POLICY BRIEF

Ukraine: first visa-free year since introducing the visa free regime (successes, challenges and lessons learned)

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Visa liberalisation contributed to important changes, among others, improved the image of Ukraine in the EU, and popularized the EU in Ukraine.

SUMMARY

Based on documents, reports and interviews with experts, this analytical note analyzed the context and the main quantitative indicators of the first visa-free year between Ukraine and the EU. It should be noted that due to an uncoordinated system of monitoring the regular passenger traffic, the actual number of visa-free travels from Ukraine to the EU probably significantly exceeds the current estimates of the Ukrainian side. Based on the most complete data available to date from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), it was concluded that, despite the fears that circulated in the Ukrainian and European media before introduction of the visa-free travel, a dramatic increase in migration activity from Ukraine to the EU did not occur. Although Ukraine remains in the top three in terms of the total number of entries into the Schengen zone, the total passenger traffic from Ukraine in 2017 decreased slightly and the level of recorded illegal crossings and crossings on forged documents decreased significantly.

Visa liberalization contributed to implementation of comprehensive security reforms, enhanced cooperation in the area of integrated border management, increased the prestige of the Ukrainian passport and citizenship, developed the transport and tourism infrastructure on the routes between Ukraine and the EU, boosted tourist and business travel, facilitated structural changes in the flow of travelers, improved the image of Ukraine in the EU, and popularized the EU in Ukraine.

Ukraine is recommended to address the findings of the First Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism. The task of ensuring the security of all Ukraine's borders, including the border with the Russian Federation, requires attention of the European partners. It is recommended that the border crossing accounting methods be synchronized, including between the EU countries, and the awareness-raising campaign to explain the principles of responsible visa-free travel be continued. It is noted that the visa-free travel is a basic step for transforming Ukraine into a safe, reliable and developing Eastern partner of the EU.

CONTEXT

On 11 June 2017, in accordance with the EU plan for development of managed and safe mobility with the Eastern Partnership countries, visa-free travel of Ukrainian citizens with biometric passports for a short-term stay in Europe came into effect. Introduction of the visa-free travel was a direct result of a visa liberalization dialog between the EU and Ukraine, launched on 29 October 2008, as well as the outcome of successful implementation of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) presented to Ukraine on 22 November 2010.

The VLAP, which is a common procedure for the Eastern Partnership countries, includes four blocks of standards to be met by a partner country, including: 1) document security, including biometrics; 2) border management, migration, and asylum; 3) public order and security; and 4) external relations and fundamental rights. The benchmarks discussed in the plan are intended to guarantee effective and sustainable achievement of the target standards not only through political decisions, but also through development of the necessary legislative and institutional framework for their implementation.

After publication of six VLAP Progress Reports (2011-2015), Ukraine was included in the list of third countries whose nationals are exempt from visa requirements to visit the Schengen countries. Thus, Ukraine became the third country after Moldova, which implemented the visa-free travel in April 2014, and Georgia, where the visa-free travel became effective in March 2017, whose nationals have the right to take advantage of the visa-free travel to all the EU member states[1] (except Ireland and the UK, which are EU members but are not part of the Schengen zone) and stay in the Schengen zone for up to 90 days during any 180-day period for tourist or business purposes (excluding employment), as well as to visit family members.

To prevent abuses of the visa-free travel and to ensure that the political situation does not pose a threat to further development and security of the partner country, on 20 December 2017, the European Commission developed and published the First Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism which provides for a possibility of temporary return to visa requirements in case of non-compliance with the liberalization criteria. The Report remarks that on the whole Ukraine continues meeting the visa liberalization benchmarks, however, a number of requirements need to be addressed[2], in particular ensure further fulfilling of anti-corruption reforms. In addition, as part of the EU policy to strengthen border control by the end of 2021[3], a cross-checking through the ETIAS European Travel Information and Authorisation System will be introduced to identify those who pose a security threat[4]: every three years, nationals of the countries which enjoy the visa-free travel with the EU will need to complete an online application and pay an authorization fee (€7 for each application, except applicants younger than 18 and older than 70, who are exempt from the fee).

Visa free travel is perceived by the partners as a mutually beneficial solution to facilitate people-to-people contacts and strengthen business, social and cultural ties between the EU and Ukraine (Association Implementation Report on Ukraine SWD (2017) 376).

1. The visa-free travel with Ukraine also extends to Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland, which are not EU members but are Schengen zone associated members. The EU members Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, and Romania, which have not yet completed their Schengen zone accession process, are also included in the list of countries which have a visa-free travel with Ukraine.

2. First Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism, Brussels, 20.12.2017 COM (2017) 815 final, p. 13, 14.

3. Security Union: Commission welcomes the European Parliament's adoption of the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) and a stronger EU-LISA Agency. European Commission Press release, July 5, 2018. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-4367_en.htm, access date 21 August 2018.

4. Border security: screening travelers before they arrive in the EU // European Parliament News, July 4, 2018. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/security/20180628STO06868/security-screening-travellers-before-they-arrive-in-the-eu, access date 25 July 2018.

In the context of implementation of the visa-free travel between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, Ukraine is a unique case for two main reasons: 1) it is the largest of the Eastern Partnership countries in terms of population (42 mln)[5], territory (557.5 sq. km)[6] and the length of external borders (6,993 sq. km)[7], including borders with the EU (Ukraine borders Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), with the European Partnership countries (Moldova and Belarus) and with Russia; 2) it is the only country with two unresolved conflicts in its territory (the territory of the Crimea annexed by the Russian Federation in the south and the conflict in the Donetsk and Lugansk Regions in the east). Difficult geopolitical conditions determine the challenges and risks associated with both border management and implementation of the reforms necessary to continue the visa-free travel. Nonetheless, Ukraine continues to seek sustainable solutions to ensure security and to carry out structural reforms in the priority areas. According to public opinion polls, granting of the visa-free travel to Ukraine remains one of the country's tangible achievements in the period after the Euromaidan, the most significant political event of 2017[8], and can be used as a powerful incentive for reform and development of Ukraine as one of the EU largest and most reliable Eastern partners.

MAIN INDICATORS OF THE FIRST VISA-FREE YEAR

Accounting issues. An analysis of the visa-free statistics shows that as of June 2018, the quantitative estimates of the visa-free results has discrepancies due to different approaches to monitoring of the regular passenger traffic: presumably, the share of visa-free travels from Ukraine to the EU far exceeds the estimates of the Ukrainian side.

From January 2015 to June 2018, the State Migration Service of Ukraine issued 9 million biometric passports, including 5 million since 2017, when the visa-free travel entered into force[9].

The State Border Guard Service of Ukraine reports 20.3 mln border crossings between Ukraine and the EU from 11 June 2017 to 11 June 2018. During the period, 4.8 mln crossings on biometric passports were recorded, including 555,000 visa-free[10], which evidences that only 2.7% of all the EU border crossings were visa-free. In practice, this means that a passenger traveling on a biometric passport can cross the EU border using various types of valid visas (e.g., student, working, family within the Schengen zone and a visa for short-term visits outside the Schengen zone).

The number of visa-free crossings recorded by the Ukrainian side is underestimated for two main reasons: 1) the Ukrainian border guards keep track of the visa-free travels only for those passengers who cross the border on a biometric passport for the first time; 2) the available data of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine do not include transit border crossings between Ukraine and the EU through other countries, e.g., to Poland or Lithuania through Belarus, to Romania or Bulgaria through Moldova, and also to other European countries via Turkey (this route is popular due to developed transport links from Istanbul to other destinations in the EU). In addition, the

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5. Excluding the temporarily occupied territories of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. Evaluation by the State Statistical Service of Ukraine as of 1 January 2018. Available at: www.ukrstat.gov.ua, access date 25 September 2018.

6. This refers to the controlled territory of Ukraine in 2017. In 1991, the controlled territory of Ukraine was 603.7 sq. km.

7. "Length of Ukraine's borders". The State Border Service of Ukraine response to the NGO "Europe without Barriers" request dated 5 November 2018. Available at: https://europewb.org.ua/protyazhnist-kordoniv-ukrayiny/, access date 13 November 2018.

8. Most Ukrainians named visa-free travel with the EU the main political event of the year. "Democratic Initiatives" Foundation survey data // Ukrainian Pravda, 27 December 2017. Available at: https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2017/12/27/7075547/, access date: 5 September, 2018

9. Interview with Sergey Gunko, Head of the Communication and Electronic Services Department of the State Migration Service of Ukraine // Hromadske Radio, 11 June 2018. Available at: https://hromadskeradio.org/news/2018/06/11/rik-bezvizu-popyt-na-biometrychni-pasporty-zalyshayetsya-pidvyshchenym, access date 20 July 2018.

10. Information of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, 11 June 2018. Available at: https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/Za-rik-bezvizu-prikordonniki-oformili-555-tisyach-ukrainciv-za-sproshchenoyu-proceduroyu/, access date 10 July 2018.

visa-free passenger traffic does not take into account entrances to the EU of the Ukraine nationals temporarily residing in third countries[11], as well as visa-free movement of Ukraine nationals using passports of third-countries (despite the fact that the Ukrainian legislation does not recognize dual citizenship, people who reside in the border regions massively use Hungarian and Romanian passports).

The challenges of Ukrainian registration of visa-free movements in the first visa-free year will be revealed in February-March 2019 after publication of the data of the EU Directorate General for Migration and Internal Affairs (DGHome). The statistics will take into account all entries registered by the member countries throughout the year from January 2018 to January 2019.

Passenger traffic[12]. The Frontex report[13] states that for three months after implementing of a visa-free travel with Ukraine (from July to September 2017)[14] the passenger traffic increased by 15% over the same period in 2016. However, the total passenger traffic from Ukraine in the reporting year decreased by 2.6% (from 14,695,622 to 14,318,281 crossings). On the whole, Ukraine remains in the top three in terms of the total number of entries to the Schengen zone (for comparison, in 2017 there were 11.2 mln entries from Morocco, 9.7 mln from Russia, 1.9 mln from Moldova, and all of the mentioned countries, in contrast to Ukraine, demonstrate a tendency to a rise in the annual passenger traffic). According to the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, 36% of the visa-free travels are made through air border crossing points[15] (i.e., most of the crossings are made through land border crossing points).

Refusals of entry[16]. According to Frontex, Ukraine leads the list of countries whose citizens most often were refused entry in 2017 (37,117 non-admissions, which is 34% more than in 2016). For comparison, Russia ranks second in the number of entry refusals (36,342 non-admissions, but the number of refusals decreased by 55% since 2016), Moldova ranks sixth (5,953 non-admissions, with a decrease in the number of refusals since 2016 by 57%). The three most common causes of EU entry refusals to Ukraine nationals include: lack of documentary evidence of the purpose of the trip (44% of the total number of refusals), lack of a valid visa or residence permit (21%), lack of the necessary funds for the period of stay in the EU or for return and transit (12%). At the same time, the number of recorded illegal border crossings[17] has decreased by 24% and the number of crossings on forged documents, including fake visas, decreased by 34%[18]. It should be noted that the data concern the total passenger traffic, therefore the conclusions regarding the issues arising during visa-free entries are estimations: e.g., according to the experts interviewed, the most frequent reasons for refusal of the visa-free entry may be overstay in the EU or other violations committed during the passenger's previous entries and recorded in the system[19].

Ukraine leads the list of countries whose citizens most often were refused entry in 2017. At the same time, the number of recorded illegal border crossings has decreased by 24% and the number of crossings on forged documents, including fake visas, decreased by 34%.

11. Interview with Irina Sushko, Executive Director of the NGO "Europe without Barriers", 22 August 2018. The organization is engaged in advocacy for reforms in the field of security, freedom of movement and migration and continuously cooperates with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Migration Service, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. Interview with David Stulik, Press Attache of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, 31 August 2018. The interviews were conducted in preparation of the analytical note by the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

12. Frontex Risk Analysis 2018: 17, 52.

13. For technical reasons, the Frontex report does not reflect statistics for some countries, in particular for Italy, Cyprus, Malta, and Portugal for individual months. See note in Frontex Risk Analysis 2018, p. 52. However, until publication of the DGHome annual report, the Frontex data is the most comprehensive data available to date.

14. The passenger traffic from June to September is usually the most intense, which is related to increased tourism during the period. In the subsequent months, the intensity of the passenger traffic decreases.

15. Information of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, 11 June 2018. Available at: https://dpsu.gov.ua/ua/news/Za-rik-bezvizu-prikordonniki-oformili-555-tisyach-ukrainciv-za-sproshchenoyu-proceduroyu/, access date 10 July 2018. It should be noted that the share of the air passenger traffic in the structure of all the movements across the EU borders in 2017 was 57% (Frontex Risk Analysis 2018: 52).

16. Frontex Risk Analysis 2018: 9, 18, 19, 23, 48, 43, 49.

17. The total number of recorded illegal crossings of the border of Ukraine and the EU in 2017 was 105. It is primarily about land crossings with the EU member states bordering Ukraine.

18. The total number of the recorded uses of forged documents for EU border crossing by nationals of Ukraine in 2017 was 801, of which 519 (i.e., about 65%) were registered when crossing the border with Poland.

19. There is an issue related to operational data collection and analysis of information on refusals of entry to the EU from Ukraine at the air border crossing points, because the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine officers learn about entry refusals only if the passenger reports this when crossing back. Interview with Vasyl Servatyuk, First Deputy Chairman of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine // Ukrainska Pravda, 11 June 2018. Available at: https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2018/06/11/7082929/, access date 5 September 2018.

Frontex notes that competent authorities should focus specifically on monitoring the movement of individuals who pose an increased risk to public security (in 2017, 134 such cases were recorded and 2,267 nationals from Ukraine were denied entry because of national alert lists banning their entry), while movement of bona fide travelers should be facilitated.

ASSESSMENT OF SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF THE FIRST VISA-FREE YEAR

According to Ukrainian and European experts, introduction of the visa-free travel comes with it a number of positive and complex image-related, political, and economic results for both Ukraine and the EU, namely:

- Visa liberalization **evokes in-depth security reforms**, providing new benefits not only for the individuals who travel visa-free, but also for those who do not leave Ukraine (e.g., expanded network of centers for rendering administrative services to the population[20], enhanced document security and personal data protection, improved control over border processes, in particular, the operation of the phytosanitary and customs services). At the same time, Ukraine has failed to raise public awareness about biometric identifiers (namely, alternatives, such as electronic signature, retina, facial oval resorted to where biometric identifiers cannot be used), therefore, part of the population have retained a biased opinion against biometrics and lack awareness of its benefits.

- The prestige of the Ukrainian passport and citizenship is increasing (in the Quality of Nationality Index, Ukraine has risen from 99th position in 2016 to 80th in 2017: this is a general trend for the Eastern Partnership countries that have been granted visa-free travel with the EU[21]), including for the Ukrainian nationals living in the uncontrolled territories in the Crimea and Donbass, which promotes national integration and reduces interest in obtaining other countries' passports. At the same time, the balance between freedom of movement and security should be given closer attention (for more details, see the recommendations).

- The transport and tourist infrastructure of the routes between Ukraine and the EU has been developing, low-cost airlines enter the market (e.g., Ryanair entered Ukraine on 3 September 2018, the launch of EasyJet and Eurowings is expected in 2018[22]), thus travel becomes more affordable, flights are possible from a larger number of cities (apart from million-population cities, new points of communication appear on the flight maps, e.g., Kherson, where international traffic increased rapidly in 2017). At the same time, there are difficulties with the logistics of land movements: the number of border crossing points, in particular, on the border with Poland, is not enough (according to experts, in order to avoid the "bottleneck" effect at the land crossing points, their number should be increased several times). Although the EU allocates money for modernization and construction of border crossing points on the border with Ukraine, the funds are used inefficiently (in 2018 the project to upgrade six border crossing

points on the EU eastern border was not completed and subsequently closed)[23]. In addition, at the EU initiative, the signing of the "Open Skies" treaty on joint aerial space between Ukraine and the EU was postponed indefinitely[24].

• Removal of logistical barriers contributes to an **increased number of tourist and business trips and a structural change in the traveler flow** (there is a growing awareness that not only "labor migrants" travel to the EU from Ukraine), improved prospects for bilateral relations (trade, educational, scientific, cultural), expanded formal and informal horizontal relations, which, eventually, contributes to improving the image of Ukraine in the EU and popularizes the EU in Ukraine. At the same time, against the background of deteriorating economic situation of the population and a limited alternative of transport solutions in Ukraine, travels do not yet take a significant place in the leisure structure of the Ukrainian nationals. According to a 2017 poll, only about 17% of respondents in all the regions of Ukraine traveled somewhere for vacation or during the year[25], 57% have never been abroad, 72% in principle do not plan such a trip; of those who do not plan to visit the EU countries, 77% cannot do this for material reasons[26]. According to a late 2018 poll (i.e., almost a year and a half after introduction of the visa-free travel), 7.6% of respondents traveled to the EU as tourists, 5.4% visited friends and relatives, 4.7% traveled to the EU in search of employment opportunities, 0.5% went to study, 1.1% to professional events (conferences, exhibitions, etc.), however, 81.9% did not take advantage of new opportunities for travel[27]. This suggests that the inclusive potential of the visa-free travel for the nationals of Ukraine has yet to be worked on. In addition, against the background of migration crises and the risk of phobias arising against their background, the EU countries should pay more attention to an objective and progressive assessment of the economic and geopolitical advantages of closer and more comprehensive cooperation with Ukraine (besides integrating the Ukrainian labor resources into their labor markets), including investment and innovation cooperation projects.

Among the most important system challenges to the visa-free travel in Ukraine, experts name two key ones: 1) a possible rollback of reforms associated with the start of the election campaign in Ukraine (the presidential election will be held in March 2019); 2) deterioration of the migration situation (since identification of migrants with an irregular status after introduction of the visa-free travel takes time[28] and depends on the accounting method).

The European Parliament plays a key control role in launching the visa suspension mechanism: where there are grounds, the mechanism will be applied. According to the European partners, in the short term there is no threat, but there are signals that are causing concern. In the mid-term perspective, if Ukraine does not focus on addressing the findings of the First Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism of 20.12.2017, a critical mass of violations can accumulate[29]. Despite the fact that the visa-free travel has been introduced in several countries, including five countries of the Western Balkans and three countries of the Eastern Partnership, it remains a pilot project for the EU and its mechanism on many issues has not yet been worked out yet. In this sense, each new national visa-free case is a set of tasks that requires development and use of both standard and unique tools for reaching the goals set.

Against the background of deteriorating economic situation of the population and a limited alternative of transport solutions in Ukraine, travels do not yet take a significant place in the leisure structure of the Ukrainian nationals

23. See: EU scraps border projects as 'Ukraine fatigue' grows // Reuters, 20 February 2018. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-eu-grants-exclusive/exclusive-eu-scraps-border-projects-as-ukraine-fatigue-grows-idUSKCN1G41GT?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29, access date 5 September 2018.

24. For more details about the significance of the "Open Sky" treaty and the status of its signing, see the State Aviation Administration of Ukraine, section "European Integration". Available at: https://avia.gov.ua/pro-nas/mizhnarodna-diyalnist/yevrointegratsiya/, access date 1 September 2018.

25. A poll by the Institute of Sociology of Ukraine, June 2017. Sampling of 1800 respondents.

26. A poll by the Gorshenin Institute in conjunction with the Representative Office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine and Belarus, June 2017. Sampling of 2000 respondents.

27. A poll by the Institute of Sociology of Ukraine, October 2018. Sampling of 1800 respondents.

28. Currently, illegal migrants from Ukraine are most often identified during border crossing or if they committed an offense.

29. Interview with David Stulik and Irina Sushko.

PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For Ukraine. After the first visa-free year, the main tactical priority of further work for Ukraine is **compliance with the already mentioned recommendations of the monitoring Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism**. Specifically, Ukraine should: 1) enhance cooperation with the EU to prevent risks stemming from irregular migration; 2) step up information campaigns clarifying the rights and obligations entailed in visa-free travel; 3) ensure independence, effectiveness and sustainability of the anti-corruption institutional framework (in particular by setting up a High Anti-Corruption Court in accordance with the Venice Commission opinion and Ukrainian legislation[30]); 4) restore credibility of the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) and establish an effective verification system of asset declarations; 5) repeal requirements for electronic declaration of civil society activists; 6) step up efforts to combat organized crime, including by increasing resources and expertise in the National Police and a clear delineation of competencies and improving cooperation between the law enforcement agencies.

In the context of border management, the first visa-free year allowed for enhanced cooperation between the national security services and Europol, but weak horizontal interaction between the agencies inside Ukraine (State Migration Service, State Border Guard Service, Security Service, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) remains evident. The Ukrainian side was recommended to improve its migration policy, paying particular attention to development of a regulatory standard for entry of foreign citizens into Ukraine, including on the issue of granting long-term visas, residence permits, citizenship.

For Ukraine and EU. In terms of strategic priorities, it is important to note the **need to strengthen cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the field of border security**. Despite the fact that the EU and its consultative missions (e.g., EUAM) do not have a mandate to assist Ukraine in the conflict zone in the east, the tasks of integrated management and border security in this problem area require partners' urgent and close attention. In particular, since, according to the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, more than 400 km of Ukraine's border with the Russian Federation remain virtually unmonitored, to reduce the risk of border crossing for individuals who pose a threat to security, it is necessary to **introduce innovative elements of border management** through introduction of additional control filters that do not affect mobility, but are of preventive nature[31].

It is necessary to **develop a mechanism for exchange of relevant information between national agencies** on lists of countries with migration risks, to give clear instructions on the mandates of security services (who needs to be stopped and for how many hours, who makes the final decision regarding refusal of entry, readmission, asylum, who pays the costs of decision implementation). It is recommended that bilateral negotiations are held on the **possibility of introducing joint control at the borders between the EU countries and Ukraine** (where this has not yet been done), which will reduce the crossing time[32]. It is recommended that the border crossing accounting methods be synchronized, including between the EU countries. It is also necessary to work on the possibilities of separating passenger and cargo flows at the land border crossing points, speeding up customs control, and strengthening cooperation to minimize corruption risks through joint monitoring with participation of Ukraine and the EU countries.

In terms of strategic priorities, it is important to note the need to strengthen cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the field of border security.

Ukraine and the EU are recommended to continue the awareness-raising campaign explaining to individuals what it means to travel responsibly

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30. In September 2018, candidates for the Public Council of International Experts are selected to assist in selection of judges of the High Anti-Corruption Court (HAC). According to Hugo Mingarelli, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, the EU intends to offer its candidates to the council in the near future. Potential candidates for judges must submit their applications by 14 September 2018.

31. This refers to extended use of biometric verification and identification, including for foreigners, technologization of control, including contactless inspection of vehicles and persons, other elements of introduction of the "digital border" model, as well as introduction of the "second line of control" (interviews), use of the "one-stop shop" (in which, e.g., representatives of the customs and environmental services can work together), joint risk analysis, etc. Comment by Irina Sushko, 14 November 2018. See also Filippov S. Border control in the crime countering system // Scientific Papers of National University "Odesa Law Academy", 2018, p. 127, 128.

32. See Kulchytska K. Quality matters: what should be improved on the EU-Ukraine land border // Blogactive, November 5, 2018. Available at: https://ukraineoffice.blogactiv.eu/2018/11/05/quality-matters-what-should-be-improved-on-the-eu-ukraine-land-border/, access date 12 November 2018.

Bilateral initiatives should also be aimed at improving the transport infrastructure, upgrading of the old and construction of new roads, airports, border crossing points between Ukraine and the EU, while the Ukrainian side should raise technical and anti-corruption standards in implementing such joint projects.

Ukraine and the EU are recommended to continue the **awareness-raising campaign explaining to individuals what it means to travel responsibly**, how to protect themselves from unscrupulous intermediaries and avoid the risks of human trafficking, and also explain the importance of the visa-free travel for development of Ukraine and its neighbors, focusing on what has changed and in which spheres, apart from the right of simplified border crossing.

Strategic recommendations on the following joint post visa-free steps provoke a heated discussion between the Ukrainian and European sides: e.g., the statements by Petro Poroshenko, President of Ukraine, about Ukraine's accession to the Schengen zone and the EU as the country's next steps towards approximation with Europe do not resonate with the European partners who consider such goals ungrounded and premature. Attention is drawn to the need of consolidating the visa-free accomplishments as a basis for working on the following stages of reforms: it is necessary to intensify legislative initiatives to implement the Association Agreement[33], take practical steps for nostrification of diplomas and other qualification documents, and open access to the land and real estate market, etc.

Discussions about the forms of integration of Ukraine and the EU are becoming controversial after a recent publication by the European Commission of the "Association Implementation Report on Ukraine", which many Ukrainian experts considered as rejection of bilateral plans for integration with the EU market. The Brussels message is interpreted by the Ukrainian side as a pessimistic cooperation plan: currently, given the low progress in implementation of the reforms, it may not be a question of bilateral plans, but only of unilateral commitments of Ukraine[34].

For the EU. Given the specifics of operation of the Ukrainian government structures, the EU should assist Ukraine in operationalization of the Association Agreement with definition of specific statements of work, deadlines and implementation indicators. For further implementation of the legislation, the Ukrainian government needs assistance of a wide range of actors, therefore the EU is recommended to expand partnership on projects, increasing the circle of recipients, and strengthen work in the regions, mainstreaming the demand for reforms and control of civil society over their implementation. For objective monitoring of the situation, the EU is recommended to diversify information channels, namely, not only collect data from government agencies and public councils under them, but also cooperate with independent experts and non-governmental organizations. It is critical that the EU recognize its interest in Ukraine as a safe, reliable and rapidly developing partner, as well as articulate the real prospects for Ukraine's economic and political integration into the European area.

33. To date, Ukraine has adopted 88 laws in the framework of the Association Agreement implementation. In the European partners' opinion, this is a very slow pace. In Slovakia, e.g., hundreds of laws were passed in a year as part of the Association Agreement implementation (interview with David Stulik).

34. Sidoreneko S., There is association, but no integration: The European Commission appreciated the progress of Ukraine in implementation of the agreement with the EU // European Pravda 12 November 2018. Available at: https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/articles/2018/11/12/7089263/, access date 13 November 2018. Association Implementation Report (Brussels, 7.11.2018 SWD(2018) 462 final) available at: https://cdn3-eeas.fpfis.tech.ec.europa.eu/cdn/farfuture/aZnrbQ70ZJtiXaRXV69qTtPI-d-gbCzZxpirQUpU6EY/mtime:1541749617/sites/eeas/files/2018_association_implementation_report_on_ukraine.pdf?fbclid=IwAR343Jz5Lwdwns-VVejmAU9cfP40vuW-ibMs9UnhyL6mNilrt6ICM9ispUU, access date 13 November 2018.

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