

# Youth Opinion and Opportunities for EU Public Diplomacy: Youth Narratives and Perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine Relations in Ukraine and the three Baltic States (E-YOUTH)

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## Policy Brief #3: Findings of Interviews with Youth Elites

### Brief of the interviews with political and media youth elites in Estonia



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On the **operational** side, the process of arranging and conducting the pre-planned set of interviews had to be extended due to the growing concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has literally ‘cancelled out’ a possibility to proceed with or ask for an in-person interview; therefore, all interviews in Estonia were conducted via Skype (recorded) or phone (with the voice being recorded). Interestingly enough, the answers given during the interviews – especially, in the context of the project’s main theme – were not moderated (if at all) by the pandemic-associated uncertainty as well as the international community’s response to the COVID-19. It can, with necessity, mean that the Estonian sample is on a nearly perfect comparative line with other samples, which were

gathered when the pandemic had not reached the first wave’s peak. **Structurally**, the sample is based on the responses of high-profile representatives of political and media elite circles. The political segment of the sample is featured by the presence of two MPs (from the ruling coalition and the opposition), a former member of a local government (representing the current Prime Minister’s party), a project manager of a high-profile organisation/think tank, and a doctoral researcher. On the media side, we managed to cover all major Estonian outlets (*ERR*, *Postimees*, and *Delfi*) by the presence of their reporters, an TV news anchor (*ERR*, *ETV+*), and a university marketing professional (TalTech). When the interview was being arranged, each and every respondent was visibly pleased to take part in the project, but the vast majority of them opted to remain incognito. What is also very important, in the interviewing sample, one can detect a very good balance on the interviewees’ linguistic diversity (4 interviews were given in the Russian language, and the remaining 6 – in English). On the side of **policy advice**, the most comprehensive *general* outlook on the issues were given by the media segment – these interviewees are usually driven by a particular theme in their professional work; therefore ‘Ukraine’ and the project-related context pops up not on the everyday basis. But interviewees’ general knowledge

was good, and their desire to search for a ‘local hook’ was also there. In a way, they reconfirmed that what had been found during media monitoring of the project – in Estonia, a news is worthwhile publishing if it has a local interest/‘touch’/‘hook’. The ‘political’ group of the interviewees were more into security-focused areas of discussion, be it in the process of discussing history, politics, economics, or general social trivia. These are the areas where the precise details and specifics could be found. In a significant addition, naturally, the respondents’ political ‘orientation’ played a role in the answers as well. For both segments, regardless of the age, the post-USSR time, in general, was seen as having brought plenty of changes in the context of Estonia-Ukraine or worldwide interactions. The Ze (Zelensky) political ‘revolution’ is seen generally positive (and attention capturing), while the expectations from the new leadership of Ukraine to actually deliver are very high in Estonia. There were also sentiments – on both political and media sides – that Ukraine, being helped/assisted by Estonia now, could, in the future, be of assistance to Estonia, too. Finally, on both sides of the interviewing sample in Estonia, the Ukrainian theme was ‘met/received’ without any antagonism towards Ukraine as a state, and towards Ukrainian society as a people.

**In Focus**

- Interviewing during Covid restrictions
- Sampling for youth opinion-makers
- Findings of interviews with youth leaders in politics, media and civil society

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## The EU, Ukraine, and the Baltic states: opinions of the youth leaders in Lithuania



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In-depth interviews of Lithuanian youth leaders took place between March 10 – April 16, 2020. The target group consisted of 5 youth political leaders and 5 youth activists (NGO leaders) and opinion leaders. Due to pandemic-related restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Skype or phone. This brief focuses on the main trends and insights of youth leaders on the perceptions of Ukraine in Lithuania, Baltic states, and the EU.

### **The image of and the state of relationship with Ukraine in the perceptions of youth leaders.**

Similarly to the survey results of 2019 which indicated that *the image* of Ukraine is heavily affected by post-2014 geopolitical setting, interviewed youth leaders also associate Ukraine with the Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the revolutionary Maidan and the state of war in general. Some of the associations are related to cultural clichés such as culinary heritage in traditional dishes. Differently to the opinion of the general public, some youth leaders pointed out to the changes and the current political reforms in Ukraine. Interviewees unanimously regard the overall relationship of Lithuania and Ukraine as very warm from both sides. Differently from Poland, Lithuania has no historic of political disputes with Ukraine. There is a very close relationship in both historical and political sense, and Lithuanian support in the EU and in advocating the Eastern Partnership is among the strongest within the EU.

Youth leaders also regard Lithuanian support and the friendship towards Ukraine as somehow unique and superior among all Baltic states. Respondents stress the cases of genuine public support for Ukraine, solidarity, popular fundraising activities, and mobilisation of support in social networks. Other Baltic states probably are less visible, according to interviewees, but the overall support to Ukraine in its movement towards NATO and the EU is nonetheless substantial. Respondents admit that at the top political level, the backing of Ukrainian cause is quite unanimous among all Baltic states, however, the support at the popular ('spiritual level', as one of the respondents stated) level is more pronounced in Lithuania.

### **Historical legacy and the current perceptions of Ukraine-Lithuania relations**

All interviewed youth leaders resonate with the crucial importance of common historic experiences for the relations between Ukraine and Lithuania. The narrative about the period of Lithuanian Grand Duchy is glorified on every occasion, and Ukrainian storyline is very important in this context ('Historically we were brothers and sisters, we had a common state and possibly shared the same world vision'). Interestingly, many youth representatives completely reject the Soviet period as irrelevant. To them, the post-Soviet period and especially the period of Europeanisation is far more important. In their opinion, Lithuania could set a good example for a successful transition. Lithuanians developed the similar meaning related to freedom, and Lithuanian success or failure story – depending on how people see it in Ukraine – could trigger a domino effect in Ukrainian democratic process.

Several respondents pinpoint to the Orange and recent Maidan revolutions as turning points in the relations between Lithuania and Ukraine. According to interviewees, during these periods, two countries

became really close in their values and attitudes. Ukrainians demonstrated the immunity and resistance towards authoritarianism and Kremlin-dictated politics. Activation of civil society in Ukraine also triggered support in Lithuanian society. This move is seen as resistance to the Soviet-type *nomenklatura* by Ukrainians and a turn to the West – altogether advancing to a very positive image in Lithuania, because Lithuania had very similar experiences in the 90s'.

### **EU-Ukraine relationship: perceptions of youth leaders**

Youth leaders regard the Ukrainian case to be an inseparable part in the EU-Russia relations. Despite the unanimous decision within the EU is difficult to reach, Lithuania and other Baltic states managed ('through blood') to assist the Ukrainian cause. Respondents also mention some 'fatigue' in the Ukrainian case, as many different issues come out for the EU, consequently leading to somewhat stagnation of its relationship with Ukraine.

When discussing the main conditions for Ukraine to achieve to join the EU, youth leaders focus on some external and internal issues. Speaking about Ukraine's domestic politics, respondents highlight fighting corruption, strengthening state administrative capacities, improving the management of state enterprises, which currently serve only the interests of the small group. Solving conflict with the Russia is a crucial condition that is also mentioned as a necessary precondition for closer integration with the EU and NATO.

### **Perceptions of the EU: leadership and crisis**

Perception of the EU among Lithuanian youth leaders is less straightforward than that of Ukraine. Some informants claim that the EU remains among the major players in the world politics while others are more sceptical about its leadership. They define the EU as a declining power at the world stage. To them, the Brexit crisis is a good illustration of the EU losing its political strength. The entire decade for the EU was a period of constant

crisis. In 2010, there was the Greek debt crisis, then eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Ukrainian crisis, Brexit, the threat of Coronavirus crisis. According to Lithuanian interviewees, 10-11 years of crisis do not allow EU to act globally. In military terms, the EU is also seen as still dependent on the US military capacities. There are some ideas about the EU's own army, but NATO remains the central force, and, consequently, a big part of the political agenda in Europe will be formed along the US political lines.

The rising populism and the emergence of the far right was named as another important problem for the EU. Respondents believe that usually, during the critical periods, the EU manages to put aside the internal conflict and act as one, but that what the far-right movements are trying to do is to raise questions which already have been answered long ago. They try to antagonise various social groups and question the very existence of the European Union. Some respondents stress this as the biggest threat to the EU as a project: if people fail to trust EU institutions and try to redeem the loss of sovereignty within the EU, then the EU project is losing its ground. Here, youth leaders quite unanimously stand for stronger EU integration. However, they name disappointment in traditional ideologies as another potential threat to the political order in Europe. They find that traditional liberal, conservative, and social democratic parties do not differ anymore. By seeing no real differences in the political field, people tend to choose the parties which are offering some real alternative. That is why, according to Lithuanian young opinion leaders, Europe needs to redeem its ideological spine. Traditional parties need to admit that the emergence of extremist parties is in fact part of their policies. It is not something to blame the EU for, but rather the national traditional parties. According to young leaders, the real problem is in missing a real alternative among existing political parties.

*Historical and cultural similarities compose the core of associations and perceptions shared by interviewees in all four locations. At political level, respondents consider the EU, its policies and developments (including crises) as the key factors affecting the pace and extent of Ukraine-Baltic cooperation. The system of international relations and the state of international institutions represents another lens, yet on the global level.*

## Study of youth narratives and perceptions of the EU and EU-Ukraine relations in Ukraine: interviews with the representatives of young elites in Ukraine

The team of researchers of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv carried out a set of interviews with the following categories of young Ukrainian decision- and opinion-makers: civil society (3 interviews), mass media (4 interviews) and government representatives (3 interviews).

Interviewed representatives of civil society were all members of Ukrainian non-governmental organisations. The representatives of mass media included one employee of a famous Ukrainian law newspaper and two freelance journalists. The government was represented by one member of the Ukrainian parliament and two officers working in the ministries. The first pilot interview was with the representative of both civil society and mass media. In total, ten interviews were conducted during the period from 14 January 2020 till 21 February 2020.

The interviews were recorded on smartphones and afterwards

transcribed. Places where interviews were carried out included cafes, open spaces, law firms, but mainly – the building of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. All interviewees did not agree to the public disclosure of interviews so that the texts of the interviews were not published publicly.

Most of interviewees had a positive attitude towards the Baltic States and the EU. They characterised the EU as modern, united, European, peaceful, strong, friendly, promising, efficient and trustworthy. Only two respondents characterised it as hypocritical, one – as intriguing, one – as disintegrating, and one – as distant. The Baltic States were characterised by interviewees as modern, united, European, efficient, strong, peaceful, courageous, friendly, trustworthy, resilient and promising. One respondent characterised the Baltic States as intriguing.

However, more specifically and in the context of cooperation with the Baltic states, interviewees revealed mixed attitudes, similar to the interviewed students. There is appreciation of the shared past and the vision that the Baltic states can perform as a role model for Ukraine's democratic transformation. Some of these countries and particularly Lithuania are seen as advocates and defenders of Ukraine in the EU. Interviewees appreciate support of their Baltic colleagues and deem them as very courageous for that they stand their ground and support Ukraine irrespective of odds to push for their cause in the international fora. However, the differences in perceptions come when Ukrainian interviewees assess how the international arena works. Some of them see alliance with the Baltic states as an example of properly functioning international institutions, which allow to 'channel' national interests of smaller states.

However, others see the system of international relations as dominated by 'big' powers, and, to such interviewees, success for the case of Ukraine, even when backed by the Baltic states, seems to be less likely.



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## Findings of interviews with youth opinion leaders in Latvia



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In Latvia, 10 youth leaders were interviewed in March-May 2019. The youth leaders represented the following entities/organisations:

- Music industry/theatre – popular singers and new actors, directors;

- State sector (administration – young people filling in high posts in state administration);

- Political parties – young people at the 'head' of political parties;

- Youth NGOs – young people having established youth NGOs;

- Youth parliament – young people having chaired the youth Parliament of Latvia and EYP.

Interviewed youth leaders mostly had high perceived awareness of Ukraine culturally and historically, as well as politically. Youth leaders also think that Latvia more broadly has 'special knowledge' of Ukraine because of the common past. When asked about the associations with the country, the participants most often mentioned common friends or a certain phenomenon (such as

the Revolution of Dignity) associated with Ukraine. Overall, youth leaders expressed their support and interest in Ukraine's security situation and political progress towards the European family of values. However, they were dubious of the potential adherence of Ukraine to the EU in the future. It is interesting to note that the perception of Latvia as a 'bridge' and a geographical connecting point between the East and the West was often similar to the perception of Ukraine, which interviewees also characterised as a country 'in between'. This, however, also means that cooperation with Ukraine was sometimes perceived with caution, and therefore a distance in the

otherwise friendly, solid relationship was to be kept until it became certain that Ukraine chose the European path. Perhaps the most important finding of the interviews is that in relationship between the Baltic states (Latvia), Ukraine and the EU, the EU was seen as a primary actor, a geopolitical, political and economic powerhouse, which had to lead the relationship and get involved with Ukraine. This is because the youth leaders were united in explaining that the possibilities of Latvia's, Lithuania's and Estonia's foreign policy instruments were limited when compared to those of the EU.

