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BRIEF

UKRAINE'S PRACTICAL STEPS TOWARDS NATO

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Ukraine recognises that its accession to NATO is, above all, a political process that hinges on the Allies' collective will. However, to join NATO, Ukraine will also need to demonstrate broad public support and political consensus, and to undertake comprehensive economic, legal, judicial, and security sector reforms. Ukraine can take significant practical steps today to prepare for its accession and be fully ready to join the Alliance once the decision is taken. Such steps began years ago and have involved comprehensive legislative changes, the restructuring of defence management, and the development of extensive training programmes. As part of this process, Ukraine aims to attain complete interoperability with NATO through a gradual shift to NATO standards and doctrines, and western military equipment.

All functions of the armed forces need fundamental restructuring to meet NATO's basic requirements for membership.[1] Launched in 2015, Ukraine's defence reform is aimed at five strategic goals: to implement unified leadership of the defence forces based on NATO principles and standards; to initiate effective defence planning and resource management according to modern Euro-Atlantic approaches; to develop operational capabilities to ensure the repulsion of armed aggression and the maintenance of international security; to create a unified system for logistics and medical support; and to professionalise the armed forces and establish a military reserve.

In addition, certain norms and common approaches across all spheres of state activity must be adopted before NATO membership. Ukraine will need to focus on improvements to: democratic civilian control over the defence forces; ensuring transparency in decision-making at all levels; increasing the effectiveness of existing anti-corruption bodies; and gender policy.[2]

Since 2009, the Annual National Programmes under the NATO-Ukraine Commission (now Council) have been vital for implementing these reforms. Since the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO has also provided support to Ukraine through the Comprehensive Assistance Package.[3] The 2024 Annual National Programme reflects Ukraine's comprehensive approach to achieving Euro-Atlantic integration, focusing heavily on defence and security reforms.[4] Among its key goals are: anti-corruption and transparency (with a separate focus on reforming defence procurement and ensuring transparency in partner assistance); democratic civilian control and law enforcement reforms; interoperability with NATO in legal matters, resource planning and management; defence industrial development; and information security and cybersecurity.

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Challenges

Ukraine faces several significant challenges and obstacles to implementing this reform agenda. One of the main challenges, of course, is the ongoing war with Russia, which strains resources and diverts attention from long-term reform efforts. While the need for reform is obvious, wartime conditions may make black-and-white situations greyer. For instance, it is crucial to have a transparent defence procurement system, but at the same time, one that does not inadvertently reveal strategic plans to the enemy.[5] Also, dramatic price increases due to supply deficits in the global weapons market complicate efforts to ensure fair pricing and proper oversight. Furthermore, the urgency of acquiring weapons sometimes necessitates overpayment, which, while practical in the short term, may be perceived as illegal or unethical.[6]

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There is also a delicate balance to be struck between maintaining a system that works and implementing new reforms. Transitioning to a new system can create chaos and inefficiency, as the existing structure must learn and adapt to new principles and rules. This is particularly challenging when immediate and effective action is required on the battlefield.

Achieving the objectives of reform is feasible but, in the end, hinges critically on stable and sustained support from international partners whose resources and experience are indispensable. Delays or vetoes that stem from the positions of certain partners can significantly hinder progress, while newly elected administrations can disrupt NATO cooperation with Ukraine.[7] Continuous and unwavering international backing will be vital in ensuring Ukraine's success in meeting NATO standards and achieving full integration.

NATO Standards

A crucial aspect of any state's pre-accession reforms, which has substantial impact on the operational, material, and administrative domains, is the adoption of NATO standards.[8] Ukraine has established a foundational legal framework for implementing NATO standards, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to advancing in this direction. One of the first and most important steps was the definition of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration of as a strategic goal of foreign policy in the constitution. The Law "On National Security of Ukraine" of 21 June 2018 defines the adoption of NATO standards at the general legislative level and specifies NATO membership as a fundamental national interest of the state. Ukraine's key strategic defence documents were also aligned with this objective, including: the Military Doctrine of Ukraine (September 2015), which stipulates that technical compatibility with NATO standards is vital for the future development of the armed forces; the National Security Strategy of Ukraine (September 2020), which provides the basis for developing a partnership with, and potentially joining, NATO; and the Strategic Defence Bulletin (September 2021), which outlines the need to reform the defence management bodies and establish unified democratic civilian control over the armed forces as required by NATO, and defines the goal of aligning with NATO standards of recruiting and personnel policy.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) have regulated the implementation of NATO standards through documents that encompass the study of NATO practices, and the regulation of organisational and technical aspects and their integration into Ukraine's national legislation, for example, the MoD Order "On Military Standardisation," (February 2020). In 2021, Ukraine adopted a new set of Ukraine-NATO Partnership Goals extending until 2025, and practical adjustments are currently underway as part of the military standardisation programme for 2024-26.[9]

Around 2 000 NATO military interoperability standards are documented in approximately 1 200 standardisation agreements and Alliance guidance documents.[10] According to the latest report from the MoD, as of January 2024, 335 NATO standards have been examined, with 318 already implemented (177 in the operational area, 121 in the material area, and 20 in the administrative area) and 17 rejected due to irrelevance or implementation challenges. Presently, 246 standards are under review. By the end of 2024, the MoD and AFU plan to review 100% of the NATO standards outlined in the Ukraine-NATO Partnership Goals. Furthermore, by the end of 2026, they aim to have reviewed 581 current NATO standards, representing approximately 51% of the total number.

Training

For many years prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian soldiers participated in a range of training programmes, often under NATO instructors, in Ukraine and abroad.[11] This collaboration intensified following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its provocation of military aggression in eastern Ukraine. After 24 February 2022, the urgent need to prepare large numbers of new troops able to use western weapons prompted a significant expansion of these programmes.

As foreign instructors could not come to Ukraine officially, and due to the risk of Russian strikes on training locations within Ukraine, Ukrainian recruits have been trained abroad. The main host countries have been the UK, Poland, the US, Germany, France, Sweden, Czechia, and Spain, while the EU has played a key role in organising training through its EUMAM Ukraine mission. In total over 30 countries have participated in these efforts. Approximately 20 000 Ukrainian military personnel were trained abroad in 2022. By the end of 2023, this number had increased to a cumulative total of 100 000 individuals.[12]

Sources: Espresso / ArmyInform / Slovo i Dilo

This training is crucial not only for mastering the western equipment provided by Ukraine's allies but also for taking on board western operational standards and NATO experience. In this regard, in February 2024, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the establishment of the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre in Poland.[13] The centre's goal is to achieve full interoperability between the AFU and NATO forces through joint training exercises and the exchange of combat experience.

English Language

Another effort to align Ukraine's military education and operational standards with those of NATO is the MoD's ambitious initiative to ensure that all military personnel are fluent in English (and military English) by 2026. Several projects have been developed and are currently being tested, including transitioning higher military education institutions to English. Thus, English proficiency is not just built though language courses but also through integrating English into the core military education curriculum and into the teaching of specialist military disciplines and operational training.[14] However, technical and logistical challenges make the feasibility of achieving full fluency across the entire military by 2026 highly questionable.

Conclusion

Above all, political and strategic considerations will drive decisions about Ukraine's accession to NATO. Nonetheless, it is crucial that Ukraine is fully prepared to join when the geopolitical conditions are right, not least to be sure that there are no formal reasons for sceptics to deny an invitation. Ukraine's strategic goals are thus to reform its defence sector and to achieve full interoperability with NATO forces by systematically adopting NATO standards in the operational, material, and administrative domains. These efforts will not only strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities but will also contribute to broader security and stability. Ukraine has made significant progress and the steps it has taken despite the challenges posed by the ongoing war make a compelling case for its future membership of the Alliance. The continuing support of NATO members will be crucial in helping Ukraine take the final steps towards joining the Alliance and solidifying a robust and united Euro-Atlantic security framework.

Endnotes

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