

From Ambivalence to Strategic Partnership?  
Ukraine-NATO Relations Under Russian Pressure

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....1

*Historiography* .....3

Section 1: Independent Ukraine .....7

*Soviet Legacy* .....7

*Early Independence*.....12

Section 2: The NATO Issue .....17

*The Orange Revolution* .....17

*Bucharest Summit Declaration and Russian Aggression* .....20

*Non-Alignment to Annexation* .....23

Section 3: Russian Aggression .....25

*International Response* .....25

*Full-scale Invasion*.....29

*The Future?*.....30

Conclusion .....33

Bibliography.....37

*Primary Sources* .....37

*Secondary Sources* .....40

## Introduction

Since Ukrainian independence, Ukraine's relations with Western institutions such as The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have undergone major shifts. Throughout the 1990s, the Ukrainian population had ambivalent and even skeptical views on NATO while the leadership worked to position their country between both NATO and Russia to secure Ukraine's international recognition and political legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> The early 2000s saw two political revolutions in Ukraine where the Ukrainian population demanded greater integration with the West and an end to political corruption often closely tied to Russian influence.<sup>2</sup> It was during this period that NATO officially announced Ukraine's future in NATO but failed to provide an accession path or timeline for Ukrainian membership. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and sponsored separatist "republics" in Eastern Ukraine. Russian aggression marked a distinct shift in Ukraine's approach to NATO, firmly turning to Western integration and away from Russian influence.<sup>3</sup> The conflict further escalated in 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale invasion into Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Despite the escalation in violence and Ukraine's repeated requests for NATO membership, NATO remains a supportive ally for Ukraine without providing direct intervention in the ongoing conflict. Such positioning has resulted in a stalemate on the development of Ukraine-NATO relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 2nd edition, What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford University Press, 2020), 78.

<sup>3</sup> "Relations with Ukraine," NATO, accessed December 20, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-ukraine>.

<sup>4</sup> Marta Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, Cambridge Elements (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 53.

The topic of this thesis is largely inspired by my participation in the University of Victoria EU Study Tour in May 2025. Through this field school, I visited key European Union (EU) institutions, NATO headquarters, and multiple universities. During these visits to both academic and political institutions, discussion of Ukrainian integration with the West was a key focus; however, no clear vision on how these relations could be expanded in the future was offered. Various speakers continuously reaffirmed that Ukraine has a place in NATO in the future, but the path forward seemed unclear in the face of the current war between Russia and Ukraine.

Through an analysis of key events spanning 1991 to the present day, this thesis seeks to determine the significance of Russia as an unofficial mediating member on the development of Ukraine-NATO relations and the consequences of Russian opposition to Ukraine's membership in NATO. A strong emphasis will be put on the agency of Ukrainian political elites and voters, and the role Ukrainian government has played in relations with NATO. Given the expansive nature of this topic, this thesis will focus on pivotal events in the development of Ukraine-NATO relations while recognizing that other factors have contributed to the present state of the partnership. NATO and "The West" will be used interchangeably as a means to demonstrate political orientation towards Russia or towards NATO and its allies ("The West"). As this thesis is grounded in the historical development of Ukraine-NATO relations, it does not suggest a future path forward in the present conflict but rather aims to provide an analysis of past relations in order to understand the direction taken in the development of the modern partnership. By deepening understanding of the historical context of Ukraine-NATO relations, this thesis will demonstrate the overbearing role that Russia has played as an informal mediating member

throughout the development of Ukraine-NATO relations and the significant consequences this has had on the current state of the Ukraine-NATO partnership.

### *Historiography*

Recent literature on Ukraine-NATO relations largely seeks to explain the causes and impacts of the current war with Russia. The debates presented in these sources explore NATO enlargement, a new Cold War, Ukraine's role, and the possibility of alternative outcomes had past events unfolded differently. The arguments made throughout the literature demonstrate the significant role that historical Ukraine-NATO relations play in contemporary politics.

On early relations between NATO and Ukraine, Leonid Polyakov in *Ukraine-NATO Relations and New Prospects for Peacekeeping*, offers a compelling and detailed account of Ukraine-NATO relations throughout the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Polyakov argues that “only after a clear policy had been developed for attracting and involving Russia in NATO affairs was attention turned to Ukraine”<sup>6</sup> clearly inserting Russia into the early development of Ukraine-NATO relations. Polyakov's research is not dissimilar to my own, putting a strong emphasis on the role Ukraine itself played in these relations. At the same time, he demonstrates how Russia has been a dominating factor in Ukraine-NATO relations since Ukrainian independence and how it has played a significant role in shaping how Ukraine-NATO relations were initially approached by both NATO and Ukraine.

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<sup>5</sup> Leonid Polyakov, *Ukraine-NATO Relations and New Prospects for Peacekeeping* (Royal Inst. of Internat. Affairs, Russia and Eurasia Programme, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Polyakov, *Ukraine-NATO Relations and New Prospects for Peacekeeping*, 23.

Andrew T. Wolff takes a different direction in discussing these relations in Chapter 3 of *NATO's Return to Europe: Engaging Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond*.<sup>7</sup> Published in 2015 – notably before the full scale invasion – Wolff argues that NATO delayed Ukraine's membership until "Ukraine demonstrate[ed] tangible progress in its military and political reforms and solve[ed] its security problem in Crimea and the Donbas region"<sup>8</sup> – referring to Russia's 2014 annexation. Writing in the present tense applicable to this work's publication, Wolff contends that "Ukrainian officials hope to join the Alliance one day, and NATO insists the door is open for Ukraine to become a member, but it seems that strategic concerns now take precedence over NATO's enlargement policy."<sup>9</sup> Wolff emphasises Ukrainian responsibility to meet NATO's criteria for membership as the principle factor for delayed integration and he implies that NATO's hesitation about admitting Ukraine in the foreseeable future is heavily influenced by the ongoing war. Interestingly, this argument does not directly consider Russia as a force in these relations; however, the security concerns – a direct result of Russian action – are a significant contributing factor.

Another approach to the discussion of the current conflict lies in counterfactuals.<sup>10</sup> Tuomas Forsberg and Heikki Patomäki in *Debating the War in Ukraine, Counterfactual Histories and Future Possibilities* take a counterfactual approach to Ukraine's relations with the West, discussing how the modern conflict could have been avoided. Although sometimes taking differing approaches in their debate, both scholars argue that "it was a mistake in 2008 to

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca R. Moore et al., *NATO's Return to Europe: Engaging Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond* (Georgetown University Press, 2017), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=31308770>.

<sup>8</sup> Moore et al., *NATO's Return to Europe*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Moore et al., *NATO's Return to Europe*, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Counterfactual history hypothesises how the past could have played out had something been done differently. This is useful in exploring the cause and effect of events and actions.

declare that NATO would expand to Georgia and Ukraine”<sup>11</sup> as this declaration marked a significant turning point in the path towards the modern conflict. Their discussion follows a chronological order, asking “what exactly are the historical moments and situations where acting differently would have been a real possibility and could have had a major impact?”<sup>12</sup> This source is largely grounded in the modern context by observing past events through the lens of Russia’s war on Ukraine. In this debate, a focus is put on Russia’s central role in the global context, but some attention is also paid to Ukraine itself as a factor, particularly in discussion of the 2004 Orange Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

Along the lines of counterfactuals, some scholars also attempt to offer direction for how expanded Ukraine-NATO relations could impact – and often improve – the current situation. Liana Fix, in “The Future Is Now: Security Guarantees for Ukraine” argues that NATO needs to establish some form of expanded relations with Ukraine as soon as possible. While recognizing that full security guarantees – such as full membership and protection of NATO’s Article 5 – is not a possibility at the present time, she argues that “giving Ukraine security guarantees sooner rather than later, on the other hand, would reduce the Kremlin’s confidence.”<sup>14</sup> Fix’s firm statement demonstrates the ever-present role of Russia in Ukraine-NATO relations: in this context, how these relations could help drive Russia out of Ukraine.

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<sup>11</sup> Tuomas Forsberg and Heikki Patomäki, *Debating the War in Ukraine: Counterfactual Histories and Future Possibilities* (Routledge, 2022), x, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003375326>.

<sup>12</sup> Forsberg and Patomäki, *Debating the War in Ukraine*, xiii.

<sup>13</sup> Forsberg and Patomäki, *Debating the War in Ukraine*, 26.; Both the 2008 declaration and the 2004 Orange Revolution will be expanded upon later in this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Article 5 refers to NATO’s founding treaty and the mutual-defence clause; Liana Fix, “The Future Is Now: Security Guarantees for Ukraine,” *Survival* 65, no. 3 (2023): 67-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2218697>.

In a secondary publication, Fix in “NATO and Ukraine: The Peril of Indecision” continues this debate, emphasising that expanded NATO-Ukraine relations in the present could end the current conflict. If a well-defined NATO position could “present a clear account of how and under what assumptions Ukraine’s membership in NATO could come about,” Fix argues that “NATO could explicitly frame the membership option as integral to ending the war and bringing security and stability to the region.”<sup>15</sup> Although my thesis is grounded in the historical development of Ukraine-NATO relations, Fix offers an illuminating argument on how NATO’s lack of commitment in relations with Ukraine has impacted the present war between Russia and Ukraine. This argument also offers a historical perspective – like that of the counterfactuals – of what could be happening in the present had these relations already been in place.

Jan Eichler’s *NATO and the War in Ukraine: Geopolitical Context and Long-Term Consequences* offers a critical view on NATO expansion after the Cold War, presenting this as the leading cause for Russia’s attack on Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> His argument strongly emphasises relations between NATO and Russia, arguing that NATO expansion – including the development of relations with Ukraine – is a defining factor in the modern conflict. Eichler states that NATO expansion “strengthened Russian security fears and negative feelings of encirclement” as NATO expanded closer to the Russian border resulting in the Russian invasion of Ukraine to prevent further expansion.<sup>17</sup> Eichler’s perspective offers a critical view on NATO’s role in Russia’s war on Ukraine; however, it must be acknowledged that this is a key argument employed by Russian

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<sup>15</sup> Liana Fix, “NATO and Ukraine: The Peril of Indecision,” *Survival* 66, no. 4 (2024): 71–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2380197>.

<sup>16</sup> Jan Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine: Geopolitical Context and Long-Term Consequences*, Contributions to International Relations (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68779-2..>

<sup>17</sup> Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine*, 2.

President Vladimir Putin to justify Russian actions. Given this argument's prominence in scholarship on the war in Ukraine, it cannot be ignored but a critical perspective is required for its interpretation. Eichler defines the war in Ukraine as a proxy war "which satisfies the criteria of a long-term proxy war with all its negative consequences not only for Ukraine but also for the world economy and security in Europe."<sup>18</sup> This argument places the war within the larger geopolitical context but dismisses both Ukrainian identity and agency and supports Putin's own justification for the conflict. Eichler's misunderstanding of the war's larger historical context allows him to focus almost exclusively on the dynamic between NATO and Russia, directly inserting the Russian factor into any debate on the expanding relations between NATO and other countries in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> While I do not endorse his overall interpretation of the war's causes, his work highlights the overbearing role of Russia – and the consequences of this oversight – in the development of relations between NATO and Ukraine.

## Section 1: Independent Ukraine

### *Soviet Legacy*

Following Ukrainian independence, the lasting influence of the Soviet Union initially played a significant role in Ukrainian politics, especially in regard to their relations with Western institutions such as NATO. As a former Soviet republic, Ukraine and its people were subjected to

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<sup>18</sup> Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine*, 2; Other scholars also define the war in Ukraine as a proxy war. See Viktor Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War: Diplomatic Challenges and Geopolitical Uncertainties*, Contributions to International Relations (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-52444-8>.

<sup>19</sup> This debate, focusing on Russian aggression as a key consequence of NATO expansion, is also prominent in other scholarship as well. See Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316675885> and Andrew T. Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 91, no. 5 (2015): 1103–21.

Soviet propaganda which influenced their perception of NATO and portrayed the West as the major Cold War threat. The Soviet period also had a significant impact on the demographic of Ukraine, leaving a large population of ethnic Russians and Russophones within Ukraine that some political parties and Russia sought to exploit. Finally, as a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) within the Soviet Union, Ukraine was left to build their government structures almost entirely from the ground up after independence while struggling to separate the existing institutions from the Soviet ones taken over by Russia.

During the Cold War, NATO was presented in official government discourse as the prominent enemy of the Soviet Union, including Ukraine. The Soviet Union used propaganda to enforce this image, spreading both “directed information and disinformation [by] providing state, political, and public leaders with curated documents; publishing newspaper articles, books, brochures, and leaflets by foreign authors; radio, television broadcasts, and interviews with notable figures, including scholars, to publicise the theses prepared in advance.”<sup>20</sup> The Soviet-enforced image of NATO as an overbearing, powerful, and extremely threatening military power did not dissolve with the Soviet Union. This perception of NATO was exploited by political opposition, resulting in “certain sections of Ukrainian society continuing to regard NATO not just as a hostile bloc but as an aggressor, a threat to the national security of both Russia and Ukraine.”<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the Ukrainian governments during the early independence period did not prioritize military integration with the West. Instead, early elections focused on securing

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<sup>20</sup> Roman Horbyk et al., “The Transformation of Propaganda: The Continuities and Discontinuities of Information Operations, from Soviet to Russian Active Measures,” *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* 5, no. 1 (2023): 78, <https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2023-0005>.

<sup>21</sup> Sergei Glebov, “Concerning Strange Relations: Extensive Perceptions of Security Spaces within the Ukraine-Russia-NATO Triangle,” *Russian Politics and Law* 47, no. 5 (2009): 53.

international recognition of Ukrainian independence.<sup>22</sup> Russia continues to use the notion of NATO as the aggressor as a key propaganda tactic, adopting many of the same themes and techniques employed by the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> Thus, by the late 1990s, the expansion of Ukrainian relations with the West signalled not only Ukrainian orientation towards the West but also a rejection of this Russian rhetoric and further separation from the Russian state.

Soviet policies also significantly influenced the demographic of Ukraine, with certain regions having a prominent Russian minority. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians living in other Soviet states usually chose to stay where they were, including in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Ukraine has one of the largest Russian diasporas in the world.<sup>25</sup> Although achieving a majority vote for independence from Russia in all regions, political divisions in Ukraine quickly grew based on the cultural profile of its regions.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars claim that these contrasts arose “between an ethnically Ukrainian, and largely Ukrainian-speaking, west and center and a south and east that had large ethnic Russian minorities, was largely Russophone, and supported candidates promising closer relations with Russia”.<sup>27</sup> However, this simplistic interpretation of Ukrainian identity has been challenged – especially since the 2014 Euromaidan and ongoing Russian aggression. The Soviet state institutionalized identity in which “every citizen was assigned a supposedly descent-based ethnic designation” that was not always in line with the

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<sup>22</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 195.

<sup>23</sup> Horbyk et al., “The Transformation of Propaganda,” 89–90.

<sup>24</sup> Moore et al., *NATO's Return to Europe*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Hall Gardner, “Soviet Collapse and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict,” in *Crimea, Global Rivalry, and the Vengeance of History*, ed. Hall Gardner (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), 46, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137528179\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137528179_4).

<sup>26</sup> Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson, “Identity and Political Preferences in Ukraine – before and after the Euromaidan,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, nos. 2–3 (2018): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452181>.

<sup>27</sup> Pop-Eleches and Robertson, “Identity and Political Preferences in Ukraine – before and after the Euromaidan,” 107.

language they identified with, leaving discrepancies in people's own identity and their "assigned ethnic categories."<sup>28</sup> After independence "civic characteristics such as respect for Ukrainian laws, citizenship and the perception of Ukraine as one's homeland" over "language, ethnic origin or religion" were viewed as key factors of a Ukrainian identity.<sup>29</sup> Instead of being based on ethnicity and language as was previously suggested, the divisions arose between how regions defined their own identity in relation to the whole. For example, in the Donbas region – where separatists republics were illegally proclaimed in 2014 – citizens largely identified with their region rather than Ukraine itself.<sup>30</sup> Thus, "those people who were discontented with the current policies of the state were less likely to develop or declare such identification [with the state] than those who supported the authorities" resulting in regional political divisions.<sup>31</sup> This has significantly impacted how these regions vote in relation to pro-Western versus pro-Russian leadership and contributed to a constant political shift in Ukrainian politics. This instability is important as depending on what government was in power at a given point changed how Ukraine approached relations with the West and NATO.

It is common for scholars to draw comparisons between Ukraine and other post-socialist states such as Poland. Some of these countries – including Poland – quickly integrated with the West after the collapse of communism, joining both NATO and the EU.<sup>32</sup> Poland joined NATO in

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<sup>28</sup> Volodymyr Kulyk, "Is Ukraine a Multiethnic Country?," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 2 (2022): 305–6.

<sup>29</sup> Volodymyr Kulyk, "Language and Identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan," *Thesis Eleven* 136, no. 1 (2016): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616668621>.

<sup>30</sup> Kulyk, "Language and Identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan," 94.

<sup>31</sup> Kulyk, "Language and Identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan," 94.

<sup>32</sup> "Poland in NATO - More than 20 Years," Ministry of National Defence, accessed December 23, 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/poland-in-nato-20-years>; "Poland in the EU," Poland in the EU, accessed December 23, 2025, <https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency/poland-in-the-eu/>.

1999, only ten years after the collapse of communism.<sup>33</sup> Ukraine, however, has still not reached this level of Western integration. A key component of these comparisons resides in the countries' democratic and economic development. Prior to 1991, Ukraine had only briefly been politically independent and had little experience as an independent nation.<sup>34</sup> Under Soviet rule, Ukraine had borders roughly corresponding to the areas in which ethnic Ukrainians constituted a majority; however, the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic remained under Moscow's firm control.<sup>35</sup> When Ukraine became independent, its existing political and economic structures were directly inherited from the Ukrainian SSR.<sup>36</sup> Rather than reforming these institutions, during the 1990s Ukraine continued to use the old state structures, even expanding staff numbers of these ministries, while also imposing a new political language through these institutions.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Poland underwent major political and economic reforms to achieve its foreign policy objectives.<sup>38</sup> Poland put a strong emphasis on Western integration, working to reinforce their democracy and firm adherence to the rule of law.<sup>39</sup> Poland also reformed its armed forces, abandoning its Warsaw Pact command structures to bring them into line with NATO standards.<sup>40</sup> Poland's commitment to these objectives (set forth to achieve Western integration) allowed them to integrate politically and militarily with the West more quickly than the Ukrainian approach did.

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<sup>33</sup> "Partnership for Peace Programme," NATO, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-programme>; Ministry of National Defence, "Poland in NATO - More than 20 Years."

<sup>34</sup> See Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 67; Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 194.

<sup>37</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 194.

<sup>38</sup> Laure Paquette, *NATO and Eastern Europe after 2000: Strategic Interactions with Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria* (Nova science, 2001), 42.

<sup>39</sup> Paquette, *NATO and Eastern Europe after 2000*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Paquette, *NATO and Eastern Europe after 2000*, 39.

This argument is still regularly made today in conversation about modern Ukraine. I personally witnessed a prominent scholar discuss these comparisons during a panel at Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz in May 2025. One of the panelists discussed how post-communist societies suffer a deficit in trust from the West in both the state's themselves and their institutions. This has led to these states needing to prove themselves as "good Europeans" and "useful allies." The panelist drew comparisons between Poland and Ukraine in their success at achieving this. They put an emphasises on Poland's history of sovereignty, clear development of a national identity, and their role in the Eastern Bloc as a formally independent state rather than a republic within the USSR as key reasons they have since integrated with the West while Ukraine has not. Although this is an important point to consider, it should also be noted that the political goals of Ukraine and Poland contrasted considerably during this period, significantly influencing how each approached the West at this time.

### *Early Independence*

From the start of Ukrainian independence, Western countries and institutions such as NATO were far more concerned with establishing relations with Russia, overshadowing those with Ukraine. In fact, a more hesitant approach was often taken in regard to Ukraine specifically to avoid antagonizing Russia. Ultimately, during this period, the Western priority was Russia. Ukraine's main goal after independence was asserting its distinctness from Russia and reinforcing international recognition of its independence.<sup>41</sup> These objectives were reflected in

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<sup>41</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 195.

the Ukrainian approaches to foreign policy. Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991, a NATO initiative to foster relations with former Warsaw nations.<sup>42</sup> These initial relations would lay the groundwork for future cooperation between NATO and Ukraine.

Initially the biggest concern for the West in regard to Ukraine was the issue of nuclear weapons. Although NATO was not directly involved in the subsequent agreements, key NATO countries such as the United States (US) and Britain were. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a significant number of nuclear arms were left in Ukraine; not only the weapons themselves but also the facilities and expertise to support these weapons.<sup>43</sup> Addressing the fragmented Soviet arsenal thus became a Western priority. As the Cold War ended, both Russia and the US wanted to limit the number of nations holding nuclear weapons. Agreement on this objective resulted in a joint US-Russian effort to denuclearize Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> It was not until 1994 that Ukraine would ratify the START I treaty – an agreement between the Soviet Union and the US (to which Russia committed after the Soviet collapse) that significantly decreased strategic nuclear weapons – and endorse the Trilateral Statement to transfer its nuclear weapons to Russia in exchange for economic aid.<sup>45</sup> Alongside these agreements was the 1994 Budapest Memorandum consisting of vague guarantees from the US, Britain, and Russia to “refrain from the threat or use of force

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<sup>42</sup> “North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991-1997),” NATO, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/north-atlantic-cooperation-council-1991-1997>.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Kunz et al., *Kind Words, Cruise Missiles, and Everything in Between: The Use of Power Resources in U. S. Policies Towards Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus 1989-2008* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2017), 148, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=5782785>.

<sup>44</sup> Yuri Kostenko, *Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament: A History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021), 11, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674250888>.

<sup>45</sup> Kostenko, *Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament*, 12.

against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine” and “to provide assistance to Ukraine, as a non-nuclear-weapon state party to the Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression or an object of a threat of aggression in which nuclear weapons are used.”<sup>46</sup> The Budapest Memorandum has emerged as a significant point of discussion in the current conflict, despite it explicitly stating that these defense guarantees are under the condition of nuclear warfare being used against Ukraine. These agreements and Western pressure on Ukraine demonstrate the Western priority to denuclearize Ukraine while appeasing Russian interests.

Elected in 1991, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk put forward European orientation as a way to distance Ukraine from Russia; however, the West was not initially interested in developing these relations.<sup>47</sup> Kravchuk’s domestic approach focused on promoting a Ukrainian identity and separating Ukrainian institutions – particularly in education – from those of Russia.<sup>48</sup> He also reframed Ukrainian history, emphasising the harsh oppression faced under Soviet rule, further promoting a distinct identity while widening the divide between Russia and Ukraine. Although these policies were welcomed in some areas, they were not well received in the largely Russian-speaking regions. This discontent was strongly reflected in the March 1994 elections.

During these elections, Kravchuk tried to represent his presidency through its successful foreign policy engagements such as the trilateral agreement on Ukraine’s nuclear weapons;

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<sup>46</sup> “Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” accessed December 30, 2025, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

<sup>47</sup> Yekelchyk, *Ukraine*, 197.

<sup>48</sup> Yekelchyk, *Ukraine*, 200.

however, the opposition held a wider appeal to those discontent with Kravchuk's Ukrainianization policies and their anti-Russian implications.<sup>49</sup> Leonid Kuchma, leader of the opposition, blamed Ukraine's economic struggles on Kravchuk's Ukrainianization policies and "campaigned on a platform of economic reform, building close ties with Russia, and making Russian the second state language."<sup>50</sup> Connecting the domestic policies of Ukrainianization directly to orientation away from Russia demonstrates the close link between domestic and foreign affairs and the influence this has on Ukraine's approach to the West and NATO. Kuchma's victory in this election reflected the stark political divide that would plague Ukrainian politics, particularly in voter response to foreign policies.

Despite his more pro-Russian campaign promises, Kuchma recognized the importance of maintaining Ukrainian political legitimacy and independence from Russia. In February 1994, Ukraine joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.<sup>51</sup> This built on Ukraine's membership in NACC by establishing "cooperation between NATO and individual partner countries" like Ukraine.<sup>52</sup> Cooperation was further expanded in 1997 when Ukraine and NATO signed the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership.<sup>53</sup> The Charter "established the NATO-Ukraine Commission as the main body responsible for developing the NATO-Ukraine relationship and for directing cooperative activities."<sup>54</sup> These agreements built a stronger foundation for Ukraine-NATO cooperation, allowing for deeper integration of Ukraine, and its participation in NATO military activities. However, Ukraine broadening relations with NATO was a cause for concern

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<sup>49</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 201.

<sup>50</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 201.

<sup>51</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

<sup>52</sup> NATO, "Partnership for Peace Programme."

<sup>53</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 202.

<sup>54</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

for Russia and Kuchma used these relations with the West as a means to build more balanced relations with Russia. In 1997, Ukraine and Russia signed a Treaty of Friendship that recognized Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial borders.<sup>55</sup> Kuchma “found it beneficial to play the West and Russia against each other,” allowing Ukraine to expand relations with the West while still maintaining close ties to Russia.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the 1990s, neither the West nor Ukraine were fully committed to relations with the other resulting in limited development while Russia remained a prominent mediating power between them.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO and Russia have had a turbulent development of relations. Like Ukraine, Russia joined NACC in 1991 and the PfP in 1994.<sup>57</sup> The NATO-Russia Founding Act included the establishment of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in 1997 to further build the NATO-Russia partnership.<sup>58</sup> Although relations were suspended in 1999 during the Kosovo Crisis, NATO-Russia relations reached a high point in the early 2000s through cooperation against international terrorism.<sup>59</sup> In a joint speech by former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and Putin, Robertson emphasized that Russia had not applied for NATO membership but instead offered “a partnership that is growing in importance, in depth and in relevance.”<sup>60</sup> However, in a 2021 interview with *The Guardian*, Robertson stated that Putin had asked about NATO membership for Russia but rejected following the traditional

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<sup>55</sup> Yekelchik, *Ukraine*, 202; “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation,” accessed December 29, 2025, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002803e6fae>.

<sup>56</sup> Yekelchik, *Ukraine*, 202.

<sup>57</sup> “Relations with Russia,” NATO, accessed March 27, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-russia>.

<sup>58</sup> Tuomas Forsberg and Graeme Herd, “Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2014.1001824>.

<sup>59</sup> NATO, “Relations with Russia.”

<sup>60</sup> “The Avalon Project : Speech by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, and the Russian President Putin; October 3, 2001,” accessed March 26, 2026, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/nato\\_002.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/nato_002.asp).

process for membership.<sup>61</sup> Russia never officially applied for membership but this conversation and the direct statement that Russia had not applied in 2001 indicates that discussion and speculation of Russian NATO membership was present during this period. The NATO-Russia Council was created in 2002 to replace the PJC.<sup>62</sup> This furthered cooperation and dialogue between Russia and NATO as equal partners.<sup>63</sup> After the 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration promising eventual membership to Ukraine and Georgia, and the subsequent invasion of Georgia by Russia, relations were temporarily suspended.<sup>64</sup> Although again reinstated, practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia has since been suspended from 2014 onwards due to the Russian annexation of Crimea. The break in relations following the events of 2008 have had a significant impact on Ukraine-NATO relations, with growing Russian hostility towards the West influencing the approach both NATO and Ukraine have taken towards each other.

## Section 2: The NATO Issue

### *The Orange Revolution*

The Ukrainian political scene was highly unstable entering the 2000s, having a significant impact on its approach to foreign relations. To resolve the skyrocketing foreign debts, Kuchma appointed Viktor Yushchenko – an experienced banker “known for his pro-Western liberal and reformist views” – as Prime Minister in December 1999.<sup>65</sup> However, due to his crackdowns on

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<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Rankin, “Ex-Nato Head Says Putin Wanted to Join Alliance Early on in His Rule,” World News, *The Guardian*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/04/ex-nato-head-says-putin-wanted-to-join-alliance-early-on-in-his-rule>.

<sup>62</sup> NATO, “Relations with Russia.”

<sup>63</sup> NATO, “Relations with Russia.”

<sup>64</sup> Forsberg and Herd, “Russia and NATO,” 49.

<sup>65</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 207.

crony capitalism, the oligarchs and Communists in parliament removed Yushchenko in April 2001.<sup>66</sup> He instead led a center-right party called “Our Ukraine” in the March 2002 parliamentary elections which were heavily manipulated leading to condemnation from the West and an opening for Russia to build its influence in Ukraine.<sup>67</sup>

Kuchma attempted to salvage relations with the West. On May 23, 2002, Yevhen Marchuk, secretary of the Ukrainian national security and defense council announced Ukraine’s intentions to join NATO – a statement supported by Kuchma.<sup>68</sup> At the 2002 Prague Summit, NATO stated that “We note Ukraine’s determination to pursue full Euro-Atlantic integration, and encourage Ukraine to implement all the reforms necessary” identifying “political, economic, military and other reform areas where Ukraine is committed to make further progress and where NATO will continue to assist.”<sup>69</sup> The NATO-Ukraine Action Plan was established to clearly define these objectives and deepen the relationship between NATO and Ukraine without NATO taking a firm position on an accession path for Ukraine’s NATO membership.<sup>70</sup> Although an accession path remained unclear, the action plan highlighted the reforms that Ukraine would need to implement for NATO membership to be considered.

Kuchma was an extremely unpopular leader as he neared the end of his second term; however, he and his inner circle had strong desires to remain in power.<sup>71</sup> Kuchma selected

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<sup>66</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 209–10.

<sup>67</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 211.

<sup>68</sup> Oleg Varfolomeyev, “Ukraine Turns to NATO,” *Time*, June 20, 2002, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,264234,00.html>.

<sup>69</sup> “Prague Summit Declaration,” NATO, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2002/11/21/prague-summit-declaration>.

<sup>70</sup> “NATO-Ukraine Action Plan,” NATO, accessed February 17, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2002/11/22/nato-ukraine-action-plan>.

<sup>71</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 212.

Viktor Yanukovych – Prime Minister since 2002 – to run in his place in the 2004 elections, following the Russian precedence set by Boris Yeltsin of selecting a successor.<sup>72</sup> Yanukovych himself was not very popular, seen as a symbol of the oligarchs and closer relations with Russia; Yushchenko, running as the opposition, brought his pro-Western views to his presidential campaign.<sup>73</sup> This election was a crossroad for Ukrainian politics between the West and Russia.

Yanukovych was announced as the initial winner; however, it was quickly revealed that the election had been rigged, resulting in immediate protests in Kyiv.<sup>74</sup> The election outcome and protests also drew international attention with both the US and EU condemning the results and refusing to acknowledge Yanukovych's "victory"; in contrast, Russia was the first to congratulate him.<sup>75</sup> Foreign mediators facilitated negotiations and on December 3 the Supreme Court declared the election invalid and called for a repeat election which was subject to intense surveillance by both domestic and foreign observers.<sup>76</sup> In the end, Yushchenko won by a narrow majority with regional voting patterns reflected in "Yanukovych carrying the Russian-speaking east and south and Yushchenko the Ukrainian-speaking West."<sup>77</sup> The Orange Revolution was a critical turning point in Russian relations with the West, seen as an embarrassment for Putin after he directly supported Yanukovych, creating increased Russian friction with the West.<sup>78</sup>

Although the Orange Revolution was not a direct reflection of voter orientation towards NATO membership, it marked a significant milestone in Ukrainian democracy and political

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<sup>72</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 213; Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 82.

<sup>74</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 216–17.

<sup>75</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 217.

<sup>76</sup> Anders Åslund and Michael McFaul, eds., *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1mtz6gq>.

<sup>77</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 219.

<sup>78</sup> Forsberg and Patomäki, *Debating the War in Ukraine*, 26.

accountability. According to a June 2002 poll, only 32 per cent of Ukrainian respondents said they would vote for NATO membership at that time.<sup>79</sup> Despite this, the Orange Revolution was a critical step for Ukraine towards the West. Under Yushchenko, Ukraine took a more pro-Western approach to foreign policies, distancing itself from Russia's political and economic influence perpetuated under Kuchma and supported by Yanukovich.

### *Bucharest Summit Declaration and Russian Aggression*

Established in 1949 and still in practice today, The North Atlantic Treaty outlines the goals and values of NATO.<sup>80</sup> Composed of 14 articles, it emphasizes NATO's adherence to the Charter of the United Nations and NATO's united "efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security."<sup>81</sup> Article 5 defines this collective defense, stipulating that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all NATO members.<sup>82</sup> NATO also has an "open door policy" defined by Article 10, stating that membership is open to "any European country in a position to undertake the commitments and obligations of membership, and contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area."<sup>83</sup> Both Article 5 and Article 10 are crucial to the Ukrainian context in the present and their bid for NATO membership.

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<sup>79</sup> Oleg Varfolomeyev, "Is Ukraine Ready to Join NATO?," Jamestown, July 16, 2002, <https://jamestown.org/is-ukraine-ready-to-join-nato/>.

<sup>80</sup> "The North Atlantic Treaty," NATO, accessed March 26, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty>.

<sup>81</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty."

<sup>82</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty."

<sup>83</sup> "Enlargement and Article 10," NATO, accessed March 26, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/enlargement-and-article-10>.

At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin stated that Russia did not support NATO enlargement, condemning the West for disrupting European security.<sup>84</sup> He argued that

NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?<sup>85</sup>

Putin indicated that his administration viewed NATO enlargement as a direct threat to Russian interests, generating mistrust and a growing divide between Russia and the West. Despite this, the 2008 Bucharest Summit marked a milestone in Ukraine-NATO relations with NATO promising eventual membership to both Ukraine and Georgia. The official summit declaration stated that

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations. We welcome the democratic reforms in Ukraine and Georgia and look forward to free and fair parliamentary elections in Georgia in May. MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership.<sup>86</sup>

Although a significant step in Ukraine's bid for membership in NATO, this declaration did not create a timeline for membership or provide Ukraine an accession path. It recognized the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as the next step; however, neither Ukraine nor Georgia were actually accepted into this program.<sup>87</sup> Although a majority of NATO member states were in

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<sup>84</sup> Andrew T. Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 91, no. 5 (2015): 1109.

<sup>85</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia, February 12, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>86</sup> NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2008)," NATO, accessed November 11, 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>87</sup> See "Membership Action Plan (MAP)," NATO, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/membership-action-plan-map>.

favour of Ukraine and Georgia's participation in MAP, both the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy opposed their application, causing delays in the membership process and demonstrating NATO's hesitancy on a firm commitment at this time.<sup>88</sup> Merkel and Sarkozy argued that a commitment to Ukrainian NATO membership at that time would have provoked Russian aggression.<sup>89</sup> This notion is, however, contradictory as although an accession path was not agreed upon, Ukraine's future in NATO was directly established.

The Bucharest Summit highlighted Ukraine's desire for more direct integration with the West and further strained their already tense relations with Russia.<sup>90</sup> It also heightened the emerging Russian antagonism with the West: "The decision not to grant MAP to Ukraine and Georgia signalled NATO's reluctance to confront Russia in its perceived sphere of influence. This, in turn, emboldened Russia and contributed to its willingness to use military force to assert its interests in the region."<sup>91</sup> In August 2008, Russia launched an attack on Georgia claiming to be defending pro-Russian separatist republics in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>92</sup> The Russian success limited any further discussion of Georgia's NATO membership.<sup>93</sup> Although not necessarily a direct result of the Bucharest Summit Declaration, NATO's hesitancy to take a decisive decision on Georgia's membership may have demonstrated to Russia that NATO would not intervene in the region.<sup>94</sup> The Five-Day War was a decisive victory for Russia, allowing it to

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<sup>88</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 28.

<sup>90</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 29.

<sup>91</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 29.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Jones, *Georgia: The Conflict with Russia and the Crisis in South Ossetia*, August 18, 2008, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04819/>.

<sup>93</sup> Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis," 1109.

<sup>94</sup> Wolff, "The Future of NATO Enlargement after the Ukraine Crisis," 1110.

establish a new navy base in Georgia and maintain its navy presence in the Black Sea.<sup>95</sup> It displayed Russia's willingness for direct military intervention in the region despite – or in the face of – NATO's growing influence.

### *Non-Alignment to Annexation*

The 2008 global financial crisis significantly impacted Ukraine's economy, and in turn, Yushchenko's popularity.<sup>96</sup> This combined with the growing divide within the party – the alliance formed to defeat Kuchma – resulted in Yushchenko losing the 2010 presidential election to his former opponent Yanukovich who had been serving as Prime Minister since 2006.<sup>97</sup> Under the more pro-Russian leadership of Yanukovich, this period saw a shift away from the intensified dialogue with the West culminating in NATO's 2008 declaration. Yanukovich adopted the law "On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy" Law of Ukraine in July 2010, stipulating that "Ukraine, being a European non-aligned state, exercises an open foreign policy and strives for cooperation with all interested partners, avoiding depending on specific states, groups of states or international structures,"<sup>98</sup> thus putting a hold on Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations while also demonstrating the Ukrainian elites unwillingness to advance relations with Russia.

The economic situation and corruption did not improve under Yanukovich.<sup>99</sup> As the economy struggled, Yanukovich was forced to seek loans, entering negotiations with both the

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<sup>95</sup> Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 43.

<sup>97</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 43.

<sup>98</sup> "On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy," Official Website of the Parliament of Ukraine, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/go/2411-17>.

<sup>99</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 43.

EU and Russia.<sup>100</sup> In November 2013, Ukraine and the EU planned to sign an association agreement; however, before this was finalized, Yanukovich travelled to Moscow and instead signed an agreement with Russia.<sup>101</sup> After threatening sanctions should Ukraine sign the agreement with the EU, Russia offered Ukraine their requested \$15 billion (USD) loan putting a hold on Ukraine building stronger economic ties with the EU.<sup>102</sup> Outraged by this, the Ukrainian population launched mass protests in Independence Square during what became known as the Euromaidan Revolution.<sup>103</sup> As the protests escalated, government crackdown turned violent, further fueling the flames.<sup>104</sup> The protests reached a turning point in February 2014 when Yanukovich was overthrown and fled to Russia.<sup>105</sup> It was clear that the majority of Ukrainian people strongly favoured integration with the West – specifically the EU in this case – and wanted distance from the overbearing Russian influence and corruption perpetuated under Yanukovich.

Capitalizing on the political upheaval in Ukraine, Russia used this opportunity to annex the Crimean Peninsula and occupy regions of Eastern Ukraine. On February 27, 2014, unidentified soldiers – known by the local population as the “little green men” – entered Crimea and took over key institutions such as the Ukrainian military bases, airport, communications, and parliament.<sup>106</sup> Using these institutions as a base of control they held a sham referendum, which allegedly demonstrated that 96 per cent of the peninsula’s population was in support of

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<sup>100</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 43.

<sup>101</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 94.

<sup>102</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 94.

<sup>103</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 43.

<sup>104</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 44.

<sup>106</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 46.

joining Russia.<sup>107</sup> Fueled by Russian operatives, pro-Russian protests also grew in Eastern Ukraine – particularly in the largely Russophone Donetsk and Luhansk regions – locking the region in a conflict between pro-Russians and Ukrainian patriots.<sup>108</sup> Russia had shown its hand in Ukraine and Ukrainian non-alignment officially came to an end in response to Russia’s aggression.<sup>109</sup> Despite earlier ambivalence on relations with NATO, in the face of Russian aggression, relations with the West – especially the military alliance of NATO – were swiftly becoming a priority for Ukraine.

### **Section 3: Russian Aggression**

#### *International Response*

In May 2014, three months after Yanukovich fled Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko was elected President.<sup>110</sup> Poroshenko brought political experience and oligarch business connections to the position, seen as the best option to lead the country in a time of war and to implement reforms after the conflict ended.<sup>111</sup> Due to the power vacuum in Ukraine after the Euromaidan and “its Western partners urging Kyiv not to take ‘precipitate action,’” Russia was able to fully annex Crimea and integrate it into the Russian Federation.<sup>112</sup> Thus, Poroshenko turned his attention to Eastern Ukraine. Because the West encouraged Ukraine not to take military action in Crimea, they demonstrated their unwillingness to directly confront Russia in this conflict – an indication that Russian aggression had a strong influence on how the West approached Ukraine after the

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<sup>107</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 46.

<sup>108</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 48.

<sup>109</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine.”

<sup>110</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 154.

<sup>112</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 47.

annexation. Had Ukraine become a NATO member before the annexation, this would not have been the case; however, without prior NATO membership, Russian aggression put a hold on Ukraine's ability to attain membership status.

Poroshenko began diplomatic talks with Russia through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>113</sup> The Minsk I Agreement – or Minsk I Protocol – called for the creation of a buffer zone and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the region as well as the exchange of prisoners and access for humanitarian aid.<sup>114</sup> Ultimately, this agreement was not fully implemented and fighting continued to escalate.<sup>115</sup> The Minsk II Agreement, negotiated by Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France, was set to solve the issues of the Minsk I Agreement, namely the stipulation that both sides would need to withdraw their heavy weapons from the buffer zone.<sup>116</sup> This agreement also failed, demonstrating the pressing challenges of resolving this conflict.<sup>117</sup>

The domestic priority for Poroshenko was military reforms. Prior to the conflict “the old army had been underfunded, demoralized, and headed by a number of generals with secret Russian citizenship.”<sup>118</sup> Unlike Poland which had successfully reformed its military in the 1990s for integration with NATO, Ukraine was now faced with these issues while conflict was already emerging. Poroshenko found a reliable defence minister, more than doubled the defense budget, increased the military's size including allowing women to serve in combat, and

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<sup>113</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 49.

<sup>114</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 29.

<sup>115</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 30.

<sup>116</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 30–31.

<sup>117</sup> Jakupec, *Dynamics of the Ukraine War*, 31.

<sup>118</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not 'the' Ukraine*, 51.

improved military training.<sup>119</sup> This military training has been carried out in partnership with NATO to reinforce “its capability development and capacity-building in Ukraine, alongside Allied training of tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops.”<sup>120</sup> In order to accomplish this, “NATO foreign ministers agreed on measures to enhance Ukraine’s ability to provide for its own security” by enhancing existing cooperation programs and developing new ones.<sup>121</sup> This cooperation was mutually beneficial, allowing Ukraine to improve its military capabilities while increasing NATO presence in the Black Sea region – a key strategic location for maritime defense.<sup>122</sup>

After the annexation, the NATO-Ukraine Commission strongly condemned Russia’s actions, clearly indicating NATO’s position in the face of Russian aggression:

We, the Foreign Ministers of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, are united in our condemnation of Russia’s illegal military intervention in Ukraine, and Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. We do not recognize Russia’s illegal and illegitimate “annexation” of Crimea. We will continue to work together to reach a political and diplomatic solution which respects international law and Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders.

We call on Russia to de-escalate by reducing its troops in Crimea to pre-crisis levels and withdrawing them to their bases; to reduce its military activities along the Ukrainian border; to reverse the illegal and illegitimate “annexation” of Crimea; to refrain from any further interference and aggressive actions in Ukraine; to respect the rights of the Ukrainian population including the Crimean Tartars; and to fulfil its international obligations and to abide by international law.<sup>123</sup>

This statement reflects NATO’s position, strongly condemning Russia and calling for its immediate withdrawal; however, in the face of Russian aggression, direct intervention was

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<sup>119</sup> Paquette, *NATO and Eastern Europe after 2000*, 39; Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 51.

<sup>120</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine.”

<sup>121</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine.”

<sup>122</sup> Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine*, 122.

<sup>123</sup> “Statement of the NATO-Ukraine Commission,” NATO, accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/04/01/statement-of-the-nato-ukraine-commission>.

outside NATO's current capabilities with Ukraine still not having been granted membership status. Direct intervention by NATO would further escalate the conflict. Although direct intervention was out of the question, NATO and its Western allies provided economic support to Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Russia to push for an end to the conflict.<sup>124</sup> After the annexation, NATO suspend both civilian and military cooperation with Russia but left communication channels open.<sup>125</sup> Despite limiting ties with Russia to increase pressure for their withdrawal and demonstrate firm solidarity with Ukraine, leaving communication opened allowed for dialogue with Russia about the conflict.

The Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) was implemented at the 2016 Warsaw Summit "as a key mechanism to help Ukraine transform its security and defence sector."<sup>126</sup> At the Summit, NATO reaffirmed their commitment to an independent Ukraine and further condemned Russian actions, calling for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements and continued open communication.<sup>127</sup> They directly asserted that "the Alliance does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia" but "will not compromise on the principles on which our Alliance and security in Europe and North America rest."<sup>128</sup> Even while condemning Russia's actions, NATO made it clear that they were not interested in direct intervention in the current conflict unless Russia violates NATO security directly. Given that "NATO's reaction was

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<sup>124</sup> Eichler, *NATO and the War in Ukraine*, 71.

<sup>125</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

<sup>126</sup> "Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine," NATO, accessed February 18, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/comprehensive-assistance-package-cap-for-ukraine>.

<sup>127</sup> "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," NATO, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2016/07/09/warsaw-summit-communication>.

<sup>128</sup> NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué."

first and foremost rhetorical in nature,” it was demonstrated that Ukraine, while a key NATO partner, did not have NATO military protection.<sup>129</sup>

### *Full-scale Invasion*

Despite NATO’s firm but limited support, Ukraine still maintained the importance of gaining full membership. In February 2019, membership of both NATO and the EU became a constitutional goal.<sup>130</sup> This stipulated that the parliament, cabinet of ministers, and the president are required to ensure and implement “the strategic course of the State to acquire full membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.”<sup>131</sup> The 2019 amendment demonstrated Ukraine’s firm and official commitment to NATO membership moving forward.

Although Poroshenko did implement successful reforms during his term including military and economic reforms – having successfully signed the EU Association Agreement that had sparked the Euromaidan Revolution – his popularity declined as corruption remained an issue in Ukrainian governance.<sup>132</sup> With the ongoing conflict, Ukraine was seeking political change.<sup>133</sup> During the March 2019 presidential elections Volodymyr Zelensky won in a landslide; his party “Servant of the People” also won a parliamentary majority.<sup>134</sup> His objectives followed

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<sup>129</sup> Ulrich Schmid, *Ukraine: Contested Nationhood in a European Context* (Routledge, 2019), 97, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429244506>.

<sup>130</sup> Schmid, *Ukraine*, 102.

<sup>131</sup> “The Constitution of Ukraine,” Official Website of the Parliament of Ukraine, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/go/254%D0%BA/96-%D0%B2%D1%80>.

<sup>132</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 50.

<sup>133</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 172.

<sup>134</sup> Yekelchuk, *Ukraine*, 2nd edition, 173–74.

those of Poroshenko: to put an end to both corruption and conflict in Ukraine.<sup>135</sup> Seeking international aid, Zelensky was faced with the same issue as Poroshenko, finding that “nobody was prepared to push Russia into peace.”<sup>136</sup> NATO’s indirect military support for Ukraine after the annexation substantiated the significant role Russia plays in Ukraine-NATO relations. Russian aggression challenged how these relations developed up to this point and became locked in a stalemate after direct conflict emerged. In February 2022, Russia launched an attack on Ukraine from three fronts.<sup>137</sup> Claiming to be on a mission to “de-nazify” Ukraine and arguing that NATO had been threatening Russia’s borders, Russia’s full-scale war on Ukraine had begun.<sup>138</sup>

### *The Future?*

Following the full-scale invasion, Ukraine again requested NATO membership.<sup>139</sup> At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO stated that “We reaffirm our unwavering solidarity with the government and people of Ukraine in the heroic defence of their nation, their land, and our shared values” and that “We remain steadfast in our commitment to further step up political and practical support to Ukraine as it continues to defend its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, and will continue our support for as long as it takes.”<sup>140</sup> Despite NATO’s unmistakable support for Ukraine and its sovereignty, the emphasis on political and practical support leaves a gap in Ukraine-NATO relations. Without

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<sup>135</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 52.

<sup>136</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 53.

<sup>137</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 53.

<sup>138</sup> Dyczok, *Ukraine Not ‘the’ Ukraine*, 53.

<sup>139</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine.”

<sup>140</sup> NATO, “Vilnius Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2023),” NATO, accessed November 11, 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm).

NATO membership, Ukraine will not receive direct military support from NATO, especially with fears of escalating conflict with Russia emerging should Ukraine become a NATO member. As Article 5 would mobilize the entire NATO alliance against Russia should Ukraine become a member while at war, membership is not a possibility without greatly expanding the casualties of this war. NATO did advance Ukraine's membership status for the future, removing the requirement of MAP even though Ukraine had never actually been offered the program.<sup>141</sup>

NATO continues to condemn Russia's war on Ukraine, repeatedly calling for Russia to "immediately stop this illegal war of aggression, cease its use of force against Ukraine, and completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its forces and equipment from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters."<sup>142</sup> NATO's position on the current conflict demonstrates their commitment to Ukraine, despite Ukraine-NATO relations being restrained by Russian aggression.

Economic and military support to Ukraine has continued to grow. The 2022 Madrid Summit further expanded the CAP, providing "immediate, short-term, non-lethal military assistance."<sup>143</sup> It is important to note that while NATO itself does not provide weapons to Ukraine, individual member nations have done so on their own. A US led initiative, the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG) plans and coordinates the delivery of military supplies to Ukraine.<sup>144</sup> The UDCG includes all thirty-two NATO member states as well as twenty-four

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<sup>141</sup> NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2023)."

<sup>142</sup> NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2023)."

<sup>143</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

<sup>144</sup> "Fact Sheet on Efforts of Ukraine Defense Contact Group – National Armaments Directors," U.S. Department of War, accessed March 26, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3897721/fact-sheet-on-efforts-of-ukraine-defense-contact-group-national-armaments-direc/>.

additional members and representatives from both NATO and the EU.<sup>145</sup> Although NATO member states have facilitated weapon shipments to Ukraine, NATO itself remains firmly committed to deescalation in a non-lethal manner.<sup>146</sup> The 2023 Vilnius Summit extended CAP into a multi-year program “to help rebuild the Ukrainian security and defence sector and transition Ukraine towards full interoperability with NATO.”<sup>147</sup> The continued expansion of CAP demonstrates the evolution of economic aid to Ukraine as the conflict continues. The 2024 Washington Summit created two programs to increase NATO-Ukraine military training and integration: the Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) and the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU).<sup>148</sup>

According to a 2024 survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre, support for NATO membership increased from 66.8 per cent in November-December 2021 to 82.3 per cent in September 2024.<sup>149</sup> Although NATO has supplied non-lethal supplies, economic aid, and military training to support Ukraine, they have not taken any direct intervention in the conflict nor have they provided a clear accession path for Ukraine’s NATO membership. While Ukraine is at war with Russia, NATO cannot accept Ukraine as a member without further escalating the conflict

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<sup>145</sup> *Ukraine Defense Contact Group*, Mission Ukraine, March 30, 2024, <https://uamission.com/ukraine-defense-contact-group/>; For more information on the support provided by the UDCG to Ukraine see “Ramstein: What the Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meetings Delivered for Ukraine in 2025,” Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, December 17, 2025, <https://mod.gov.ua/en/news/ramstein-what-the-ukraine-defense-contact-group-meetings-delivered-for-ukraine-in-2025>.

<sup>146</sup> NATO, “NATO’s Support for Ukraine,” accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/natos-support-for-ukraine>.

<sup>147</sup> NATO, “Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine.”

<sup>148</sup> NATO, “Relations with Ukraine”; NATO, “Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre,” *NATO’s ACT*, n.d., accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.act.nato.int/jatec/>; NATO, “NATO Security Assistance Ukraine,” About NSATU, accessed February 19, 2026, <https://shape.nato.int/NSATU/about-us/about-us>.

<sup>149</sup> “Support among Citizens for Ukrainians Accession to the EU and NATO. Attitude to Foreign Countries. Attitude to Peace Talks,” Razumkov Centre, September 2024, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/research-areas/surveys/support-among-citizens-for-ukraine-s-accession-to-the-eu-and-nato-attitude-to-foreign-countries-attitude-to-peace-talks-september-2024>.

and directly confronting Russian aggression, leaving further development of Ukraine-NATO relations at a standstill.

### **Conclusion**

Since Ukrainian independence, Russia has always been, and still remains, a significant limiting factor in Ukraine-NATO relations. Through both indirect and direct Russian influence, this precedent was established in the early years of Ukrainian independence and continues to be an influential force in NATO's response to Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine. Although NATO affirmed Ukraine's future as a member, its inability to provide an accession path has restricted Ukraine-NATO relations. Ukraine's dynamic political landscape also played a significant role in how these relations could or could not develop.

The legacy of the Soviet Union and the prominence of Russia during the 1990s had a significant influence on Ukraine-NATO relations and set the precedence for this influence to continue. While Ukraine lacked popular support for NATO membership, it was focused on establishing relations with both Russia and NATO. NATO, on the other hand, focused on normalizing relations with Russia and had little focus on Ukraine itself. Although neither Ukraine nor NATO prioritized developing relations with each other, Ukraine did join multiple NATO programs and established the Charter on a Distinct Partnership initiating dialogue and cooperation between NATO and Ukraine.<sup>150</sup> Throughout this period Russia played a significant

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<sup>150</sup> NATO, "North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991-1997)"; NATO, "Partnership for Peace Programme"; NATO, "Relations with Ukraine."

role in the dynamic of Ukraine-NATO relations, establishing its own agreements with both Ukraine and NATO.<sup>151</sup>

The early 2000s saw a distinct shift in how Ukraine and NATO approached each other. Although popular support for NATO membership remained low, the Orange Revolution demonstrated the population's western orientation and commitment to democracy. Despite Putin indicating that his administration viewed NATO enlargement as a threat, NATO declared at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members.<sup>152</sup> NATO, however, failed to provide an accession path or timeline for this to take place. The 2010 presidential election in Ukraine saw pro-Russian leader Yanukovich come to power resulting in a shift away from the West seen previously under Yushchenko. Under Yanukovich, Ukraine declared official non-alignment, effectively halting the development of relations with either NATO or Russia.<sup>153</sup> Lasting until 2014, non-alignment came to an end after the Euromaidan Revolution overthrew Yanukovich and Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Despite Ukraine-NATO relations seeing positive advancement in the early 2000s, NATO's inability to provide Ukraine an accession path, Ukraine's period of non-alignment, and growing Russian aggression all stalled the development of further Ukraine-NATO relations.

Although NATO continues to condemn Russia's actions, both in 2014 and after the full-scale invasion in 2022, they are unable to provide direct intervention in the conflict. NATO has provided Ukraine with both economic support and military training, expanding programs such

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<sup>151</sup> "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation"; NATO, "Relations with Russia."

<sup>152</sup> Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy"; NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2008)."

<sup>153</sup> "On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy," Official Website of the Parliament of Ukraine, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/go/2411-17>.

as CAP, JATEC, and NSATU.<sup>154</sup> Outside of NATO itself, the UDCG plans and coordinates the shipping of military supplies to Ukraine, providing weapons and military equipment.<sup>155</sup> This, however, is done separately from the NATO military structures. The ongoing conflict leaves NATO in a precarious position, balancing firm support for Ukraine with concerns about further antagonizing Russia.

With the ongoing conflict, NATO is unable to accept Ukraine as a member. Doing so would automatically trigger Article 5, mobilizing all of NATO's members against Russia and greatly escalating the conflict.<sup>156</sup> This notion alone demonstrates the undoubtable role that Russia plays in present Ukraine-NATO relations; however, Russia has always been a mediating factor. In the 1990s, NATO focused on normalizing relations with Russia over those with Ukraine. As NATO-Russia hostilities grew in the early 2000s, NATO declared that Ukraine would become a NATO member, despite Putin indicating that NATO enlargement would be viewed as a threat to Russia. This was further exemplified through Russian aggression in Georgia after the Bucharest Declaration. While Ukraine declared non-alignment from 2010 to 2014, Russia's annexation of the Crimea and full-scale invasion in 2022 has resulted in the standstill of the development of Ukraine-NATO relations. During my visit to NATO Headquarters in May 2025, the possibility of Ukraine's membership status playing a key role in peace deals with Russia was discussed; however, it was also directly stated that Ukraine will become a full NATO member in the future. These statements appear contradictory and are a display of NATO's still hesitant approach to

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<sup>154</sup> NATO, "Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine"; NATO, "Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre"; NATO, "NATO Security Assistance Ukraine."

<sup>155</sup> Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, "Ramstein: What the Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meetings Delivered for Ukraine in 2025."

<sup>156</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty."

direct Ukrainian integration in the face of Russian aggression. The current approach by NATO demonstrates that full NATO membership is currently out of reach for Ukraine; however, future relations would heavily rely on overcoming Russia's persistent and overbearing role.

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