



**Doctoral School
of International
Relations and
Political Science**

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

for the Doctoral Dissertation of

Anastasiia Kychak

**European Integration of Ukraine:
Testing Liberal Intergovernmentalism Approach**

Thesis Consultant: Benczes István Zsolt, Ph.D

Professor

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Department of World Economy

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1. Earlier Research and Relevance

Ukraine's relations with the European Union represent a unique case for European integration studies, especially in light of its recent application for EU membership. Despite serious challenges such as the war with Russia, political instability and economic difficulties, Ukraine's integration with the EU continues to strengthen. This dissertation aims to identify the key motivations driving Ukraine's integration with the EU at both the governmental and societal levels.

The choice of Ukraine as a case study in this research, which focuses on its path to integration into the European Union through the prism of a Liberal intergovernmental mechanism, is relevant for several reasons.

First, Ukraine's geographic location between Russia and the European Union makes its European integration process a unique and important example for understanding the broader dynamics of EU enlargement. Since 2004, Ukraine has pursued integration with the European Union. At the same time, Ukraine's aspirations to join European institutions have become a key challenge to Russian influence in the region, providing a rich context for studying the interplay between the formation of Ukrainian national preferences, international negotiations with Russia and the EU, and institutional arrangements with them.

Second, the Ukrainian case is also historically significant because Ukraine's European integration has been a long process and has been marked by two important events: the Orange Revolution (2004) and the subsequent Euromaidan (2013-2014), both of which reflected public demands for rapprochement with Europe. After Euromaidan, Ukraine's choice in favour of Europe became apparent, leading to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. But despite serious challenges such as the war with Russia, political instability, and economic difficulties, Ukraine's integration with the EU continues to strengthen, raising the question of why Ukraine remains steadfast in its European choice despite the political and humanitarian consequences for the country.

Moreover, Ukraine's relations with the European Union represent an interesting case for European integration studies, especially in light of its recent application for EU membership. Studying Ukraine through Liberal Intergovernmentalism allows an in-depth examination of how domestic preferences align with interstate negotiations and shape the integration process. The central role of Ukrainian society and political elites in shaping foreign policy and national preferences makes it an ideal case to apply Liberal Intergovernmentalism, which emphasises the influence of domestic political processes on international negotiations (Moravcsik, 2020). Given the limited application of this theory to candidate countries, the case of Ukraine offers a valuable opportunity to assess its relevance and practicality in this context.

In addition, the internal divisions in Ukraine - between pro-European and pro-Russian factions and their exploitation of language differences, which in turn has widened the gap between the eastern and western parts of the country, including their foreign policy preferences - provide an interesting dimension for studying the role of national identity and political elites in shaping foreign policy.

In sum, Ukraine's ongoing path towards European integration, especially after the Russian invasion in February 2022, makes it a timely and relevant case study for examining the broader mechanisms of EU enlargement. The choice of Ukraine as a case study provides an opportunity to apply Liberal Intergovernmentalism to the complex context of a candidate country's integration process, which includes domestic political forces, civil society, international negotiations, and regional security concerns. By focusing on Ukraine, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of European integration, especially from the perspective of candidate countries.

2. Research Methods and Process

The dissertation uses a within-case design to analyse Ukraine's integration into the EU, employing process tracing as its primary analytical method. This approach is used to uncover the underlying causal mechanisms within a single case study. To study the process of Ukraine's European integration, this thesis focuses on a series of significant events: the Orange Revolution of 2004, the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-2014, and the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Employing a qualitative analysis, the study aims to explore and interpret the underlying motivations driving Ukraine's European integration.

The research adopts a deductive approach and applies theory testing to assess whether Ukraine's national priorities concerning European integration are consistent with the principles of Liberal Intergovernmentalism. Process tracing theory testing derives a theory from the existing literature and tests whether the evidence supports each aspect of the hypothesis. It identifies causal mechanisms by examining whether they functioned as expected in the case and assessing their overall presence.

Following this approach, the thesis derives a hypothesis from LI theory and tests whether the evidence from the case of Ukraine supports the proposed causal mechanisms. Within this framework, the literature review will first provide the theoretical foundation, followed by a historical contextualisation of the case study. A process-tracing analysis will then complement this to examine the course of EU integration in the case of Ukraine.

Utilising process tracing, this research identifies:

1. The relevant actors involved,
2. The formation of their beliefs and preferences,
3. How do these preferences shape their actions,
4. How the individual actions of multiple actors are combined to produce the collective outcome.

Based on the review of the literature, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis 1: The causal mechanisms proposed by LI can fully account for the case of Ukraine, where national preferences play an important role in shaping the state's foreign policy and the regional integration process.

Hypothesis 2: A political leader's (political party's) rhetoric and identity politics are expected to strongly influence the formation of public opinion about the EU in Ukraine.

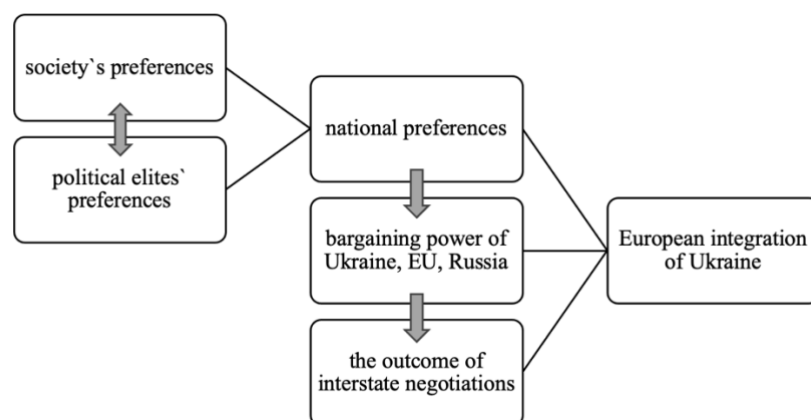
Because the thesis uses the process tracing method, it seeks to identify the intervening causal process, the causal chain and mechanism, that links an independent variable (or variables) to the outcome of the dependent variable (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

Consequently, the *dependent variable* is perceptions of Ukraine's European integration.

The independent variables: (1) society's preferences; (2) and preferences of the political elite (presidents, political parties).

Causal forces: (1) national preferences; (2) the preferences and bargaining power of Ukraine, as well as other international actors (EU, Russia); (3) the outcome of interstate negotiations (Association Agreement, DCFTA, level of fulfilment of Copenhagen criteria).

Figure 1. Study variables



Source: own construction

3. Main Findings

The central research question guiding this study has been: “To what extent can Liberal Intergovernmentalism account for the European Integration of Ukraine?”

The dissertation concludes that *Liberal Intergovernmentalism alone cannot fully explain Ukraine’s European integration*. The thesis argues that, although Liberal Intergovernmentalism provides valuable insights into Ukraine’s European integration process, its explanatory power is constrained. The three-stage causal mechanism identified by the theory, national preference formation, intergovernmental bargaining and institutional choice, can be observed in the case of Ukraine and offers a coherent account of these dynamics. Liberal Intergovernmentalism is beneficial for analysing Ukraine's European integration processes during the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan and following the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022. In particular, Liberal Intergovernmentalism can account for the negotiation process between Ukraine and Russia after the Orange Revolution and explain Yushchenko's 'balanced' foreign policy approach. It also comprehensively accounts for the Yanukovych government's negotiations with the EU and Russia before the Vilnius Summit, during which it was expected to sign the Association Agreement. LI provides a convincing explanation of the institutionalisation of EU-Ukraine relations after Euromaidan, particularly about the AA and the DCFTA. LI is especially instrumental in explaining the EU integration of Ukraine following the 2022 Russian invasion. It explains the consolidation between society and political elites regarding national preferences for further European integration. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, economic relations between the countries have been impossible, and it has been in the country's economic interests to deepen integration with the EU. Therefore, consolidating society and political elites is natural and necessary regarding the state's security and economic priorities. LI can also account for the negotiations between Ukraine and the EU on granting Ukraine candidate status and the consequent negotiations on possible membership.

However, the LI encounters limitations in accounting for the underlying

motivations behind Ukraine's commitment to EU integration following the Euromaidan Revolution. It does not fully capture the role of identity politics in shaping integration preferences. Liberal Intergovernmentalism assumes that states primarily pursue economic interests in international relations. Accordingly, it would have been more beneficial for Ukraine, economically and in terms of security, to adopt an Eurasian foreign policy, since Russia was Ukraine's largest trading partner and Ukraine was almost entirely dependent on Russian gas. After the Orange Revolution, Ukraine suffered significant economic losses as a result of gas wars with Russia and a massive increase in gas prices for Ukraine as a result. After the 2014 revolution, Ukraine suffered significant security losses due to the cession of territory. Ukraine also experienced significant economic losses. The country lost its largest trading partner and was forced to urgently seek new partners. However, despite these risks, both the state and, more importantly, society pursued European integration, a trajectory that does not fully align with the core assumptions of Liberal Intergovernmentalism. Although Yanukovich's decision to reject the Association Agreement in favour of closer relations with Russia is consistent with LI's theoretical assumptions, the subsequent mobilisation of Ukrainian society, through mass protest and revolution, challenged this logic by demanding a European-oriented path of development. For Ukrainians, integration with Russia meant authoritarianism, corruption, and oligarchic power. In 2004, Ukrainians made it clear that they wanted a democratic future for their country.

Hence, for the reasons outlined above, and given the central role of identity politics in shaping Ukraine's decision to pursue integration, this thesis argues that the application of Post-functionalism is essential for analysing its influence on social dynamics and the formation of public opinion. Moreover, the preferences of key domestic actors, particularly society and political elites, have significantly shaped the integration process, with their interdependence most clearly demonstrated during the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution. The thesis argues that the majority of the Ukrainian population supported European integration because the prospect of integration was perceived as a means to increase Ukraine's economic well-being, establish democratic institutions, and, at the same time, preserve the

country's national identity. On the other hand, the prospect of Eurasian integration was perceived as a potential threat to Ukrainian national identity, as it would establish even closer ties with Russia and deepen Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia. This is in line with Post-functionalism, which suggests that individuals with a strong national identity are often sceptical of integration when it becomes clear that loyalty to their country and its institutions conflicts with integration. Thus, the dissertation argues that applying Post-functionalism is needed to fully understand Ukraine's decision to pursue European integration, given the significant role of identity politics in shaping national preferences. The incorporation of Post-functionalism is necessary to provide a more comprehensive analysis, as it enables consideration of social dynamics, public opinion and broader cultural factors underpinning Ukraine's integration choices.

Furthermore, the thesis argues that Post-functionalism is valuable for understanding the EU's policy shift towards Ukraine following Russia's 2022 aggression. The EU's response to Russian aggression radically differed in 2014 and 2022. While LI offers a solid explanation for the EU's sanctions policy in 2014, the thesis claims that Post-functionalism provides a more convincing account of the differences in the EU's response to the wars in 2014 and 2022. In 2014, the conflict seemed distant and uncertain, surrounded by many open questions and doubts. It was highly politicised, making the adoption of sanctions difficult. By 2022, however, Russia's invasion was not only a blatant act of aggression but also a direct threat to European security. This shift in perception helped depoliticise sanctions and other previously contentious issues, enabling swift decision-making. Moreover, this shift can be seen through the lens of identity politics. In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine were perceived as distant events, often framed as an internal Ukrainian conflict and not explicitly referred to as a war. As a result, many Europeans felt detached from the issue. In 2022, when the war reached the EU's borders, the situation became much more immediate and personal, prompting a quicker and more unified response. Regarding the rapid implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive, Post-functionalism sees the refugee debate as a conflict between competing European and national identities rather than one driven by economic or political concerns.

Solidarity with displaced Ukrainians highlights the politicised and often discriminatory nature of refugee protection. The debate around refugees and migrants is primarily about cultural distinctions between 'us' and 'them', with different visions of Europe at its core rather than national priorities. Hence, arguments that Ukraine belongs to the European family and the need for EU unity were central to the agreement on the Temporary Protection Regulation.

For the reasons outlined above, the first hypothesis — that the causal mechanisms proposed by Liberal Intergovernmentalism can fully account for the Ukrainian case — is rejected. Although Liberal Intergovernmentalism explains key aspects of preference formation and interstate bargaining, it does not adequately capture the role of identity politics in Ukraine's integration trajectory. To capture this dimension, the thesis suggests incorporating Post-functionalism into the analytical framework.

By contrast, the second hypothesis is confirmed. In the Ukrainian context, identity politics and party rhetoric have played a significant role in shaping public opinion, a pattern particularly evident during electoral campaigns and in the periods surrounding the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions. For decades, Ukrainian politicians have exploited the East–West divide and language issues to mobilise regional support, often coupling these themes with promises of closer alignment with either Russia or the West. In practice, however, such campaign rhetoric frequently gave way to more cautious and balanced policies once in office. The language question became a major source of political mobilisation and contributed significantly to both the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013. At the same time, society has exerted direct influence on political elites, most notably during the Euromaidan protests, which led to the removal of President Yanukovich following his refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. These developments demonstrate the interdependence of elite and societal preferences, particularly during elections and periods of political upheaval. Overall, the influence of domestic actors, especially society, has been decisive in shaping Ukraine's European integration trajectory.

Despite the ongoing war, Ukraine has intensified its integration with the

European Union, with reform efforts primarily concentrated on institutional alignment. By 2026, Ukraine had met most of the European Commission's requirements to open accession negotiations, including key reforms in anti-corruption institutions, judicial governance, anti-money laundering, and legislation on minorities and the media. The corruption scandal of 2025 further highlighted the central role of society not only in advancing European integration but also in monitoring compliance with EU requirements. Sustaining progress requires the active involvement of citizens and businesses, supported by continued administrative reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, professional standards and access to public institutions. Strengthening civic awareness, improving access to information and encouraging public oversight remain essential to maintaining reform momentum. Broad societal engagement will ultimately be decisive in accelerating and consolidating Ukraine's EU integration process.

Accordingly, the thesis proposes the following policy recommendations to support and advance Ukraine's European integration:

- Ukraine should continue strengthening the independence and capacity of key institutions, including those responsible for the judiciary, rule of law, anti-corruption, and other areas required by EU accession criteria. Sustained institutional consolidation across these sectors is essential not only for fulfilling EU requirements but also for maintaining domestic and international credibility.
- Given the decisive role of identity politics and public opinion, authorities should pursue inclusive nation-building policies that avoid exacerbating regional or linguistic divisions and consistently communicate reform objectives and EU integration goals to preserve societal consensus.
- Civic engagement should be actively encouraged through enhanced civil society oversight, improved access to public information, participatory governance, robust whistleblower protections, and greater public awareness of civic rights, all of which are essential for reinforcing accountability and accelerating reforms.

- Finally, EU institutions should maintain clear accession benchmarks and provide credible incentives, ensuring sustained political commitment that anchors domestic reforms, supports ongoing progress, and reduces the risk of reform fatigue.

The thesis acknowledges several limitations. First, the reliance on Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Post-functionalism may not fully capture alternative explanatory perspectives, such as neo-functionalism, constructivism or geopolitically oriented approaches. Second, as Ukraine's European integration remains an ongoing process, particularly in the context of war, the conclusions are necessarily provisional; future political or military developments may significantly reshape its trajectory. The exceptional circumstances of full-scale war further limit the generalisability of the findings to other enlargement cases. Finally, the analysis is based primarily on secondary sources and publicly available data, which may constrain empirical depth. Moreover, public opinion polling conducted under wartime conditions may be influenced by emotional mobilisation, social desirability bias and restricted access to certain territories.

Future research could broaden this analysis by incorporating additional theoretical perspectives to provide a more comprehensive account of Ukraine's European integration. Furthermore, as the present study focuses primarily on the Ukrainian domestic dimension, subsequent research could expand the scope to include the EU perspective, particularly the preferences and strategic calculations of key member states and EU institutions. Empirical depth could also be enhanced through the inclusion of elite and expert interviews, systematic content analysis of parliamentary debates, and survey-based research examining attitudes towards EU integration. A post-war reassessment will be necessary to evaluate whether wartime unity persists and whether identity consolidation remains stable over time. Finally, a comparative analysis with other enlargement cases would strengthen the generalisability of the findings and allow for a more robust assessment of the long-term institutional implementation of EU reforms.

4. Summary

A key focus of the dissertation is to understand why Ukrainians, at both public and governmental levels, continue to support European integration despite the significant costs, most notably the ongoing war with Russia. To achieve this goal, a historical contextualisation of the case study was conducted by examining Ukraine's relations with the EU and Russia since 1991, alongside an analysis of Russia's role in shaping Ukraine's path of European integration. The study also investigated how presidential transitions influenced Ukraine's foreign policy and public opinion on EU integration, and evaluated key events such as the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, and the post-2022 invasion period through the lens of European integration theories. Furthermore, the framework of Liberal Intergovernmentalism was applied to structure the analysis, including an assessment of national preference formation, intergovernmental bargaining, and institutionalisation in Ukraine's European integration process, culminating in an evaluation of Ukraine's current stage of EU integration and its progress toward potential membership.

The novelty of this study is that it applies the framework of Liberal Intergovernmentalism to the analysis of a candidate state, using Ukraine as a case study and examining the integration process from Ukraine's perspective rather than the EU's. This provides a unique opportunity to assess how the theory can be applied to shape a candidate state's preferences and to evaluate its relevance and applicability in such cases.

As a result, the thesis argues that the defining feature of Ukraine's integration process is the central role of the public in consolidating the country's choice of European integration. It is claimed that from the perspective of Liberal Intergovernmentalism, the choice of European integration was not self-evident, whether considered in economic, political or humanitarian terms, particularly in the context of ongoing war. In particular, the LI encounters limitations in accounting for the underlying motivations behind Ukraine's commitment to EU integration following the Euromaidan Revolution. It does not fully capture the role of identity politics in shaping integration preferences. The analysis, therefore, emphasises the decisive role

of Ukrainian society in shaping and sustaining this strategic political direction.

Hence, the thesis argues that the application of Post-functionalism is essential for analysing its influence on social dynamics and the formation of public opinion. Moreover, the preferences of key domestic actors, particularly society and political elites, have significantly shaped the integration process, with their interdependence most clearly demonstrated during the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution. The thesis argues that the majority of the Ukrainian population supported European integration because the prospect of integration was perceived as a means to increase Ukraine's economic well-being, establish democratic institutions, and, at the same time, preserve the country's national identity. On the other hand, the prospect of Eurasian integration was perceived as a potential threat to Ukrainian national identity, as it would establish even closer ties with Russia and deepen Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia.

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