

Ukraine Needs Hard Security Guarantees, NATO Membership Preferred

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The responsibility for preventing Russia's invasion of Ukraine lies both on the West and on Ukrainian society, which was not unified about Ukraine's NATO membership. All of the Russian talk about the NATO "threat" was just a cover-up for the real task of destroying Ukrainians as an independent nation. In the present situation, Kyiv is carrying the bloody burden of the European war alone, though with significant Western support. To prevent Ukraine's and Europe's failure in what appears to be a long-term struggle with Russia, it is necessary to recognize and accept the necessity of real security guarantees (unlike the Budapest-type 1990s "security assurances"). One option may be a non-bloc variant with real security guarantees provided by the US, the UK, France, and perhaps Turkey, Poland, and others. It should include immediate military support, including troops on the ground if Russia attacks Ukraine. A second option for Kyiv would be moving toward NATO membership. In this case, very painful compromises regarding Russian war crimes and some territories lost in 2014 may have to be considered.

Why Isn't Ukraine in NATO? Or: Ask Putin How He "Made NATO Great Again"

In the last two decades, since the NATO Prague summit in 2002, there have been three key objections to Ukraine's NATO integration voiced by Western powers. First, Ukraine has been called an unstable democracy, a hybrid regime with a very weak rule of law and crony capitalism. Second, the Ukrainian army lagged behind in its development from the remnant of the Soviet Armed Forces to a modern professional army that can operate according to NATO standards. Third, the majority of Ukrainian people did not support NATO integration.

These three points were strong enough to prevail in any discussion before mentioning the Russian influence in Europe and the interest of many European countries, namely Germany and France, to enhance their partnership with Russia. Economically weak,

undemocratic with inefficient security institutions, and socially divided Ukraine suited President Vladimir Putin's plans of reconstruction of the Russian spheres of influence. Therefore, Russian authorities were at pains to keep Ukraine within this track of development and constantly intervened in domestic Ukrainian politics.

However, Russian efforts backfired as early as 2004, when Ukrainians revolted against falsifications of the results of elections in favor of the pro-Russian candidate. Then, in 2014, Ukrainians defeated an attempt at an authoritarian coup and repelled the Russian-masked military aggression in the east. Over the next five years, Ukraine has made significant progress in opening its economy, reducing oligarchic influence, and conducting defense and security reforms. Thus, we argue that Putin's aggressiveness was a critical catalyst for the changes that brought Ukraine closer to fulfilling NATO accession criteria.

Moreover, according to two decades of sociological monitoring of public opinion regarding NATO conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, we can argue that it was Putin and his policies that pushed Ukrainians to embrace NATO membership as the best security option for the country. If in 2012, only 13 percent backed NATO membership, in September 2014, this number increased to 44 percent, and in December 2021, support for integration with NATO hit a majority of 53 percent (see **Figure 1**). Only 15 percent of Ukrainians were ready to turn down NATO membership in [exchange](#) for a peace agreement in the Donbas. The beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022, only cemented this opinion, which was also shown by an [opinion poll](#) in March 2022 conducted by the Rating sociological firm.

It must be admitted that it is not a unique Ukrainian phenomenon. Putin's policy toward Europe has made NATO an attractive alliance even to countries that sought cooperation with Russia. Ultimately, NATO's existence critically reduces Russian ability to spread and strengthen its influence in Europe. The most illustrative are the examples of Germany and Hungary. Both countries value their close economic and energy cooperation with Russia. At the same time, they are protected from Russian assertiveness by Article 5 of the mutual defense treaty. Berlin and Budapest depend on supplies of Russian oil and natural gas, but Russia cannot weaponize this dependency in combination with direct military pressure.

Another case study is a situation in the Baltic states. Putin openly threatens to use force to protect "Russian-speaking people" in neighboring countries. However, since 2002 Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been out of reach of such threats. After the occupation of Crimea, they made much effort to persuade other NATO members that Russian attempts to grow and use a "fifth column" among Russian speakers constitute a serious

security risk that must be mitigated by the increased and permanent presence of NATO troops on the ground.

Finally, after the invasion of Ukraine, Finland and Sweden recognized that only formidable military superiority could prevent and mitigate aggressive Russian plans against its non-aligned neighbors, regardless of the previous history of relations, economic ties, and official statements of the Russian government. Therefore, they will join NATO prudently, calculating that evident risk of confrontation, connected to participation in the collective defense alliance, is much better than carrying alone a strategic uncertainty about the future Russian actions.

NATO's Choice Toward Russia: Rewarding & Containing or Repelling & Isolating

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made a good point when he invited former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy to Bucha to see the consequences of their decisions made during the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008. Hundreds of killed and tortured Ukrainians, victims of the Russian war criminals, are the last testimony of the gross strategic failure of the decades of Western policies toward Russia under Putin's rule. Although, we must admit that previous victims of explosions in Moscow and Volgodonsk, civilian casualties in Grozny, Beslan, and Aleppo, and war crimes in Georgia and Ukrainian Donbas were also strong signals the West decided to ignore.

The question is now whether the security mechanisms are enough to protect both Europe and Ukraine from a dictator who is not shy to use threats of genocide, war crimes, and nuclear blackmail to achieve his goals. There is a barely hidden temptation to make Ukraine capable of reducing the Russian menace in a protracted war. The evident weakness of such an effort is that Putin is well aware of it too. He has enough capabilities to increase escalation beyond the Ukrainian borders. He has not refused his plans to force NATO to retreat to pre-1997 borders or face a "military-technical response," recklessly demonstrated by the Russian missile attacks against Ukrainian cities.

This leaves the collective West with a few (radical) options.

First is a path of deliberate de-escalation and diplomatic brinkmanship. At the end of the day, it means searching for a mixture of means to reward Putin for his aggression and contain his aggressive plans. This approach has many caveats that divide the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

Are oil and gas embargos a means of containment or escalation? Would accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO bring more stability or instability to the Baltic Sea region, where the seabed gas pipeline connects Russia to Germany? How should the EU respond to the war crimes, amounting to genocide, committed by Russia in Ukraine? What must be the limits and conditions to the supplies of heavy weapons to Ukraine? Should economic sanctions be extended indefinitely or depend on Russian behavior in the future? What kind of weapons and troops must be present in the NATO countries bordering Russia to guarantee their security and not be perceived by Russia as a provocation of war?

These are only some key questions that still have no clear political answers at all decision-making levels in most European capitals. This indecisiveness and ambiguity allow the Kremlin to continue all kinds of military actions in Ukraine and devastate Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. It will increase the cost of victory for Ukraine and its allies and reduce the opportunity for compromises because, at this point, they leave Ukraine weaker and more vulnerable to future Russian offensive than it was before the beginning of the invasion.

Even if Ukraine obtains stronger security guarantees from key NATO countries, it will take at least a decade to rebuild the damaged economy and restore normal life. Meanwhile, if energy embargos are not implemented, Russia will need only several years to re-arm itself, learn lessons from its current defeats, and adapt the domestic economy to a new all-out war against a weakened Ukraine. It means that the so-called “diplomatic solution” of the current war can only give Russian authorities more time to prepare another, more deadly assault against Ukraine, while nations dare not intervene.

Second, it is a way of making a forceful response to Russian aggression and, probably, a new edition of the “Iron Curtain” separating Russia from the rest of Europe. It means swift and total energy embargos and severe short-term economic costs for EU members coupled with growing defense expenditures.

Above all, it must include massive supplies of heavy assault weapons to Ukraine to facilitate the quick defeat of the Russian army, forcing it to retreat beyond the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine. We argue that only the moment when Ukrainian troops approach the administrative border of occupied Crimea will the Russian government make a choice in favor of substantive peace talks.

For Ukraine, this would be difficult because it would have to choose between the desired liberation of Crimea and a complete ceasefire. It will also mean that the punishment of Russian war criminals may be delayed indefinitely. Achieving and explaining this kind of

compromise with the aggressor must be facilitated by strong guarantees that Ukraine shall not suffer from a future invasion.

The first option may be a non-bloc variant but with real security guarantees provided by the US, the UK, France, Turkey, Poland, etc., and should include immediate military support, including a no-fly zone and missile defense if Russia attacks Ukraine. However, it does not mean that Kyiv should refuse to move to NATO membership. This crucial condition can keep aggressive Russian plans at bay. As in the case of Finland and Sweden's highly likely quick accession to NATO at the Madrid summit, Ukraine must have the same possibility to join NATO to counterbalance Russian threats of another war in the future.

Our Comments on Other Memos

Regarding **Paul D'Anieri's** suggestion that "if Ukraine gains the ability to fight Russia without NATO's help, it might also be able to renew the war to regain lost territory over NATO's objections," we think that this could be true if Ukraine's goal were the restoration of the territorial integrity. Another explanation for such behavior of Ukraine is that territories like the Crimean peninsula or Kherson are crucial for freedom of navigation and sea trade routes for Ukraine's exports and imports. However, we argue that territories and seas are only theatres for projections of policy decisions made by sovereign governments. The Russian government clearly decided to put brutal force behind its decisions regarding its neighbors. In such a situation, no territorial gains of Ukraine can change the mindset of the Russian authorities and coerce them to respect principles of peaceful coexistence. Therefore, we argued in our piece that any temporary peace agreement with Putin's Russia would mean only delay of the new war.

Mariya Omelicheva puts emphasis on the security and military build-up of Ukraine. We argue that the hypothetical "Fortress Ukraine" must have an enormous economic foundation based on a strong capital market, efficient labor force, and modern technologies. Some kind of "Marshall Plan" for Ukraine can only be a kick-starter that prepares the ground for massive private and public investments. Will investors come if the country is viewed by rating agencies as being under credible threat of attack from a neighboring, resentful nuclear power? Will educated people stay in a country that faces more war in the medium term? We think that external and politically dependent aid cannot guarantee the resilience of Ukraine without the removal or significant decrease of the Russian threat.

Maria Popova and **Oxana Shevel** suggest that NATO membership for Ukraine must include "good-faith assurances to Russia" that Ukraine will not attack it in the future. This could be supported by NATO's self-restraint of giving Ukraine certain types of weapons,

limiting the presence of NATO troops, and providing Russia with observation status of joint Ukraine-NATO drills. However, it is hard to imagine that before 1991 same kind of concessions could have been given to the USSR in connection to West Germany's membership in NATO.

On the contrary, only the firmness of NATO regarding all territory of West Germany, including Western Berlin, contained USSR and guaranteed cold peace in Europe. Thus, Ukraine should have the potential to not only wage a defensive war, which can lead to huge economic and human losses, but also prevent Russia even from considering an attack on Ukraine.

Moreover, Ukraine, unlike West Germany, is not a former aggressor state whereby the scope of sovereignty and defense policy can be decided by major Western powers. It is hardly possible that such circumventing of NATO membership for Ukraine could be supported by other Central European nations that back Ukraine in the current war and abhor giving Russia any kind of veto over the internal affairs of the Alliance.

Thus, the key question of the papers written by **D'Anieri**, and **Omelicheva** (as well as our own) is whether a new war can be avoided by means of considering Russian interests as they are presented by the Putin regime? We think possibly, but not through territorial arrangements, defense and security reforms, or a future status of Ukraine as a NATO member. None of these conditions can force the nuclear authoritarian and aggressive Russia to retreat and give up attempts to subdue or destroy its neighbors.

Conclusion

We argue that the plausibility of negotiations and lasting peace in Europe can emerge only when Russia agrees to discuss the issue of war crimes and its responsibility for the invasion of Ukraine that started in 2014. This is a crucial indicator because it demonstrates Russian willingness to respect its multilateral and bilateral obligations toward Ukraine it voluntarily maintained until 2014. At the same time, we think that this will not happen in the observable future because Putin's regime substituted the value of the rule of law with the value of imperial might as a source of domestic and international order.

Figure 1. Ukrainians on National Security Options (2007-2021)

Public opinion in Ukraine about the best option for the national security, 2007-2021

Q: Which option for the national security of Ukraine, in your opinion, would be the best one? (one answer)

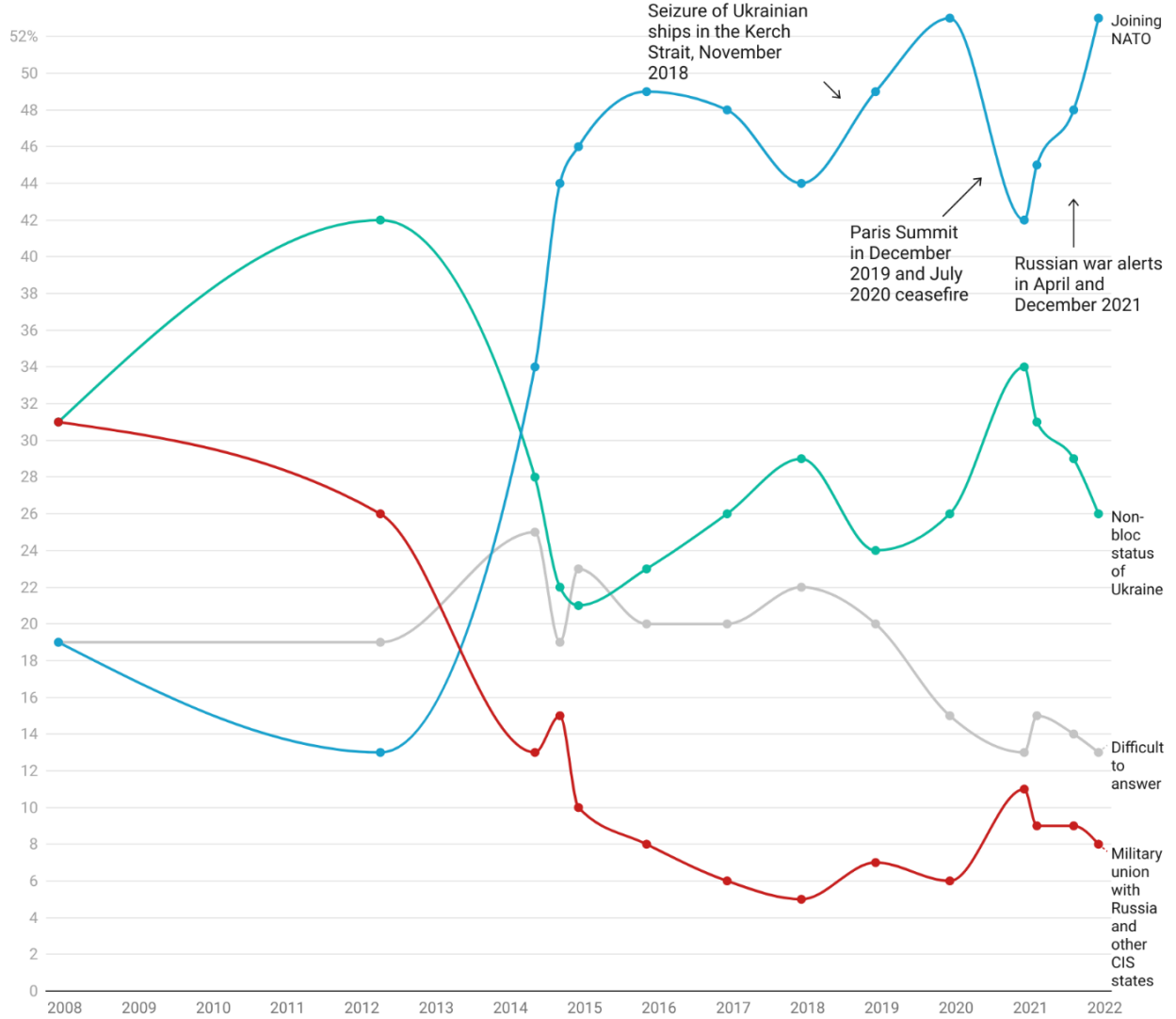


Chart: Petro Burkovskiy • Source: DIF nationwide public opinion polls, 2007-2021 • Created with Datawrapper