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Trade Flows Between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership Countries: Dynamics and Prospects

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Abstract

The Eastern Partnership is a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy focusing on the EU's Eastern neighbours. Its main objective is to deepen the political and economic integration of the EU with six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The aim of this paper is to assess the development of EU trade relations with Eastern Partnership Countries from 2002 to 2021 and to indicate its prospects. The results show that the EU is in a group of main trading partners of the Eastern Partnership countries. The EU noticed both: a trade surplus with Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia (except in 2005); and a trade deficit with Azerbaijan. The volumes of imports and exports had increased over the years which also led to better economic integration with the EU. However, the future EU-Eastern Partnership trade characteristics and dynamics remain unknown due to the Russian invasion on Ukraine that caused troubles in trade flows in Ukraine and economic sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership (EaP), European Union (EU), exports, imports, trade

Торговые потоки между Европейским Союзом и странами Восточного партнерства: динамика и перспективы

Аннотация

Восточное партнерство является частью Европейской политики соседства, ориентированной на восточных соседей ЕС. Его основной целью является углубление политической и экономической интеграции ЕС с шестью странами Восточной Европы и Южного Кавказа: Арменией, Азербайджаном, Беларусью, Грузией, Молдовой и Украиной. Целью данной статьи является оценка развития торговых отношений ЕС со странами Восточного партнерства с 2002 по 2021 год и обозначение его перспектив. Результаты показывают, что ЕС входит в группу основных торговых партнеров стран Восточного партнерства. ЕС заметил и то, и другое: положительное сальдо торгового баланса с Беларусью, Грузией, Молдовой, Украиной и Арменией (кроме 2005 г.); и торговый дефицит с Азербайджаном. Объемы импорта и экспорта с годами увеличились, что также привело к лучшей экономической интеграции с ЕС. Однако будущие торговые характеристики и динамика ЕС-Восточного партнерства остаются неизвестными из-за российского вторжения в Украину, которое вызвало проблемы с торговыми потоками в Украине, и экономических санкций против России и Беларуси.

Ключевые слова: Восточное партнерство (ВП), Европейский Союз (ЕС), экспорт, импорт, торговля

Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a programme within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy aiming at the political and economic relations of the EU with six countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This programme was initiated by Polish diplomacy and supported by Sweden and it was successfully launched during the Czech Presidency in 2009 (Adamczyk, 2010; Copsey and Pomorska, 2014; Scott, 2016). The Eastern Partnership is being developed in two ways. The first one is the bilateral dimension, which focuses on strengthening the relationships of individual Eastern European countries with the EU. The other one is the multilateral dimension, which refers to taking up and solving common challenges by all partners (Ágh and Kovács, 2016; Christou, 2010; Vandecasteele et al., 2013).

The most important initiatives that are the focus of the Eastern Partnership framework are travel facilitation supported mainly by visa programmes; trade enhancements in the form of trade agreement; cooperation within common border control; economic cooperation including energy security issues; and flagship initiatives, i.e. development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Through this policy programme, the EU wants to improve the quality of state institutions by enhancing reforms in different areas including public administration, the civil service and the rule of law. The key role in this initiative plays the Common Security and Defence Policy (Ciobanu, 2018; Crombois, 2019; Shelest, 2016). Moreover, the EU aims at ensuring macroeconomic stability in the Eastern Partnership countries by supporting SMEs, enhancing opportunities for the labour market, emphasising the need for economic convergence in regions, and developing the digital market. To facilitate these actions the EU has adopted the so-called Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Hoekman, 2017; Manoli, 2013; Muravska and Berlin, 2016). Another important EU policy instrument is an action named Connectivity with its main goal for Europe to be the most connected continent by 2030. This programme takes into consideration not only infrastructural projects (like the ones in transport, energy or digitalisation) but also ideas sharing, good practices, standards, and others (Bonafede, 2019; Ltd, 2018; Raik, 2022). Fostering mobility, especially through visa facilitation, youth exchange programmes and communication infrastructure is also supported in the EU-Eastern Partnership relations (Drăgan, 2015; Korosteleva et al., 2014; Wiegand and Schulz, 2015).

This paper, therefore, tries to assess the dynamic and prospects of trade flows between the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries. It mainly applies vital literature sources but also the Eurostat, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank data on trade flows and trade balance to show their dynamics and trends in terms of trade. Thus, the paper illustrates crucial statistics for trade, which substantially contribute to the debate derived from the literature review. The structure of this paper includes two main sections on (1) trade of EU with Eastern Partnership countries, and (2) prospects for the EU-EaP trade. The first one presents a description of the trade relations of each EaP country with the EU. The second one focuses on future scenarios in trading relations between the EU and EaP countries. Then, the paper concludes.

Trade of EU with Eastern Partnership countries

Trade plays a vital role in the development of each economy. Therefore, this section starts by presenting its dynamics related to the gross domestic product (GDP) in particular EaP countries and the EU. Figure 1 presents trade (the sum of exports and imports of goods and services) measured as a share of GDP. Belarus is the most trade-depended country since the trade-GDP ratio exceeded 100% in all considered years. All EaP countries, except for Armenia, exceeded at least once 100% trade-GDP ratio in the period of 2002–2021. In 2021, Belarus had the highest number of trade as a percentage of GDP exceeding 138% followed by Georgia with more than 101%, the EU – with 93%, Moldova – 89%, Ukraine – 83%, Armenia – 78%, and Azerbaijan – 77%.

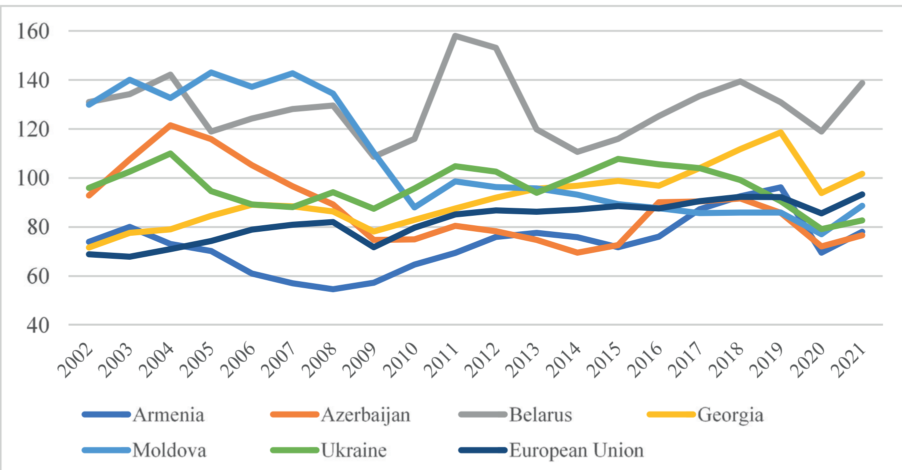

Figure 1. Trade in the EU and the EaP countries (% of GDP)
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Trade with the EU economies has played a vital role in economic and institutional development in Eastern Partnership countries. Findings from previous analysis on EU-EaP trade have proven that free trade agreements with the EU have led to significant gains for EaP economies (Gylfason et al., 2015; Sepashvili, 2017). Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are members of WTO while Azerbaijan and Belarus are only observers of the WTO. This may suggest that economic development enforced by the quality of institutions is enforced when being a member of WTO (Kurilionak et al., 2007). Since the role of trade with the EU is of great importance for EaP countries it is crucial to analyse its development in a country-specific case.

Before describing the trade flows of a particular EaP country with the EU, it is crucial to see an overview of the EU-EaP trade relations. Table 1 presents the top trading partners in good in 2021 for all EaP countries. It does turn out that in 2021 the EU was the main trading partner for 4 out of 6 EaP countries: Azerbaijan. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In the remaining economies: Armenia and Belarus, the EU was the second biggest partner for trade with between 18,9-19,9% of the share in total trade. The EU had the biggest share of total trade in 2021 in Moldova reaching 49,1%, while in Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Georgia it was 44,8%, 39,6% and 21,1% respectively.

Table 1. Top trading partners in goods in 2021

	Imports			Exports			Total trade		
	Partner	Value in mln €	% World	Partner	Value in mln €	% World	Partner	Value in mln €	% World
Armenia									
	World	4529	100,0	World	2556	100,0	World	7085	100,0
1	Russia	1507	33,3	Russia	716	28,0	Russia	2223	31,4
2	EU27	787	17,4	EU27	555	21,7	EU27	1342	18,9
3	China	733	16,2	China	332	13,0	China	1066	15,0
4	Iran	370	8,2	Switzerland	304	11,9	Iran	425	6,0
5	Ukraine	121	2,7	Iraq	150	5,9	Switzerland	326	4,6
Azerbaijan									
	World	9896	100,0	World	18777	100,0	World	28674	100,0
1	EU27	1806	18,2	EU27	11046	58,8	EU27	12852	44,8
2	Russia	1754	17,7	Turkey	2384	12,7	Turkey	3942	13,7
3	Turkey	1558	15,7	Russia	779	4,1	Russia	2533	8,8
4	China	1386	14,0	Israel	759	4,0	China	1505	5,3
5	Ukraine	397	4,0	Georgia	559	3,0	Israel	785	2,7

Continuation of table 1.

	Imports			Exports			Total trade		
	Partner	Value in mln €	% World	Partner	Value in mln €	% World	Partner	Value in mln €	% World
Belarus									
	World	35352	100,0	World	33727	100,0	World	69079	100,0
1	Russia	20006	56,6	Russia	13860	41,1	Russia	33866	49,0
2	EU27	5709	16,1	EU27	8055	23,9	EU27	13764	19,9
3	China	3442	9,7	Ukraine	4577	13,6	Ukraine	5845	8,5
4	Ukraine	1267	3,6	Kazakhstan	771	2,3	China	4177	6,0
5	Turkey	610	1,7	China	735	2,2	Kazakhstan	924	1,3
Georgia									
	World	8544	100,0	World	3587	100,0	World	12131	100,0
1	EU27	1957	22,9	EU27	606	16,9	EU27	2564	21,1
2	Turkey	1546	18,1	China	520	14,5	Turkey	1819	15,0
3	Russia	865	10,1	Russia	516	14,4	Russia	1380	11,4
4	China	731	8,6	Azerbaijan	450	12,5	China	1252	10,3
5	USA	548	6,4	Turkey	272	7,6	Azerbaijan	956	7,9
Moldo-va									
	World	6067	100,0	World	2657	100,0	World	8724	100,0
1	EU27	2663	43,9	EU27	1622	61,1	EU27	4285	49,1
2	Russia	891	14,7	Turkey	265	10,0	Russia	1124	12,9
3	China	707	11,7	Russia	233	8,8	Turkey	724	8,3
4	Ukraine	564	9,3	Switzerland	100	3,8	China	718	8,2
5	Turkey	458	7,6	Ukraine	78	3,0	Ukraine	643	7,4
Ukraine									
	World	59154	100,0	World	55658	100,0	World	114812	100
1	EU27	23751	40,2	EU27	21738	39,1	EU27	45489	39,6
2	China	8994	15,2	China	6758	12,1	China	15752	13,7
3	Russia	4946	8,4	Turkey	3382	6,1	Russia	7778	6,8
4	Belarus	3979	6,7	Russia	2832	5,1	Turkey	6048	5,3
5	USA	2883	4,9	India	2125	3,8	Belarus	5216	4,5

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the IMF and the Eurostat

Armenia

Bilateral trade relations between the EU and Armenia are described in a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which has been applied in 2018 but officially was adopted in 2021. The CEPA focuses on further improvements of EU-Armenia trade by supporting the business regulatory environment. This consist of the following fields: capital flows, establishment, government procurement, intellectual property rights, companies operation, services (including removal of trade barriers in EU-Armenia trade), state-owned enterprises, and sustainable development (Aram, 2019; Khvorostiankina, 2021). Armenian trade in goods with the EU accounted for nearly 19% in 2021. The EU is Armenia's second biggest export and import market with a share of almost 22% and 17.4% respectively in 2021. The EU countries mainly import from Armenia manufactured goods and crude materials, except fuels, while the EU exports to Armenia consist mainly of machinery and transport equipment, miscellaneous manufactured goods and chemicals and related products. The EU remains one of the most important markets for the Armenian economy and the balance of trade shows that there is except in 2005, the EU had a positive trade balance with Armenia from 2002 to 2021. It is worth noting that the volume of EU trade with Armenia has developed significantly over the years (figure 2).

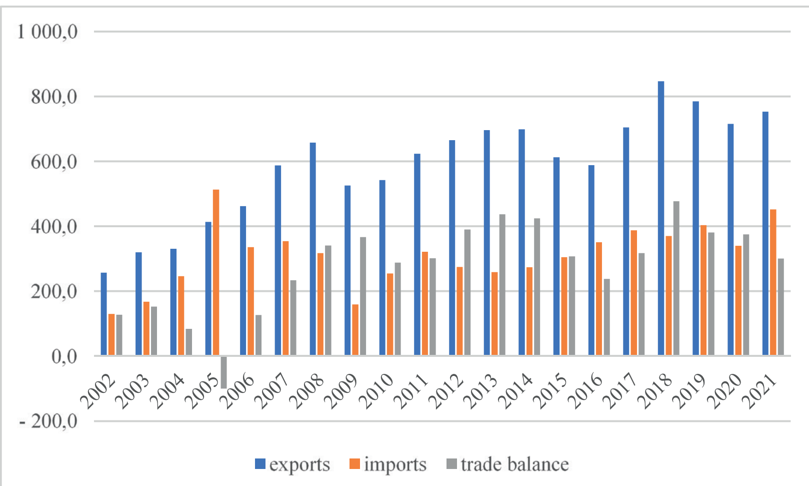

Figure 2. EU-Armenia trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Azerbaijan

The trade relations between the EU and Azerbaijan have been regulated in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement set in 1999, although there are still ongoing negotiations on a new trade agreement that started in 2017 (Cucerescu, 2017). The EU is the main trading partner for Azerbaijan with a share of nearly 45% of total trade in goods, while exports reached 59% and imports around 19% in 2021. EU imports from Azerbaijan mainly include mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials while EU exports to Azerbaijan consist to a large extent of machinery and transport equipment. The EU remains the leading partner for the Azerbaijan economy with a negative trade balance for the EU, meaning that the EU imports far more from Azerbaijan than it exports. The volume of trade also increased from 2002 to 2021 with its peak in 2011 (figure 3).

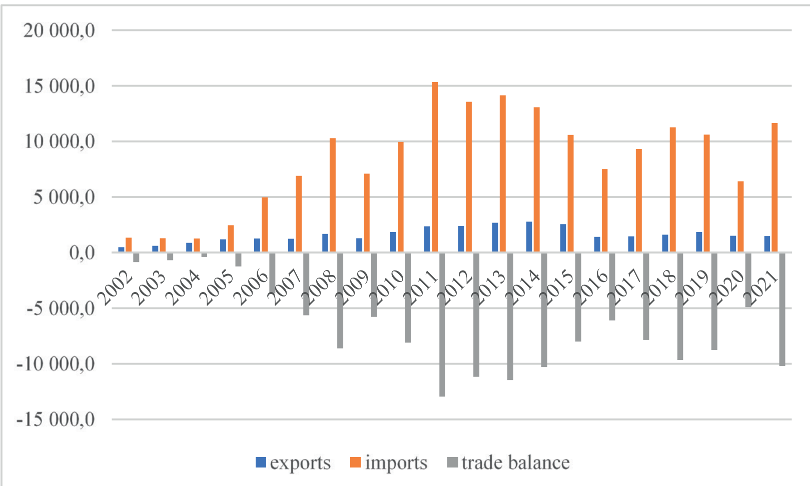

Figure 3. EU-Azerbaijan trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Belarus

The EU-Belarus trade is very complicated since the EU has not ratified the bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement from 1995 and with current EU sanctions imposed on the Belarusian economy due to its involvement in Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. There are currently many restrictions on trade, limits on financial inflows as well as prohibitions on some transactions (Ambrosio, 2022; Przetacznik, 2022). The period of analysis covers the 2002-2021 periods and the assessments of sanctions' impact on trade might be a basis for future analysis and research. The EU was the second best trade partner of Belarus accounting for 19.9% of the total trade in goods in 2021. Share of Belarusian exports to the EU amounted to nearly 24% of the country's overall exports and the main exports were wood, mineral products and base metals in 2021. Belarus mainly imported from the EU machinery, chemicals and transport equipment. Albeit EU-Belarus trade relations have been currently suspended, in recent years the volume of the trade transactions increased over years (figure 4) with the EU trade surpluses in trade balance (although there were some years of drops mainly due to political situation).

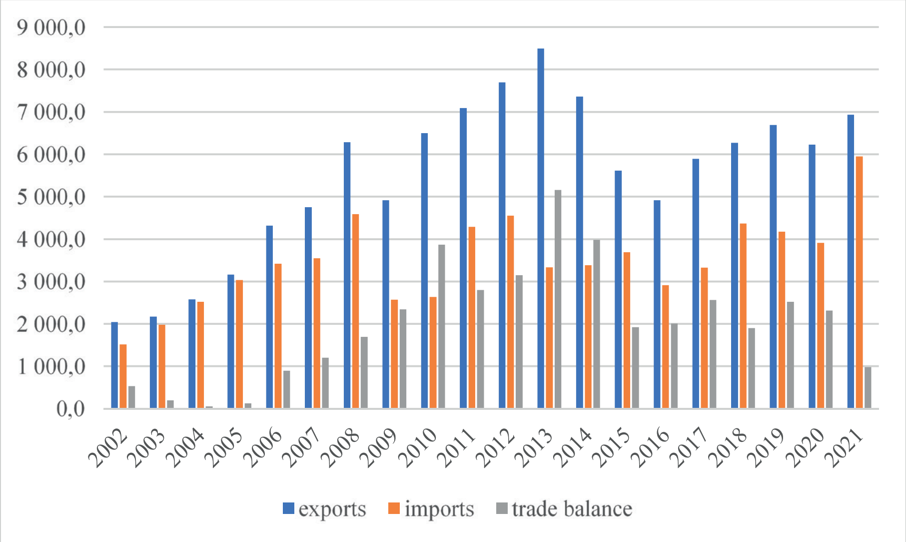

Figure 4. EU-Belarus trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Georgia

Georgia signed an Associated Agreement with the EU in 2014 including the DCFTA with regulations on preferential trade rules. The DCFTA aims at deepening the economic integration of Georgia with the EU applied through actions and reforms taken in the field of trade. It also removes all imports tariffs on goods and assures mutual admission to trade in services (Emerson and Kovziridze, 2016; Poli, 2016). In 2021, the EU was Georgia's most important partner for trade in goods accounting for around 21% of the total country's trade while the value for exports and imports was nearly 17% and 23% respectively. Georgia's trade in goods with the EU shows a deficit in terms of trade. Georgia imports from the EU mainly chemical and mineral products as well as machinery and appliances, while it mainly exports to the EU chemical and mineral products, and vegetables. EU trade with Georgia increased over years with exports of Eu to Georgia exceeding €2 billion in 2021 (figure 5).

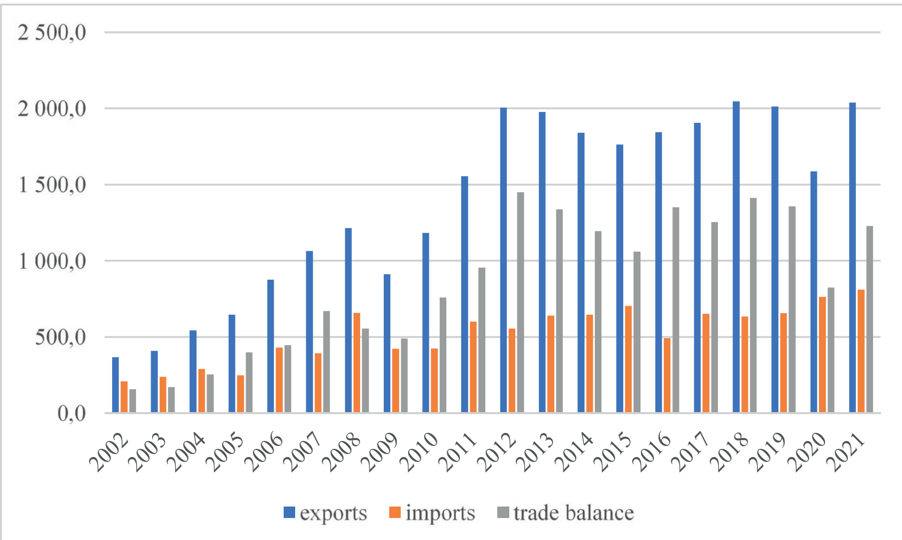

Figure 5. EU-Georgia trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Moldova

Moldova like Georgia also signed Associated Agreement with the EU in 2014 and a part of it was the DCFTA with rules on preferential trade regimes (Loo, 2017). The EU trade with Ireland accounted for more than 49% of

Iceland's total trade in goods in 2021 (the share of Moldovia's exports was more than 61% while imports one was almost 44%), which makes the EU a leading partner for Moldova in terms of trade. EU's exports to Moldavia mainly consist of machinery and appliances, and mineral products, while the main import items include electrical machinery and appliances, base metals, and vegetables. The EU had a trade surplus with Moldova of more than €1,3 million in 2021 (figure 6).

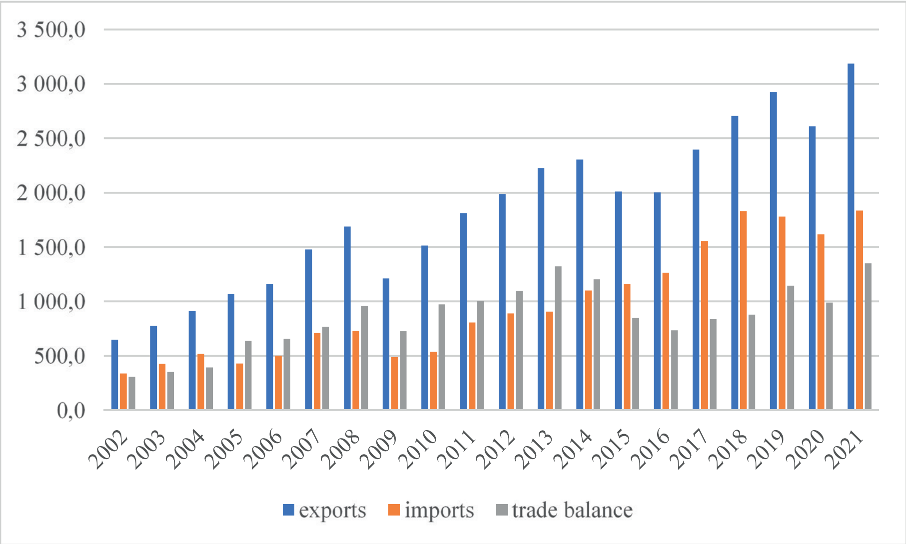

Figure 6. EU-Moldova trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Ukraine

Ukraine like Georgia and Moldova took part in Associated Agreement with the EU in 2014 and also signed the DCFTA. The share of EU trade with Ukraine was around 1.2% of the EU's total trade in 2021. Ukraine is the fifteenth largest trading partner of the EU. Trade in goods with the EU accounted for 39,5 % of Ukraine's total trade in 2021. Ukrainian exports to the EU reached 39% of the total country's exports and included mainly iron and steel, ores, slag and ash, animal and vegetable fats and oils. The EU is the first largest source of Ukrainian imports with a 40% share in total Ukrainian imports and the main imported goods are machinery, transport equipment and vehicles and mineral fuels. The volume of EU-Ukraine trade developed over years (figure 7), although from the current perspective due to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine the trade characteristics have changed. It is important to notice that this military invasion on Ukraine does not only impose an effect on EU-Ukraine trade but also causes significant changes in trade on a global scale (Orhan, 2022).

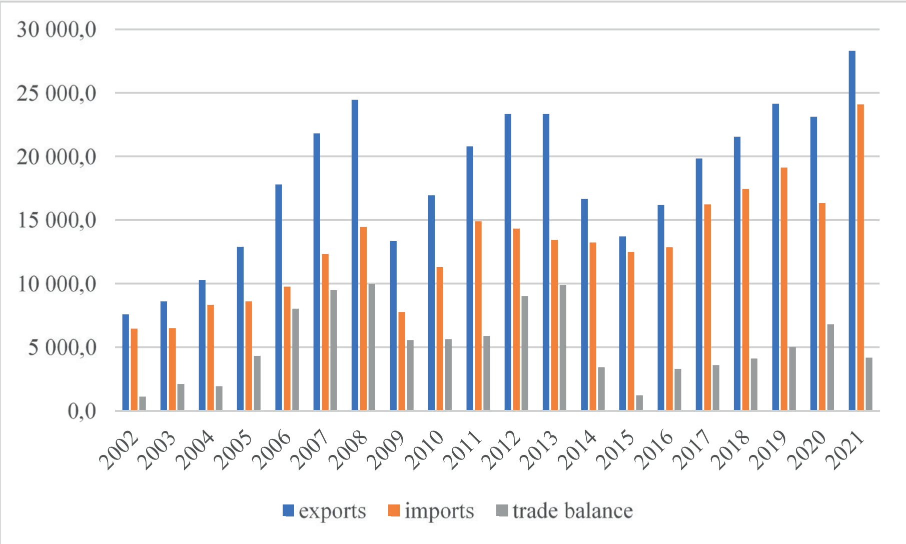

Figure 7. EU-Ukraine trade flows and balance in 2002–2021 [million €]
Source: Own elaboration based on data from Eurostat

Prospects on the EU-EaP trade

Due to political conflict and Russia's military offence on Ukraine, the future characteristics and dynamics of the EU-EaP countries' trade are in question. There are the following issues to be taken into account:

There are numerous economic sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus that have both direct and indirect consequences on trade.

Since one of the main trading partners for some EaP is Russia, the problem of sanctions also refers to those trading with Russia as well as Russia, in response, has also introduced their sanctions.

The problem with trade flows from Ukraine is mainly problematic from a global food security point of view (Behnassi and El Haiba, 2022; Gross, 2022; Pörtner et al., 2022). Around 30% of the global wheat supply comes from Ukraine and due to war, some farmers cannot continue their production as well as they become more expensive due to rising oil prices and directing oil for military operations for the army.

Strong dependence on natural gas imports from Russia. In 2021, 40% of total EU gas consumption was supplied by Russia. That is why the EU and other countries call for energy security to become independent from Russia's gas and fossil fuels supply (Chepeliev et al., 2022; Mišík, 2022).

Conclusion

Trade is not only important due to its import and export quantities but it also helps trading partners to develop their economies, improve the quality of institutions, and foster competition that may result in creating more innovation. Having stated that, the EU through the Eastern Partnership programme does want to promote its shared values, solutions, and development in the EaP countries. Therefore, trade is one of the key crucial tools to improve economic integration with the EU. Although there were some fluctuations in the EU-EaP trade flows, the EU remains one of the leading trading partners of EaP economies. Between 2002 and 2021 all EaP countries had increased trade volumes with the EU. Since the current political situation caused by a military invasion of Russia on Ukraine imposed many sanctions on Russia and Belarus as well as resulted in troubles in trade flows in Ukraine, the future characteristics of trade will change significantly. Therefore, in future research, it is vital to assess the trade changes in the EU-EaP countries after the outbreak of war.

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