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**AN EU RECOVERY PROGRAMME FOR UKRAINE?
 TOWARDS A NEW NARRATIVE
 FOR EU—UKRAINE RELATIONS?**

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Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin. An EU recovery programme for Ukraine? Towards a new narrative for EU—Ukraine relations? In 1947, the United States of America launched the European Recovery Programme to support the post-war reconstruction of Europe. The Marshall Plan, as it became known after U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, was one of the major success stories of US foreign policy in the twentieth century. The notion of an EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine provoked interest – and division in Ukraine. The enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007 demonstrated the EU's capacity to mount grand economic and political projects. However, since then, the EU has faced difficulties exerting influence and constructing a coherent narrative of its role in the European neighbourhood and the wider world. Would a more transformative aid and development programme for its Ukrainian neighbour offer an opportunity for the EU as well as Ukraine? In this article we use a series of elite interviews conducted across Ukraine in 2016-17 to explore how such a notion is understood. We find that Ukrainian elites have mixed feelings about existing EU aid programmes; many respondents resented the conditions the EU imposes, but nor do they want or expect aid to be given unconditionally. Whilst many aspire for Ukraine to reach EU standards of law and prosperity, Ukrainian elites favour self-help in their efforts to forge a stable sovereign state. Both the EU and Russia are understood as metonymies – as standing for two sets of values and geopolitical futures – and neither quite fit what Ukrainians seek. We conclude that whilst a Marshall Plan-style action could have benefits, it is not desired as a basis for a shared narrative and basis of cooperation and development.

Key words: EU—Ukraine relations, Marshall Plan, economy, politics, narrative, Ukrainian elites, interviews.

Алістер Міскімон, Бен О'Луглін. Програма ЄС, спрямована на оздоровлення України? У напрямку до нового нарративу у відносинах між ЄС та Україною? У 1947 році Сполучені Штати Америки започаткували Програму європейського оздоровлення задля підтримки відбудови післявоєнної Європи. План Маршалла, названий на честь Держсекретаря США Джорджа Маршалла, став одним із найвагоміших досягнень в американській зовнішній політиці двадцятого століття. Ідея європейської програми, спрямованої на оздоровлення України, викликає як інтерес, так і несумісність думок українців. Розширення ЄС у 2004 і 2007 роках продемонструвало здатність ЄС здійснювати масштабні економічні та політичні проекти. Однак з тих пір ЄС зазнала труднощів у розповсюдженні свого впливу і формулюванні зрозумілого нарративу щодо своєї ролі в європейському сусідстві та у широкому світі. Чи зможе конструктивніша допомога та програма розвитку для українського сусіда надати нові можливості як для ЄС, так і для України? У цій статті ми аналізуємо серію інтерв'ю, взятих у представників еліти з різних регіонів України в 2016-2017 роках з метою отримати відповідь на поставлене запитання. Результати аналізу показують, що представники української еліти мають змішані почуття щодо існуючих програм допомоги Україні з боку ЄС; багато респондентів обурені умовами, висунутими ЄС, проте вони й не очікують на відсутність умов як таких. Численні представники української еліти прагнуть досягнення Україною європейських стандартів у

законодавстві і добробуті громадян, але водночас надають перевагу самостійній розбудові незалежної держави. І Україна, і Росія сприймаються метонімічно – як носії двох систем цінностей та геополітичних прагнень; жодна з цих систем не задовольняє вимоги українців. У висновку ми стверджуємо, що хоча дії, подібні до плану Маршалла, можуть бути корисними, їх навряд чи можна розглядати як об'єднуючий суспільний наратив та основу для співробітництва та розвитку.

Ключові слова: відносини між ЄС та Україною, План Маршалла, економіка, політика, наратив, українські еліти, інтерв'ю.

Алистер Мискімон, Бен О'Луглін. Програма ЄС, направлена на оздоровлення України? В напрямленні нового нарратива в отношениях между ЕС и Украиной? В 1947 году Соединенные Штаты Америки развернули Программу европейского оздоровления с целью поддержки восстановления послевоенной Европы. План Маршалла, названный в честь Госсекретаря США Джорджа Маршалла, стал одним из наиболее существенных достижений в американской внешней политике двадцатого столетия. Идея европейской программы, направленной на оздоровление Украины, вызывает как интерес, так и несовместимость мнений украинцев. Расширение ЕС в 2004 и 2007 годах продемонстрировало способность Европы осуществлять масштабные экономические проекты. Однако с тех пор ЕС испытывает трудности в распространении своего влияния и формулировке понятного нарратива относительно своей роли в европейском соседстве и на мировой арене. Сможет ли более конструктивная помощь Украине, а также программа развития для украинского соседа предоставить новые возможности как для ЕС, так и для Украины? В этой статье мы анализируем серию интервью, взятых у представителей элиты из разных регионов Украины в 2016-2017 годах с целью получить ответ на поставленный вопрос. Результаты анализа показывают, что представители украинской элиты демонстрируют смешанные чувства относительно существующих программ помощи Украине со стороны ЕС; многие респонденты возмущены условиями, выдвигаемыми ЕС, однако они и не ожидают отсутствия условий как таковых. Значительная часть украинской элиты стремятся к тому, чтобы Украина достигла европейских стандартов в законодательстве и благополучии граждан, но одновременно отдают предпочтение самостоятельному построению независимого государства. И Украина, и Россия воспринимаются метонимично – как носители двух систем ценностей и геополитических устремлений; и ни одна из этих систем не удовлетворяет требования украинцев. В итоге мы утверждаем, что, хотя действия, подобные Плану Маршалла, могут быть полезны, их вряд ли можно рассматривать как объединяющий общественный нарратив и основу для сотрудничества и развития.

Ключевые слова: отношения между ЕС и Украиной, План Маршалла, экономика, политика, нарратив, украинские элиты, интервью.

1. Introduction

Price: The Marshall Plan seemed a spark of light 70 years ago.

Where do those sparks come from today? There is a yearning for transformative visions!

Kornprobst: If you have a vision you need to see an ophthalmologist¹.

This exchange between US international law professor Monroe Price and German political scientist Markus Kornprobst in 2017 takes us to the heart of how we think and talk about political change. Can societies be deliberately transformed, particularly societies facing malaise, crisis or conflict? And what is the role of communication in transformative processes? Can communication bring visions into being or, equally, take visions off the agenda or even off the horizon of what is thought possible?

In our research on public opinion in Ukraine², the idea of an EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine occurs frequently in Ukrainian news media and elicits strong reactions among young people in focus groups. Many Ukrainians expected the EU and its member states to do more to help when Russia invaded its territory in 2014 and annexed Crimea. Whilst recognizing that the EU provides economic and development assistance, some Ukrainians felt this was the moment for a

dramatic, visible gesture – whilst others were extremely wary [Chaban and O’Loughlin 2018]. Just as the US piled money into Western Europe after WWII to stop the spread of Soviet influence, why would the EU not move decisively against Russian influence now? Certainly, times have changed. Politically, the notion of “nation-building” has acquired different, often pejorative meanings in recent decades. Economically, while markets for capital and lending were stunted after World War II, today any Marshall Plan-size investment should in theory be available through financial markets [Eichengreen 2001]. And yet, even if financial assistance does go to Ukraine from the EU and Ukrainians can borrow money on international markets, this does not offer the same sense of collective human agency. The Marshall Plan stands as a template – a simplifying cognitive device that gives rapid meaning to events [Kitzinger 2000; Hoskins 2006]. History provides the template; events give the EU an opportunity. If not now, when?

The EU already provides a significant amount of assistance to Ukraine through formal programmes, such as the €11 billion support package for Ukraine agreed in March 2014. Renewed Russian aggression in late 2018 triggered calls within Europe for more assistance [CEPA, 2018]. However, the EU has not raised the profile of its assistance and elites within Ukraine display ambivalence towards the March 2014 programme. Local elites point to the unwieldy nature of financial assistance and academic analysis supports this view [Wolczuk and Žeruolis 2018]. In addition, many Ukrainians are unaware of these levels of assistance; or, such assistance is not the first thing they think of when they think about the EU. Creating a strategic narrative for this assistance is challenging. On the one hand, turning the existing large but low-profile assistance into a full-blown ‘plan’ would not require a huge stretch of narrative ingenuity – merely more practical organization in how this is communicated. It is a matter of political will, imagination and confidence. However, what might appear a compelling strategy to exert greater EU influence faces significant challenges. Interviews with leading members of media, business, cultural and political elites in Ukraine highlight wide ranging views of the EU and its assistance programmes, both positive and negative. Even with the most positive responses to EU activity in Ukraine, few interviewees saw EU assistance as the sole answer, and indeed, in the longer term, respondents stressed the importance of Ukraine finding a *unique* path through the political, economic and social challenges it faces. From an EU perspective, its reticence to outline a more ambitious basis for relations points not only to the dominance of internal crises in the EU’s agenda, but also to limitations of EU agency. Nearly all of the 50 Ukrainian elites we interviewed stressed EU internal challenges as impediments to the EU playing a more forceful and active international role.

Despite these challenges, the EU and its leading member states need a clearer articulation of EU-Ukraine relations, that both provides a basis for a progressive relationship and recognizes the current challenges. We argue that the Marshall Plan template suggests that in transformational projects it is important to act first according to a general principle, and then build a strategic narrative to legitimize that action later. We define strategic narratives as ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors [Miskimmon *et al.* 2013: 2]. Leaders and ordinary citizens are continually fitting new events into prior embedded narratives. Each narrative has a setting, a plot involving an obstacle to overcome, characters, tools they use to address the obstacle, and an orientation towards desirable or undesirable endings [Burke 1969; Shanahan *et al.* 2011]. Here the concept of myth helps unpack the mechanism through which a strategic narrative of transformation can appear credible. Myth functions by obscuring the origin of a phenomenon. Levi-Strauss writes that myth ‘is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at “taking off” from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling’ [Levi-Strauss 1955: 430-431]. Details cease to matter. Barthes writes, ‘myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made’ [2009: 169]. What actually happened in the original Marshall Plan becomes masked by *the idea of* what the Marshall Plan was, as a totality. Myth simplifies that past to offer a template for the future. This is

how it contributes to strategic narratives that leaders craft to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics (see also [Bliesemann de Guevara 2016]).

Consequently, our expectation as we go on to analyse how Ukrainians consider the idea of an EU Recovery Programme today is that there will be less focus on what the Marshall Plan actually did and, instead, a more open sense of what aid and transformation might look like today.

Our analysis explores a theory of agent-led transformation in which the meaning of the agent's action becomes clear only after the transformation. We postulate the following model:

1. Leaders monitor the “soup” of policy ideas and visions available to them [see Kingdon, 1984]
2. An emergency situation demands leaders to choose ideas and articulate a vision
3. Ideational entrepreneurs step forward and seek authorisation to lead a transformative programme
4. The programme is enacted in the target country or countries through economic, political and cultural policy instruments
5. Some aspects work, some do not, and there are some unforeseen dynamics
6. Post-hoc rationalisation and mythologizing lends the programme coherence; it stands as a template for future action

We trace how this operated for the Marshall Plan and then we identify how these aspects are considered in contemporary Ukraine.

Certainly, any EU Recovery Programme would risk upsetting Russia, at a time when the EU's open support for NATO already irks the Kremlin. It must not be forgotten that after the fall of the Soviet Union, the idea of a Marshall Plan for Russia was an idea in the Washington DC policy “soup” through the 1990s [Spechler, 1992; Helprin, 1998]. Many commentators suggested external action was needed to stabilize Russia's economy and institutionalize democracy. Today, however, a Recovery Programme for Ukraine would risk reinforcing a ‘new Cold War’ narrative that has already been building up in European news media in the past few years [Ojala and Panti, 2017]. It would raise expectations within more pro-European sections of Ukrainian society that would have to be met. At the same time, the EU would have to recognize that even pro-EU Ukrainians largely reject any complete severing of ties from Russia [Szostek, 2018] and that a Recovery Programme-boosted Ukraine would still be open to cultural and familial people-to-people ties with Russia. It would have to avoid deepening any binary antagonism between the EU and Russia, West and East. In short, it would have to be a socio-economic and political plan like the original Marshall Plan but not be used to deepen geopolitical divisions and initiate a new Iron Curtain. The EU is largely comfortable with hybrid identities and cross-border cultural linkages; such forms of identification and modes of being are intrinsic to the European model. But the new plan must not be presented as *against* Russia, no matter how much defensive Russian voices seek to re-narrate it that way.

In closing the introduction, we highlight three significant implications of our arguments. First, for the study of narrative in International Relations, we learn that strategic narratives can help organize and signal an actor's goals before they act, but the real “power” of strategic narratives lies in the moment when *post-hoc* rationalization and mythification of the action meshes with the performative expectation that that actor can achieve equal goals in the future. While the US had vague goals of limiting Soviet influence and restoring markets for US exports, the Marshall Plan's power became located in the mythical status that, first, the US could achieve major transnational outcomes and, second, such plans (more Marshall Plans) are possible.

Second, that whatever benefits an EU Recovery Programme might bring to Ukraine, it might bring more benefits to the EU itself. This argument is based on an examination of the original Marshall Plan and what it reveals about international transformational projects. These projects are rare – EU enlargement in the 1990s and China's current Belt and Road initiative are perhaps the

most similar ambitious efforts to lead change on a transnational scale. The EU is marked by internal crises, not least a direct challenge to liberal values from populist-nationalist leaders which generates anxiety about whether liberal societies should exclude the non-liberal [Rae, 2018]. The EU also faces a turbulent external order. The EU requires opportunities to *evidence* its particular form of power in the world and to show that its vision of a liberal world order based on democracy, managed markets and rule of law is still viable. ‘The gravest risk the European Union faces is to be the guardian of a status quo that has ceased to exist,’ writes Krastev [Krastev, 2018, no page]. It must show – make visible, through action – that such an order can deliver prosperity and security. Our interview data will show the extent to which such a project would be welcome.

Finally, our focus here is the broader strategic canvas – indeed what is at stake here is the very notion of a vast canvas for human action and how action works on that canvas. Ideas about Marshall Plans offer a chance to reflect on exactly what role visions are supposed to play in international relations. We are familiar with imagined communities – our nations or political communities in the present and how they emerged from the past. But in a post-ideological age with low trust in leaders, experts and institutions to guide change to the collective benefit (at least in the West), we must reflect on the value of visions. In our study we evaluate whether Ukrainian elites are closer to Price or Kornprobst: Are visions inspirational or an affliction?

2. What was the Marshall Plan? The creation of a template

Here we examine the actual historical record of how the Marshall Plan unfolded, through the six steps of our theoretical model of agent-led transformation in which the meaning of the agent’s action becomes clear only after the transformation. This will allow us in the next section to compare to contemporary Ukrainian views of a possible EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine.

1. Leaders monitor the “soup” of policy ideas and visions available to them (see [Kingdon, 1984]).

At the US State Department by 1945 the prevailing ideas about the causes of world wars focused on class hatred, poverty and a lack of hope that populations’ circumstances would change (Ellwood, 2006). It was felt that European societies had never experienced economic democracy – direct access to capital and technology. US policymakers observed two narratives competing with the Marshall Plan idea: Comintern’s aggressively socialist narrative of development, and a narrative of the welfare state that saw security and prosperity emerging through the provision of collective goods rather than personal wealth-seeking. US policymakers would come to adapt and bend to the welfare state narrative that had wide support in Europe.

2. An emergency situation demands leaders must choose ideas and articulate a vision.

A harsh winter in Europe in 1946-47 created urgency to act. Communist parties in Italy, France and Germany appeared to be rising and offered their own rationales and narratives for how Europe could be rescued. US policymakers also sought to minimise the chances of another war in Europe by addressing public needs and concerns. There was no actual plan: it was a balance of payments exercise over the course of a year, motivated by the short-term aim of industrial renewal in Europe. It became a four-year initiative as members of the US Congress realized this was a chance to reform Western and Central Europe as a bulwark against the USSR and communism. However, there was a political aim too. The US recognized an opportunity to convince Europeans that a mix of capitalism and democracy did not automatically lead to Nazism, an experience from the 1920s and 1930s that scarred European perspectives. The Marshall Plan offered the promise to Europeans of a better life through modernization along capitalist-democratic lines.

Second, the US was suffering a balance of payment surplus while Europe was largely bankrupt – the “dollar gap” [Milward 1989]. Industrial activity in Europe would drive wages and thus demand for US goods and currency.

3. Ideational entrepreneurs step forward and seek authorisation to lead a transformative programme.

Marshall and his colleagues wanted to give Europeans not just aid but autonomy. The US would deposit reserves for development programmes into European banks. It would be for Europeans to decide how that would be spent. Marshall said that the programme was to be ‘a cure rather than palliative’ and hence the aim was to enact structural change in how European economies functioned [cited in Ellwood, 2006: 19]. There would be no conditionality on aid, and without any stipulation about what type of policies recipients must pursue this left the programme open to Soviet countries to join. This was a very risky strategy and the USSR soon objected and narrated the Marshall Plan as instead an imperial strategy to control Europe.

4. The programme is enacted in the target country or countries through economic, political and cultural policy instruments.

In economic terms, Europeans were encouraged to buy US goods and services. European payments would go not to the US but to the Marshall fund that Europeans could draw on.

As an effort to persuade wary Europeans that capitalism and democracy were the route to a better life, the Marshall Plan took on the trappings of a marketing campaign. The primary narrative was that economic stability and growth were the basis for political independence. Economic stability entailed the effort of all individuals, as workers and as consumers. Growth would bring ever-expanding prosperity for the ever-expanding mainstream and middle class.

The US Marshall Plan narrative was not uncontested. For this reason, it would be easy to look for similarities and lessons for European strategic communications professionals seeking to subvert or counter communications from Russia in Eastern Europe today. The US realised that narratives from the USSR depicted the Plan unfavourably. The US launched a public and cultural diplomacy programme that largely bypassed governments and targeted citizens directly.

The USSR projected messages about the benefits of communism and framed the Marshall Plan as US imperialism or neocolonialism. In 1947 the Cominform decided on a strategy to limit ‘Marshallization’ in France, Italy, Austria and elsewhere. In France, the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) was encouraged to ‘rely on the masses’ because a broad section of workers were unhappy with conditions and might be willing to strike, resisting any smooth transition to a new capitalism-democratic formation [Ross, 1975: 509]. And indeed, working class disenchantment did exist to varying degrees across European societies; the Soviet narrative would have credibility to some.

It is striking that the public and cultural diplomacy efforts were led not by military strategists, as many campaigns against Russian information warfare are today, but by civilians in government and those recruited from the private sector. Efforts were made to show the future benefits to all sections of societies. Leaflets, films, theatre performances as well as photography and news articles were mobilized. For instance, in 1948 the US Information Service (USIS) hired Yoichi Okamoto to run its Pictorial Section in Vienna, a crucible of propaganda given the Soviet occupation of some of the city. Okamoto used artistic photography to document progress and to show individual Austrians benefiting from the Plan. As Bischoff and Petschar [2017] argue, Okamoto’s photographs were dominated by people smiling – unusually for archive images of that time. Okamoto specifically set out to take a present a visual narrative about improved quality of life rather than an abstract struggle. It was not a matter of “defeating” the enemy’s vision, but of generating support for the US vision. Civil agents were not secondary to military agents.

5. Some aspects work, some do not, and there are some unforeseen dynamics

The Marshall Plan succeeded in reducing trade between European states and their old empires and instead boosting trade within Europe – a key structural transformation. Relations between France and Germany improved. Yet there was resistance too: each country had political factions opposed to the Plan in some way and US policymakers had to give way to governments introducing welfare programmes.

There may have been one Marshall Plan, but it meant many things to many countries inside and outside Europe, depending on each country's self-image and national narrative. This is the case for all phenomena in international relations. France's post-WWII narrative was that the French nation recovered through its own hard work, not a Marshall Plan.

Austria became a specific focus point for contestation between the Marshall Plan narrative and Soviet communications. Many Austrians feared becoming another Germany and thus open to persuasion about how to achieve some kind of political stability. When the Marshall Plan began, Austria was particularly under Soviet-occupation. However, motivated by the aim of limiting Soviet influence in the country, the Marshall Plan avoided placing conditions on participation and provided funding to all sections of Austria anyway.

6. Post-hoc rationalisation and mythologizing lends the programme coherence; it stands as a template for future action

A US action to restore European economies after World War II became possible because of bipartisan support motivated by fear of totalitarianism, extremism and the rise of the USSR – US Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson reversed his backing of *détente* in 1946. Hence we might question the degree to which a transformational project needs a dangerous external force it must unify against.

The Marshall Plan has gained mythical status as the most successful US foreign policy ever. For Ellwood [2006] the Marshall Plan was a focal point that allowed the US develop grand strategy for the first time. This in turn allowed US policymakers to reflect on the characterization of their nation and their national narrative. The personal became tied to a wider mission. One Marshall plan policymaker later reflected: 'We had a goal; we had fire in our bellies; we worked like hell; we had rough, disciplined thinking; and we could program, strive for, and see results' [cited in Ellwood 2012: 344].

As a geopolitical exercise the Marshall Plan also brought the notion of European integration to public consciousness, beyond policymakers and intellectuals.

In summary, based on this history, what might we expect an EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine to encounter? First, that reception and effects will vary by region. Second, that counter-narratives will emerge and the EU would have to recognize and even perhaps accommodate local preferences. Given the imbalance of power between the EU and Ukraine, a Plan would need to avoid the appearance of pacification. Third, a Plan would be easier if presented in opposition to a threatening other, but loyalties in Ukraine are not binary and the EU would have to manage relations with Russia sensitively. Fourth, that it would provide a sense of purpose and confidence for both Ukrainians and the EU.

The EU has provided assistance to Ukraine since 1991. From 1992-2015 the EU offered around €12.1 billion in assistance. The European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) offered the largest assistance of €2.3 billion [Wolczuk and Zeruolis, 2018]. When Russia invaded Ukrainian territory in 2014 the EU launched a Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) programme – a crisis response instrument intended to secure the EU neighbourhood. The EU obtains the capital on international markets and loans it to Ukraine on the same conditions under which the EU borrowed

the capital. As reported in the *Kyiv Post*, this positions the EU as ‘lender’ and Ukraine as ‘borrower’ [Petrov 2018]. Following Russian aggression against the Ukrainian navy in the Azov Sea in November 2018 the EU released the first tranche of a new MFA of €500 million in assistance [European Commission, 2018]. This made Ukraine recipient of the largest amount of EU funding by any non-EU country, but on what the EU concedes are similar conditions to IMF assistance [ibid].

Member states have offered around €1.4 billion in direct grants since 1992 and also offer assistance in a number of forms. For instance, the British Council and Goethe Institute use cultural relations activities to help Ukrainians develop their civil society. Funded by their respective foreign ministries, these organisations use arts and language programmes to foster social entrepreneurship and dialogue across Ukraine’s regions. The EU also supports technical assistance projects at a local level. Both these cultural and technical instruments operate according to a mix of cascade, network and diffusion models of social change to shift norms and practices. However, they face limits whereby the funding of short- and medium- term projects does not necessarily help Ukraine build stronger institutions [British Council and Goethe-Institut 2018; Wolczuk and Zeruolis 2018]. There is also a lack of an overarching concept and the EU, facing the opportunity to be the primary conduit to channel international assistance to Ukraine, has been slow to offer such conceptual or practical coordination [Rabinovych 2018]. There are, in short, enough instruments to allow for a single ‘plan’ but this is not realized.

3. Method

As part of an EU-funded project on EU crisis diplomacy in Ukraine, throughout 2016-2017 fifty elites were interviewed across Ukraine working in the media, business, the cultural sphere, civil society and politics. Our aim was to understand how the EU is perceived in Ukraine, and to identify the narratives used by elites to explain not only the challenges Ukraine faces, but also how elites narrate their understanding of the EU and Ukraine-EU relations. Interviews were semi-structured with elites in the capital Kyiv, centre and east of Ukraine. Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian depending on the interviewee’s preference, and recorded, transcribed, and translated. Interviewees gave consent to publication on condition of anonymity; the anonymity procedure also follows Human Ethics Committees’ prescriptions. The questionnaire ranged across themes of the EU’s perceived role in the world *vis-à-vis* other major powers, perceptions of the EU’s potential role in resolving the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and the role of media in shaping the images of the EU and EU-Ukraine relations (this last theme was explored in-depth in the interviews with media professionals).

Central to these discussions was what role the EU should have in Ukraine’s economic and political development. We found a wide range of views of how Ukraine should best develop and a largely ambivalent view of the role of the EU in this process. Economic aid was a universal topic for discussion, but often couched in less than positive terms, despite its centrality to EU-Ukraine relations. Economic assistance was little understood and importantly, there was no clear overarching narrative of its medium to long-term perspective.

Four major narratives emerged from the wide-ranging interviews we conducted. First, that the EU’s work and economic assistance in Ukraine is little understood, even among elites, who frequently point to a lack of awareness of the EU’s role. Ukrainian elites narrate the international system as state-centric, rather than defined by constitutive institutions. Second, Ukrainian elites focused almost universally on the need to domestic reform, without which, an assistance was seen as papering over the cracks. Third, elites were very aware of the EU’s internal challenges and directly pointed to that as limiting the EU’s engagement in Ukraine. Finally, there was no clear future oriented narrative of EU-Ukraine relations and development goals for Ukraine. We highlight this below in the analysis of our findings. We analyse the findings through the lens of our six-stage model of transformative projects.

4. Results: Analysis of Ukraine elite interviews

1. Leaders monitor the “soup” of policy ideas and visions available to them (see [Kingdon, 1984])

In our analysis of the interview data, we looked for what ideas Ukrainian elites refer to, and in particular, whether after years of EU assistance they are dissatisfied with existing aid programmes or want something new. National reforms set the context for much of the respondents’ statements. The ebb and flow of reforms, driven by perceived sporadic engagement with the EU and inconsistent domestic application of policies, is a major theme in our discussions with interviewees. The lack of full realisation of reforms provides a source of frustration for interviewees and provides challenges for a coherent reform process to emerge. For instance, a civil society actor speaking in December 2016 argued the following:

All the history of Ukrainian reforms is the inconsistent, incomplete, half-reforms. This means, classical political science says that such reforms, they are worse than the absence of any reforms because stopping the reforms at some point, it is usually advantageous to certain clans, certain forces, certain mobbing groups that peruse this incompleteness, these holes, which are consequently formed. And here we have the same experience, for twenty-five years we have been having these pseudo reforms.

The incompleteness of the national reform efforts is foregrounded in interviewee responses. However, several interviewees refer to the EU in aspirational terms. One political elite, when interviewed in January 2017 suggests,

The EU as an institution for me is this benchmark, of what we have to build in Ukraine. I am not talking about immediate membership in the EU because it is impossible. If we take the experience of Poland, applying in 1994 until 1 January 2004, when Poland joined the EU, it took at least 10 years. But the EU for me is that strategy of how not only the EU has to be developing, but those principles that are inherent in the functioning of this institution that we have to build in Ukraine.

Here we see the policy ‘soup’ of ideas these elite consider are based on templates: a template of positive reform with the EU and its principles as a benchmark, versus incomplete and therefore harmful reform.

Next, we treat two stages together:

2. An emergency situation demands leaders to choose ideas and articulate a vision
3. Ideational entrepreneurs step forward and seek authorisation to lead a transformative programme

In the main, most interviewees considered that EU member states and their leaders, rather than the EU as a unitary actor, were the major players in shaping policy discussions between the EU and Ukraine. For example, a civil society actor interviewed in February 2016 was asked if they thought the EU is a leader in international politics. They replied:

Yes and no. Because, you know, as they say, in the EU there is a matter of perception of the EU. That is, you know, the old joke when I need to talk to the EU, the Americans say "who I

need to call?" right. That is, on the one hand it claims to be a leader, yes, and there competing, for example, with the same United States or China in the world. Nevertheless, this leadership can often be treated with doubt because there is on the one hand the leadership of three major, core countries, i.e. Germany, France and the UK. And the leadership of the European Union as a union, yes. That is always, as they say ... These, as they say, certain problems, nuances related to this. But clearly, still I would say that the EU is a leader in the world.

Other interviewees were more explicit in pointing to what they thought were the limitations of the EU. Speaking in December 2016 a civil society actor responded to the same question stating:

Good question. Well, obviously [the EU] is not a leader to the extent that it could have been, to the extent, say, the United States certainly are, that take this more proactive position, and paradoxically that is Russia. It is not a leader, it is a spoiler, but a very effective spoiler. The European Union in this respect is much weaker and more passive, but it is the leader, well at least in the sense that it sets some, well, given that it is economic power, that is, it sets some parameters.

Respondents refer to a small number of EU member states – Germany, the UK, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, and to a lesser extent France – as being the main supporters of Ukraine in the EU. Overall, however, interviewees highlight both internal and external actors being engaged, largely proactively, in reform processes. Business elites point to the under-exploited role of SMEs in driving economic reform and point to the impediments to supporting this in current EU funding mechanisms [see also Wolczuk and Zeruolis 2018]. Interviewees do not look to political leaders. Rather, each group of interviewees – business, media, civil society, culture and politics – point to how their own sectors could have greater influence in driving reform. This indicates overall support for gradualism through networks in specific sectors and engaging with EU member states. It does not indicate support for a radical transformation plan.

4. The programme is enacted in the target country or countries through economic, political and cultural policy instruments

We have learnt a lot about economic and political development since 1947, and Ukraine has its own experiences of assistance since gaining independence. We know that transformations require hierarchy and transactions between different layers of administration both internally and externally. Experts from international organisations, from local government, and from NGOs will compete to shape policy implementation and may not have an interest in opening up public involvement in policy (Odugbemi and Lee, 2011). However, public acceptance of any transformation matters for long-term institutionalization. Peripheral regions within a society may have the capacity to resist or elect local leaders who seek to roll back the transformative policy; reversal is possible.

Some of the interviewees pinpoint concrete ways in which the EU's assistance is helping Ukraine. Cultural and educational links were regularly raised in interviews as showing potential for good. Some respondents focus on the challenges this has brought. Business and political elites focused on the pros and cons of EU assistance from the perspective of wealth generation and political influence. For instance, one interviewee from the business sector when interviewed in March 2017 stated:

I think that, generally speaking, everyone should pursue his interest in the EU makes it much better [for business] than Ukraine. I personally have not analyzed the free trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU. I listened to people who told me that unfortunately the interests of Ukraine ... are not very well represented and protected. That, say so – there is no free

cheese. And unfortunately the Ukrainian state is too weak to defend its interests. And I think everything else is derived from this.

The same interviewee went on to describe the EU as ‘conservative, hypocritical, inefficient’. Interviewees view economic instruments both positively and negatively. For example, a political actor interviewed in December 2016 responded asked whether the EU’s image had improved as a result of committing resources to Ukraine replied in the following way:

Well, let’s probably put it this way. All this allocated money has to be returned by us. So, I see this as an exclusively negative thing. The allocation of funds is done on credit. So, naturally, I am against it. From my point of view, I think it to be wrong. In my understanding, now the EU is enjoying the hard situation in Ukraine and places its spheres of influence by, let’s say, allocating funds to us. First, they have to be returned... Secondly, let’s say, the IMF’s participation... of course, it’s not exactly the EU, but nevertheless they’re sending the same message: to change the social situation, to increase tariffs. I also associate this with the work of the EU in this direction. That is, we are now setting ourselves the task of bringing our fundamental prices, tariffs and everything to the level in the EU, and, as a result, [our] perception of the EU is not positive in this respect....

Another interviewee stressed the conditional nature of the funding from the EU. In an interview with a political elite in October 2016 they argued that financial aid had not substantially changed the perception of the EU in Ukraine:

Taking into account the fact that... The implementation of a support package of 11 billion euro... and what was it used for? For the military conflict to a greater extent. But not everyone understands that it needs to be returned. Of course, there is [some help] for the city. There are programmes. We’re working with the World Bank; they’re financing, improving, roughly speaking, network utilities, all assets, for example, some pumps... Extra money is being allocated for the housing stock. There’s a programme... which is also the World Bank’s... a plant recycling household waste is being planned to be built. The first stage has already... It’s in the Dergachevsky training ground. In this respect, yes. But this is taken on credit in any case. That is, we took, we’re building. Yes, it’s good. But we will have to return it.

This respondent felt any aid must be repaid, while Ukraine loses from the cost of reforming practices to meet EU benchmarks. Another political elite, speaking in January 2017, refers rather cynically to different incentives within Ukraine for working with the EU:

Smart people think, they understand that the EU is some values, processes, values, people. And for the rest of the public it is like an ATM, as a source of income, etcetera. Maybe in this way it has changed more. Expectations that here they have to help us somehow.

This respondent pointed to attitudes in Ukraine that the state did not have to reform as aid would come anyway. These responses show that whether aid is conditional or ‘like an ATM’ there is no sense that EU aid has had positive effects.

5. Some aspects work, some do not, and there are some unforeseen dynamics

Interviewees based much of their discussions on the future impact of intra-EU problems for Ukraine. A civil society actor interviewed in February 2017 was asked their view of the impact of the Euro crisis, Brexit and the migration crisis on the EU. They said:

Well, it's a bit devalued. And in the world and in Ukraine, I think. But when it comes to the world, selectively. For Brexit is perceived by many in the United States, including Trump primarily, positive. Some here perceive Brexit, including me, positively too. Although this position is quite unusual. It even shocked our local commentators, so to say, and the politicians ... That is, everyone thought that Europe should grow like a snow ball, adding on and adding on its surroundings on itself. Suddenly it began to disintegrate.

This narration of the unravelling of the EU came up several times across the interviews. The unraveling was understood to be limiting the EU's agency to play a defining role in Ukraine. This is particularly significant for Ukraine, given the events of Maidan. There has been a double shift in narrative since 2014 in Ukraine – moving from a narrative of Ukraine's EU destiny, to one of Ukraine's need for domestic reform as the priority *and* a shift towards a narrative of the EU focused on the centrifugal pressures on European integration, rather than its integrative strengths. This shift complicates the reception of any EU narrative in Ukraine, highlighted in our interview data.

6. *Post-hoc* rationalisation and mythologizing lends the programme coherence; it stands as a template for future action

It was generally unclear across the interviews what narratives or myths elites in Ukraine had for future relations, which could act as a template for action. There was no sense of a tangible future but nor a template in the past to draw upon. In an interview on 29th June 2016, one media elite suggested:

The relationship of Ukraine and the European Union is, unfortunately, changing from a romantic period to a period of a kind of confrontation at the moment. At least on the regional level, it's 100%, I mean on the level of separate states. Just today they have written that the Netherlands are very likely to block the signing of the Association Agreement. Our relationship with Poland, our closest neighbor, on the public level is, unfortunately, deteriorating a lot, and this is a result, in many ways, of the information policy both of Russia and of our country, a disastrous one, unfortunately. That's why we, and especially after what has happened to Britain [Brexit], unfortunately, are becoming a very unpleasant and problematic topic which they should try to avoid, to "sweep under the rug" at best or even to get rid of totally. The Ukrainian topic is untimely.

This respondent suggests that the time for optimism where relations were close is changing and that given the priority of other challenges, Ukraine is now not a priority. Historical relationships which proved useful in the past are waning. There is no sense that a coherent solution is possible - the window of opportunity has passed and Ukraine has been left unloved.

However, one member of the cultural elite in Ukraine interviewed in December 2016 suggested that Ukraine faced an historical choice:

From my point of view, for Ukraine to join the EU, it is necessary to break its relations with the Soviet past at all levels. The nearest reminder of the Soviet past is Russia. So now a strategic process of breaking relations is taking place. But since we did not use to have a feeling that Russia was an enemy, it has happened, and this process is under-way. But our innate skepticism, it helps many people to keep some balance of awareness that what may happen is like "out of the frying pan into the fire". That is, visible softness is a myth. As Ostap Bender said: "Talks about Europe are myths of the afterlife."

This interviewee suggests that myth is central to any future-oriented trajectory which Ukraine may have. Indeed, the idea of joining the EU has come to possess the qualities of myth – where the notion originated no longer matters, and how much of a guide for action it could be is wholly uncertain. With this trajectory comes challenges, with no clear resolution. From this perspective, EU membership, and hence the underlying logic of relations with the EU, is not clear. The EU has no clear strategic narrative to help address this, hampered by not having a clear membership perspective for Ukraine, and indeed for the wider European Neighbourhood Policy [Miskimmon, 2018].

A civil society actor, speaking in December 2016 made this point when they said:

... it is probably easier to describe it as different perspectives of expectations. Because the EU sees Ukraine and in general all the neighbours. This, by the way, this so-called European Neighbourhood Policy, or the European neighborhood, this reflects it very well. The very name of this policy is ambivalent, because it is not clear what is at stake - European Neighbourhood Policy. Is this the Policy of European Neighbourhood or the European Policy of Neighbourhood? It can be interpreted both ways. I also assume that this name was coined not without such an intent.

This civil society tries to see how Ukraine is viewed from the perspective of the EU, continuing:

In any case, this policy reflects the attitude of the EU to its neighbors primarily as soft and potentially hard threat. That is, their attitude towards neighbours is aimed primarily to minimizing the external threats. So that there was no threat of uncontrolled migration, penetration of crime, human trafficking, etc., drugs, pollution, all these infectious diseases. That is, they see us primarily as a threat. They are of course trying to somehow keep these neighboring countries afloat, so they do not become failed states, so to minimize these threats. Well, such a pragmatic policy.

This individual concluded by considering whether Ukraine is being spurned by the EU by accident or simply by neglect of attention:

In any case it is not about integration, it is not their agenda. That is, this attitude is about the same as America's to Mexico. It is necessary that Mexico was more or less sustainable and viable. Ukraine, on the other hand, has very different expectations, Ukraine still always emphasizes the desire to integrate, that is to learn, integrate the structures, which means to take all these values, to meet the Copenhagen criteria. That is a completely different attitude and, of course, as one partner wants the marriage, the other just wants neighbour's cohabitation. It is difficult to reconcile these expectations, there is always some friction.

This lack of clarity is an opening for manipulation of how the EU is presented in Ukraine, but also serves as a potential opportunity for greater clarity and public debate. A Ukrainian media elite, interviewed on 28 July 2016 argued the following:

Because in this country the topic of the EU is often used as an attempt to manipulate public opinion and that's bad. In all that "slag", as I call it, even topics of high quality get lost. Professional approach is just profaned. It's a problem, but it's a general problem, but it's also evident in the EU case. There are also a great number of myths which need to be dispelled or confirmed because the EU is something frightening to them. Russia is also playing on those myths and stereotypes, with all those horror stories. And this general ignorance of the audience, of course... It's very simple to play on that ignorance. But it's a very long process.

It must be a separate trend on forming an adequate attitude. It should be dealt with professionally, and not only mass media should take part in it. It doesn't concern the EU exclusively; it's just can be seen vividly in the case of the EU.

Media elites pointed to the need for greater support for a free press in Ukraine to have a firm basis for discussion of Ukraine's future development. For this respondent, the EU must help Ukraine build a more robust public sphere both as an intrinsic good and as a mechanism to reduce the potential influence of Russian myths.

In another response, Ukraine's relations with the EU and Russia are set within a challenging binary of potential rebirth and psychoanalysis – looking back to Ukraine's historical ties affecting which paths lie before Ukraine. A civil society actor speaking in December 2016 argued:

Well, from what I see – of course they are opposed. I see this on the level of the elites, and the so-called elites, and the society. To varying degrees, but I think that everyone understands what they are, so to speak, metonymies of two different projects, the EU and Russia. Embodiments of different value systems, totally different development paths. So I think that when we say these two words, immediately there is a whole chain of associations that entails almost all of the geopolitics. So, the other thing that we have, well, you see, there is a huge part of society that has a kind of schizophrenia because they came out of this Orthodox Eastern Slavic world, this imaginary community or imagined community, right. But at the same time their logic suggests them that Russia is still hostile, Russia is dangerous, Russia is threatening, Russia is the dead end of development, but at the same time this belonging remains.

The EU and Russia stand as metonyms for wider value systems and geopolitical futures – but both are problematic. This civil society actor continued:

This umbilical cord [with Russia], it is still uncut, it creates a huge conflict, I just see it that way, again you can see that from sociology [that] shows that the society it is shifting, gradually drifting to the West, even if for different reasons there is not much enthusiasm about the EU. I can understand that too, the EU itself is often alienating Ukrainians. Moreover, there is no more enthusiasm about Russia, about this Eastern Slavic union, it is already too, thank God, gone or disappearing.

This reinforces a narrative where there is no clear path or clarity on the role that the EU will have in Ukraine's future development. Nation-building defines many of the responses concerning the future of EU-Ukraine relations. A member of the business elite interviewed in January 2017 argues,

I think that if in ten years we got the status of a candidate in the EU, an official one, a confirmed one with calm and clear prospects, it would be the best outcome for Ukraine. Because the country would already get some, you know, firm understanding that in the future... I understand that it is too early for us to be a member, it is so early, we still have to do so much work in order to reach the level of those states. Talking about the level, I mean the level of legislation first of all, military power, let's say the capacity to defend ourselves. Those values, we are talking about, European values, they must be really absorbed by us, not simply declared, but absorbed: we do not have corruption or we understand to some degree and mentally, and personally we do not support corruption. We are building a sovereign state...

Ukraine lacks the qualities of a coherent sovereign state, in this account. Free of any myths of rescue, support or shared destiny offered by the EU or Russia, Ukraine should be left to itself as it passes through these stages.

5. Conclusions

The idea of an EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine, based on a template of the Marshall Plan, emerged within a three-year research project analyzing Ukrainian perceptions of the EU. As a thought experiment, and based on lessons learnt from the original Marshall Plan, we can say that such a vision offers the EU an opportunity to challenge the sense of retrenchment and fatalism in the face of challenges to a liberal order of market democracies. It would also offer Ukraine a sense of movement in the context of the stalemate of its war with Russia and slow pace of development. In this article we took the notion of an EU Recovery Programme for Ukraine identified in our ongoing research, developed it into a six-stage model of transformational political projects, and then explored how Ukrainian elites considered those stages. These interviewees talked about the nature and results of current EU aid practices. Some criticized aid as conditional, others as containing an unevenness that could cause unintended damage, and others as ‘like an ATM’ that meant Ukrainians might not confront the substantive challenges they face. There is no support for anything project fitting the Marshall Plan template. Interviewees offered no simple acceptance of how any transformation would work in any of the six stages. The emerging narrative is instead: leave us to reform ourselves and gradually enhance relations through cultural, business and civil society networks.

Critically, interviewees drew attention to the mythical and metonymic qualities of transformative visions; mythical because any original transformation has been long forgotten and is no basis for current discussion, and metonymic because the EU and Russia stand for wider value systems and historical trajectories that Ukrainians might choose between. Each of those futures is uncertain. That uncertainty is reinforced by doubt about the capacity and motives of both the EU and Russia as actors. EU member states rather than the EU itself are viewed as more credible actors. The EU is equated with financial and migration crises, for some. Indeed, some respondents supported Brexit in part because it suggested it is possible for a country to be European but not of the EU.

What are the implications for the EU’s narrative towards Ukraine? Our analysis indicates that national sovereignty is key to Ukrainian elites’ narratives of the past, present and future of their country. The Marshall Plan boosted states who welcomed managed markets and capitalism but did not involve overt transformation of political structures. Through post-1990 enlargement policies the EU has, in contrast, always conceived of a linkage between conditional aid and political reform both in domestic institutions and joining EU institutions. There is no indication Ukrainian elites would welcome such a process; they prefer national consolidation.

Perhaps the idea of another Marshall Plan points to an intrinsically regressive mode of thinking. Templates bring problems as well as inspiration. Kitzinger writes, ‘Far from opening up historical reflection they reify a kind of historical determinism which can filter out dissenting accounts, camouflage conflicting facts and promote one type of narrative’ [Kitzinger, 2000: 76]. *Another* Hiroshima, *another* Great Depression, *another* EU enlargement – these simplifying cognitive devices can limit the range of options considered and prevent policymakers from understanding what is unique about the present situation. Our interviewees were alert to the dangers of myths and this challenges those in Ukraine and the EU to imagine alternative models of building a shared future.

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NOTES

1. Milton Wolf Seminar, Diplomatische Akademie Wien, Vienna, 25-27 April 2017. See <http://www.aaf-online.org/index.php/news-details/items/milton-wolf-seminar-2017.html>
2. Data presented is from a three-year research project called “Crisis, Conflict and Critical Diplomacy: EU Perceptions in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine” (C³EU), supported by the Jean Monnet Programme of the Erasmus+ (see Introduction by Chaban and Zhabotynska (2018) to this Special Issue.

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