

Rethinking the Concept of Central Europe with Ukraine as its member: What Kind of “Soft” Connectivity is Needed in a New Geopolitical Reality?

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Summary

Beyond Russia’s unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine, much has led to the new geopolitical reality in Central Europe, namely Ukraine’s incredible ability to resist both in the military and civil realms successfully and the readiness of the transatlantic West to support Ukraine not just to win the war but also to speed up joining the EU. Ukraine is shaping and consolidating it, redrawing the line between Europe and Eurasia.

There is every reason to say that a new geopolitical region has occurred in the Eastern flank of the EU and NATO. It could be identified as the new Central Europe, rooted in the intellectual legacy of F.Naumann’s “Mitteleuropa” and M.Kundera’s “Central Europe as a cultural phenomenon”.

Functioning now mainly on ad hoc decisions, this new Central Europe needs new policies to be sustainable and prosperous. Undoubtedly, one of the results of this policy should be the EU, and subsequently NATO, enlargement to the east, with the accession of Ukraine and Moldova at the forefront. This policy brief aims to map how policy designing in this context should start.

In 2014, parallel to the Russian aggression, Ukraine increasingly became an integral part of the transatlantic West, regardless of whether or not the West was ready to offer Ukraine EU or NATO membership in the foreseeable future. But the visa-free regime, the association agreement with the EU, and numerous reforms, even if not all successful, were Ukrainian steps in the Western direction.

After February 24, 2022, when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started, the geopolitical future for Ukraine became non-alternative: If Ukraine is to

survive as an independent state, it has to become a member of the EU and NATO. The sooner, the better.

Although Ukraine officially applied for membership in both alliances, to the EU on February 28, 2022, and to NATO on September 30, 2022, Ukraine’s accession will take time and tremendous effort in both cases, even though the EU track seems particularly more optimistic.

Since 2014 and especially after February 2022, another non-alternativeness for Ukraine has become crystal clear for the last nine years. Interestingly, it was articulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book “The Grand Chessboard” back in 1997:

“If Ukraine is to survive as an independent state, it will have to become part of Central Europe rather than Eurasia, and if it is to be a part of Central Europe, then it will have to partake fully of Central Europe’s links to NATO and the European Union”.

This decisive interlink and interdependence between the survival of Ukraine as a sovereign state, its transformation into a Central European state, and its accession to the EU and NATO are, unfortunately, still not obvious to many in Ukraine and in the West, even with its strong geopolitical basis. Therefore, there is a strong need and urgency to develop the policy doctrine.

Features of the new Central Europe

Looking at the Eastern flank of the EU and NATO since 2014, we see many regional similarities and links that go beyond their official borders, eliminating the “grey zone” and “buffer zone” in the middle of Europe. To make a long story short, countries like Ukraine and

Moldova aren't “countries in-between” but part of Central Europe and the transatlantic West, so far unofficially.

It is essential to highlight that strengthening Ukraine's ties with immediate Western neighbours is accompanied by the simultaneous weakening and destruction of relations with Russia and Belarus. For instance, precisely after the Russian aggression started with the occupation of Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine reaffirmed its energy security through gas reverse deliveries from Slovakia¹ and Hungary².

Here are just a few examples about Hungary, which has looked exclusively pro-Russian for the last decade:

- According to the GTS Operator of Ukraine³, in 2022, supplies from Hungary accounted for 46% of gas imports to Ukraine; in 2021 - more than 85% , and for 2020 - more than 26%.
- Hungary was the main gas exporter to Ukraine in 2021. At that time, Ukraine received almost 2.2 billion cubic meters. In comparison, imports from Slovakia in 2021 amounted to 285.3 million cubic meters, and from Poland, 78.6 million cubic meters. But it is important to highlight that in 2021, it was mainly virtual import⁴;
- In 2022, the GTS managed to ensure the reversal of the Ukrainian section of the oil product pipeline “Samara - Western direction” for the supply of diesel fuel from the territory of Hungary to Ukraine⁵. This made it possible to support Ukraine's fuel market during a crisis and ensure fuel availability for more than 2.5 million car owners. During this year, 114,000 tons of diesel fuel were pumped through the oil product pipeline.

According to official data, the total volume of gas imports from Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary to Ukraine in 2022 has doubled to more than 50 million cubic meters daily⁶. This volume corresponded to daily domestic gas production.

In 2020, Poland overtook Russia in trade with Ukraine⁷, and the trend maintained in 20218. According to the results of 2022, the year of the starting full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian export geography is obviously in favour of Central Europe: 63% of exports went to the European Union - \$27.9 billion, and the top three EU states were Poland (\$6.6 billion), Romania (\$3.8 billion), and Hungary (\$2.27 billion). Germany received \$2.23 billion in exports, and Italy and Spain received \$1.5 billion each. In comparison, the largest export market for Ukraine outside the EU was Turkey (\$2.9 billion), surpassing China (\$2.46 billion).

Before the full-scale Russian invasion, Central European companies such as Hungarian-owned WizzAir and the Polish-owned PZU Group were critical in capacity building and market development of air transport and insurance infrastructure in Ukraine according to Western standards.

There are two more crucial features, which framed this new Central Europe:

First, the reaction of Ukraine's immediate Western neighbours and countries of the Eastern flank of the EU and NATO to the full-scale Russian invasion.

According to the Ukraine Support Tracker by the Kiel Institute tracker⁹, the top five countries that have helped Ukraine the most since the Russian invasion, in the percentage of their GDP, are all countries in the Eastern Flank of the EU and NATO. Among the top 20, these countries make up half.

The amount of Polish military support for Ukraine is approximately 2 billion euros¹⁰. In April of 2022, Slovakia became the first NATO country to supply Ukraine with heavy air defence systems (S-300PMU). In the first months of the full-scale Russian invasion, Hungary, despite political rhetoric about the ban on transit weapons for Ukraine through Hungary, and Romania became critically important for the transit of Soviet weapons and fuel for Ukraine from Bulgaria¹¹.

1 <https://www.rferl.org/a/slovakia-ukraine-reverse-gas-supplies/26564162.html>

2 <https://infopost.media/ugorskyj-revers-yak-susidy-pidtrymuyut-energetychnu-bezpeku-ukrayiny/>

3 <https://tsoua.com/news/garantovani-potuzhnosti-dlya-importu-z-ugorshhyny-podovzheni-do-kvitnya-2023/>

4 <https://tsoua.com/news/klyuchovi-pokaznyky-z-transportuvannya-gazu-operatora-gts-ukrayiny-ogtsu-u-2021-roczy/>

5 <https://bit.ly/3RIIO1v>

6 <https://tsoua.com/news/garantovani-potuzhnosti-dlya-importu-z-ugorshhyny-podovzheni-do-kvitnya-2023/>

7 The total trade turnover between Ukraine and Poland in 2020 amounted to \$7.36 billion <https://en.thepage.ua/news/poland-has-overtaken-russia-in-trade-with-ukraine-top-countries-by-trade-turnover>

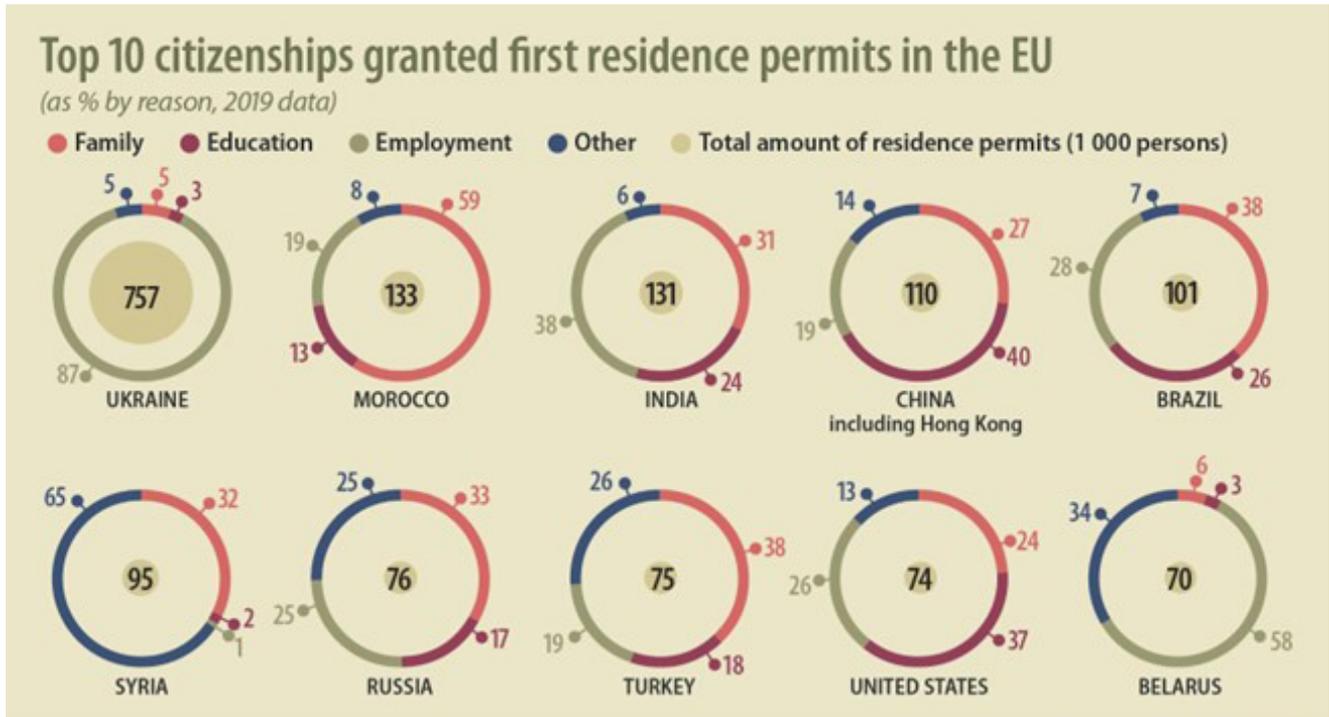
8 The export from Ukraine to Poland amounted to 5.23 billion dollars, which is 59.7% more than in 2020) <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-economy/3403805-eksport-tovariv-zbilisiva-na-384-a-import-poslug-majze-na-tretinu-derzstat.html>

9 <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/?cookieLevel=not-set>

10 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/9/infographic-who-provides-the-most-aid-to-ukraine>

11 <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-volodymyr-zelenskyy-kiril-petkov-poorest-country-eu-ukraine/>

Second, Ukrainian refugees and the workforce.



Since the start of Russian aggression in 2014, [Ukrainians have ranked at the top of the list of those having been issued first residence permits in European Union, according to Eurostat.](#)

After the full-scale Russian invasion, 25% of Ukrainian refugees were hosted by V4 countries¹². Yet, there is no doubt that many of them will not come back to Ukraine. However this can be seen as a positive thing

12 <https://bit.ly/3DS9Opg>

as they will represent Ukrainian interest in these countries and be the joint bridge for all of Central Europe.

But this new Central Europe is not just about strengthening and increasing ties between Ukraine and its immediate Western neighbours. It is also about common challenges:

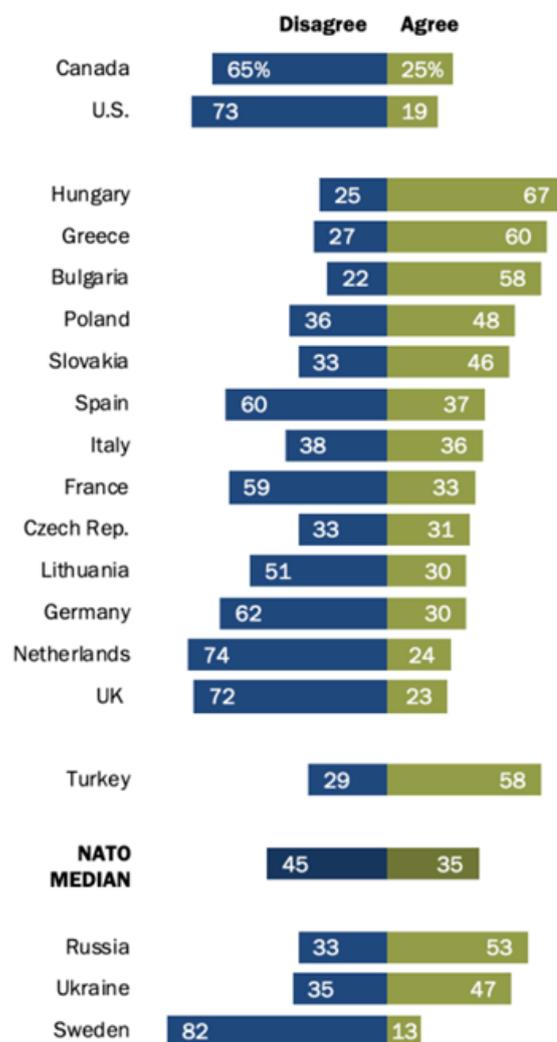
- Even despite the framework of the EU and NATO uniting part of the CEE countries, this region is still challenged by illiberal intentions, right-wing populism, corruption, a lack of social cohesion, and the raising of traditional nationalism. All these lead to the situation erstwhile attractive liberal democracy turned into fragility and could end up as a flawed one model. In other words, Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania are more united by these challenges than these are divided by the Schengen Area and the membership in the EU or NATO. Ukraine has and will have post-soviet, war and post-war contexts which will influence immediate Western neighbours a lot;
- This vulnerability from the CEE has turned the region into an ideal and unified springboard for Russia and China to promote their strategic interest in Europe to challenge the transatlantic community from inside and outside as a part of great power competition. In the past few years before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow and Beijing achieved considerable success in CEE through well-coordinated actions and by deploying their favourite tricks – blackmailing with the help of energy sources and disinformation about dumping, “debt book/debt trap diplomacy” and vaccines. It is essential to realize that Russian and Chinese influences are still inside the EU and NATO, especially in the CEE. Hence, not just Ukraine but the whole of Central Europe is still a playground of great power competition;
- The critical lack and need to attract Western investments, primarily German, French, and American, as well as the simultaneous need to develop remote regions of the CEE countries (east of Hungary and Slovakia are the best examples in this regard), in particular the border with Ukraine, automatically create a need for infrastructure development in the CEE. This is why the Three Seas Initiative¹³ was launched in 2015, which unites 12 EU member states and the USA, Germany and Ukraine with special status. This issue could be

effectively addressed through the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine;

- Dynamic “multi-speed” and regional integration processes, such as The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and Visegrad 4 (V4) are needed to be rethought and relaunched. Moreover, since June 2022, Ukraine has become a “participating partner” of 3SI¹⁴. This challenge could be managed through supporting and practical assistance of Ukraine’s accession to the European Union;

Europeans divided over whether parts of neighboring countries belong to them

% who ___ that there are parts of neighboring countries that really belong to us



Note: Don't know responses not shown. Sweden, Ukraine and Russia are not NATO member states.

Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q50f. "NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States"

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¹³ <https://3seas.eu/about/objectives>

¹⁴ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/ukraine-becomes-participating-partner-of-three-seas-initiative/

- Central Europe is still the place of challenging bilateral political debates about minority rights and history, which are used by “third party” and influenced by it to provide a wide range of instability - not just in the region of CEE but also in the EU and NATO. This “third party” is Russia. Hence there is a solid demand to identify this influence and counter it.

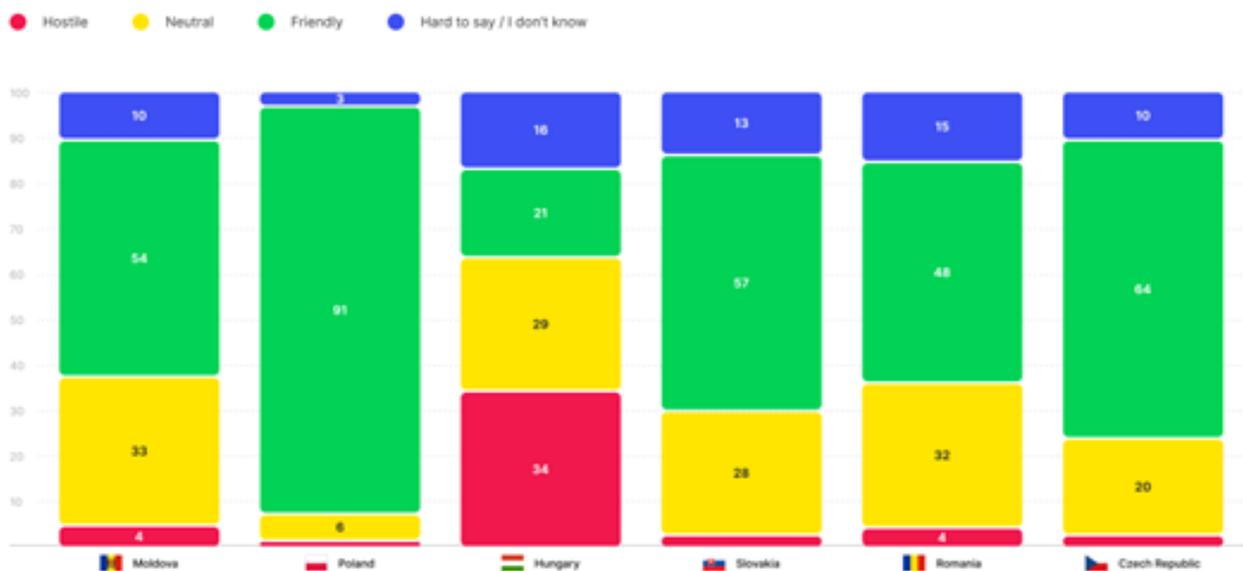
The most difficult discourses in bilateral relations of the CEE states are between Romania and Hungary, Hungary and Slovakia, as well as between Ukraine and Hungary, Ukraine and Romania, Ukraine and Poland, and Ukraine and Bulgaria.

For example, according to the results of a March 2021 survey, 49.5 % of respondents said that Hunga-

ry’s politics towards Transylvania aims at the “tearing away” of the region¹⁵. In a survey conducted in August 2022¹⁶ regarding the Ukrainian perception of immediate Western neighbours after six months of the full-scale Russian invasion, Hungary seemed to be the most problematic.

From reconciliation during the 1990s and 2000s, Central and Eastern European states have significant and applicable experience for Ukraine in overcoming bilateral tensions with neighbours on their way to becoming EU and NATO members. Additionally to reconciliation joint efforts are needed to cope with the malign and hybrid influence of the “third parties”, in particular Russia, in bilateral relations in Central Europe.

How, in your opinion, do such countries treat Ukraine?



The survey was conducted by the sociological service of the Razumkov Center together with the Ilko Kucheriv Foundation “Democratic Initiatives” on the order of the Institute for Central European Strategy from August 5 to 12, 2022, in the territories controlled by the government of Ukraine and where hostilities are not taking place. 2024 respondents over the age of 18 were surveyed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3%.

15 The survey was conducted conducted by the Romanian polling company INSCOP Research and supported by the German Marshall Fund <https://cutt.ly/PU-VqEmS>

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Recommendations

What Ukraine could and should do:

- Encourage international donors and think tanks like the German Marshall Fund (GMF), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Aspen Institute, The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and Visegrad Fund, to modify their programs on Central Europe and include Ukraine in the joint discourse.

Ukraine is still very often either in a separate basket or in the “Eastern Partnership basket”. Sometimes, international donors provide “mirror scholarships” for Ukrainians and Russians, probably with the naive idea of reconciliation. For example, at the end of 2022, the German Marshall Fund renewed its program in Central Europe and targeted eight countries - Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, but not Ukraine. Such practice led to the gap in expertise on the new geopolitical reality described in this policy brief.

There is a strong need to establish in new Central Europe the networks of analysts, policy designers and thought leaders, who will develop policy and decision making processes in new geopolitical reality in the Eastern flank of the EU and NATO. It will allow to build network of UA-West experts who speak the same professional language, could work in teams for the future in designing and advocating policy for the Central European countries to tackle common challenges;

Simply to say, we need more such programs, like the one by Globsec within which this policy brief was done.

Of course, such programs need Ukraine’s state support, and a good step to start with is lifting the restrictions or creating special permission to travel abroad for male think-tankers.

Initiate the development of a full-fledged strategy for good neighbourhood relations in Central Europe as part of Ukraine’s integration into the EU. This strategy should combine both the bilateral level of relations with Ukraine’s immediate Western neighbours and the multilateral level within new Central Europe using the framework of 3SI. The strategy should be based on the experience of other Central European countries on mutual reconciliation and economic cooperation as part of the region’s EU and NATO enlarge-

ment processes. Moreover, this strategy has to have answers on how to integrate existing ad hoc decisions for Ukraine by the EU, made because of the full-scale Russian invasion, such as the suspension of EU import duties on Ukrainian exports, “Solidarity Lanes”, and temporary protection status, into sustainable ones as a part of the EU accession process.

The concept of a new Central Europe should be promoted as a pro-Western and transatlantic concept to avoid speculations and fear about Central Europe as something opposite and problematic to Western Europe and Old Europe.

- These first two recommendations should be enhanced by the initiative to establish the Ukrainian version of the College of Europe in Natolin with the same aim and updated purposes, such as reintegrating and consolidating new Central Europe with Ukraine as its part. Such a campus could be created with the support of international donors, and it is essential to engage donors from Central Europe, like The Visegrad Fund.

Ukraine’s goal should be to train not just analysts but policy designers and public servants (Ukrainian euro-bureaucrats) or consultants who will help in future EU accession processes, will organize, moderate and implement this process from Ukraine’s side, being on the same page and talking the same language as European colleagues.

- Establish the position of the special envoy or the institution responsible for dealing with the matters of Central Europe, in particular immediate Western neighbours. One of the key priorities of such an envoy should be connectivity and supply chains in Central Europe and joint projects such as Via Carpatia, Viking train, and the development of the network of Euro-rails in Western Ukraine.

In December 2018, Ukraine already took the necessary steps by launching the institute of the authorized head of cross-border cooperation. However, the institute could not fully launch its work because of the lack of resources and no visible goals.

Similar positions are held by the Czech Republic (Jan Marian, Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership), Slovakia (Martin Kačo, Ambassador at

Large for Ukraine), and until recently, even Hungary (Grezsa István, governmental envoy).

- Open regional offices for Euro integration¹⁷ in its Western regions, in Zakarpatska, Lvivska, Ivano-Frankivska, Chernivetska and Volynska oblasts, and promote them as informational and analytical hubs. These offices could operate under a special envoy or the institution responsible for dealing with the matters of Central Europe, as well as under the office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine.
- Launch a Central European program within Ukrainian Institute and Ukrainian Cultural Fund for creating the community and infrastructure for such regional discourse in Ukraine among artists, journalists, researchers, academics, and writers to boost interdisciplinary discourse on new Central Europe.

What international partners could and should do:

- Establish a series of programs for joint activities of Central European artists, think-tankers, and writers, covering Ukraine as part of Central Europe to promote interdisciplinary discourse, create networks and even task forces for policy designing, advocacy and decision making.
- Invest in bilateral dialogues in Central and Eastern Europe on sensitive topics to strengthen dialogue on reconciliation: Ukrainian-Polish historical dialogue, Ukrainian-Hungarian and Ukrainian Romanian, Slovakian-Hungarian, Hungarian-Romanian dialogue on ethnic and historical topics. It could also be implemented at the civil society level by establishing some analogy to the Eastern partnership civil society forum;
- Prioritize the development of border and cross-border infrastructure along Ukraine’s border with the EU and start the reconstruction of Ukraine from this. Such an approach allows to start rebuilding Ukraine immediately because infrastructure at the Ukraine-EU border couldn’t be the target of Russian missile attacks. This initiative could also be implemented under Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) or other EU programs as part of Ukraine’s integration into the EU.

¹⁷ <https://eu-ua.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/olha-stefanishyna-opened-regional-european-integration-office-dnipro>