

## Reforming Ukrainian Defense: No Shortage of Challenges



**Isabelle FACON**

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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

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# Abstract

Ukraine's conflict with Russia has highlighted the catastrophic state of Ukraine's defense apparatus. Three years after the Euromaidan protests and as the war in the east continues, the government has pursued significant military reforms. Kiev has published new strategic documents which reflect the complexity of the challenges facing Ukrainian national security. Pressure from NATO, whose standards Ukraine is seeking to adopt in modernizing its existing forces and in developing new defense capabilities, comes in addition to pressure from civil society, which manifests itself in numerous ways, including through volunteers and NGO support for the military and its reforms. Nonetheless, military reform in Ukraine is still suffering from a number of constraints related to the amount of resources available, resistance on the part of various national players and conflicts between different institutions.

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# Introduction

The conflict with Russia delivered a blow to Ukraine's society and armed forces, and revealed the true state of its defense apparatus. The Ukrainian government discovered that it possessed no military tools to resist the methods that led to Russia's annexation of Crimea. A few weeks later, the Ukrainian military, aided by a few Special Forces units and airborne troops,<sup>1</sup> found itself powerless to halt separatist incursions into Donbas. Even officials admit that in March 2014, only 6,000 of the 140,000 soldiers in the Ukrainian army were ready for combat.<sup>2</sup> Many soldiers simply deserted. Logistics failed due to disorganization, there was no unity of command, communications were not secure and emergency care for the injured could not be guaranteed. Only the volunteer battalions allowed the Ukrainian government to hold the frontline while it reorganized and consolidated its regular forces, bitter proof that "the Ukrainian police and army alone were unable to protect state sovereignty".<sup>3</sup>

What explains this weakness? It was well known that the Ukrainian army was underfunded and badly equipped, and that the regime, fearful for its hold on power, tended to favor the domestic security services.<sup>4</sup> Riddled with corruption and poorly trained, the army was also divided, like the rest of the country, over which way Ukraine should lean—towards Europe, or towards Russia. The conflict in fact revealed that part of the army was not loyal to its own state. The reforms undertaken after Ukraine became independent in 1991 consisted, essentially, of reductions in manpower, a mammoth task in and of itself given that Ukraine had inherited 40% of all personnel in the Red Army.<sup>5</sup> But the permanent instability in Ukraine's

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Translated from French by Cameron Johnston.

1. Interview with a defense expert, 28 November 2016. NB: all the interviews cited here were conducted in Kiev with Ukrainian citizens, unless stated otherwise.

2. This assessment was made by the former Defense Minister, Ihor Tenyuk. See R. Saint-Pierre, "L'expertise canadienne au service de l'armée ukrainienne" [Canadian expertise in the service of the Ukrainian army], Radio Canada, 17 February 2016, <http://ici.radio-canada.ca>.

3. "Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions: The New Model Army", Ukrinform, 3 November 2014.

4. According to a foreign diplomat, this was always the case: the army was viewed as less trustworthy and useful in this respect (interview, 1 December 2016).

5. M. Bugriy, H. Maksak, "The Initial Situation Before Conducting SSR in the Ukraine", in R. Ondrejcsak (ed.), *Security Sector Reform: Global Case Studies*, Bratislava: CENAA, 2016, p. 65.

domestic politics and geopolitics prevented the state from developing a strategic vision that would have guided the restructuring of the defense sector. In 2014, therefore, one of the priorities of the government that emerged from the Euromaidan protests was the “reinvention” of the Ukrainian military.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly three years after it began, the conflict in Donbas has forced the Ukrainian state to implement reforms in the army, which have attracted close attention from both Ukraine’s political class and civil society. Ukrainian and international observers agree that the state of the Ukrainian armed forces has now improved. While Kiev is rejoicing that the army has been able to contain the advances of the Russian-backed separatists,<sup>7</sup> even the most skeptical Ukrainian military experts now admit that that the situation in the army has “changed partly as a result of the combat operations in Donbas. Ukraine has finally decided to create an army and other armed formations that are built for war”, not just for squandering state resources.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, views differ over how comprehensive the changes made since 2014 actually are. The Ukrainian government faces constant criticism from the opposition, the population and the international community about the pace and shortcomings of reforms undertaken since Maidan. To what extent is this criticism justified when it comes to the defense sector? As a focus of the Ukrainian government’s rhetoric, military reform is a very sensitive subject. The reliability of sources and evidence, and the objectivity of different arguments, are therefore extremely unclear. These reforms are being carried out against the background of war and institutional upheavals, which involve foreign countries through the provision of military assistance.<sup>9</sup> This paper analyses what is at stake in the reform of Ukraine’s defense apparatus, and the political context in which it is taking place.

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6. To adopt the phrase used by the Ukrainian ambassador to Canada when talking about the training given by 200 Canadian instructors to Ukrainian forces (R. Saint-Pierre, “L’expertise canadienne au service de l’armée ukrainienne” [Canadian expertise in the service of the Ukrainian army], *op. cit.* [2]).

7. Speech by a senior Ukrainian politician, March 2016.

8. D. Tymchuk, “Voennaia reforma v Ukraine: 7 shagov k pobede” [Military reform in Ukraine: 7 steps to victory], 17 September 2014, Informationsnoe soprotyvlenie, <http://sprotyv.info>. Lieutenant-colonel Tymchuk is a member of the Popular Front’s military office.

9. Another methodological problem lies in the confusion caused by the inconsistency of available data.

# Military Reform, a Wartime Imperative

The sudden shock of the conflict with Russia made Kiev acutely aware of the need to thoroughly overhaul the Ukrainian defense apparatus. As one person centrally involved in recent efforts to transform the military put it, the importance attached to this particular part of the reforms is due to the fact that “we almost lost our country”.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, some informed commentators affirm that the conflict has been “a positive element in generally negative circumstances”.<sup>11</sup>

## The conflict as an engine of transformation

The absolute priority, at the beginning of the conflict, was to mobilise enough recruits to meet the needs of the “Anti-terrorist Operation” (ATO). The government launched six campaigns of partial mobilization (more than 200,000 people)<sup>12</sup> in 2014 and 2015, which were nevertheless marked by numerous desertions. To the chagrin of defense experts, the authorities sometimes resorted to coercion and many conscripts departed for the front without basic training.<sup>13</sup> It was in this context that territorial defense battalions were used in the ATO zone,<sup>14</sup> not without certain problems including lack of experience and breaches of discipline, and that the state accepted the presence of volunteer battalions on the front from April 2014 onwards. These battalions were not necessarily better trained or equipped than regular units, but their personnel’s strong commitment to the cause made the difference. For them, this “was a way of continuing the

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10. R. Rahemtulla, “Ukraine Defense Reform Leader ‘Could Write Book on How to Sabotage Change’”, *Kyiv Post*, 1 November 2016, [www.kyivpost.com](http://www.kyivpost.com). The leader mentioned is A. Zagorodnyuk, a civil society figure who leads the Office of Reform Projects within the Ministry of Defense. He personifies the volunteer movement that was born with the “Revolution of Dignity”, which itself reflects the population’s desire to pressure the government into carrying out the reforms it promised.

11. Interview with a Ukrainian political commentator, 19 November 2016.

12. Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, *White Book 2015*, p. 10, [www.mil.gov.ua](http://www.mil.gov.ua).

13. S. Mel’nik, “Vozmozhen li v Ukraine perekhod na kontraktnuiu armiiu” [Is transition to a contract army possible in Ukraine], *Novoe Vremia*, 4 August 2015, <http://nv.ua>.

14. In the spring of 2014, Ukraine started to create a reserve force in the form of territorial defense battalions—at least one in each region—to protect sensitive sites (explanation provided by a defense expert, email exchange, 20 December 2016).



Revolution of Dignity”;<sup>15</sup> or, as another Ukrainian specialist explained, “they are not doing a job, they are doing a duty”.<sup>16</sup>

Initially, for the many Ukrainians who wanted to fight, joining a volunteer battalion took less time than going through the formal channels of recruitment into the regular armed forces (even if, thereafter, official recruitment procedures improved).<sup>17</sup> Overall, conscription remains rather unpopular among the population and the political elites.<sup>18</sup> The Ukrainian authorities are now placing their bets on securing contract personnel (whose length of service may vary), with higher wages offered to those who serve in the ATO. In 2016, 63,500 contracts are said to have been signed.<sup>19</sup> In the space of three years, the Ukrainian army has grown significantly, from 140,000 to 250,000 troops. In view of this success, the seventh conscription campaign, due to take place in 2016, was cancelled. Officially, the army no longer sends conscripts to the ATO zone, only professional contractors. The volunteer battalions, meanwhile, have been formally reintegrated into the army or the National Guard (*see below*).

The conflict has also showcased the dire consequences of a lack of training in the armed forces. Since Ukraine became independent in 1991, a lack of funding for defense meant that training only took place at the platoon/company level, and rarely under combat conditions. It was estimated that pilots flew for around 40 hours a year, while in the other services, training was “purely symbolic”.<sup>20</sup> Naturally, the quality of reservists suffered because “most of them did not even receive basic knowledge and skills during their service in the army”.<sup>21</sup> Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why the ATO zone might be seen as a true “school or academy for Ukrainian forces”<sup>22</sup>, where they are able to acquire valuable experience at the tactical level.<sup>23</sup> Many veterans are working as instructors or trainers of the armed forces and some occupy senior positions in the Ministry of Defense. Their operational experience, and that of other Ukrainian military specialists involved in the conflict

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15. Interview with an official at the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016.

16. Interview with a political scientist, 29 November 2016.

17. Interview with an employee at an NGO, 29 November 2016.

18. Interview with an official at the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016.

19. “Defence Ministry: Over 63,500 Soldiers Sign Contracts for Military Service in 2016”, Ukrainske Radio, 18 November 2016, [www.nrcu.gov.ua](http://www.nrcu.gov.ua).

20. D. Tymchuk, “Voennaia reforma v Ukraine : 7 shagov k pobede” [Military reform in Ukraine : 7 steps to victory], *op. cit.* [8].

21. *Ibid.*

22. Interview with a defense specialist, 28 November 2016.

23. Interview with members of the National Security and Defense Council (hereafter NSDC), 30 November 2016.

since the end of the first year of the war, is highly valued.<sup>24</sup> According to one Ukrainian expert in military affairs, the need to have fully operational brigades that are trained for combat is now well understood. According to another expert, about fifteen formations currently meet these requirements.<sup>25</sup>

The development of Ukrainian Special Forces, which ultimately might be comprised of 2,000 to 3,000 personnel with a separate chain of command, is inspired by Ukraine's experience in Crimea and in Donbas and the modus operandi demonstrated by Russia there. Among other things, these forces will be expected to carry out operations in the information and psychological domains – areas whose importance is highlighted in Ukraine's military doctrine – and be capable of penetrating the depths of enemy territory.<sup>26</sup> Advances on these policies are said to be quick and Ukrainian authorities are determined to fulfil them. Many observers argue that if Ukraine had possessed such forces in 2014, it would have been able to prevent the separatists from gaining a foothold in Donbas, and subsequent events would have taken a different course.<sup>27</sup>

Ukrainian leaders believe that the conflict has highlighted shortcomings in the government's ability to anticipate future events and has demonstrated the limits of a purely reactive approach. In response, Kiev has established a situational analysis centre (the "Main Situational Center") linked to similar centers in other institutions within the security and defense sectors, as well as in executive bodies at the regional and local levels. In peacetime, the primary purpose of this system will be to continually collect and analyze information in order to prevent crises from emerging.<sup>28</sup> If a crisis does break out, this centre would be responsible for coordinating the response. Should a crisis of national proportions develop, the centre would assemble the resources and defense forces needed to return the situation to normal.

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24. D. Tymchuk, "Voennaia reforma v Ukraine: 7 shagov k pobede" [Military reform in Ukraine: 7 steps to victory], *op. cit.* [8]; interview with an official at the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016.

25. Interviews, 1 December 2016. The integration of territorial defense battalions into the armed forces has allowed the number of brigades to be increased—armoured vehicles, artillery, infantry (interview with a military specialist via email, 20 December 2016).

26. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 28 November 2016.

27. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016.

28. *Idem.* According to the Secretary of the NSDC, all regional authorities possessed such a centre by August 2016 (NSDC website, 5 August 2016).

The conflict has also spurred reforms in the Ukrainian defense industry, which, despite its many problems, has apparently made strides in manufacturing equipment that is needed in Donbas, such as reconnaissance equipment, artillery, certain types of precision weapons, and electronic warfare tools including anti-drone systems.<sup>29</sup>

In any event, a major consequence of the conflict has been to greatly increase interest – from the authorities, the political class and society at large – in reform of the defense sector, thereby presenting the armed forces with a new, favorable environment after many years of deterioration and neglect.

## The main guidelines, orientations and axes of defense reform

As early as spring of 2014, the “European Ukraine” coalition promised reforms of the defense and security sectors.<sup>30</sup> Work did not really begin, however, until 2015 when the government took the logical first step of rewriting its strategic documents: the National Security Strategy (May 2015), a new Military Doctrine (September 2015), the unprecedented Concept for the Development of the Security and Defense Sectors (December 2015) and the Strategic Defense Bulletin, a kind of roadmap for defense sector reform which was adopted in June 2016 and presented to NATO at the Warsaw summit. In addition, amendments have been made to the law on defense, as well as the laws on the National Guard and the legal regime of martial law. A new law on national security is currently being drawn up.<sup>31</sup>

The assessment of the security situation in Ukraine contained within these documents underpins the changes that the government aims to implement in the armed forces. The two main objectives of Ukraine’s military policy are to fend off armed aggression from Russia and to create favorable conditions for restoring the state’s territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders (the “liberation of temporarily occupied territories”).<sup>32</sup> Ukraine’s previous military doctrine made no mention of

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29. Interview with a specialist in military matters, 28 November 2016; with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

30. M. Bugriy, “Ukraine’s New Concept Paper on Security and Defense Reform”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 13, No. 79, 22 April 2016, <https://jamestown.org>.

31. National Security and Defense Council (NSDC), “Key Findings of the First Stage of Reform of Ukrainian National Security and Defense”, undated, p. 3.

32. According to the authors of the military doctrine; “Voennaia doktrina Ukrainy: Rossiia–protivnik” [Ukraine’s military doctrine: Russia is the adversary], BBC, 25 September 2015, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

enemies. In the more recent documents, Russia is designated a “military adversary” and the military doctrine stresses that a large-scale military offensive against Ukraine is highly likely. The principal scenarios considered by the military doctrine are as follows: large-scale armed aggression against Ukraine by Russia, involving ground, sea and aerospace operations; special operations, including operations under the cover of peacekeeping operations without a mandate from the UN Security Council; a blockade of Ukraine’s ports, coast, or airspace; an armed conflict within Ukraine initiated by Moscow (in which Ukrainian experts hypothesize Russia would be tempted to opt for a “peacekeeping operation” if Ukraine was destabilized by radical groups such as Right Sector);<sup>33</sup> an armed conflict on Ukraine’s border; terrorist and diversionary acts; or the ordering of kidnappings and assassinations of public figures, political leaders or foreign diplomats, with the aim of provoking a war or stoking international tension. All eventualities are considered, from the loss of control over parts of Ukraine’s territory to a total loss of sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> While, in the past, the armed forces were primarily concentrated in the west and centre of Ukraine, the doctrine envisages a more even distribution of forces across the country, an arrangement that is also dictated by the recent strengthening of Russia’s permanent military forces on Ukraine’s borders.

Another important aspect of the new security documents is the recognition of the vast disparity in military power between Ukraine and Russia,<sup>35</sup> which is tempered, however, by the declaration that the “military component” of Moscow’s “hybrid war” in Donbas is “limited”. The multifaceted character of the Russian threat makes security “not just a problem for the General Staff or for intelligence”.<sup>36</sup> Better coordination and stronger horizontal links between the relevant state institutions are therefore required. Another Ukrainian response to the complex “Russia challenge” is seemingly found in efforts to entrench a culture of resistance, inspired by the country’s experience in Donbas and informed by the gulf in power between Ukraine and Russia, which is not expected to narrow any time soon. The aim is to be able to inflict massive losses on any would-be invader: mobilizing the whole of society is therefore important.<sup>37</sup>

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33. Interview with a specialist in military matters, 28 November 2016.

34. P. Shuklinov, “Novaia voennaia doktrina Ukrainy: 10 kliuchevykh polozhenij” [Ukraine’s new military doctrine: 10 key points], Liga.Novosti, 25 September 2015, <http://news.liga.net>.

35. Even if some Ukrainian officials highlight Russia’s weaknesses, such as the small proportion of its armed forces that are really deployable to a theatre of operations, economic problems, etc. (interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016).

36. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016.

37. Interview with an official at the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016.

To achieve this, the links between the power ministries and the population, which were forged during the conflict in Donbas, must be maintained. Certain parts of the population could, for instance, be trained to conduct deception operations and implement asymmetric responses to the enemy.<sup>38</sup>

These changes, in addition to the newfound importance attached to reservist training, favor the continued existence of conscription,<sup>39</sup> despite its unpopularity. This is envisaged in a mixed recruiting system supported by a steady increase in the number of contract soldiers, particularly in combat units.<sup>40</sup> Here too, the choices that have been made reflect a more realistic approach to Ukrainian security. Prior to Crimea, conscription had been gradually wound down, leading to the *de facto* dismantling of the training system for a sufficient reserve force.<sup>41</sup> This policy was based on the assumption that the country faced no external threats;<sup>42</sup> some even entertained the hope that Ukraine would qualify for NATO's membership action plan.<sup>43</sup>

The cost, of both the conflict and the overhaul of the armed forces, has meant that more money has been channeled towards the military: the public seems to accept this, despite the challenging economic situation. The forces therefore find themselves in the unprecedented position of being "prioritized in budget planning"<sup>44</sup> and allocated 3% of gross domestic product (GDP), out of 5% for the entire security sector. The 2016 budget for the security sector was approximately \$4 billion. This rearrangement of priorities has allowed the post-Maidan government to follow through on one of its promises by increasing personnel wages. Likewise, offering more attractive contracts has been a priority, particularly in the ATO zone.<sup>45</sup> According to some sources, an ordinary soldier has seen a pay increase from UAH 2,000 to 7,000 per month,<sup>46</sup> while men serving in the ATO zone

38. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016. In 2013, D. Tymchuk called for the establishment of permanent preparedness of the population for partisan warfare, especially in border regions (D. Tymchuk, "Voennaia reforma v Ukraine" [Military reform in Ukraine], <http://yasno-group.com>, undated, (probably 2013)).

39. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

40. P. Shuklinov, "Novaia voennaia doktrina Ukrainy: 10 kliuchevykh polozhenij" [Ukraine's new military doctrine: 10 key points], *op. cit.* [34]; "Voennaia doktrina Ukrainy: Rossiia—protivnik" [Ukraine's military doctrine: Russia is the adversary], *op. cit.* [32].

41. D. Tymchuk, "Voennaia reforma v Ukraine" [Military reform in Ukraine], *op. cit.* [38].

42. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

43. S. Mel'nik, "Vozmozhen li v Ukraine perekhod na kontraktnuuiu armiiu" [Is transferring to an army of contract servicemen possible in Ukraine], *op. cit.* [13]; interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016.

44. Interview with a Ukrainian political commentator, 29 November 2016.

45. Speech by a senior Ukrainian politician (under the Chatham House rule), Kiev, March 2016.

46. According to official data released by the Ministry of Finance, on 2 March 2016, average income in Ukraine is only UAH 4,362 per month, or approximately 145 euros. The minimum

are apparently receiving around UAH 10,000.<sup>47</sup> Another source puts a captain's salary at UAH 9-10,000, compared to 3-4,000 at the end of 2013, with those serving in the ATO zone earning even higher sums.<sup>48</sup> The Ministry of Information Policy provides more precise data on how much these soldiers are paid.

## Promoting reforms: all-out mobilization to transform Ukraine's institutions

In another first, civil society now regards the challenges of reforming the armed forces as an integral part of transforming Ukrainian society. Reform of Ukraine's national security system therefore figures among the priorities set out by the Reanimation Package of Reforms, a grand coalition of NGOs and experts who have tasked themselves with ensuring that the post-Maidan reforms are implemented (the reform of the security sector represents the 14<sup>th</sup> priority out of 23).<sup>49</sup> By all measures, reform of defense and national security is a priority for the government that emerged from the Euromaidan revolution, and the conflict has lent further impetus. It figures seventh in the list of 18 priority programs set out by the National Reform Council.<sup>50</sup> Within the Ministry of Defense, reforms are supervised by the Council of Reforms, led by Defense Minister Stepan Poltorak. The Council's work in this area is now guided by the Bulletin of Strategic Defense, which was adopted in 2016 with help from NATO. The Council also works in concert with officials from other executive bodies, members of parliament, representatives of civil society, volunteers and international consultants, who come together in approximately twenty working groups.<sup>51</sup>

Since November 2014, ten or so volunteers (*Volontiorskij Desant*) took on the role of consultants within the Ministry of Defense with the aim of pushing forward various initiatives, including the improvement of logistical support to forces in the ATO zone, of medical aid and supplies for

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monthly salary is currently set at UAH 1,378, or 46 euros. The vast majority of Ukrainian workers must therefore get by with salaries of UAH 2,000-3,000 (€70-100) a month.

47. Interview with a representative of an NGO, 29 November 2016.

48. Interview with a military expert, 2 December 2016.

49. Website of the *Reanimation Package of Reforms*: <http://rpr.org.ua>. It should also be noted that the majority of the NGOs and voluntary movements are dedicated to supporting the ATO front, social rehabilitation for veterans, etc. (interview with a representative from an NGO, 29 November 2016; see the list of NGOs that support the armed forces: <http://mip.gov.ua>).

50. The coordinator of this program is Archil Tsintsadze, a Georgian colonel and husband of Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine. For the official website of the National Reform Council, see <http://reforms.in.ua>.

51. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.

the troops and the transition to the *ProZorro*<sup>52</sup> online procurement system. In March 2015, these volunteers asked Andriy Zagorodnyuk (*see footnote 10*) to examine the possibility of adhering to international standards in the defense sector, on the basis of his experience as a company director.<sup>53</sup> Zagorodnyuk now heads the Reforms Project Office, an advisory entity established by the Ministry of Defense on 18 August 2015 that consists of approximately 40 individuals.<sup>54</sup> Although it is unlikely that this office will become the driving force behind systemic reforms in the defense sector given its members' lack of military experience and background,<sup>55</sup> it nevertheless embodies civil society's efforts to support and monitor the changes underway in the armed forces. Recently, the Office has focused on making the Ministry of Defense's procurement system more transparent and establishing civilian control over the armed forces. By bringing volunteers into the fold, the Ministry of Defense believes that it has "institutionalized change" and encouraged the growing involvement of civil society in military affairs.<sup>56</sup>

Under former President Viktor Yanukovich, Ukrainians often say, "the Ministry of Defense was Russian" on account of the many pro-Russian officers within it. These sympathies gave Russia an added advantage during its operations in Crimea and in Donbas, allowing Russia to be well informed about the true state of the Ukrainian forces.<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting, however, that pro-Russian views within the Ukrainian military pre-dated Yanukovich, stretching back to the bonds forged during the Soviet era between Ukrainian and Russian officers, often as former classmates or veterans of the war in Afghanistan. Faced with this "consanguinity",<sup>58</sup> the Ukrainian military used polygraphs<sup>59</sup> to flush out at least some of the pro-Russian loyalists who had not already left of their own accord. This

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52. "ProZorro" is an online procurement system which aims to promote transparency in the public sector and combat nepotism and corruption in Ukraine.

53. This forty year-old native of Kiev, who studied finance at the University of Oxford, used to head the Discovery Drilling Equipment company. Since the beginning of the conflict, he has placed his company in the service of the forces serving in Donbas (manufacture of armour plating for vehicles, heating units for military camps, assistance in organising medical care, basic logistics...).

54. Official website of the Reforms Project Office.

55. Interview with specialists in military matters, 1 and 2 December 2016.

56. Interview with an official from the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016.

57. Interview with a specialist in military matters, 28 November 2016; interview with a member of the NSDC, March 2016; R. Rahemtulla, "Ukraine Defense Reform Leader 'Could Write Book on How to Sabotage Change'", *op. cit.* [10].

58. To adopt the expression of a foreign diplomat (interview, 1 December 2016).

59. Minister of Defense Poltorak revealed that 40% of the MOD's senior officials who took the test failed ("Ukraine's Defense Minister: 40% of Ministry's Officials Fail Polygraph Tests", UNIAN, 25 April 2016).

approach centered on officials who had been appointed under Yanukovich or spent part of their careers in the KGB during Soviet times.<sup>60</sup> The background of the new commander (appointed in July 2016) of the Ukrainian navy – which mostly switched its allegiance to Russia during the annexation of Crimea—no doubt indicates the unfortunate trade-off between loyalty and experience within the officer corps: he spent a large part of his career in the Ground Forces and the National Guard.

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60. Interview with a member of the NSDC, March 2016.



# Dashed Hopes, Friendly Pressure, New Expectations: The Relationship with NATO as a Vector of Reform

Ukraine's efforts to implement reforms in many different areas are also related to its relative strategic isolation, which is implicit in Ukrainian officials' comments about the current state, and, above all, possible future of Ukraine's relations with the European Union and NATO.

## An ambivalent political relationship

In its strategic documents, Ukraine firmly rejects the non-aligned status which was proclaimed under Yanukovich in 2010 that reflected, in Ukrainian eyes, the pressure that Moscow brought to bear on Ukraine's geopolitical leanings. These same documents foresee a future in which Ukraine will join the European Union (with which Kiev intends to cooperate in security matters) and create favorable conditions for joining NATO, although no timescale is offered. In fact, however, as Ukrainian officials judge the Crimea and Donbas events to have been formative in assessing the limits of Western support, the documents rest on the assumption that Ukraine will not become a member of any collective security system in the foreseeable future. The goal of joining NATO, which President Poroshenko hopes to put to a referendum when the time is right, appears to enjoy the support of a majority of Ukrainians who, for a long time, were firmly opposed to the idea. A poll taken in 2015, which likely excluded those living in separatist territories, found that 64% of respondents would vote to join NATO if a referendum were held, compared to only 21% in 2009.<sup>61</sup> The Alliance, however, is treading warily. Ukrainian experts, both inside and outside government, note that the final communiqué issued at NATO's Warsaw Summit sidestepped the question

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61. I. Vorobiov, "Surprise! Ukraine Loves NATO", *Foreign Policy*, 13 August 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com>; "Ukraine Says 'No' to NATO", Pew Research Center, 29 March 2010, [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org).

of Ukrainian membership. Some member states are expected to continue to oppose Ukraine's candidacy. This pessimistic outlook is what lies behind the belief, frequently expressed by Ukrainian officials and experts, that the country must rely primarily on its own resources if it is to guarantee its security.

## The weak structural impact of cooperation with NATO

The relationship between NATO and Ukraine, despite being subject to one of the most advanced partnership agreements within NATO's Partnership for Peace program (the "Charter on a Distinctive Partnership"), has always been marked by ambiguity, not least over efforts to restructure the Ukrainian defense apparatus. In challenging the widespread assumption that Ukraine undertook no reform of its armed forces before 2014, some experts recall that it was in the wake of the Orange Revolution in 2004 that Kiev first questioned whether its military system was adequate to meet the country's needs. In 2005, it set itself the goal of bringing the national defense apparatus up to NATO standards<sup>62</sup> in what was, in part, a response to the Bush administration's willingness to get military support of as many partners as possible in the aftermath of September 11.<sup>63</sup> The subsequent reform efforts were centered on creating interoperability between Ukrainian and NATO forces, and were thus limited in scope with no real impact on the structure of the Ukrainian armed forces. As a result, however, Ukraine was both the first NATO partner to contribute to NATO's Response Force (providing strategic air transport and a unit specialized in countering nuclear, biological and chemical threats) as well as one of the few partners to have taken part in all major operations and missions conducted by the Alliance. Ukraine has contributed around 40,000 troops and experts to more than thirty international missions since 1991. In 2016, it was involved in ten missions.<sup>64</sup>

Before the conflict with Russia, Ukrainian military experts had voiced doubts about the likely consequences of cooperation with NATO for Ukraine's defense capabilities. Ukraine, they said, was "building an army that does not correspond at all to the unaligned status" that President Yanukovich had opted for in 2010.<sup>65</sup> Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO

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62. Interview with a Ukrainian specialist in military matters, 28 November 2016.

63. *Idem*.

64. M. Bugriy, H. Maksak, "The Initial Situation Before Conducting SSR in the Ukraine", *op. cit.* [5], p. 72.

65. The Ukrainian President did not suspend cooperation with NATO, even if it lost momentum during this period.

since 2004-2005 had drawn it into policies such as military specialization, niche procurement and reductions in manpower that, despite having a certain logic so long as Kiev benefitted from NATO's security guarantees in the future, resulted in settling for a "microscopically small army".<sup>66</sup> This choice was never questioned by the Yanukovich government which, on the one hand, was relatively indifferent towards all things military, and, on the other, considered a conflict with Russia to be unthinkable. In the view of these experts, the effort demanded of Ukraine by the Alliance to establish several units that could operate in conjunction with Western forces was excessive, considering neither NATO nor the EU was offering the prospect of membership in the medium term. In general, though a few commentators extol the valuable combat experience acquired by Ukrainian soldiers who have taken part in Western operations,<sup>67</sup> others are more skeptical, pointing to the rapid turnover of personnel within the military due to a lack of incentives to stay<sup>68</sup> and to the fact that only "a certain elite within the armed forces"<sup>69</sup> got a taste of Western operations. Both these factors limited the positive influence that Western operations might have had on the armed forces. Lastly, it is possible that the corruption scandals that marred some of these international deployments undermined the soldiers' respect for the officers who took part in them and sapped their confidence in the high command.

## After Crimea: initiative from NATO, realism from Kiev

NATO has responded to Ukraine's conflict with Russia by stepping up its assistance to Kiev and helping it to develop its military capabilities.<sup>70</sup> In March 2016, the various offshoots of the Alliance in Ukraine, including the Liaison Office and the Information and Documentation Centre, were consolidated into a "representative office" in Kiev which enjoys full

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66. D. Tymchuk, "Voennaia reforma v Ukraine: 7 shagov k pobede", *op. cit.* [8].

67. Certain observers claim that these forces have found themselves on the front line in the ATO zone, though it has been impossible to verify this claim. Let it be noted only that the Commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, Serhiy Popko, who was appointed at the end of March 2016, served as a major among the Ukrainian contingents deployed to Kosovo and Iraq.

68. Interviews with a political commentator on 29 November 2016 and with a foreign diplomat on 30 November 2016 (the latter believes that it is often the best servicemen who leave the armed forces).

69. One Ukrainian specialist emphasizes that this is very different from what happens with, for example, the Swedish military, in which nearly all officers have reportedly taken part in the international operations that Sweden has engaged in (interview, 29 November 2016).

70. "Relations with Ukraine", NATO, 22 November 2016, [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int).

diplomatic status, a sign of NATO's deeper engagement with the country. Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, the number of staff at the NATO Liaison Office has tripled.<sup>71</sup> Ukraine is now the main recipient of funds under NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme and is the subject of the largest NATO Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP). Five new trust funds were approved during the NATO summit in Newport in 2015: command and control systems, cyber-defense, logistics and standardization, medical rehabilitation and military career management. A sixth was added in June 2015, concerned with improving Ukraine's Counter-Improvised Explosive Devices capacity. Ukraine was also the only country to be granted the very highest level meeting at NATO's Warsaw summit, following which NATO adopted its new Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine (CAP, a package of measures to assist reform of the defense and security sector) and agreed to consider Ukrainian participation in the Enhanced Opportunities Programme, a mechanism for improving interoperability that is reserved strictly for a few key partners.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to offering non-lethal equipment as well as medical and language training, some Allies – principally Canada, Britain, the United States, Estonia and Lithuania – are providing instructors to carry out military training.<sup>73</sup> This has benefitted regular troops (including through the training of national instructors), but also certain volunteer battalions that have been deployed to the ATO zone, such as those within the National Guard, and special forces who are trained by the Israelis, Americans and Georgians.

In spite of the common belief that membership of NATO will not materialize any time soon, the country is still aiming to bring its armed forces up to NATO standards by 2020. This is no easy task, as a glance at the Strategic Defense Bulletin would quickly prove. This self-imposed objective is no doubt partly political, the intention being to keep Western partners focused on Ukraine while, at the same time, offering concrete proof that Ukraine wants to remain within the orbit of the Euro-Atlantic world (in a less constraining way than adopting EU standards<sup>74</sup>). It is also likely that Ukraine sees it as a way of pressuring the Alliance into offering

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71. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.

72. Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden. Ukrainian officials often remark that if membership were not possible, establishing a security partnership as close as that between Finland or Sweden and the Alliance would be a legitimate expectation.

73. According to officials within the Ukrainian security and defense sector, interview, March 2016. The British have reportedly trained more than 2,000 servicemen (interview with an official from the Ministry of Defense, March 2016).

74. Interview with a Ukrainian researcher, 2 December 2016.

further types of cooperation, particularly with respect to the arms industry.<sup>75</sup>

Above all, since the Ukrainian government anticipates that the international environment could make Western countries pay even less attention to Ukraine than at present, reforming the armed forces appears to Kiev as all the more urgent. Adhering to the best standards available offers a guarantee of quality. In other words, if Ukraine must face a large-scale threat alone, adopting best practice and *savoir-faire* appears to be “the fastest way of making our armed forces efficient”. As the situation currently stands, in fact, “the main goal is operational capabilities and absorbing expertise, not membership”.<sup>76</sup> Last but not least, for the executive (Presidential Administration and National Security and Defense Council), adopting NATO standards represents a good way of changing the culture and philosophy of the Ukrainian army, which still has a “strong Russian flavor”.<sup>77</sup>

It appears, therefore, that the Ukrainian government wants to use adherence to NATO standards as a way of exerting external pressure on the defense sector, to match the internal pressure. The Alliance has been influential, moreover, in reforming the Ukrainian military, not least in advising the Ukrainian authorities about revising their strategic documents, including the Military Doctrine.<sup>78</sup> The Strategic Defense Bulletin was drafted jointly by experts from the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, the National Security and Defense Council, NATO and individual members of the Alliance, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>79</sup> By the same token, NATO and EU advisers are taking part in ongoing discussions about amendments to the law on national security.<sup>80</sup>

The Ukrainian government, then, faced with resistance and obstruction at home (as Western experts in Kiev will attest), regards the “NATO factor” and, more broadly, the international factor, as an additional catalyst of reform. It will be interesting, in this regard, to monitor the

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75. V Badrak, “Kyiv Received a Response in Kind from NATO”, CACDS, 18 August 2016, <http://cacds.org.ua>; comments harvested in Kiev, December 2016.

76. Interview with a specialist in military matters, 28 November 2016.

77. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016 (they had in mind, for instance, the organisational set-up and the scant interest in the human factor, i.e. the soldier).

78. E. Neroznikova, A. Rezchikov, “Vse aktual’nye ugrozy i voennye vyzovy svyazany s Rossiej” [All the current threats and military challenges are linked to Russia], *Vzgliad*, 2 September 2015, <http://vz.ru>.

79. A. Zagorodnyuk, “The Turning Point for Ukrainian Military Reform: What is the Strategic Defence Bulletin and Why Is It So Important?”, *Ukrayinska Pravda*, 11 July 2016, [www.pravda.com.ua](http://www.pravda.com.ua).

80. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.

impact of the new Defense Reform Advisory Board: made up of four senior experts from the NATO countries that have done the most to help Ukraine,<sup>81</sup> the board is designed to advise the Ukrainian government on modernizing the armed forces. It is meant to meet once a month and will supposedly benefit from direct access to the President, the Chief of the General Staff and the Defense Minister. This new body risks inviting further objections, however, for some observers criticize the systematic imposition of Western models and standards on a Ukrainian army that is not necessarily ready to absorb them, at least in the short term, given its history and current commitments.<sup>82</sup>

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81. General John Philip Abizaid, former head of US Central Command, the former Lithuanian Minister of Defense Jonas Andriškevičius, the British General Nick Parker, who served in Iraq, Afghanistan and Sierra Leone and the Canadian Jill Sinclair, who was Assistant Deputy Minister at the Department of National Defense. The former Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, also serves as an adviser to President Poroshenko.

82. Interview with a European diplomat, 1 December 2016. One might note the reservations with which the Ukrainians as well as the Western diplomats met by the author in Kiev for this report, greeted the RAND study on reform of the Ukrainian security sector (O. Oliker *et al.*, *Security Sector Reform in Ukraine*, RAND, 2016, [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)).

# Reform: No Easy Task

The Ukrainian authorities stress how difficult it is to carry out reforms in wartime. It is no doubt true that the organizational and functional changes made to the armed forces since the beginning of the conflict represent relatively effective ad hoc responses on the operational and tactical levels. However, the prospects for strategic, systemic change remain uncertain. Many experts, including the head of NATO's representation to Kiev,<sup>83</sup> doubt whether the mechanisms for implementing the new strategic documents are robust, and suspect that the argument that it is difficult to build a new army in wartime serves to mask obstructionism, mostly from the defense sector itself.

## Resistance from the military

Reform of the defense sector, but also of intelligence and counter-intelligence, has therefore proven to be rather labored. Observers point, among other things, to the slow progress shown by the working groups within the Ministry of Defense's Reform Council, only half of which have supposedly begun to actually "work".<sup>84</sup> The "old guard" is well aware of the need for reform, but recognizes that it will find it difficult to adapt to the new environment. Others, moreover, wish that the current effort being devoted to defense marks the beginning of a return to the Soviet golden age, when the military was the state's number one priority. A gap appears to have opened, therefore, between "new" commanders at the tactical level, particularly those who have been trained by foreign instructors, and "old" commanders at the strategic level.<sup>85</sup> In a system in which delegating authority to lower ranks is not yet common practice, these divisions represent a significant barrier to change.<sup>86</sup> The older generation is being replaced only slowly. The officer training system makes reform in the armed forces even more sluggish because education methods employed are obsolete and the teaching staff are still largely trained by retired generals

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83. R. Rahemtulla, "NATO Chief in Ukraine: Kyiv Has Set Very Ambitious Goal", *Kyiv Post*, 28 novembre 2016, [www.kyivpost.com](http://www.kyivpost.com) ; interviews with military specialists, 28 November and 1<sup>er</sup> December 2016.

84. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.

85. Interview with a military specialist, 2 December 2016.

86. R. Rahemtullah, "NATO Reform: Ukraine Says It Is Pursuing 600-Point Program", *Kyiv Post*, 4 November 2016, [www.kyivpost.com](http://www.kyivpost.com).

who continue to cling to old methods and practices. Training personnel in foreign military academies may help to overcome this problem, of course, but in view of the number of officers required (20,000), more systemic solutions are needed, such as building up national capabilities following modern standards.<sup>87</sup>

A conflict has therefore arisen within the military between reformers and conservatives, with both groups, paradoxically, being satisfied with the current conditions. While the reformers enjoy the automatic support of the highest echelons of state and use that support to attack the old organizational model, the conservatives hope to exploit the armed forces' growing prestige, not so much to enact reforms as to revive the privileged status that the military enjoyed during the Soviet era.<sup>88</sup> In view of this conflict, it is worth asking how and why volunteers (the Reform Projects Office) were given formal positions within the Ministry of Defense. Various answers are put forward. Some believe that the decision was imposed by the Presidential Administration and the National Security and Defense Council in order to create additional momentum for reform.<sup>89</sup> Others, however, point to the fact that the Office lacks real institutional status (being described as an "entity") and argue that it was created to control the volunteers and make them less inclined to publicly vent their frustrations about the problems they have encountered in the process of reform. So far, they have been outspoken, using traditional and social media to expose resistance to their initiatives, the scandals surrounding state procurement contracts and corrupt schemes.<sup>90</sup> However, the Office's leader explains that he regularly encounters attempts to block his initiatives and asserts that the situation was particularly difficult in 2016.<sup>91</sup>

Suspiciously abound, meanwhile, that the Ukrainian government lacks the political will to make progress in certain key areas, such as altering the respective powers of the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff and establishing democratic control over the armed forces.<sup>92</sup> The Chief of the General Staff, General V. Muzhenko, is a close advisor of President Poroshenko and he supposedly exerts more influence over the President than does the Defense Minister, Stepan Poltorak.<sup>93</sup> Muzhenko appears to

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87. Interview with a political commentator, 29 November 2016.

88. *Idem.*

89. Interview with a military specialist, 1 December 2016.

90. Interview with a representative of a Ukrainian NGO, 29 November 2016.

91. R. Rahemtulla, "Ukraine Defense Reform Leader 'Could Write Book on How to Sabotage Change'", *op. cit.* [10].

92. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016; M. Bugriy, "Ukraine's New Concept Paper on Security and Defense Reform", *op. cit.* [30].

93. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.



oppose the institutional reforms outlined in Ukraine's new strategic documents (transferring leadership of the ministry to a civilian who would exercise tight control over the military as a whole, including the General Staff), arguing that this is not an appropriate time given that Ukraine is still at war.<sup>94</sup> It should be noted as well that Muzhenko allegedly worked actively to prevent the Strategic Defense Bulletin from being completed.

## Institutional conflicts

Officials from the National Security and Defense Council explain that the new strategic documents are a product of compromise within government and argue that even their partial implementation (30-40%) would be a cause for celebration.<sup>95</sup> Some independent experts are even more critical, arguing that this horse-trading has created countless “loopholes and ambiguities” within the documents<sup>96</sup> and lamenting the fact that the various institutions within the security sector have reformed at their own pace.<sup>97</sup> The documents therefore bear the hallmark of rivalry between different institutions and statutory ambiguities, starting with the complex division of responsibilities between the president and the cabinet vis-à-vis security and defense, and overlap between the National Reform Council and the National Security and Defense Council. Tensions are evident, not only between the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense,<sup>98</sup> but also between the Ministry of Defense and the Interior Ministry. In the latter case, personal rivalry between the two Ministers also seems to have added to the tension. When he was acting Minister of Internal Affairs, the current Interior Minister, Arsen Avakov, helped to orchestrate the dispatch of volunteer battalions to Donbas. Now, evidently, he is seeking to increase the power of the National Guard, which was commanded until October 2014 by the Minister of Defense. People from military circles seem to want to counter the negative light this casts on the army, arguing that if the National Guard appears to be more operational than the regular forces, that is because it has fewer missions to carry out and does not fight on the front line.<sup>99</sup> According to the military doctrine, however, the National

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94. Interview with foreign diplomats, 30 November and 1 December 2016.

95. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

96. M. Bugriy, “Ukraine’s New Concept Paper on Security and Defense Reform”, *op. cit.* [30].

97. Interview with a military specialist, 1 December 2016.

98. Interview with foreign diplomats, 30 November and 1 December 2016.

99. Interview with a military specialist, 28 November 2016. This same experts suggest that one of the reasons why the National Guard has a good image is that the extremely popular Azov battalion, the first volunteer battalion to travel to the front, has been integrated into the National Guard.

Guard is supposed to work with the armed forces, its main tasks being to combat terrorism and contribute to territorial defense.<sup>100</sup>

All of this hampers greater coordination between institutions, a problem that Ukraine's Western partners (citing "the persistence of functional overlaps and islands")<sup>101</sup> have identified as a serious weakness of the Ukrainian system. The Ukrainian authorities admit as much, too: the security sector is made up of more than a dozen bodies with strained relations and a deep reluctance to share information with one another, requiring authorities to force them to work together, according to members of the National Security and Defense Council.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, Ukrainian officials and experts like to stress that such coordination is already a reality in the ATO zone, with Defense, National Guard, Security Service (SBU), Border Guard and Ministry of Emergency Situations all working together.<sup>103</sup>

## Assessing the degree of control over the volunteer battalions

These symptoms betray a deep instability at the heart of Ukrainian institutions. From this point of view, the way in which the volunteer phenomenon has been handled is revealing. One year on from the beginning of the conflict, expert groups, the press and NGOs began to suggest that it was necessary to come up with a way of integrating the volunteers into official security and defense structures, not only to employ them optimally, but also to control them.<sup>104</sup> Today, all the volunteer battalions, apart from Right Sector, are under the command of the central authorities. In general, their members have signed contracts with either the Defense or the Interior Ministries and are therefore subject to the same laws and disciplinary codes as the other forces fighting in the ATO zone.<sup>105</sup>

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100. P. Shuklinov, "Novaia voennaia doktrina Ukrainy: 10 kliuchevykh polozhenij" [Ukraine's new military doctrine: 10 key points], *op. cit.* [34].

101. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 30 November 2016.

102. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

103. Interview with an official from the Ministry of Defense; with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

104. D. Tymchuk, "Voennaia reforma v Ukraine: 7 shagov k pobede", *op. cit.* [8].

105. R. Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in Post-Maidan Ukraine", *IAI Working Papers*, 15/08, March 2015, p. 11. According to Western experts, since spring 2015, volunteer formations (as well as those made up of conscripts), have mainly provided assistance, maintained order, manned checkpoints and patrolled liberated areas, while it is the formal military structures which conduct most combat operations (*Ibid*, p. 4, p. 10). The battalions integrated into the Ministry of Defense are reportedly deployed on the front line in the ATO zone, with those in the National Guard are in the second or third lines (interview with an official from the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016).

The uneasiness surrounding this subject is palpable. Figures within the armed forces not only insist that the volunteers' status within the armed forces and police has been completely normalized, but also seek to convince observers that their importance has been exaggerated, at least after 2014. On the other hand, certain experts argue that the volunteer battalions are among Ukraine's best units, and even that they constitute the backbone of Ukraine's forces on the frontline.<sup>106</sup> The Ministry of Defense maintains, however, that the regular military is now shouldering the most arduous operations and sustaining the heaviest losses, and emphasizes that the main strong point of certain volunteer battalions (in which problems of discipline are apparently worse than in the regular army) is their skilful public relations and communication strategy.<sup>107</sup> Such arguments probably derive from the military's concern to defend its own record. The volunteer battalions nonetheless attract attention, as does the possibility that they are being politicized, a prospect that visibly worries the Presidential Administration.<sup>108</sup> There are various reasons for these fears: certain members of the battalions (Azov, Donbas, Right Sector) have been scathing in their criticism of the way the ATO is led, and even of the Ukrainian government. Others, like the battalion commanders who now sit in Parliament, have evinced political ambitions and/or forged links with oligarchs. The fact that NGOs, including Amnesty International, have accused volunteers of committing abuses has probably hardened the government's resolve to take them in hand. Some foreign observers claim that certain battalions are still financed by private interests, rather than the state,<sup>109</sup> and therefore enjoy a high degree of independence from the government. On the ground, cohesion between different types of forces may not come naturally.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the divergent interests of the various actors involved, it is difficult to see things clearly. Efforts on the part of the army and the government to downplay the power of the volunteer battalions – positive or negative – no doubt reflects a desire to save face, play up their own importance in the conflict, and sweep problems under the rug. It is also clear that in Ukraine as in the West, a tendency exists (whether deliberate or not) to exaggerate the risks

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106. Interview with a specialist in military matters, 1 December 2016.

107. Interview with an official from the Ministry of Defense and members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016; with a military specialist on 1 December 2016. One of these interviewees suggested that the departure of some of these "harder" elements to the front was considered a relief because they were thought to threaten stability in the capital.

108. R. Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in Post-Maidan Ukraine", *op. cit.* [105], p 14.

109. Interview with a foreign diplomat, 1 December 2016.

connected with the battalions' excesses. In reality, only a small number of battalions and activists represent a truly serious problem. To reconcile these competing accounts, one might conclude that although, in general, the Ukrainian government has succeeded in establishing control over the volunteer battalions, the fragile political, economic and social backdrop means that it must keep an eye on certain "hard" elements and groups that are getting too cosy with political figures and business elites.<sup>110</sup> The apparent independence of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, now figuring among the most influential politicians in Ukraine. His personal ambitions are a cause for concern, as is the possibility that he could in the future use the National Guard for his own benefit. The National Guard includes the Azov battalion, considered to be one of the most radical and "turbulent"<sup>111</sup> of all, but also the Dnipro-1 battalion (nicknamed the Kolomoysky battalion after the oligarch who financed it at the start of the conflict<sup>112</sup>). Whatever the substance of these fears, the fact that such questions are posed at all, and that they are difficult to answer definitively, is evidence of real flaws within the Ukrainian government.

Another perennial flaw is corruption. It is "the number one enemy of the Ukrainian army", according to a message posted on Facebook by the Reforms Office on International Anti-corruption Day. Its director, A. Zagorodnyuk, is keen to stress that the Ministry of Defense, which has replaced various corrupt heads of departments, was one of the first government bodies to install the ProZorro system.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, corruption is invariably mentioned as one of the factors that hinders reform of the armed forces. Indeed, estimates suggest that 20-25% of the defense budget disappears through corruption.<sup>114</sup> One illustration of the problem comes from a former worker in the financial sector who, following the Euromaidan revolution, joined the military procurement department within the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade. The scale of the corruption that he encountered and the lack of any will to eradicate it persuaded him to resign after only ten months in post. He recounts his

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110. Pressure exerted by hard elements might partly explain the Ukrainian government's inertia in implementing the Minsk agreements, which are rejected by members of the most nationalist battalions (interview with a foreign diplomat, 1 December 2016).

111. Interview with a political commentator, 29 November 2016. In November 2016, Avakov named a former commander of the Azov battalion, Vadim Troyna, as head of the police, replacing the Georgian reformer Khatia Dekanoidze, who left her post denouncing corruption and the hurdles placed in the way of police reform.

112. He has also supported Right Sector, Dnipro 2, Azov and several other battalions. See "Ihor Kolomoisky: Still Throwing his Weight Around", *Kyiv Post*, 28 October 2016, [www.kyivpost.com](http://www.kyivpost.com).

113. A. Zagorodnyuk, "The Turning Point for Ukrainian Military Reform: What is the Strategic Defence Bulletin and Why Is It So Important?", *op. cit.* [79].

114. M. Schofield, "Ukraine's Military Has Rebounded despite Budget and Battle Woes", *McClatchyDC*, 9 November 2015, [www.mcclatchydc.com](http://www.mcclatchydc.com). This is probably a lower percentage, however, than in the years preceding the "Revolution of Dignity".

frustrations with defense contracts (many of which are still either classified or impenetrable) whose value was deliberately exaggerated or which were passed on to “friends” of government officials following shady dealings that sometimes involved officials at the very highest levels of government.<sup>115</sup> Kiev’s Western partners exert particular pressure on the corruption problem, questioning, for example, whether the defense budget, or the way it is spent, is transparent. Furthermore, corruption probably has a demoralizing effect on military personnel, who regularly hear stories (real or invented) about the self-enrichment of generals.<sup>116</sup>

## A constrained economic and industrial base

The reforms are also taking place in the context of a fragile economy. If the sums devoted to defense are high in proportional terms, they are relatively low in absolute terms due to the modest size of the Ukrainian economy. The proposed defense budget for 2017 is therefore around EUR 2.5 billion.<sup>117</sup> These constraints limit the salaries that can be offered to servicemen and the package of benefits attached to military careers. As a result, retaining the loyalty of servicemen will probably remain a problem for the foreseeable future.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, the problems surrounding social support to soldiers returning from the ATO zone cannot be compensated for by NGOs, however dynamic they may be. Furthermore, certain defense experts believe that Ukrainian society might eventually protest against the current level of defense spending,<sup>119</sup> particularly since corruption and resistance to change within the military are notorious. Public enthusiasm on this score has certainly waned between 2014 and 2016, Ukrainian officials note.<sup>120</sup>

Given its size and structure (24% for training, 60-65% for servicemen and women, the remainder for equipment<sup>121</sup>), the budget also prevents the

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115. D. Stern, “Corruption Claims Taint Ukraine Military”, BBC, 7 December 2016, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com). This source describes contracts signed between the army and companies connected more or less directly to senior members of the executive, and the Ministry of Defense’s reluctance to disclose information about these deals.

116. According to a foreign diplomat, who believes that this contributes to the different levels of motivation shown by the regular forces and the volunteer battalions, with the latter being driven by their ideological convictions (interview, 1 December 2016).

117. Around UAH 65 billion (according to an official at the Ministry of Defense, 30 November 2016, and members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016).

118. O. Oliker *et al.*, *Security Sector Reform in Ukraine*, *op. cit.* [82], p xiii.

119. Cited in R. Gzirian, “Ukraine’s got a Real Army Now. But Is It Preparing to Fight the Last Battle?”, Atlantic Council, 9 February 2016.

120. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

121. Interview with a defense expert, 2 December 2016.

Ukrainian government from reequipping the armed forces to any meaningful extent. In the years after 2010, most of the equipment used by the Ukrainian army reached the end of its operational life,<sup>122</sup> a fact which later had consequences in the ATO zone. According to some sources, 92% of the Ukrainian army's equipment was more than twenty years old in 2012, while only 1.2% had been produced in the previous ten years.<sup>123</sup> On average, the aircraft in service with the Ukrainian air force is 25-35 years old.<sup>124</sup> Attrition of weapons and equipment in the conflict further reduced Ukraine's stocks of useable materiel. According to one assessment, the government would need to spend at least \$5 billion by 2020 in order to remedy the situation.<sup>125</sup> For now, Ukraine's defense industry is focusing on repairing and modernizing Soviet-made equipment.<sup>126</sup> Even this is not smooth sailing, however. The severing of links with the Russian defense industry has caused serious problems because Ukraine depends on Russian-manufactured parts to continue using its Soviet-era equipment, notably its helicopters.<sup>127</sup> As mentioned earlier, Ukraine is counting on industrial cooperation with foreign partners in future. In this instance, indeed, relying primarily on domestic capabilities presents a dilemma: its industry is "under-developed"<sup>128</sup> and must partly redefine itself to adjust to the loss of access to the Russian defense market, but in order to attract foreign industrial partners, it has to be able to invest in its industrial base.<sup>129</sup>

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122. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 28 November 2016.

123. M. Klein, "Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions – Advantages and Challenges", *RUFBS Briefings*, FOI, No. 27, April 2015, p. 1.

124. "Ukraine's Air Force Commander Upbeat on Aircraft Modernization Plans", BBC Monitoring Kiev Unit, 2 May 2016.

125. Interview, 28 November 2016.

126. Interview with members of the NSDC, 30 November 2016.

127. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016. This expert laments what he sees as the Ukrainian authorities' lack of foresight on this subject, remarking that, on many occasions, Russia showed a growing appetite for controlling Ukraine's crucial industrial capabilities and an increasing tendency to extricate itself from strategic industrial and technological dependencies on foreign partners.

128. According to Ukrainian officials within the defense and security sector, interview, March 2016.

129. Interview with a specialist in defense matters, 1 December 2016.

# Conclusion

At the end of 2016, Defense Minister Poltorak declared that “all the processes of defense reform currently taking place in Ukraine are irreversible”.<sup>130</sup> In effect, if the changes currently taking place and these promised in the strategic documents are actually implemented, this would mark a radical change of direction for the Ukrainian defense sector, not to mention a definitive break with the Soviet defense model and the culture associated with it. Although many are critical of the state of the security sector in Ukraine, even the most skeptical of experts (Ukrainian as well as Western) acknowledge that the country has done more to transform its defense sector over the last two years than in the twenty-five years after independence. Can the current trajectory persist?

This transformation was made possible not only by the sudden jolt of realizing that the country was militarily powerless in 2014, but also by the twin pressures that the Ukrainian defense sector has faced. Internal pressure has been applied by volunteers (within institutions, as well as on the front) and civil society. External pressure has been applied by NATO at the invitation of the Ukrainian authorities themselves, not without expectations of stronger political and technical support.

It now seems that the authorities are summoning the will to normalize the status of volunteers within the defense apparatus. This might reflect a formalization of processes but, eventually, it could also undermine their ability to be a force for change. Given the fact that the conflict in Donbas is now practically frozen, the scrutiny that civil society (aware of the blockages to defense reform) exercises over the army could weaken. Yet civil society too represents a force for change. The government also realizes that NATO is suffering from “Ukraine fatigue”, the Alliance having grown tired of the claim that it is tricky to reform the military in time of war. Doubts hang over the ability of the Ukrainian government to impose its will on those forces which, for one reason or another, have an interest in perpetuating the conflict. These include industrialists who profit from it, elements within the volunteer battalions—be they attached to their

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130. “S. Poltorak: Top Priority in 2017 is to Fulfil Consistently Defense Reform”, website of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, 8 December 2016, [www.mil.gov.ua](http://www.mil.gov.ua).

influence, jealous of their autonomy or opposed to the Minsk agreements – and the old guard within the security sector who exploit the conflict to justify the slow pace of reform.

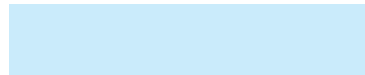
Against this already troublesome backdrop, the Ukrainians, who are well aware of what is expected of them and upfront about how long reforms will take, are looking on with alarm as the Euro-Atlantic area threatens, increasingly, to turn sour: the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the rise of populism in Europe and the weakening of the EU consensus over sanctions against Russia, on the eve of important elections in several EU member states, are all taken as proof of this. In their view, these developments, which could well lead to the collapse of the Normandy format and the Minsk agreements, pose far more profound challenges to the security of Ukraine and Europe than the speed with which Kiev adapts its armed forces to NATO standards.



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