In 1994 and 1995 Ukraine’s relations with Europe underwent a significant improvement. The signing of the Trilateral agreement on nuclear weapons, the end of Washington “Russocentrism”, the appearance of the ambitious seemingly reformist regime in Kyiv – these were among the factors that have de-blocked the road for cooperation not just EU, but with the West in general. It was in June of 1994 when Ukraine, being the first CIS country to do so, has signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with EU. Though it was rather symbolic event (even its ratification by European Union has happened four years later), the symbolism by itself was an important indicator.

The PCA, among other things, has provided an opportunity for Ukraine and EU to have an ongoing dialogue at various levels and in a large number of spheres, such as energy, trade, transportation and environment. The legal framework for cooperation was laid down. The major aim of the PCA was to push Ukraine in the direction that it would meet the existing frameworks of the single European market and the system of WTO. The political aspects were deliberately left in the shadow. However, the PCA has little to do with the issue of membership as such.

The institutional basis was installed with such structures as Cooperation Council, Cooperation Committee and Parliamentary Cooperation Committee coming into life. These structures have had little impact, though, on the behavior of Ukraine’s leaders, its understanding of how EU functions, of the very essence of the European integration process.

At the end of 1995 Ukraine was admitted into the Council of Europe. Following the ratification of the PCA by EU countries, a National Strategy for Ukraine’s integration into the EU was adopted. It has determined the full membership in the EU as Ukraine’s long-term strategic goal. At the same time, an associate member status was proclaimed to be as an immediate foreign policy goal. A Joint PCA Work Program was also adopted.
In December of the 1999, the EU has adopted a Common Strategy on Ukraine. This document has recognized Ukraine’s European aspirations and welcomed this country’s European choice. Both democracy and economic transition in Ukraine were declared to be the priorities for EU. At the same time, this document was yet again cautious as far it gets to the membership issue. Eventual EU membership for Ukraine was never mentioned among even the most remote objectives of the cooperation between Brussels and Kyiv. The implementation of the Common Strategy has not met expectation of neither side in the EU - Ukraine dialogue. Ukraine has received a signal, that even as a “strategic partner”, it does not call for EU to come up with any concrete long-term commitments, and, let alone, EU’s readiness to provide substantial resources.

Beginning from the late 1990-s the Ukraine – EU process has started to loose its momentum. The primary blame is, of course, to lay with Ukrainian leadership. The actual halt on economic reform process, undemocratic behavior in the political realm, wide-spread corruption, pressure on media and other features of Ukrainian reality did not call for increased cooperation with EU. This has led to EU’s elevated sceptical attitude towards Ukraine.

In 2000-2004 the relations between EU and Ukraine have advanced very slowly. These relations have been further aggravated by several trade disputes. Ukrainian leaders have continued to express their intention of joining the European Union. But every time it was coming to complying with concrete political and economic preconditions of the membership Ukraine was failing. The principles of democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights were not honored in this country. The gap between the declarative desire to integrate and obvious failures in implementing even the most basic preconditions to do so has increased dramatically. It has become trivial for both sides to blame each other for the lack of progress. Kyiv was accusing EU of ignoring Ukraine’s interests and Brussels, rightly so, has frequently mentioned Ukraine’s inability to meet even the most elementary criteria for getting closer towards EU.

On May 1st of 2004 Poland, Hungary and Slovakia have joined the European Union. Ukraine has become a direct neighbor of the EU. However, the expectations that Ukraine would have much more of interaction with EU as a result of the enlargement did not quite materialize. On the other hand, Ukrainians have faced first negative results of the enlargement. The fragile Euro-regions were put in danger, the visa regime has come into existence for those willing to visit Ukraine’s immediate Western neighbors.
Today, EU is not in position to ignore Ukraine. This country is not something distant anymore. The security, prosperity and stability of Ukraine influence EU directly now. This is especially evident for the EU newcomers bordering Ukraine. The amount of trade between European Union and Ukraine is growing. At the same time, the fear that new kind of “curtain” is to be created is a wide-spread one in contemporary Ukraine.

The introduction of visas has damaged somewhat the extensive cross-border trade between Ukraine and its neighbors to the west. This has especially affected the least developed regions of Ukraine.

The problem of illegal migration is one of many to be confronted by Ukraine. As the new EU members have closed their borders against those illegal migrants, they have no other option rather than accumulate in great numbers in Ukraine. The situation is complicated by the apparent “transparency” of Ukraine’s border with Russia – that is where most of illegal migrants are coming into Ukraine. There is no doubt that the problems with Ukrainian-Russian border will persist and as such those will be an important obstacle for any Ukraine’s plans to join EU in the future.

This problem has to be seen not as the one for Ukraine only, but also for EU. Even though the amount of financial assistance which comes from EU to Ukraine to meet this specific challenge is growing, the numbers are still far from being adequate. The International Organization of Migration is also not forthcoming with any kind of assistance that would allow Ukraine to cope with this growing concern.

There is little doubt that the EU is now being much more concerned with deepening the integration within the enlarged union rather than expanding any further or even projecting its influence into the immediate neighborhood. Even though the “Special neighbor” policy was launched at the Luxembourg in April of 2002, it is quite far from what any pro-European Ukrainian would expect of EU. For one thing, it groups Ukraine with Moldova and Belarus, which, of course, has little credit for Kyiv.

The 2003 has witnessed the emergence of the European Commission’s Communication “Wider Europe – Neighborhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbors”. Formally this document has presented a vision of EU’s policies towards the countries, which have no real perspectives of membership. Being realistic in its
wording, the Communication offers little ground for concrete actions. The major goals for the EU – neighboring countries interaction are seen to be the increased economic cooperation and common fight against transborder threats. The EU’s more active role in the settling this area’s conflicts, like the one in Transnistria, is also envisioned here. The whole process of cooperation should lead, according to the Communication, to the creation of stability zone, being based on common values.

The introduction of the “neighborhood policy” was met with disappointment in Ukraine. There were reasons for observers to see such policy as simply another way of saying: you will never be in. The notion of EU’s double standards is popular in Ukraine. People are getting used to the idea that only three Baltic states are to be allowed in the Union among former Soviet republics. Indeed, some of the immediate candidates to join EU have had lower economic growth than Ukraine. Also, some of the Balkan states are enjoying much clearer membership perspective than Ukraine, even though their record on managing interethnic relations and avoiding internal fractional conflict is much worse than one of Ukraine. This leads to the perception that the door to the EU is closed for Ukraine whatever it does.

On its part, though, Ukraine has done little up to this day to get closer to the European Union, to deserve its place among the candidates to join the Union. We have heard numerous declarations of Ukraine’s “European choice”, but have seen very little action. Ukraine has been quite far from doing enough to be considered a fully “European country”. Its leadership has simply continued to reiterate that Ukraine is a European country, geographically speaking, and as such deserves to be among the candidate states.

For one thing, Ukrainian leaders have never quite realized that “European choice” has lesser to do with foreign policy and much more with concrete structural changes in the fields of domestic political, economic and social performance. The benefits of participation in the process of European integration are visible for elites, but they remain incapable and/or unwilling to do anything beyond mere declarations. The recent move of introducing a visa-free regime to the countries of European Union was surely seen as a very positive development in the West. However, apparent Kyiv’s expectations to get something visible in return have surprised European decision-makers. Besides, even if these Ukraine’s steps are to be met by some relevant measures on EU’s side, this would certainly take a lot of time, given Brussels’ notorious bureaucracy.
The election political crisis of late 2004 has been a crucial moment for yet any dimension of Ukraine’s life. The choice was vital and level of political mobilizations of the masses was absolutely unprecedented. The pro-democracy and pro-market economy slogans were clearly seen in the “orange camp”. This camp’s leader has manifested himself as a pro-European one. Therefore, for many within Ukraine, as well as numerous observers outside of this country, the choice was not simply between two Victors, but rather between two very different futures. This, certainly, has much to do with Ukraine’s European aspirations.

Since “orange revolution” Ukraine has not, to a deep disappointment of many, made significant progress in its relationship with EU. The commitment of various prominent political figures to “European choice” remains nominal and opportunistic. It remains to be rather an “elites’ game” in the eyes of ordinary Ukrainians. Even though the polls are showing quite a substantial public attitude towards EU, these figures are somewhat misleading.

First of all, the level of such support is still not high enough. Government is doing close to nothing in order to popularize the “European choice”. Second, the existing support is not based on the adequate information on what EU is, how it functions and what it means for Ukraine to get closer towards the Union. Most significantly, Ukrainians do not understand that moving towards eventual (and very remote) EU membership requires hard work, some very unpopular actions taken by government. To most EU remains to be nothing more but a nice name, pure sound, so that people tend to believe that once “taken” into EU they would be better off automatically, belonging to this “elite club”. Finally, it should not be forgotten that millions of Ukrainian citizens remain suspicious of EU viewing it as an alternative to good relations with Russia.

It was impossible for the leaders of European Union to ignore the events that took place in Ukraine in late months of 2004. Brussels has hinted on deepening existing partnership. The promises to reduce trade barriers, and particularly, to start negotiations over trade in steel and textiles, to increase investment were made. The EU has indicated that it is willing to cooperate more with Ukraine on immigration and foreign and security policy. There were also suggestions that Brussels think of supporting Ukraine’s application to the WTO.

However, there has been little progress in EU – Ukraine relations detected. First, the EU was very cautious and, at the same time, very slow when it decided to act. The members of EU have been somewhat divided
in how to react to the “Ukrainian case”. One thing was clear: no massive aid or new institutional framework for relationship would be put in place, let alone promises of eventual membership. It should mentioned, of course, that European Union has entered the phase of crisis with the failure of referendums on European Constitution. The necessity to get things back in order in its own back yard is a priority, and not any kind of new external initiatives.

At the same time, the EU has closely monitored the dynamics within Ukraine. Having a lot of experience with Ukrainian declarations, this time Brussels wanted to see some real changes. They wanted Yushchenko to deliver, if not to change things overnight, than, at least, to start moving situation in the right direction.

And this did not happen. In fact, new items to the already long list of troubling developments were added. The EU is witnessing the so-called “re-privatization” campaign with worries. There are reasons to believe that promises to fight corruption have not been followed by actual deeds. The policy making has not become transparent, as it was declared. The personal appointments at various levels of the executive vertical have disappointed even the staunchest supporters of the “orange team”.

The team itself has been essentially dismissed, putting place to the increasing infighting among ex-partners. The several “power centres” have emerged around President, ridding current Kyiv’s policies of any sign of coherency. Moreover, this has put Brussels in a difficult situation, since it is close to impossible these days to understand what Ukraine’s position is, who speaks for the country and who is to be viewed as a main partner in any sort of negotiations.

The activation of Ukraine’s participation in the discussion on the future of the Single Economic Space project, taking place at the same time with yet more pro-EU and pro-NATO declarations, has brought back harsh memories of the policy a-la Kuchma. The policy continues therefore to lack clarity, sincerity and predictability. As a result, Ukraine is still not in position to be viewed as a reliable partner. Needs to be mentioned, that the most pro-European members of the government, notably the people over at the MFA, have been successfully pushed to the sidelines of the decision-making process.

The irony in the EU – Ukraine relations is that nothing has been really changed in their agenda. The documents, the institutional framework, the commitments of both sides, the criteria for Ukraine to be met – all of
these remain intact. It is as simple (and hard at the same time) as it has been before: Ukraine should move ahead in fulfilling its obligations before the EU, which are clearly stated in the Action Plan (same things that it needs so badly for its internal transformation). Words would not count for action. There is way to go for Ukraine to reaffirm itself as a “European country”.