

NATO UKRAINE

**UKRAINE — NATO IN THE RUN-UP TO
THE VILNIUS SUMMIT: KEY CONCERNS
OF MEMBER STATES**

SUMMARY

The past six months have seen an intensified debate and more proposals about granting Ukraine a new ‘enhanced opportunities’ partner status or new security guarantees without giving it a tangible prospect of full NATO membership. Despite all assurances by NATO member states that Ukraine would one day join it, there are policymakers and experts who keep opposing Ukraine’s NATO integration, at least as a short-term prospect.

In an attempt to explore the key trends in the political discourse, and the rationale of the opponents of the earliest possible integration of Ukraine into NATO, the Ukrainian Prism team interviewed experts, former diplomats, and officials from seven NATO member states, including Germany, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Turkey, and the USA, in March-April 2023. Also, it analysed the key publications on NATO expansion.

The analysis reveals that what NATO does or does not do in support of Ukraine will affect both the confidence of its member states and the scale of respect from its opponents. The failure of deterrence in the past, and the risk of repeating that failure, as well as the consequences of uncertainty over the 2008 Bucharest Summit decisions, should encourage NATO to take additional steps at the Vilnius Summit to bring Ukraine closer to membership. Lessons from the past show that ensuring long-term security for Ukraine requires more efficient mechanisms than the ones that failed to help Ukraine before. Ukraine, in turn, has to reaffirm and strengthen its image as a state that will contribute to European and transatlantic security rather than increase the risks.

Most experts continue to see the threat of further escalation from Russia as the key factor preventing Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration. The factor of Russia is prevalent, and largely affects the rationale on the future efficient operation of NATO with Ukraine as a member, a common vision of threats, and so on. The stance of far right or left parties in the domestic political scenario, including their anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-NATO positions, is another concern. This makes Ukraine hostage to domestic disputes in a number of countries.

The authors of this research paper offer a number of points that debunk the current stereotypes existing in Western audience about the possible consequences of Ukraine’s membership of NATO, and can help Ukraine in advocacy of its Euro-Atlantic integration.

INTRODUCTION

The past six months have seen an intensified debate and more proposals about granting Ukraine a new enhanced opportunities partner status or new security guarantees, without giving it a tangible prospect of full NATO membership prospect. Despite all assurances by NATO member states that Ukraine would one day join it, there are policymakers and experts who keep opposing Ukraine's NATO integration, at least as a short-term prospect.

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the key trends in the political discourse, and the rationale of the opponents of Ukraine's earliest possible integration into NATO, and to offer recommendations for Ukraine's communication strategy in NATO member states. As part of this research, the Ukrainian Prism team held semi-structured online and offline interviews with experts, former diplomats and officials¹ of seven NATO member states, including Germany, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Turkey, and the USA², in March-April 2023. The interviews focused on the key fears and concerns about Ukraine's future NATO membership that exist in the countries of the experts interviewed, the key opponents of such a move, and the points that could be used to change this discourse. Prior to the interviews, the team held expert consultations in Ukraine, in order to identify the target countries and the key hypotheses. In addition, the team analysed publications on NATO enlargement by the key think-tanks of the countries covered by the research in the past six months. The findings are not fully representative. However, they have enabled the researchers to identify certain sentiments and trends in individual NATO member states.

¹ Based on mutual consent, the interviews were anonymous, in order to have a more open representation of their positions by representatives of various political and expert communities. The experts interviewed did not necessarily reflect their personal opinion. Instead, they spoke about the rationale and points used by the opponents of NATO membership for Ukraine in their countries.

² The list of countries was compiled after consultations with the respective public entities in Ukraine engaged in Ukraine's Euroatlantic integration. These are the countries where there is no clear manifestation of Euroatlantic prospects for Ukraine, based on their domestic or foreign policy agenda.

WHAT SCEPTICS SAY IN NATO MEMBER STATES

All the experts highlighted a shift in the **attitude towards Ukraine and Russia after the full-scale war started in February 2022**. However, this has not resulted in a significant change in the attitude towards Ukraine's NATO membership. As a French expert emphasised: *"I don't think that the view [of Ukraine's prospect of NATO membership] has changed that much even with the war. Of course, we want Ukraine to win. We want Russia to lose this war and not to demonstrate that you can just invade your neighbour. At the same time, the view in Paris is also looking into the long term: What do we do after this war? What do we do with Russia?... We will first need to find security guarantees for Ukraine; second, security guarantees, or at least some stability at NATO's border; and third, a solution on relations with Russia for as long as possible to avoid a new conflict. The idea of having Ukraine joining NATO could be considered as something that will make an arrangement for security guarantees and relations with Russia more difficult."*

Fear of a possible escalation by the Russian Federation is the key point made by the opponents of Ukraine's future membership of NATO. This trend remains unchanged, regardless of how the fighting progresses or what rhetoric Moscow uses to explain its rationale for launching its aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, the analysis of the interviews conducted for this research and of various speeches at public events where this issue is discussed, often shows a **lack of clear interpretation of what this 'escalation' could be**, given that Russia is already exploiting all of its available military arsenal in Ukraine. In some cases, 'escalation' refers to the use of nuclear weapons by the Kremlin. Among others, a former US ambassador mentioned that *"in the Biden Administration, there are two principal factors that are talked about. One is that this [NATO membership for Ukraine] would provoke Moscow. The second factor is a desire not to push cautious European allies hard."* In Bulgaria, the opponents of Ukraine's NATO membership believe that *"this could provoke war and would actually put in danger not just Ukraine, but all of Europe."*

At the same time, the research shows a position whereby, apart from the threat of escalation, **Russia and its interests remain of priority status in comparison to the interests of Ukraine**: *"There are*

many Germans who would oppose [Ukraine's membership of NATO] because they say that Russia will never accept it." The French expert points out that "Russia is seen as a bigger threat than the added value of Ukraine's joining NATO could be." This rationale leads to what the German expert describes as "a Russia first policy giving Russia a de facto veto over who becomes a member of NATO and who doesn't."

The next point is that NATO member-states **do not want to go into war with Russia**, which they see as a virtually inevitable consequence of Ukraine joining NATO. The French expert pointed out that "we would not like to see France being dragged into a conflict because of art. 5 [of the North Atlantic Treaty]." German experts echo this idea: "How can NATO accept Ukraine as a member while extending art. 5 security guarantees to Ukraine when it is at the moment trying to avoid any impression that it is at war with Russia?"

Most experts do not see any connection between the **factor of Sweden and Finland** (fast entrance without MAP and rejection of neutrality) and the modalities of Ukraine's future membership. All experts interviewed for this research noted that both policymakers and the media were far more positive and doubt-free about NATO membership of these two countries because they were already EU members, so they are perceived as part of the European security architecture. Moreover, Italian experts highlighted the fact that NATO enlargement northwards, and the joining of Finland and Sweden (in the future) are seen as something that was long coming. There is no such perception about Ukraine, or it is only emerging now.

The US was the only country covered by this research where similar points were made against Finland's and Sweden's membership of NATO as the points against Ukraine joining NATO, purporting that this could provoke Russia, and lead to further escalation. However, the experts interviewed for this research highlight the fact that this [opposition] was "without the passion we've seen on Ukraine." Instead of discussing why these two countries with a long history of neutrality decided to become NATO members all of a sudden, the officials who opposed the membership of these two Nordic countries used Russian narratives, alleging that Russia is naturally entitled to influence neighbour-states, and the countries that used to be in the Soviet Union.

In a number of countries, including France and Turkey, even the non-pro-Russian or non-anti-NATO audiences **tend to have support for a dialogue with Russia and a more cautious approach to NATO enlargement. This is based on the Russian narrative about the reasons for its aggression against Ukraine.** According to the French expert, "people say that we should be more open to Russia's interests or to Russia's arguments... we should not make the same mistake after the war."

Turkish experts tend to emphasise the importance of understanding the Russian position, its security guarantees and spheres of interest.

Another concern in the perception of Ukraine's possible NATO membership is about **how NATO will operate when Ukraine joins it**, and whether Ukraine is sufficiently in line with its geopolitical views, whether it is prepared in terms of interoperability, and how old Soviet military technology could bring risks to NATO. The French expert points to a range of questions: *“How do you organise NATO with Ukraine in it? Would Ukraine in NATO be just another enlargement or something that would change the way NATO is configured and its objectives?”* Another French expert with experience in NATO noted that *“politically, the more people you have — especially at NATO, because it is consensus decision-making — the more difficult it can be to get any decision passed. So, if you integrate countries that are very different, the fear is that it might block the work.”* Apart from that, there are doubts in Germany about how responsibly Ukraine would treat its membership of NATO because *“after this war, Ukraine is going to hate Russia so much that they will not be a responsible NATO member.”* Essentially, a fear exists that Ukraine would provoke NATO into a new confrontation with Russia and would block any establishment of relations or contacts.

Representatives of far left and far right political parties are the most radical opponents of Ukraine's future membership of NATO. This trend is present in almost every country. Sometimes, the pro-Russian stance of politicians strengthens this perspective. For example, experts in Bulgaria point to the presence of the rhetoric whereby *“the West is actually behind this war in order to destroy Ukraine, in order to weaken Russia, in order to weaken us [Bulgaria], and in order to weaken Europe, and to isolate our region from an opportunity to cooperate with Russia, to cooperate with China, to get cheap resources from Russia.”*

Ukraine often becomes hostage to the domestic national discourse, primarily **anti-American sentiments extrapolated to anti-NATO sentiments**, and the resulting negative perception of NATO's future enlargement. Among others, the opinion that *“NATO is just the US empire, we don't have to comply with this US-led project, which is not our project, which is not in our interest”* is quite widespread in France. Some Slovak policymakers have a similar stance: *“[The war in Ukraine] is a Russian-American conflict and we should stay away from it. Ukraine is too corrupt to become a NATO member, and nothing good will come out of it because it will only provoke greater escalation.”*

Some countries have parties that **advocate for their own countries to leave NATO** — some of these parties have seats in parliaments. Therefore, they do not support Ukraine's membership or military assistance for Ukraine. However, the Bulgarian expert believes that this rhetoric is part of political

campaigning through which politicians (e.g. a socialist party in Bulgaria) present themselves as peacemakers who seek peace, so they oppose weapons for Ukraine as something that means war, in their interpretation. Because of this, they also oppose Ukraine's membership of NATO. Such parties *"will not support anyone who might want to join NATO by default,"* the Slovak expert points out.

The opponents of Ukraine's NATO membership include **isolationists and supporters of greater European (strategic) autonomy**, rather than the development of partnership within NATO. At the same time, the European factor has one surprising effect: European partners are essentially blamed for backpedaling on further expansion. Some points expressed in Washington suggest that the US would not mind further integration, but influential European actors oppose this, and the US would like to take their position into account, as they did with Nord Stream 2. A former US diplomat notes that *"there are cautious European allies. We have seen a clear desire of the Biden team to accommodate Germany... France is in that category, too."*

Apart from that, experts point to Ukraine's possible unpreparedness to join NATO **economically** rather than militarily, as Ukraine is sometimes seen as a country that is incapable of developing successfully during the war, and that will not be able to contribute effectively to European security architecture.

The **pacifist wing** is a specific category that is present in various countries. It can have political, intellectual, and religious contexts. For example, Slovakia is in the middle of an election process, and the opponents of Ukraine's NATO membership raise the question of their own security. They offer the following rationale for their stance: *"NATO's support in deepening cooperation with Ukraine means taking a side — we would rather stay away from this [in order not to undermine our own security.]"* As a result of its defeat in WWII and statements by the Pope, Italy, too, tends to have a generally pacifist approach. The many statements made by the Pope about the urgency of sitting down at the table of negotiations for Ukrainians and Russians, offer more background for the promotion of the ideas of pacifism. The defeat of Italian and German fascism in WWII, and the memory of the destruction caused by the war, remain strongly fixed in the minds of in society. Because of this, one Italian diplomat pointed out, *"the army, defence of the state, and patriotism are still subconsciously seen as the relic of fascism."* In Germany, some representatives of The Greens may side with this sentiment, as the party was founded in the 1980s, based on anti-NATO and generally pacifist sentiments, among others. The supporters of a feminist foreign policy which is declared in some countries, also prioritise resolution of the "conflict" at any price over searching for a just peace.

While having some who are sceptical, each individual country also has **supporters of Ukraine's future NATO membership**. A former US ambassador notes that *“there has been clear evolution in the public discussion of Ukraine joining NATO, especially as a result of Ukraine's relative success in dealing with Moscow's big invasion. The most notable change has come from Henry Kissinger.”* Former military officials with influence in some countries of Europe and the US are increasingly in favour of this point. They increasingly express the idea that *“Ukraine would be a contributor to NATO security if it joined as opposed to being a spender of NATO security. And this is becoming more and more commonly understood. Eventually, this will have an impact on this debate.”*

Apart from that, a number of countries and NATO as a body, are now discussing NATO's and the EU's Defence policy in the Black Sea region. As one former top official points out, *“the majority view in Bulgaria is that Ukraine's membership of NATO is the best guarantee for Bulgarian national security and for security and stability in the Black Sea region.”*

PRINCIPLES AND ARGUMENTS FOR UKRAINE'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGY TO ADVOCATE FOR JOINING NATO

The analysis of the key arguments used against Ukraine's membership of NATO mentioned in individual member-states, and the reflections of the authors of this research paper on these points, enable us to draw up some principles for the communication strategy for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. These principles will be relevant both in the run-up to the NATO Summit in Vilnius, and in the context of stronger advocacy for Ukraine to join in the mid-term.

General principles of Ukraine's communication policy to advocate for NATO membership

- Many points against Ukraine's NATO membership are subjective and unconfirmed — for example, that Ukraine will become an irresponsible Alliance member that will provoke Russia. Therefore, it hardly makes sense for Ukraine to rely on the reactive approach alone, explaining how false or manipulative these statements of the opponents of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration are. It might be more efficient for Ukraine to build its own clear narratives that create the image of a responsible and reliable, efficient and well-prepared future member of NATO.
- When offering its points for membership of NATO, Ukraine should take into account the interests and positions of individual countries and groups within them about guaranteeing collective security within NATO and the EU. For example, Ukraine's membership of these organisations should be explained from the perspective of how it can contribute to strengthening the strategic autonomy of the EU, as the European capacity of NATO is reinforced (important for France and Germany), or Ukraine's role in strengthening NATO's Defence policy in the Black Sea region (an important point for Bulgaria, for example).

- When advocating for Euro-Atlantic integration, Ukraine should rely on the positive experience of individual work with every EU member-state, in advocating for its EU candidacy from the first six months of 2022. Kyiv should assign individual target plans for advocacy and diplomacy work to those NATO member states where concerns exist about Ukraine’s path towards NATO.
- The most efficient tools, institutional aspects and target groups of advocates that can help influence national decision-making can be used, taking into account the specifics of the domestic context of each state individually. Depending on these individual circumstances, Ukraine should develop more intense cooperation with high-ranking retired military officials, government and non-government think-tanks that provide advice to decision-making centres in the respective countries, and journalists or academic communities that have been influenced by Russian narratives.
- Massive awareness-raising to show strong support for Euro-Atlantic aspirations in Ukrainian society, including the eastern region, should become the overarching principle.

Ukrainian arguments in communication with NATO allies

This research paper points to the key themes where proactive communication is required on the part of Ukraine.

Ukraine should build up a positive image in the respective countries. This will impact on the future perception of Ukraine as a NATO member. This positive image should be based on the following elements: 1) the success of Ukraine’s Armed Forces, showing that the “powerful” Russian army can be defeated; security sector reforms; 2) Ukraine’s economic development. This can help build an image of the future where Ukraine is a member of the EU and NATO, and a driver of economic development for the Black Sea region — and other Black Sea allies will benefit from this. The status of EU candidate and the necessary reforms are the additional elements that help Ukraine achieve NATO standards.

Ukraine’s arguments should answer the following questions:

- How can Ukraine’s NATO membership push Russia to de-escalate and not lead to a full-scale war in Europe?
- How exactly will Ukraine strengthen NATO’s and the EU’s collective security? How can member states benefit from it?
- Is Ukraine prepared for NATO membership politically and functionally?

Ukraine essentially needs to confirm and strengthen its image as a state that is already contributing to European and transatlantic security, rather than increasing risks.

In support of Ukraine's NATO aspirations, the authors of this research offer a number of points that can be used in different configurations, based on the audience they target.

Address the allies' fear of the escalation and expansion of Russia's aggression

1. Delaying the clarification of Ukraine's future by the allies leads to higher risks of anti-NATO narratives being used, both in Ukraine and in NATO member states, as well as all over the world. This has a negative impact on NATO's image, as an alliance that is afraid of Russia and allows the Kremlin to shape its strategic vision and future. NATO should, first and foremost, switch from rhetoric to practical approximation of Ukraine to membership. This is a two-way street. A shift from the ambiguous open door policy to a clear formulation and vision of Ukraine's membership prospects should be the answer to questions over Ukraine's reforms and contribution to European security. Ukraine should be invited to the North Atlantic Council meetings under the same conditions as Sweden and Finland were when they were waiting for their fully fledged membership. This will send a strong signal about NATO's intentions.
2. Inviting Sweden, and especially Finland, which shares a border with the Russian Federation, has not increased threats for NATO, and has not led to an escalation from the Kremlin. If Ukraine is denied a similar invitation, this will signal Russia's victory and the defeat of democracy, and the principle of equality for all sovereign states.
3. The fact that Ukraine had not been a NATO member in 2014 and in the next 9 years, which did not stop Russia's full-scale aggression, should be the answer to concerns about possible escalation. Respectively, there is no need to seek new formats to deter Russia, and ensure Ukraine's and Europe's security — NATO is the most reliable and tested grouping for this.
4. It is not a question of NATO expanding. It is Ukraine seeking membership in it, just as the Baltic States and Central European states were seeking it earlier. Ukraine's NATO membership is not a redrawing of spheres of influence in Europe. It is the sovereign choice of a state that seeks to become part of the democratic world, an alliance of states whose principles and values it shares.
5. When it comes to the fear of NATO's direct involvement in the war, Ukraine should remind its counterparts that Art. 5 would not apply automatically, even if Ukraine were to join NATO tomorrow. Meanwhile, Moscow already sees NATO and the nominal West as party to the conflict.

The Russian leadership and military have been mentioning from day one of the war that they are fighting with NATO, not Ukraine. By now, Ukraine and NATO are interacting fully within the scope of Art. 3 and 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty that provides for the development of individual and collective capabilities to fight off an armed attack, and consultations in case of a threat to territorial integrity or political independence.

6. When it comes to **nuclear escalation from Russia**, the lack of a clear response and solid security guarantees for Ukraine from NATO creates the environment for nuclear blackmail that is not clearly pinned to just one country. If Russia commits terrorist acts at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant — and Ukrainian intelligence warns that the risks of this are high — the environment of all European countries may be affected by its catastrophic consequences. This threat might remain relevant for a long time, given Russia's willingness to use all unconventional and barbaric tools of warfare.
7. The fear of provoking Russia, and the resulting status quo of not accepting Ukraine into NATO, would lead to unforeseen consequences in terms of the potentially uncontrolled capture of weapons of mass destruction by non-state terrorist organisations.

Ukraine as a contributor to NATO's collective security

8. Strong arguments should address the explanation of how exactly Ukraine's NATO membership will strengthen European security, and respectively, the national security of member states. It should also address what Ukraine can do as a NATO member to contribute further to NATO's joint operations and missions. In this context, Ukraine should remind its counterparts that it has taken part in all NATO-led missions; that it is an enhanced opportunities partner, and that it is one of the most proactive members of the Partnership for Peace programme. Also, Ukraine should remind its counterparts of individual cooperation projects — such as SALIS (The Strategic Airlift Interim Solution) — and their role in strengthening NATO's capabilities.
9. Ukraine is an integral element of Black Sea security. Member states will be unable to ensure sustainable development, freedom of navigation, and future maritime security in the Black Sea without Ukraine. Even if Ukraine has temporarily lost some capabilities as a result of the war, it retains serious maritime potential.
10. Ukraine has unique combat experience and stress testing of the resilience concept, and in countering hybrid and military threats. It can strengthen NATO's defence and collective defence capacity. Ukraine is the only country that has intimate knowledge of how the Russian army is fighting, which will provide an additional benefit for NATO's strategic and tactical planning.

11. Ukraine can become an integral part of joint defence projects that will reinforce European contribution to transatlantic security. For example, Ukraine can become an important element of the European Sky Shield, an air defence initiative proposed by Germany. The presence and integration of various systems in Ukraine will be an invaluable asset for joint projects of the allies in this sphere.
12. Ukraine is already prepared to join projects and plans for cybersecurity, response to natural disasters, and the impact of climate change on security and defence. Ukraine is an active participant in NATO-led joint training and intelligence sharing, which increases its interoperability and engagement. The status of an enhanced opportunities partner has already equipped Ukraine with mechanisms for greater integration into NATO's decision-making.

Ukraine's domestic preparedness to join NATO

13. Ukraine is aware of the difficulties of joining NATO during a full-scale war. At the same time, NATO has the experience of including countries with compromised sovereignty and territorial integrity. Germany joined NATO when it was divided into two countries that did not recognise each other. While being fully aware of the risks, it is important to highlight that using an "after the war" formula (especially without a clear understanding of the modalities of how the war might end) will only provoke Moscow to drag on with the uncertainty and possible warfare, even if localised, or to opt for a frozen conflict for as long as possible.
14. Rejecting MAP does not constitute an easier way for Ukraine to join NATO. It means removing an additional instrument that is not mandatory for membership, according to NATO's documents. Ukraine is clearly aware of the necessity to comply with NATO standards and prepare for interoperability. This has been implemented in recent years through the Ukraine-NATO Annual National Program.
15. Ukraine security and defence reforms since 2014 have focused on interoperability and compliance with NATO standards. From 2022, Ukraine has intensified this by switching to Western weapons systems and personnel training.
16. NATO membership will help guarantee democratic civilian control. Despite the civilian status of President Zelenskyy and Defence Minister Reznikov, the militarisation of society and the lack of possibility to exercise fully fledged civilian control because of the war and martial law are seen as a challenge for the state. NATO membership will help minimise risks in post-war Ukraine, ensure continuity in the division of responsibilities and fully fledged democratic civilian control over Ukraine's security and defence sectors.

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