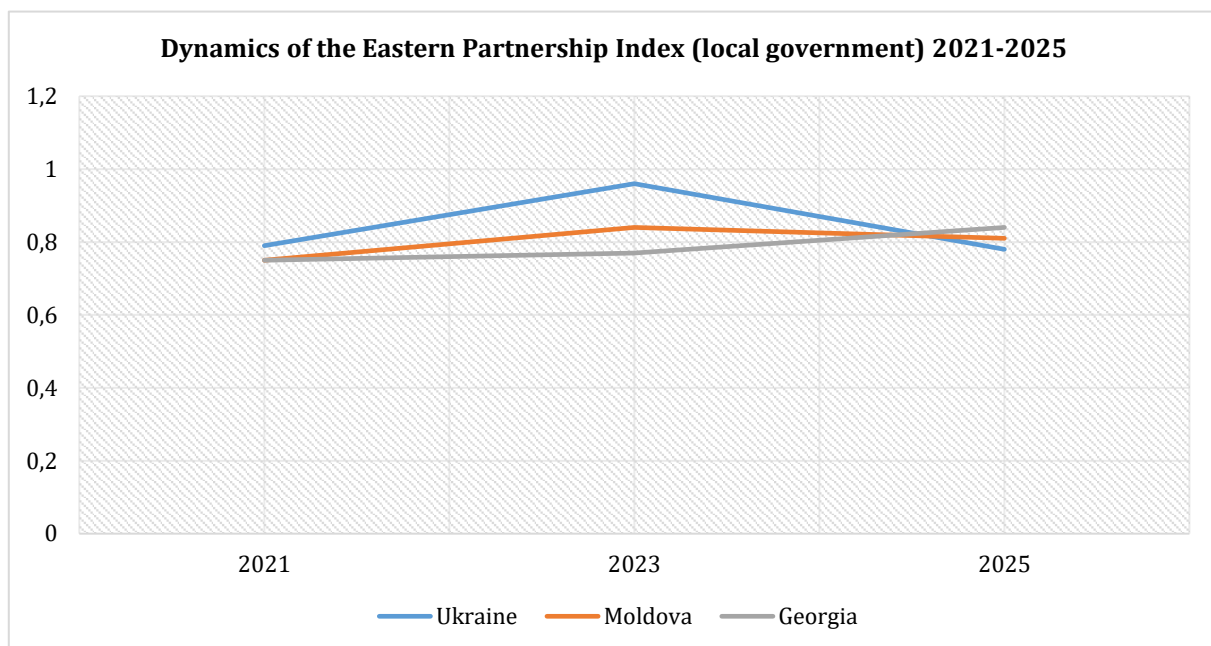


Figure 1. Eastern Partnership Index 2021-2025

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [7].

An analysis of the dynamics of the Eastern Partnership Index by the Local Self-Government sub-index shows that between 2021 and 2025, Ukraine and Moldova will demonstrate significant progress in improving reforms in the field of public administration, due to these countries being granted candidate status in 2022 and a series of reforms and regulatory acts adopted to bring them closer to EU standards. Georgia is showing negative dynamics due to disintegration processes and the partial rollback of European integration by the current pro-Russian Georgian government [7].

In order to analyze the subject of the study, we analyzed the key challenges that hinder the EU's involvement in supporting local self-government reforms in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (Table 2).

Table 2. External and internal challenges to cooperation between the EU and the “Associated Trio” countries in the field of local self-government

Internal	External
Low level of reform implementation Socio-economic instability Corruption Financial constraints Outdated system of public administration Strong centralization of power Legislative constraints Strong centralization of power Political instability Low level of technological development and digitalization	Russian factor Lack of security guarantees for countries in the region Lack of unity in the EU on the importance of integrating the “Associated Trio” countries Different views of countries on the importance of European integration Russian-Ukrainian war Frozen conflicts Hybrid challenges for countries Political instability in the world

Source: Compiled by the author based on [2, 4; 5; 12; 13; 18].

In line with the purpose of the article, we have developed a table for assessing the level of implementation of local self-government reform with EU support (Table 3).

Table 3. Implementation of local self-government reform with EU support

State	Criterion			
	Level of local self-government reform	Level of approximation to EU standards	Level of EU institutional support	Level of EU financial support
Ukraine	High	High	High	High
Moldova	Medium	High	High	High
Georgia	Medium	Medium	High	High

Source: Compiled by the author based on [1; 3; 5; 6; 8; 14; 16; 20; 21].

An analysis of Table 3 allows us to conclude that EU support for local government reform in the Associated Trio countries is stable and a priority. The EU provides significant financial and institutional support to the beneficiary countries, particularly within the framework of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Initiative. However, comparing the data in Tables 1 and 3, we can see that the level of support from the EU is not directly proportional to the level of local government reform in these countries. The reform has achieved the best results in Ukraine, while reforms in Georgia are only in their initial stages. This is primarily due to the European integration course of Ukraine and Moldova and their rapprochement with the EU, as well as Georgia’s significant shift towards Russia in its foreign policy.

5.3. Prospects and recommendations

During the initiative’s existence, the countries of the “Associated Trio” have made significant progress and achieved success on their path to the EU. All three countries have associate member status, and Ukraine and Moldova were granted EU candidate status in 2022. A roadmap for integration has been developed accordingly. European politicians predict that these two countries will join the EU by 2029, which means that they must meet the criteria for EU membership. In accordance with these criteria and requirements, the states are obliged to reform the sphere of public administration and local self-government. Therefore, in the next five years, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova will potentially achieve success in reforms in this area. However, if the war in Ukraine continues, it will significantly slow down the process of accession and reform. The situation with Georgia is somewhat more complicated in the long term, as the cooperation process is being hampered by the rise to power of pro-Russian politicians, who have partially suspended active cooperation with the EU. Therefore, until the political elite in this country changes to one with democratic and pro-European views, it is difficult to predict a strengthening of cooperation with the EU. In general, the EU’s Eastern Partnership Initiative itself needs to be transformed and new priorities set [12; 13; 19]. From the point of view of strengthening cooperation between the EU and the countries of the “Associated Trio” within this Initiative for the development of local self-government, the following areas need to be strengthened:

1. Strengthen interaction between local communities in the EU and Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova;

2. Transform the EU Eastern Partnership Initiative in line with new challenges and include a security component;
3. Stabilize the security system in the Eastern Partnership region;
4. Strengthen cooperation with Georgia to restore the pro-European integration vector;
5. Provide financial and institutional support for public administration reforms;
6. Overcome internal challenges and problems in the “Associated Trio” countries;
7. Conduct an enhanced information campaign on the opportunities offered by the EU to these countries;
8. Integrate countries into the EU;
9. Conclusion of framework agreements between the EU and the countries of the region on a roadmap for the implementation of local self-government reforms;
10. Strengthening of EU monitoring of reforms [4; 5; 10; 15].

5.4. Possible scenarios

Scenario 1. Negative. Due to significant geopolitical challenges in the region and the need to transform the Eastern Partnership, it may cease to exist altogether or be transformed into a new format. As a result, institutional and financial support for reforms from the EU will be reduced or discontinued in this format.

Scenario 2. Positive. The countries of the “Associated Trio” will become EU members after fulfilling all the requirements for accession. Accordingly, the reform of local self-government in these countries will make significant progress as a key requirement for accession. The EU will provide maximum institutional and financial support for the reform of government bodies in the countries of the region.

Scenario 3. Conservative. The EU Eastern Partnership initiative, and accordingly EU support for local government reform, will continue in the same format. In this case, reforms will progress steadily.

6. Conclusions

The EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative is an important tool for cooperation with the countries of the region. The EU launched this mechanism to deepen cooperation and sustainable development in six Eastern European countries. The key area of cooperation is public administration. Ukraine has achieved the greatest success in decentralization reform. Georgia and Moldova have somewhat worse indicators and achievements. According to the Eastern Partnership Index, Ukraine and Moldova are showing positive dynamics in terms of approaching European standards in local self-government, while Georgia is experiencing regression. The existing challenges significantly slow down the process of reform and convergence with European standards. In particular, the key challenges are corruption, political and economic instability, wars and conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region, and the weak economic capacity of the states. It is necessary to strengthen the EU’s role in supporting reforms in the “Associated Trio” countries, as this will ensure successful integration into the EU and democratization in these countries. The integration of these countries into the EU should be strengthened. The key is to enhance the resilience and economic stability of these countries. In the long term, the EU should transform the Eastern Partnership into a new format that takes security challenges into account.

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