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Current challenges of agricultural trade liberalisation between Ukraine and the EU

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► **Abstract.** Agriculture is the main specialisation of Ukraine in the international arena, which is associated with its geographical features and relatively inexpensive labour. Despite this, it remains relevant to find opportunities for the development of this industry in the country through the use of all available methods. The purpose of the study is to describe the current challenges that arise in the trade relations between these subjects of international entities. This paper examines how the situation in the agricultural sector can be improved by liberalising trade between Ukraine and the European Union. The main methods used are analysis, prediction, abstraction, and deduction. Within the framework of this study, trends in trade in agricultural products between Ukraine and the European Union are evaluated. The paper establishes that this union became the largest Ukrainian trading partner after the outbreak of war. This was caused both by actions on the part of the European Union in support of Ukraine and by the blockade of seaports, which limited the country's export options to only the land route. The study describes the features of changes in the structure of external trade between the unions in the agricultural sector and proposes specific methods to address existing issues in international interactions between countries to better understand the specific features of economic relations between Ukraine and the European Union. In addition, the study includes recommendations on how to improve relations between these subjects of international relations in the future and solve the difficulties that still exist between them in the trade in agricultural products

► **Keywords:** international relations; macroeconomics; agricultural sector; international politics; Ukrainian European integration

► Introduction

Agriculture is one of the main industries in Ukraine, which it specialises in within the framework of international trade. This became especially relevant after the outbreak of war with Russia in 2014, when the country lost its competitive advantages in other sectors of the economy, in particular metallurgy (Balzer, 2015; Ericson & Zeager, 2015). Given the country's substantial dependence on successful exports of agricultural products, ensuring a stable supply of these products abroad has become very important, in particular during the full-scale invasion of Russia in 2022. After the naval blockade, it became quite problematic for Ukraine to ensure the export of products abroad, which was restored only through the diplomatic efforts of Ukrainian diplomacy and the formation of the so-called Black Sea Grain Initiative, in which Turkey acted as an intermediary that would ensure

the unhindered export of products abroad (Strengthening the blockade..., 2023).

Nevertheless, further development of relations with other countries to ensure high-quality cooperation in the framework of agricultural trade is still relevant both now and in the future. In particular, it is important to consider this problem in the framework of interaction with the member states of the European Union (EU), which is determined by geographical, economic, and political reasons. In addition, as shown in the paper below, there have been some misunderstandings between countries since the start of the full-scale invasion regarding the export of agricultural products to the countries of the union. This study provides recommendations that should minimize possible conflicts with EU member states over trade in agricultural products.

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A significant number of researchers examined the current state of the agricultural sector. In Particular, G.S. Kukul *et al.* (2022) investigated the features of the development of the labour market in agriculture. Researchers noted that the state should implement a comprehensive policy related to supporting the agricultural sector, aimed, among other things, at small and medium-sized enterprises in the industry. The current state and prospects of agricultural development were also examined by N.Ya. Zabolotnia & V. Svidynska (2022), paid considerable attention to the opportunities for the development of the country's agricultural sector during and after the war. The assessment of relations between Ukraine and the European Union is also important. The positive and negative consequences for the country from such integration were assessed in the paper by A.T. Khevtsuriani (2020); notably, the researcher makes a general conclusion about the attractiveness of the country's accession to the union and the establishment of such a partnership. The prospects for European integration were also assessed by M. Zhytar & O. Lisnichuk (2022), who described the economic benefits of membership in the organisation, and existing obstacles that prevent the possibility of obtaining this status. A similar study was also conducted by O. Shnyrkov & O. Chegaiev (2023). However, they also pay considerable attention to certain components of economic cooperation between countries, in particular, trade between them.

Thus, the purpose of the study is to show the challenges in the framework of liberalising trade in agricultural products between Ukraine and the EU member states.

► Materials and methods

During the study, separate statistical data were used to conclude, in particular, the official website of the World Trade Organization (2023). In addition, statistical data were used, information from which demonstrated estimates of product flows to European countries (Trade Map, 2023). All calculations were performed in Microsoft Excel.

The study analysed the level of agricultural exports in quarterly and monthly terms. However, free internet sources do not provide such information, which is why it should have been grouped (Trade Map, 2023). Three major export groups were used for this, with the following numbers: 10 (cereals), 12 (oilseeds, seeds, and fruits; various grains, seeds, and fruits; industrial or medicinal plants; straw and fodder), and 15 (animal or vegetable fats and oils and their cleavage products; prepared edible fats; animal or vegetable waxes). Their amount is determined in the framework of this study as the export of the agricultural sector. This is based on the assumption that these three major export groups constitute the majority of the total exports for the given group of goods, and therefore, the use of additional, smaller groups will not significantly affect the overall picture.

The main approach used in the study was the system approach. It allowed assessing the factors affecting relations in the field of international trade between Ukraine and the EU in the form of separate interrelated flows that form a single system. A notable number of methods were also used as part of the study. In particular, the analysis played a crucial role in assessing significant volumes of

data regarding the challenges that exist in terms of liberalising trade in agricultural products between Ukraine and the EU. It also allowed concluding how to avoid these challenges.

Furthermore, a historical method was used, which allowed analysing of the data in retrospect to better understand the current trends in the existence of such challenges in the context of trade in agricultural goods. The deduction was used to identify possible factors influencing the development of relations in the field of trade based on their current state. Abstraction also played a crucial role by allowing the avoidance of evaluating the impact of individual factors when analysing them, considering their relatively low importance in influencing the relations between the European Union and Ukraine. Forecasting was also applied, enabling predictions to be made regarding the future development of trade relations between the two selected entities in international relations. Statistical research methods were used to analyse quantitative data. Using the graphical method, the necessary figures for understanding and drawing the main conclusions for the study were constructed.

► Results

Ukraine is developing the agricultural sector at an increasing pace, which is reflected in the increase in agricultural exports. Based on the data in Figure 1, it is possible to analyse changes in the export of agricultural products of Ukraine in recent years.

As seen from Figure 1, the value of agricultural sector exports in Ukraine exhibits an upward trend throughout the selected period. A noticeable decline began in early 2022, due to a full-scale Russian invasion. One quarter before the invasion, the value of exports significantly increased, reaching a record level of 8 billion dollars. In more detail, the trends that occurred after the start of a full-scale invasion are shown in Figure 2.

As can be seen from Figure 2, in the period from September 2021, there is a noticeable increase in the value of exports of agricultural products and its peak was reached in November. Given Figure 1, this trend can be explained by several circumstances. Firstly, the increasing threat from Russia towards Ukraine on the frontlines led to a rise in commodity prices, including agricultural products. Secondly, this period (late summer-autumn) is the main one for farmers in terms of sales of grown products. This is due to the seasonality of production of agricultural products. Thirdly, the factor mentioned in the description to Figure 1 also has an impact, which is related to the desire of importers to fulfill contracts signed with Ukrainian producers as soon as possible to avoid problems associated with the start of an invasion in the future.

A sharp decline in exports occurs in February and March 2022, when Russian troops launched an invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine lost the opportunity to export products by sea, which was the main way at that time. Transportation by rail was also difficult due to the constant shelling; in addition, it would in any case not be possible to replace sea transportation due to the lower capacity. Although there have been some attempts to establish alternative export routes, it is not possible to achieve past performance indicators. Only in August 2022, after the signing

of the Black Sea grain agreement on July 22, it was possible to restore exports of products to close to last year's levels (Mikhailov, 2023). It is now worth considering how

the export of agricultural products to the European Union countries changed during the war. This information can be seen in Figure 3.

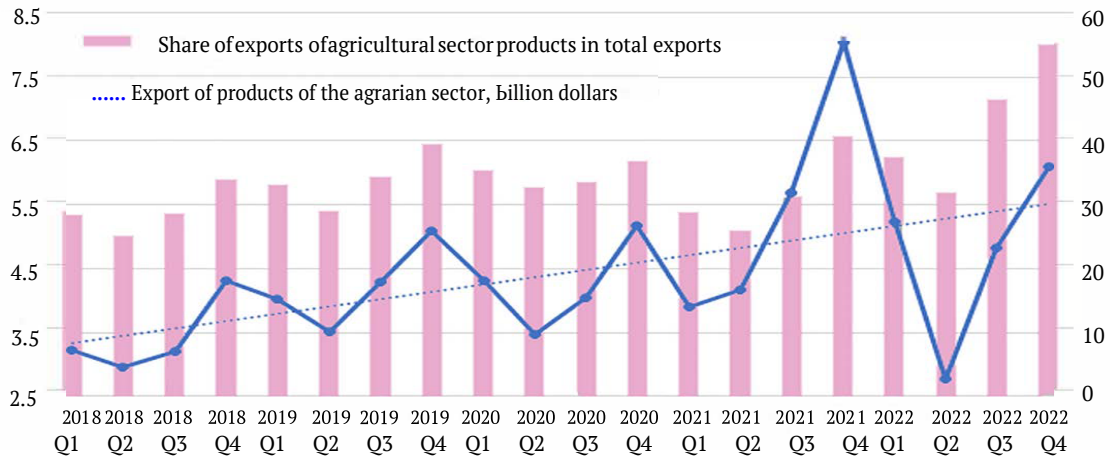


Figure 1. Importance of agricultural exports from 2018 to 2022

Note: Q – quarter

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the statistical source TradeMap (2023)



Figure 2. Monthly trends in the export of agricultural products in the period from May 2021 to December 2022

Source: compiled by the author based on the data from the statistical source Trade Map (2023)

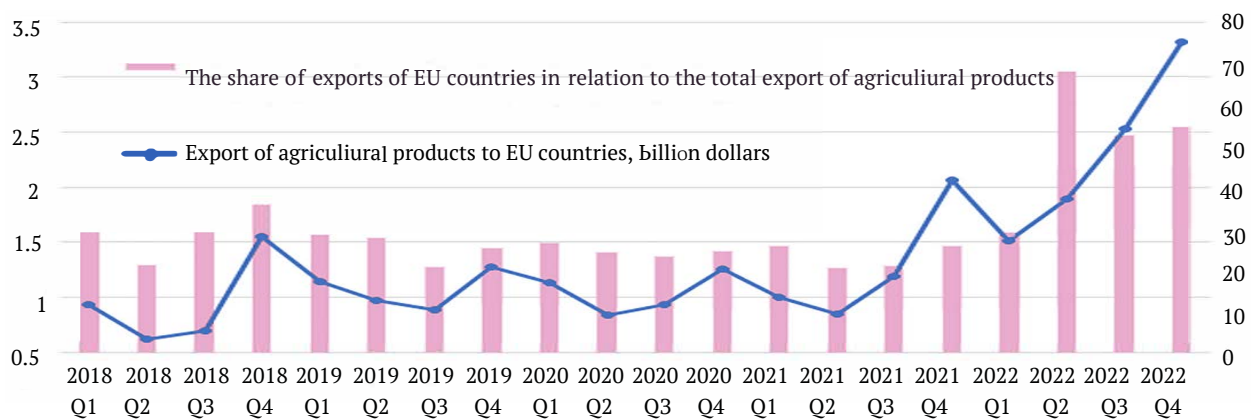


Figure 3. Agricultural exports to the European Union member states on a quarterly basis in the period from 2018 to 2022

Note: Q – quarter

Source: compiled by the author based on data from the statistical source Trade Map (2023)

As can be seen from Figure 3, the volumes of exports of goods to the European Union countries from Ukraine during 2018-2021 remained quite stable, with absolute export values varying between 0.5 to 1.5 billion dollars per quarter and relative values ranging from 10% to 35%. However, the situation has changed significantly since 2021. This is noticeable both in the volume of exports and in the share compared to other countries.

As noted above, this is due to the fact that Ukraine has lost the opportunity to export its own products abroad through other routes, except in transit through the countries of the European Union. This was also facilitated by the policies implemented aimed at reducing customs and unwashed restrictions. Figure 4 presents more information on the changes in the context of war-time exports.

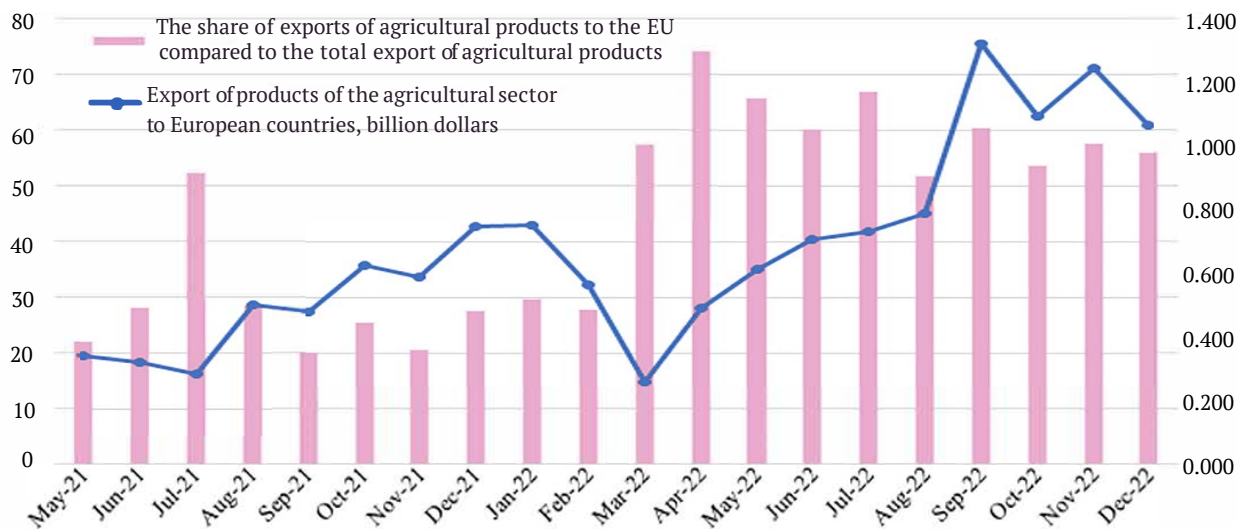


Figure 4. Volumes of agricultural exports to the European Union member states on a monthly basis in the period from 2018 to 2022

Source: compiled by the author based on the data from the statistical source Trade Map (2023)

As can be seen from Figure 4, export growth to European countries began in April 2022, and exceeded pre-war figures in August 2022. The value of exports through the European Union countries has increased to 50-60%, which is a huge indicator. This has led to the dependence of Ukraine on the possibility of exporting to the market of this union. In this case, any changes in the ability to supply products can lead to difficulties in the context of economic development. Although resolving this problem seems almost impossible at the moment, exporting goods to other countries can only be done through seaports. Therefore, increasing production that will be exported through such means will be challenging.

Trade liberalisation refers to the process of reducing trade barriers and restrictions between countries to create a free and open international market (Wacziarg & Welch, 2008; Leshchenko, 2023). This process involves reducing customs tariffs, quotas, and other restrictions on the import and export of goods and services. It has several important goals. First, it promotes increased economic growth and improved living standards in participating countries by stimulating entrepreneurship, attracting foreign investment, and expanding markets for products (Pitlik, 2003; Siddiqui, 2015). Second, liberalisation promotes inter-national cooperation and dialogue between countries, which has a positive impact on political and social stability (Yarbrough & Yarbrough, 1987; Köhler, 1988). Third, it promotes more efficient use of resources, increased competitiveness, and technology development (Syal, 2007).

In the field of agriculture, this process has certain features. They are related to the fact that agricultural products, like energy, are strategically important for countries, since they provide food and occupy a significant share of national production. This is the reason for relatively higher interest in protectionism, that is, the introduction of various barriers to entry into the market of enterprises in other countries. This can be seen when comparing the levels of customs rates for various types of products (agricultural and non-agricultural) (World Trade Organization, 2023). Another difficulty in the context of trade in agricultural products is the discrepancy in product quality and safety standards between countries. Different countries have their requirements and standards for food quality and safety, which can lead to challenges in the mutual recognition of imported products. Although Ukrainian products usually meet the requirements requested from other countries, this does not remove the risk associated with such obstacles.

After the start of a full-scale Russian invasion, a large number of countries, especially representatives of the Western world, began to help Ukraine develop in one way or another. Although such assistance was mainly implemented in the form of humanitarian or military assistance, its economic component is also important, namely, the issuance of cheap loans and the lifting of customs restrictions became a key component in supporting the country (What weapons are..., 2023). Given the last point, it is not surprising that a large number of Ukrainian products

began to be exported to European countries. In addition, this was due to some other reasons, in particular – unavailability of seaports. On this issue, the European Union countries decided to adhere to a policy of long-term trade liberalisation with Ukraine, which includes the abolition of tariff duties on the import of certain goods and the suspension of minimum import prices for one year. This is all the reason for such a spread of the country's exports among the EU, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Even though such actions on the part of European countries have generally led to positive consequences for them and Ukraine, it has also led to some difficulties. Advantages consist of the possibility of obtaining cheap Ukrainian products, which play a crucial role in reducing domestic prices that have already risen due to changes in energy supply conditions. However, such long-term free access to the market of more competitive products in Ukraine has led to certain discontent among European farmers. This led to the fact that Poland, which has supported Ukraine the most since the beginning of the invasion, imposed a ban on the import of several hundred items of food and cereals (wheat, corn, rapeseed, and sunflower), after which it was joined by other countries, namely Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia (Panchenko, 2023). However, such a policy did not align with the overall direction of the union's development, which is dictated by the European Commission. Subsequently, the situation turned into a continuous debate between the five countries mentioned above and other representatives of the European Union, which forced the countries to make concessions. Nevertheless, the situation remains quite tense. The Ukrainian side is particularly discontent with the fact that such behaviour of representatives of Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Slovakia contradicts the association agreement between the European Union and Ukraine (2007). It regulates trade relations between Ukraine and EU countries and does not have the authority to take actions that could lead to a deterioration of trade relations between the countries, especially in a unilateral manner. The restrictions were supposed to be lifted from June 5, 2023, but they were extended until September 15, which indicates existing problems with certain European countries regarding the import of Ukrainian products (the EU continues 2023).

The diplomatic component is important in this context: Ukrainian representatives must find a common language with European partners (both those who prohibit and those who advocate trade liberalisation in agriculture). This would enable finding a compromise between the parties that could partially satisfy all sides and avoid further deterioration of their relations. Currently, this option seems to be the continuation of unhindered import of goods from Ukraine in exchange for receiving assistance for Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Slovakia from other European Union countries. This assistance should be both targeted, that is, aimed at farmers who are negatively affected by filling the domestic market with cheap Ukrainian products, and non-targeted so that the governments of these countries can independently decide the area of its application. However, such an approach can only be effective for a certain period, since such assistance for countries cannot occur continuously. In other words,

a mechanism should be built where all parties can find mutually beneficial conditions without relying on tools such as state support. Moreover, it should be understood that over time, other countries may begin to pursue protectionist policies. Therefore, Ukrainian diplomacy should be prepared for such a course of events and form effective mechanisms that will avoid such difficulties, or quickly solve them if they arise.

► Discussion

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the economies of other countries was studied by E. Shahini *et al.* (2022). The study focused on the impact the war has had on the agricultural fertiliser market. The authors note that there was a supply shock (due to reduced opportunities for the supply abroad), which led to an increase in inflation, food, and fertiliser prices. This is because Ukraine and Russia are the leading producers of agricultural products in the world. The export of cheap agricultural products from Ukraine is one of the reasons for the reduction of prices for agricultural products abroad. However, this also led to problems for agricultural producers in countries to which Ukrainian goods were actively exported.

The impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the global economy was studied by M. Balbaa (2022). The researchers state that the invasion caused problems in international supply chains, which led to shocks in the supply of energy and trade processes in general. Such disruptions led to an increase in energy, commodity, and food prices, contributing to the rise of global inflation in many countries. This proves that any geopolitical conflicts are large-scale and have a negative impact not only directly on the parties to the conflict but also on third parties (Estrada & Koutronas, 2022). Therefore, political leaders should create conditions in which their emergence would be unlikely, and give preference to negotiations as a means of resolving disputes.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on the international economy was also studied by J. Patil-Dake (2022). He notes that military operations are causing a huge humanitarian catastrophe, due to which more than 10 million people have become displaced. As for the consequences for the global economy, this includes a decline in GDP (gross domestic product), a significant increase in inflation, problems in the context of macroeconomic policy for most countries of the world, and so on. The economic consequences were also palpable due to an increase in commodity prices. However, it is already clear that despite the significant challenges posed by the war to the global economy, its processes have adapted to the situation, allowing it to continue functioning and formulating alternative supply routes for various goods. This is also noticeable due to the gradual slowdown in inflation in most countries of the world and lower energy prices (The slowdown in..., 2023). Nevertheless, this situation is also relevant for Russia, which has also been able to adapt to such realities of functioning. Despite sanctions from Western countries, Russia was able to ensure stable conditions for the supply of all major types of products, including those used to create weapons. Although such workarounds are more difficult to implement, which makes supplies longer and more expensive (which certainly negatively affects

economic development), this is not enough to cause losses for the development of the country.

The role of Ukraine in international world security was studied by M. Bazhal & T. Koutchma (2022). Researchers note that Ukraine has significant potential to provide a considerable portion of the planet with food. This is due to the soil in this area. However, the country lacks the latest technologies to do this. If the country continues to attract or educate a larger number of skilled professionals in relevant fields and gains access to advanced agricultural technologies, it will lead to increased stability in the food supply, reduced transaction and transportation costs for certain countries, decreased loss of harvested produce, and improved food safety. In general, this will make it much more effective to combat the global problem of hunger. Notably, the country possesses its scientific potential but lacks resources (both financial and non-financial) for its development. Therefore, global assistance and support for researchers, entrepreneurs, individuals, or entire countries in this field remain necessary. Although such interaction is impossible in the current military conditions, the establishment of such interaction could take place after the end of the war.

The study conducted by M. Rabinovych (2022) on trade relations between Ukraine and the European Union countries is relevant in this context. The results obtained show that the programme of in-depth trade between the EU and Ukraine is of average effectiveness, with the main problems related to corruption, weak rule of law, and strong oligarchic influence. While trade liberalisation with the European Union increased the EU's share in Ukrainian exports and imports, Ukraine faced negative economic consequences due to a sharp transition from the markets of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to Western markets. Weaknesses in trade conditions include low exports of services to the EU and limited investment cooperation between Ukraine and the EU. Thus, the researcher concluded that the three years of implementation of the deep free trade zone showed ambiguous effectiveness and impact under the influence of complex political uncertainty and insufficiently formed rule of law. Nevertheless, she noted that Ukraine has opportunities to improve this situation in the future by enhancing the efficiency of the agreement functioning. It is to be expected that only after the end of the war and the beginning of the active restoration of Ukraine will it be possible to understand how effective trade with the countries of the European Union is, and what further actions in the context of trade policy the country should take to improve its position in the international arena.

The European Union has become one of Ukraine's most important partners during Russia's full-scale invasion,

both politically, militarily, and economically. The lifting of trade restrictions allowed for a significant increase in profits for Ukrainian producers, but at the same time it led to difficulties in cooperation with some countries of the union. However, any such issues can be resolved through the quality work of diplomats and finding common ground. It is expected that shortly an alternative will be found that will satisfy all parties to the conflict and reduce restrictions on the export of agricultural products from Ukraine.

► Conclusions

Thus, the study assessed current problems related to the liberalisation of trade relations between Ukraine and the European Union countries in the agricultural sector. It was demonstrated that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia resulted in an expansion of trade relations, specifically through the limitation of Ukraine's export opportunities. Using the analysis of statistical data on Ukraine's international trade, the dynamics of changes in the flow of goods from the country were shown and the challenges that countries may face in the future if similar trends continue were described.

The paper drew attention to the fact that Ukraine has significantly increased its dependence on exports to the European Union countries since other ways of international trade remain very limited. This increased dependence on the EU market creates both opportunities and challenges for Ukraine, with potential economic difficulties that may arise both during the war and after it ends. Although trade liberalisation plays a crucial role in promoting economic growth and international cooperation and initiatives aimed at strengthening it is often positively perceived by countries, the features of agricultural trade, and its role in national food security, often become a reason for protectionist measures by countries. Similar circumstances led to a temporary import ban by Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. Ukrainian diplomacy should use all the methods available to resolve all issues with these countries and ensure further unhindered terms of trade.

An essential aspect for further investigation is the assessment of the prospects and the positive and negative effects for Ukraine due to its accession to this union. In addition, it is important to find new opportunities for the development of agriculture in the country, especially in times of war.

► Acknowledgements

None.

► Conflict of Interest

None.

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► **Анотація.** Сільське господарство є основною спеціалізацією України на міжнародній арені, що пов'язано із географічними особливостями розміщення країни та порівняно недорогою робочою силою. Зважаючи на це, актуальним залишається знаходження можливостей для розвитку даної галузі в країні за допомогою використання усіх доступних методів. Метою статті було описати актуальні виклики, що виникають під час взаємин у розрізі торгівлі між даними суб'єктами міжнародних відносин. В рамках даної роботи вивчається те, яким чином можна покращити ситуацію в аграрному секторі за рахунок лібералізації торгівлі між Україною та Європейським Союзом. Основними методами, що використовувались під час роботи, були аналіз, прогнозування, абстрагування та дедукція. В рамках даного дослідження було оцінено тенденції торгівлі аграрною продукцією між Україною та Європейським Союзом. Визначено, що, після початку війни, дане об'єднання стало найбільшим українським торговим партнером. Це було викликано як діями з боку Європейського Союзу на підтримку України, так і блокадою морських портів, що залишила лише сухопутний шлях вивезення продукції з країни. В рамках дослідження були описані особливості зміни структури зовнішньої торгівлі між об'єднаннями в сфері аграрного сектору, а також були запропоновані окремі методи вирішення існуючих проблем у міжнародній взаємодії між країнами. Дана робота дає змогу краще зрозуміти особливості економічних відносин між Україною та країнами-членами Європейського Союзу. Крім цього, результати дослідження мають рекомендації стосовно того, яким чином можна покращити взаємостосунки між даними суб'єктами міжнародних відносин у майбутньому, а також дозволить вирішити труднощі, що досі існують між ними стосовно проблем, пов'язаних із торгівлею продукцією аграрного сектору

► **Ключові слова:** міжнародні відносини; макроекономіка; аграрний сектор; міжнародна політика; українська європейська інтеграція