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Ukraine and NATO – a turbulent relationship

In June 2020, Ukraine joined Georgia, Finland, Sweden, Australia and Jordan in the small group of countries that have been granted the status of members of the NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partners Program. This means closer cooperation between NATO and Ukraine and is an important political signal to Ukraine, Russia and the alliance's member states. However, this does not guarantee Ukraine's imminent membership in NATO.

Development of cooperation. Ukraine began working with NATO shortly after declaring independence. As early as 1991, it joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (transformed in 1997 into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council), a platform for NATO cooperation with partner countries. In 1994, Ukraine became the first country to participate in the Partnership for Peace program. In 1997, the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between NATO and Ukraine was signed and the NATO-Ukraine Commission was established. In the same year in Kyiv, the NATO Information and Documentation Center was launched – the first such center in a partner country – and the NATO Liaison Office was established. Meanwhile, Ukraine is represented at the headquarters of the alliance in Brussels.

Ukraine has participated in almost every alliance military operation: in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq (training mission), and in naval operations. Ukrainian soldiers take part in NATO military exercises, and soldiers from NATO countries practice on Ukrainian training grounds. Ukraine, once again as the first partner country, became part of the NATO Response Force (NRF), cooperating in the fields of maritime operations, strategic air transport, medical assistance and specialized protection against weapons of mass destruction. Ukraine also undertakes military cooperation with individual NATO member states; for example, the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade.

However, in the context of the overall functioning of Ukraine's defense system, this wide cooperation has produced quite limited results, related only to specific activities. The general weakness of the Ukrainian armed forces was clearly demonstrated by the events in Crimea and Donbas, especially in the initial phase of the conflict. In consequence, when cooperating with Ukraine, the alliance now places emphasis on supporting the development of the capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces, their professionalization and the development of interoperability.

Moreover, in order to strengthen the Ukrainian defense sector, the alliance provides, through the Trust Funds established for this purpose, financial, technical and substantive assistance in a number of fields. These include reforms to the defense sector and to civil and democratic control over the armed forces (hence anti-corruption programs and training); military education; and consultancy on standardization, logistics, communication and command procedures. Many of these activities are carried out under the Partnership for Peace program.

Enhanced Opportunities. NATO has repeatedly and at various levels expressed its unequivocal support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. After 2014, there was a considerable intensification of cooperation between Ukraine and NATO. This was also reflected in the formal dimension: the NATO-Ukraine Strategic Communications Partnership Roadmap was adopted in 2015, and the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine at the Warsaw summit in 2016. Earlier, at the Welsh summit in Newport in 2014, based on the assumption that interoperability is crucial to the effectiveness of NATO's cooperation with partners, the Partnership Interoperability Initiative was launched. Extended Opportunities Partner status is part of this and it provides opportunities for deepened cooperation. This status is certainly a success for Ukraine and a tribute to its efforts. However, it is not a guarantee, or even an announcement, of membership in NATO. In October 2019,

during his visit to Kyiv, Jens Stoltenberg noted that "NATO's door remains open," but that "the road to membership is not easy." The unprecedented scale of cooperation has not eliminated numerous problems that hinder the rapprochement between NATO and Ukraine.

Ukrainian problems. In the 1990s, the young Ukrainian state tried to settle down, adapt to the post-Cold War turbulence and find its place in the new security environment and the international arena. In the field of foreign and security policy, the so-called multi-vector attitude was chosen; taking into account the degree of Russification and Sovietization of Ukraine's political elite and the general situation of the state, this was not a surprise. Despite this ambivalence, as early as 2002, President Leonid Kuchma declared that Ukraine would strive to join NATO. After 2004's Orange Revolution, President Viktor Yushchenko reaffirmed this declaration, and in 2008 Ukraine applied for a Membership Action Plan, which usually leads to a country's admission to NATO. Despite the safeguard that the decision to join any military alliance would be made only after a nationwide referendum, there was a violent political dispute in Ukraine anyway, and the MAP, which was ultimately not granted to Ukraine, became one of the axes of the Ukrainian political discourse. In 2010, the new president, Viktor Yanukovych, announced that NATO membership was out of the question for Ukraine and there were no plans for it. But four years later, his successor, Petro Poroshenko, rejected the concept of non-aligned status; and after the parliamentary elections, the new government declared NATO accession to be a priority. In 2017, this was confirmed by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, and then by another president, Volodymyr Zelensky. In 2018 the constitution was amended to reflect this. The political swings and the nature of Ukraine's political culture have also meant that the numerous cooperation programs with NATO have not been treated as strategic opportunities for the Ukrainian state, but as elements of current politics and immediate benefits. This is also noticeable at the level of individual behavior: often cooperation and joint ventures with NATO are treated primarily as opportunities to gain tangible profit.

For much of this period, the key problem remained the very low public support for the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, despite the declarations and actions of the authorities. Until 2014, the level of support fluctuated between 15% and 40% of the population, while opponents constituted 33–70%. However, at any given moment there were always more opponents than supporters. Only in May 2014 did the number of Ukrainians supporting joining NATO finally for the first time exceed the number of opponents. According to a survey by the Razumkov Center in January 2020, 49.8% of Ukrainians would like their country to join NATO, while 29.8% are opposed. These results vary considerably by region; for example, in the western part of Ukraine, the number of NATO enthusiasts exceeds 70% (opponents are 10%), while in the east the numbers are less than 25% and almost 60%, respectively. This is due to the many historically shaped differences between different parts of Ukraine, but also to the mental heritage of the Cold War and the Soviet Union: to this day, NATO is more often associated with "threats" than with "defense."

NATO problems. The character of NATO's decision-making process – constant consultations and seeking consensus among member states – makes it difficult for the alliance to make decisions on key issues; especially since the most important ones, such as admitting new members, require unanimity. Ukraine experienced this in 2008, when the Bucharest NATO summit, contrary to its announcements, did not grant MAP to Ukraine and Georgia due to divergent positions among allies. NATO's relations with Ukraine are also influenced by the relations of individual alliance members with Ukraine. Recently, this has been illustrated by the attitude of Hungary, which blocked the tightening of NATO cooperation with Ukraine because of Ukrainian laws on education and language, which, in the opinion of Hungary, infringe the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. There are also vivid fears among many member states regarding what they see as the uncertain political, social and economic situation of Ukraine, and thus its wobbly credibility. In this context, there have already been serious crises in NATO-Ukraine relations; for example, the Georgiy Gongadze murder and the scandal concerning the sale of Ukrainian weapons to Iraq.

The attitudes of NATO members are also influenced by the firm stance of Russia, which consistently and firmly opposes Ukraine's possible accession to NATO – and many of these states do not consider threats emanating from Russia as a priority. Some NATO members are even in favor of "pragmatism" and the normalization of

relations with Russia. It is worth noting that since 2001, Ukraine has repeatedly sought NATO support in the face of growing pressure from Russia: the alliance did not respond to these signals, apparently completely trivializing a threat on its eastern flank, and even saw Russia as its strategic partner in the east. At present, Ukraine is still an "indirect victim" of the alliance's basic dilemma: who/what is the most important threat and what is the identity of the alliance in a rapidly changing environment? This also applies to other dilemmas generated by the disparate interests and political visions of individual member states, deepening divergence between the European members of the alliance and the United States, and the belief (justified in most cases) that the larger the organization, the less cohesive it will be.

Uncertain future. Strategically, NATO and Ukraine have similar interests, and NATO also unequivocally supports Ukraine; condemning the annexation of Crimea and aggression in Donbas, stressing the necessity of implementing the Minsk agreements, and so on. In real terms, however, in the military dimension, Ukraine has not received significant aid so far. Granting EOP status is an important symbolic gesture, but it is not an engagement or a promise of marriage.

Ukraine's political course in foreign policy is unlikely to change. It was confirmed recently by the new security strategy of Ukraine adopted September 14, 2020, and the declaration of President Zelensky who, when signing the law on intelligence on October 21, 2020, stated that this was another step towards integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. NATO's course will not change either: the alliance is aware of the geopolitical importance of Ukraine. According to experts, an independent and sovereign Ukraine remains a key factor in Euro-Atlantic security, and NATO must strongly support the transatlantic aspirations of both Ukraine and Georgia. However, for the same reasons, Russia's attitude will not change either, so let us not expect any imminent enlargement of the alliance. A further condition is the stabilization of the situation in Ukraine, which means that as long as the conflict in Donbas continues, there is no real prospect of Ukrainian NATO membership. On the other hand, the alliance still has problems with its own identity, cohesion and the lack of a new strategic concept. The current one was adopted a decade ago, in a completely different security environment: before the war in Syria, the rise of Daesh, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas.