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Prospects for Cooperation between NATO and Ukraine

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During the Brussels summit, NATO expressed its readiness to develop cooperation with Ukraine, but this will be dependent on domestic reforms in that country. At present, progress in this respect is not sufficient to allow Ukraine to deepen its relations with the Alliance. The Ukrainian authorities should continue introducing changes in the security and defence sector and extend the interoperability of the Ukrainian and NATO armed forces.

The situation in Ukraine was discussed during the NATO summit in Brussels, held on 11– 12 July. The debate took place as part of a trilateral meeting on security in the Black Sea region, with the participation of the Alliance countries, Ukraine and Georgia. No separate meeting of the NATO–Ukraine Commission was held owing to opposition from Hungary, which has been blocking meetings since last autumn as Budapest is in dispute with Kyiv regarding Ukrainian education law.

The Brussels Summit Provisions Regarding Ukraine. The meeting in Brussels did not change the dynamics of relations between Ukraine and NATO. The final declaration only indicates that the decisions taken in 2008 at the Bucharest summit, including the assurances that Ukraine will eventually become a member of the Alliance, remain in force. NATO confirmed its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory and condemned the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Alliance also called on the Ukrainian authorities to continue domestic reforms, especially in the security and defence sector, while declaring that it will continue to support Ukraine in strengthening its defence capabilities and adopting NATO standards.

Despite Ukrainian efforts, the country has not been included in NATO's Extended Opportunities Programme, which the authorities in Kyiv had been hoping for since withdrawing their Membership Action Plan (MAP) application at the Brussels summit (even though there was never any chance of success in getting the MAP). The Extended Opportunities Programme is not a direct route to NATO membership, but it does provide for additional cooperation in terms of planning, exercises and information exchange, and is addressed to those partners that make a special contribution to Alliance operations (Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden are now involved). Some NATO members, however, rejected Ukraine's potential inclusion, justifying their decision by pointing to, among other things, the low level of interoperability between the Ukrainian and NATO armed forces.

Security and Defence Reforms in Ukraine. Forced by the need to counteract the Russian aggression, the Ukrainian authorities in 2014 initiated wide-ranging reforms in the security-and-defence sector. The changes mainly affected the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), the potential of which has increased significantly. The number of troops in active service has nearly doubled to more than 200,000 people. Military expenditure has increased more than threefold, and should reach about $3.3 billion in 2018, although this is still far below the amount needed (the Ministry of Defence applied for in excess of $5 billion). Command and control reform began simultaneously. The Ministry of Defence aims to have the UAF fully able to achieve NATO standards and interoperability with Alliance troops by the end of 2020, but

this will be difficult to reach. Vadym Prystayko, the head of Ukraine's mission to NATO, estimated that only 25% of NATO standards had been implemented by February this year.

At the same time, NATO has been increasingly vocal in recent weeks about the pace and scope of Ukrainian reforms, including the implementation of the annual action plan. The Alliance criticises Ukraine primarily for the lack of civilian control over the armed forces. Despite repeated promises by the Ukrainian authorities this has not yet been introduced, which weakens Ukraine's credibility among NATO countries. A new law on national security, adopted by the Ukrainian parliament in June, provides that civilian leadership will take over the Ministry of Defence from 1 January 2019.

NATO also urges Ukraine to strengthen parliamentary control over the security and defence sector, including over defence expenditures and special services. In this respect, however, the Ukrainian authorities are likely to delay changes further in order to avoid damaging the interests of business groups that currently receive financial benefits through the non-transparent defence procurement system.

The Importance of Relations Between NATO and Ukraine. Relations between NATO and Ukraine have intensified significantly since Russia's aggression against the latter. The Alliance has been actively engaged in supporting Ukraine, both strategically (through consultancy in the field of security and defence sector reform) and tactically (through NATO training for Ukrainian units). At the summit in Warsaw, NATO countries additionally approved the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine, including, among other things, projects in the areas of command and control, logistics, cybersecurity and medical rehabilitation. Since 2014, the Ukrainian authorities have recognised Alliance membership as a priority in their foreign policy and announced that Ukraine's desire to join both NATO and the EU will be enshrined in the constitution (40–45% of Ukrainians are now in favour of joining the Alliance). Although lack of consensus on this matter among the current Alliance members makes Ukraine's accession to NATO unlikely in the near future, further cooperation is of key political importance for both parties. The annexation of Crimea weakened the credibility of NATO's policy towards its partners, so Alliance support for Ukraine signals that NATO disagrees with the Russian policy of creating zones of influence and defends the principles on which the European order is based. For Ukraine, cooperation with NATO is an opportunity to strengthen its security and independence from Russia.

Prospects. In the short term, it is most likely that the current state of bilateral relations between NATO and Ukraine will continue. The Alliance will further support Ukraine in strengthening its defence capabilities, strategically and tactically. However, emphasis will be on the more effective use of existing instruments, especially the annual action plan, towards which Ukraine has so far been ambivalent, considering it only as option on the road to NATO membership. Any possible deepening of cooperation between Ukraine and NATO should be considered in the medium term at earliest and will be dependent on Ukraine's further progress in reforming the security and defence sector, including the introduction of civilian control over the armed forces and increasing UAF interoperability with NATO forces.

At the same time, NATO will continue to put pressure on the Ukrainian authorities to fulfil their commitments with respect to security and defence sector reform. For a growing number of Alliance members, the need for Ukraine to counteract Russian aggression no longer justifies the further delay of domestic reforms. From the Polish point of view, changes that may lead to increased transparency of defence spending and liberalisation of the defence industry market will be important, as they would facilitate cooperation between Polish enterprises and Ukrainian partners in this sector. However, the lack of prospects for deeper relations with NATO in the short term, which could be used in the upcoming presidential campaign in Ukraine, will significantly reduce the political incentives for further reforms.

The Hungarian authorities will probably keep blocking NATO–Ukraine Commission meetings in the near future, due to Budapest's dispute with Kyiv over Ukrainian education law. While Ukraine declares its willingness to comply with the Venice Commission recommendations, which Hungary sees as a precondition for lifting the veto, this may happen no sooner that in autumn this year, when the Ukrainian parliament convenes after the summer break. However, it is possible that Hungary will again decide to block cooperation between NATO and Ukraine, especially if the latter adopts a new law that would regulate use of the state language and weaken the position of minority languages (in February, the law regulating this matter was recognised as unconstitutional). It is in Poland's interest that any current and potential new disputes between Hungary and Ukraine be resolved bilaterally, and do not affect Alliance cooperation with Ukraine.