

# COUNTRY CHAPTER ON UKRAINE

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# UKRAINE DEBATES THE FUTURE OF NATO

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In recent years, Ukraine has not formulated a clearly outlined and articulated global foreign policy strategy, but rather has focused on a set of priorities (Gaber et al. 2020: 5). To a great extent, this has to do with the fact that Ukraine has been preoccupied for years with the conflict with Russia, for which NATO (and accession to it) is viewed as the ultimate solution. The think-tank and NGO landscape is therefore significantly shaped by this topic. The main institutes involved in framing the discourse about NATO include the National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS), the Foreign Policy Council »Ukrainian Prism« (UP), the Razumkov Centre (RC) and the International Centre for Policy Studies (ICPS). There are also a number of academics from various university-affiliated research organisations. Most are unconditionally pro-NATO/West in their stance, with the exception of ICPS, which represents a more moderate position towards both Euro-Atlantic integration and relations with Russia.

Discussions about NATO in Ukrainian discourse are in many respects synonymous with relations with the United States, as Kyiv set itself the ambitious goal. However, according to Ukrainian experts, the prerequisite for this is that Russia remains a significant security challenge for the entire Euro-Atlantic area, which would make Ukraine a Western bulwark to contain Moscow's belligerent and aggressive foreign policy (Getmanchuk/Solodkyi/Porchkhidze 2020: 9).

After pursuing a »non-aligned« foreign policy for its nearly 25 years of independence, Ukraine's commitment to a transatlantic orientation in its strategic culture, including the pursuit of NATO membership, was increased significantly as a result of the 2014 crisis (Glebov 2017: 49–50). Currently the overwhelming majority of foreign policy experts agree that (the road to) joining NATO would help Ukraine to achieve three main foreign and security policy goals: (i) provide a credible deterrent against its main geopolitical threat, Russia; (ii) modernize its armed forces and navy; and eventually (iii) restore full Ukrainian sovereignty in Donbass and Crimea (Kravchenko 2021). At the same time, Ukraine does not view its Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations only through military and foreign policy lenses, but also considers the path to NATO membership as a powerful mechanism that would help it to finally turn the tide domestically, most prominently, in fighting corruption.

## INTERNAL ADAPTATION AND A LONG ROAD TO MEMBERSHIP

The aspiration to become a NATO member (along with EU accession) has been anchored in the Ukrainian constitution since February 2019, and it is fully supported by a clear majority of the expert community (Kapitonenko 2018: 23). On the societal level, general support for NATO accession has been growing consistently over the years. It continues to be a problem, however, that half of the population is struggling to grasp the rules under which the Alliance really functions, which some specialists relate to constant disinformation campaigns and pro-Russian propaganda (National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS) 2020: 22). Without the full confidence of Ukrainian society, potential NATO membership will remain unattainable (Symonova 2020). Under Ukrainian law, a countrywide referendum is required to start the process of NATO accession, but recent polls indicate that support for NATO membership among the population as a whole has been hovering around 50 per cent (as of October 2020 it was 41 per cent<sup>1</sup>), with up to one-fifth of all respondents still undecided or indifferent (Centre for Insights in Survey Research (2019): 62). A better public information policy about the benefits of NATO membership for the whole country is therefore seen by the expert community as essential to finally tip the balance towards accession (Kravchenko 2021).

Even the most ardent champions of Ukraine's NATO accession agree that the country still has a lot of homework to do, in particular with regard to democratization and parliamentary control of the armed forces. With the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine still at least a few years away, think tankers argue that the country should adopt a more pragmatic approach and focus on the essence of cooperation rather than on declarations of intent or the official status of the accession process (Kapitonenko 2018: 25). This has to come from an increased awareness that reforms are carried out first and foremost in the country's own interest, meaning that joining NATO would strengthen not only foreign policy but also domestic stability (Lytvynenko 2020).

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=979&page=5>

Utilizing pursuit of NATO membership for domestic purposes has increasingly been endorsed by the new president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. Even though he is sometimes criticized for his »inertial approach to NATO« the successful continuation of engagement with the Alliance through implementation of the Annual National Programme (ANP) and the Enhanced Opportunity Partnership (EOP) has been recognized by all sides of the think-tank spectrum (Litra/Getmanchuk 2020: 38). These programmes envisage the intensification of intelligence sharing between Ukraine and NATO states, as well as reform of the country's air force and navy. As far as the latter is concerned, some experts have proposed (recently included in Ukraine's Strategy for the Naval Forces 2035<sup>2</sup>) of a »mosquito fleet« of small, manoeuvrable vessels to strengthen coastal defence, in which NATO (primarily the United States and the United Kingdom) could play an important part by training military personnel (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020: 24). What is missing in this »pragmatic« approach, however, is a vision of how to overcome the biggest stumbling block on the road to NATO, namely Crimea and the conflict in Donbass.

## SOLVING THE CONFLICT IN DONBASS AND CRIMEA

Children who go to school for the first time on September 1, 2021, will be the first generation, for whom Ukraine has been a »foreign country« for their entire lives. Ukrainians are clearly dissatisfied with the status quo, but at the same time fatigue with the impasse in resolving the conflicts is becoming more tangible. Even though some still argue that reintegrating Crimea and Donbass back into Ukraine should be tackled together (Lytvynenko 2020), others now believe that they should be viewed independently. For them Donbass is the absolute priority for economic and military reasons, while Crimea should be dealt with at a later stage. For instance, former diplomat and currently a think tanker Filipchuk (ICPS) proposes to introduce shared governance with Russia over Crimea and after two decades to carry out another referendum (Filipchuk 2017).

With regard to the conflict in Donbass, a compromise is generally regarded to be a more tangible prospect than on Crimea, for several reasons. First, there is a functioning negotiating process in the form of the Normandy format with the Trilateral contact group under OSCE chairmanship, with working committees on technical issues. Furthermore, the military conflict in Donbass is more pressing as it continues to claim the lives of hundreds of people every year and is a heavy financial burden on the budget. Nevertheless, there is no consensus on whether the continuation of dialogue with Russia in its present form makes sense or whether it should be reformed (notably by including the United States and the United Kingdom in the multilateral formats) to build additional pressure on Russia. Opponents of such suggestions

argue that Russia rarely yields under pressure and might be more likely to compromise with Germany and France than with other leading Western partners. Moreover, by further delegating responsibilities for negotiating with Russia to NATO members, Kyiv risks being considered only in the context of conflict with Moscow rather than as an independent actor (Dubovik et al. 2021).

To change the status quo Taras Kuzio, for instance, argues that the military option should still be considered, as post-Soviet peace-making has proven to be anything but effective. In that context he talks about »learning an important lesson« from Azerbaijan and how the latter recaptured parts of Nagorno-Karabakh last year (Kuzio 2020). He points out that after decades of Minsk Group inactivity, Azerbaijan challenged the Russian guarantees for its ally Armenia and has shown that they are not always reliable, because Moscow did not directly engage in the conflict alongside an official CSTO ally. Furthermore, he also underlines the importance of building strong regional security partnerships (especially with Turkey, which supplies Azerbaijan with parts for its military drones). Last but not least, Kuzio stressed that the Azerbaijani victory in Nagorno-Karabakh is a practical demonstration of the importance of military innovation against the background of the ongoing military reform in Ukraine.

## RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

An absolute majority of experts consider Russia to be Ukraine's main geopolitical threat. In this regard, it is argued that Putin can be stopped only by a policy of containment and that the re-establishment of good neighbourly relations with Russia is impossible for Ukraine until the full restoration of the country's territorial integrity (Koretska 2020b: 4). However, a small number of other experts also argue that dialogue and contacts with Russia should be maintained for pragmatic reasons as long as full membership of NATO is out of reach (Filipchuk/Yaroshenko/Ivashko/Kyian 2017).

In the conflict with Russia, time is generally against Ukraine. Some think tankers assume that a »Ukraine fatigue« in the West is setting in, slowly but surely, given that no tangible developments on Donbass are in sight (Galouchka 2020: 4). In the Ukrainian view, if Russia maintains its position as a »neutral mediator« in the Donbass conflict, waiting for »the West« to lose interest in the conflict in Ukraine and thus be ready to compromise in the future, the pressure on Kyiv will continue to rise, sometimes leading to reckless moves, such as the Zelensky administration's official commitment to the so-called »Steinmeier formula« in 2019, which led to an outbreak of civil unrest (Pashkov 2020).

At the same time, experts believe that the pause in personal contacts and summits between the United States and Russia ushered in by the pandemic has slightly mitigated the negative effects of recent years (Shelest 2021). But even if the Biden administration is not expected to reset relations with Russia, it is also unlikely that the new US administration will actively pursue Ukraine's NATO membership, as the Trump

2 Available at: <https://navy.mil.gov.ua/strategiya-vijskovo-morskyh-syl-zbrojnyh-syl-ukrayiny-2035/>

heritage of so-called »Ukraine-gate«, among other things, is still quite present (Dubovik et al. 2021). Ukrainian think tankers rather expect the new American administration to focus more on climate issues and arms control (for example, New START and the Iran nuclear deal), and less on Eastern Europe, even if Russia does not occupy such a prominent place on the foreign policy agenda anymore (Getmanchuk/Solodkyy/Porchkhidze 2020).

Overall, Ukraine views itself in relation to NATO not only as a net consumer, but also as a contributor to NATO's security, especially as far as the Russia–NATO stand-off is concerned. Ukrainian think tankers believe that Kyiv has unique experience and knowledge in hybrid warfare with Moscow. Moreover, the Ukrainian army has actual combat experience against Russian armed forces that few NATO members have. This knowledge could be shared in joint exercises with NATO participating states (in 2020, officially, seven such drills took place) (Rohulia 2018: 11–12).

### **BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: PURSUING COOPERATION WITH CHINA AND SIMULTANEOUS EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION?**

Although Russia remains one of the biggest challenges to NATO, some Ukrainian experts fear that Beijing might replace Moscow as the main threat of the United States in its »pivot to the East«. This could potentially diminish Kyiv's role for the West, as it views itself as one of Russia's main antagonists in the bigger NATO–Russia stand-off (Fakhuridnova 2020: 33–34). In that sense Donald Trump's presidency confirmed Ukrainian's worst suspicions, as beside China side-lining Russia as the main geopolitical threat, internal NATO clashes (for example, concerning the 2 per cent of GDP pledge debate) took over from expansion at the top of the agenda (Shelest 2019). To patch up the relations with its Western European allies, Ukrainians fear that the Biden administration will avoid risking new points of conflict with them, which might include halting the active promotion of NATO membership for Ukraine (Getmanchuk/Solodkyy/Porchkhidze 2020).

Ukrainian cooperation with Euro-Atlantic partners, however, does not exist solely through partnership with the United States. Germany is also seen by many think tankers as an essential partner and is generally viewed more favourably than the United States. Getmanchuk and Solodkyy (2018: 604–605), for instance, argue that Ukraine should avoid engaging with Berlin only on the issue of military conflict, but expand the scope of cooperation both thematically as well as in depth. Beyond cooperation in the de-mining programme in eastern Ukraine or participation in peacekeeping missions, the Ukrainian side seeks more support, especially with regard to possible cooperation platforms through the EU's CSDP programmes. These programmes could involve Ukraine in the development of a Black Sea security initiative, in NATO's air defence systems as well as in the defence infrastructure against cyberattacks (Fedorenko/Polyakov/

Koziy 2019: 23–24). But because of the asymmetric nature of relations between Ukraine and its Western partners (Kyiv is constantly on the receiving side), the country is still struggling to establish a functioning military-technical cooperation with its transatlantic partners, despite the similarity of security interests between the EU and Ukraine in relation to Russia (Filipchuk 2017).

While NATO/EU accession will remain the absolute priority in Ukraine's foreign policy, Kyiv is pursuing cautious but active cooperation with Beijing despite increasingly anti-Chinese rhetoric in the West in recent years, with a premium put on partnerships in areas that do not overlap military or political domains (Fakhuridnova 2020: 33). Ukraine prefers not to feel obligated (or rather has no better option because of the poor condition of its economy) to confront Chinese activities in Europe, even though some member states have officially expressed some reservations about Kyiv's growing cooperation with Beijing. A case in point is the Skyrizon company, which sought to buy the Ukrainian engine manufacturing firm MotorSich several years ago. After the Chinese firm had already agreed to invest USD 100 million, the deal was put on hold after then national security advisor John Bolton's visit to Ukraine in 2019. The US government tried to persuade the US-based Oriole Capital Group to take over the investment plan, but failed (previously, the Trump administration had promised to support the Kharkov aviation factory with USD 150 million, with the same result).

To compensate for the not always successful cooperation with the leading Western and Eastern powers, Ukraine has attempted to work out a consistent neighbourhood policy, especially in relations with Poland, Hungary, Romania and Lithuania, as they are viewed as an additional channel of influence on overall EU decision-making vis-à-vis Russia. However, because of the lack of a good regional strategy, relations with these states have become increasingly strained (ICPS 2017). Even though the Zelensky administration has put a premium on cooperation with these states (for example, in the »Lublin triangle« with Poland and Lithuania),<sup>3</sup> this relationship is regularly disrupted by scandals, such as the introduction of the Ukrainian language law, which prohibited Hungarian and Romanian communities in western Ukraine from teaching in their native languages.

Turkey has recently become an important NATO partner for Ukraine too, especially as far as the military-industrial complex is concerned. Turkish helicopters are equipped with Ukrainian engines, while Ankara supplies Kyiv with brand new corvettes for its navy. Joint Turkish–Ukrainian drone ventures are also considered to be a success.<sup>4</sup> Last, but not least, the Turkish side has been an ardent supporter of Ukraine on the question of Crimea and puts special emphasis on the rights of Crimean Tatars living on the peninsula.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmytro-kuleba-gabrielijs-landsbergis-and-zbigniew-rau-agree-strengthen-lublin-triangle-role-central-europe>

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/ukraine-awaits-turkish-corvettes-drones-this-year>

## UKRAINE AS PART OF A WIDER EUROPEAN SECURITY COMPLEX

Even without a concrete prospect of accession, Ukraine will intensify its engagement with NATO for both domestic and foreign policy reasons (Getmanchuk/Solodkyy/Porchkhidze 2020: 15). Meeting the MAP criteria would not only help Ukraine to reform its armed forces and build democratic institutions, but it could also have wider spillover effects on sustainable peace in Europe (Getmanchuk/Solodkyy/Porchkhidze 2020: 16).

And even if the prospect of NATO accession remains the subject of heated debates without tangible results over the next 10–15 years, it is unlikely that Ukraine's ambitions of joining NATO will disappear soon (Sukhankin 2019). Prior to taking the next steps, however, Ukraine should stop ignoring the elephant in the room and propose a realistic solution concerning how to get rid of the major stumbling block on the road to membership: the conflict in Donbass (Makarchuk 2020: 239–240). If the current consensus on that issue does not shift from »all-out containment of Russia« and »unconditional return of Crimea and Donbass« the goal of NATO membership before 2030 risks remaining merely an ambition. Even though Ukrainian officials (Kuleba 2020) sometimes entertain the idea of NATO accession without the two breakaway regions (the so-called »West German scenario«), the consensus remains that as long as Eastern Ukraine continues to be a war zone, there can be no discussions about Ukraine's membership of NATO (Yalta European Strategy 2017).

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