

The Concept of Non-Alignment in Ukrainian Strategic Thinking

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This article showcases the relationship between Ukraine's policies of Euro-Atlantic integration and the non-alignment (neutrality or the non-bloc status) concept in a historical perspective. Being interwoven in the fabric of public discussions about the state's strategic orientation, both concepts have maintained their conflicting presence in the official discourse. The state's official course has oscillated between the two in a pendulum swing under the gravity of concrete political circumstances, calculus and timing. Initially, neutrality was a reflection of the quest of the newly independent state to safeguard its statehood. Because there was clearly a gap between the ideas of collective security, of which Ukraine has sought to be a part, and neutrality, there was, from the mid-1990s, a pronounced shift towards Euro-Atlantic integration as Ukraine's strategic goal. Later, non-bloc status was shown, on many occasions, to have been instrumentalized by the political class. It served as an escape strategy for a leadership disgruntled with the democratization pressure from the West or as an appeasement against Russian assertiveness. After the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, the idea of neutrality lost its ground in the official discourse and was marginalized as it was seen as a product of Russian coercion.

Keywords: Ukraine, non-alignment, neutrality, Russia



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Introduction

The Ukrainian case is an embodiment of the conundrums posed by neutrality as a security option. Ukraine's precarious position between two antagonistic security systems since its independence has invited speculation that the country's own security interests and those of Russia and the West would be best served if Ukraine opted for neutrality and abstained

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from joining the Euro-Atlantic structures. Some commentators have regarded Ukraine's size, ethnic diversity, multi-layered national identity, and its being a 'phantom pain' for Russia as a natural prescription for neutrality. The Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014 has reinvigorated the international debate on the relevance of neutrality, the repercussions of the changing security environment for European neutral states in general, and the applicability of neutrality as a problem-solving model for Ukraine in particular.

Ukrainian strategic thinking since early 1990s was nourished by the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment, or non-bloc, status (used interchangeably) alongside the ideas of multi-vectorism, Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism. From the early 2000s, when NATO membership became a tangible option on Ukraine's security agenda, up to 2014, one could witness a struggle of strategic narratives in a Ukrainian society that was oscillating between neutrality and a pro-Western orientation. The neutrality debate was a condensed representation of the identity struggles, fears, and apprehensions of a fragile, emergent democracy.

This paper sets out to describe the place of the neutrality concept in the strategic thinking of Ukraine. The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the concepts of neutrality (non-alignment or non-bloc status) and Euro-Atlantic integration in Ukrainian public discussions. It explores the reasons for the oscillation of the official political course between the two in the past and the main pro and con arguments behind the domestic and international debate on neutrality as a security-enhancing model for Ukraine.

Oscillating between neutrality and the West, 1991–2005

Because of the divisive nature of the 'neutrality versus Euro-Atlantic integration' debate from the early 1990s, a clear-cut

definition of Ukraine's strategic goals was absent and there was general conceptual confusion around the issue. The record of the use of the neutrality concept in official discourse was quite patchy. The declaration of state sovereignty of 1990 positioned Ukraine as a neutral state.¹ However, the neutrality posture evolved: the initially declared permanent neutrality had to be reconciled with the elite's desire to promote Ukraine as a constituent part of the European security system. The tension between the two ideas was apparently recognized at the time. Symptomatically, in the early independence years, the Ukrainian leadership did not rule out the abandonment of neutral status and accession to NATO, should the international environment change.

The neutrality option represented a difficult balancing act between two conflicting pressures: that of Ukraine's desire to integrate with Europe, on one side, and its dependence on Russia, on the other.² After 1991, owing to the ties of interdependency, foreign policy and security thinking of its elite naturally turned around cooperation with Russia and within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), even though there were apprehensions about Russia's assertiveness. Ukraine was striving to obtain international support (hence its denuclearization policy), to have its borders recognized by its neighbours, and to settle the conflict issues with Russia.

In the initial years, Ukraine's neutrality underwent significant changes. Only seven years passed from proclaiming permanent neutrality to agreeing on a distinctive partnership with NATO in 1997. According to the former Foreign Minister, Anatoliy Zlenko, this was a natural shift for a newly established state 'from initial, somewhat idealistic views to the understanding of realities and designing of the pragmatic policies on their basis.'³ He opined that the declaration of permanent neutrality had played a positive role in the first

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1 Декларація про державний суверенітет України. (Відомості Верховної Ради УРСР (БВР), 1990, N 31, ст.429 [Declaration on State Sovereignty of Ukraine, Statements of Verkhovna Rada of USSR (VRU)]

2 Larrabee, F.S. "Ukraine's Balancing Act", *Survival*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1996, p. 143.

3 Зленко, А., "Нейтралітет чи позаблоковість: чи це в інтересах України?", Віче, квітень 2009 [Zlenko, A. "Neutrality or Non-bloc Status: Is This in Interests of Ukraine?", *Viche*, April 2009], Available at: <http://veche.kiev.ua/journal/1418/> (Accessed: July 9, 2020)

years of Ukrainian independence, since it enabled avoiding Russian pressure to join a new military alliance on the territory of the former Soviet Union. However, this policy has evolved towards greater engagement with NATO. The major concern at that moment was not to let Ukraine turn into a buffer or ‘grey zone’.⁴ Thus, neutrality served important political purposes when Ukraine gained its independence, but later was believed not to reflect the Ukrainian strategic realities.

The evolution was fast and pronounced: the ‘Main directions of foreign policy of Ukraine’ resolution adopted by Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada in July 1993 stated that neutrality should not interfere with Ukraine’s participation in the all-European security system.⁵ Ukraine’s Constitution of 1996 did not incorporate the neutrality clause; on the contrary, the National Security Concept from 1997 stated Ukraine’s willingness to enter ‘the existing and new systems of universal and regional security’ and the Law on the National Security of 2003 stated, for the first time, the need to join the EU and NATO while maintaining good relations with Russia.⁶

From the early 1990s, Ukraine acknowledged the central role played by NATO in the European security architecture and, unlike Russia, did not see the organization’s activities or enlargement as inconsistent with its national interests. It welcomed the signing of the ‘Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security’ between Russia and NATO (1997) as it considered normalization of their relations as a contributing factor to its national security.

Ukraine joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme in 1994 and became an active participant in almost all NATO

4 Zlenko, A., “Foreign Policy Interests and Problems of European Security”, *Fordham International Law Journal*, Vol. 21, November 1997, No 1, pp.55-56.

5 Про Основні напрями зовнішньої політики України (Відомості Верховної Ради України (ВВР), 1993, N 37, ст.379) [About the Main Directions of Foreign Policy of Ukraine, Statements of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine]

6 Про Концепцію (основи державної політики) національної безпеки України (Відомості Верховної Ради України (ВВР), 1997, N 10, ст.85) [On the Concept (Fundamentals of the State Policy) of the National Security of Ukraine, Statements of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine], Закон України Про основи національної безпеки України (Відомості Верховної Ради України (ВВР), 2003, № 39, ст.351) [Law of Ukraine On the Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine, Statements of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine]

exercises. After signing of Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between Ukraine and NATO in 1997, Ukraine took pride in seeing this as a signal that it was among the founding states of the new European security system.⁷

In the mid-1990s, alongside the lack of full normalization of Ukrainian–Russian relations, Ukraine increasingly leaned towards the Western institutions. The lack of a final settlement of the Russian Black Sea Fleet issue and Russia’s stance in not recognizing the Ukrainian borders until the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership was signed in 1997 are believed to have pushed the Ukrainian authorities to seek independent security arrangements outside of the Russia-led integration projects.

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The CIS was regarded by Ukraine as a playground for Russian hegemonic practices. Ukraine sought to approach the organization as a discussion club rather than as a new integration entity and, by not ratifying its charter, became not a member, but only a participant. Ukraine’s abstention at that time was a key factor ‘holding back the emergence of a new Russian-led military bloc that could once again plunge Europe into a Cold War.’⁸

Integration into Europe in all realms was seen as a reinstatement of a separate, non-Russian identity for Ukraine, and strengthened its newly acquired status against the former empire. However, in Ukraine’s case, unlike those of other Central European members of the former Warsaw pact, the security policies seemed to be not underpinned by the idea of ‘returning to Europe’ as an existential choice. The majority of Ukrainians did not perceive Russia as a threat and, in the public imagination, moving towards Europe did not preclude maintaining ‘brotherly’ relations with Russia. Moreover, the idea of joining NATO occupied the minds of only a small part of the political elite and society at large. At a time when Ukraine’s Central European neighbours were not part of the EU and NATO and the creation of some sub-regional security groupings was considered plausible, neutrality seemed to be one of the more or less legitimate ideas.

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7 Zlenko, A., “Foreign Policy Interests...”, p.58.

8 Kuzio, T., “A Way with Words: Keeping Kiev Secure”, *The World Today*, Vol. 52, No. 12, December 1996, p.319.

During Leonid Kuchma's two terms (1994–2005), Ukraine maintained its signature multi-vector policy. This policy was regarded as a pragmatic instrument for benefitting from not staking all on co-operation with one partner and a way for a disoriented new state to come to terms with its foreign policy identity while building its statehood. It has also been continuously criticized by advocates of European orientation as an ambivalent policy that kept Ukraine in a gray zone of estrangement from European partners.

In 2002, then-President Kuchma announced, in a first ever statement of this kind, that Ukraine's eventual goal is NATO membership. The NATO-Ukraine Action Plan was adopted at a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the level of Foreign Ministers. This turn was apparently a reflection of the fact that Kuchma's second term was blemished by controversies⁹ and he attempted to go out of international isolation. On this and many other occasions, the vulnerability of the Ukrainian political clan was skillfully utilized by Russia, which led to anxiety that this would reorient the country 'from carefully measured, Western-oriented neutrality, to being openly Moscow dominated'.¹⁰

The commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration turned out to be a declaratory figure of speech rather than a strategic narrative for reform. The democratic deficit and the superficial nature of the reforms made both European and Euro-Atlantic integration a hostage of political mimicry and simulation. A dubious and politically motivated approach to NATO membership manifested itself in July 2004 when, after the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the Istanbul NATO Summit, then-President Kuchma amended the Military Doctrine by decree. The initial text of the Doctrine, which had been adopted a month before, included a clause about the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, with EU and NATO membership as the final goal. The updated version excluded the provision about membership. The rationale voiced was that both EU and NATO

9 The murder of the opposition journalist Giorgi Gongadze in 2000 and the following 'Kuchmagate'; Kolchuga scandal in 2002.

10 "Ukraine at the Crossroads: Ten Years After Independence", Hearing Before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, One Hundred Seventh Congress, First Session, 2 May 2001, Vol.4, U.S. Government Printing Office.

were in ‘crisis’ because of enlargement and the war in Iraq.¹¹

The clause about Ukraine preparing for fully fledged membership in the EU and NATO was reinstated to the Doctrine, though, after the Orange Revolution in April 2005 by then-President Viktor Yushchenko, who ran on a slogan of Ukraine belonging to the West. In 2005, an Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine’s aspiration to NATO membership was launched. This post-Maidan period was crucial for elevating the idea of EU and NATO membership to the level of a strategic narrative for the first time in Ukrainian history. The idea did not take root and the programme was never fully implemented because of internal political divisions. In the 2006 parliamentary elections, the pro-Russian Party of Regions came to power and Viktor Yanukovich, elected as Prime Minister, famously declared that Ukraine was not ready for NATO membership.

The experience of non-bloc status, 2010–2014

In President Yanukovich era (2010–2014), the strategic documents of Ukraine were amended with a clause about non-bloc status. At the same time, Ukraine declared that its commitment to be a part of the European system of collective security remained unwavering, which raised doubts among Ukrainian experts who saw these two vectors as irreconcilable.¹²

Non-bloc status in this period was camouflaging policies that were gravitating towards Russia. In 2010, in open contradiction to the neutrality principle, then-President Yanukovich signed the so-called ‘Kharkiv agreements’ with the then Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, which allowed for the prolongation of the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea for an additional 25 years.

11 “Кучма пояснив, чому він виключив з Військової доктрини положення про вступ України до НАТО і ЄС” [Kuchma explained why he had excluded the clause about Ukraine’s accession to NATO and EU from the Military Doctrine], *Korrespondent.net*, 6 August 2004, Available at: <https://ua.korrespondent.net/ukraine/249165-kuchma-poyasniv-chomu-vin-viklyuchiv-z-vijskovoyi-doktrini-polozhennya-pro-vstup-ukrayini-do-nato-i-es> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

12 S. Glebov, “The Black Sea Security Space in Perspective: Ukraine’s Non-alignment as a Challenge to the ‘New’ Euro-atlanticism”, in Ayca Ergun and Hamlet Isaxanli (eds.), *Security and Cross Border Cooperation in the EU, the Black Sea Region and Southern Caucasus* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2013), p.99.

According to the official narrative, the abstention from joining military alliances would enable focusing efforts and resources on comprehensive social and economic reforms. The reasoning was also that NATO membership was divisive for the society and would escalate tensions in regional security. Conflictual relations with Russia were portrayed as harming Ukraine's national interests and European integration efforts. At the same time, the Ukrainian leadership was ruling out the idea of joining the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – notwithstanding the latter's pressure that had been exercised from the early 2000s when Vladimir Putin ascended to power in Russia.¹³

The intra-Ukrainian debates on neutrality in those years reflected the dynamics within Russian–Ukrainian relations as well as Russia–West antagonisms. The main argument in favour of neutrality was the belief that neutrality would solve the Ukrainian

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‘geography curse’ and help it to benefit from staying equidistant from two conflicting blocs— an idea which has had a long tradition in Ukrainian strategic thinking.¹⁴ The narrative of the ‘bridge between the civilizations’ transmitted this vision.

References to historical precedents were at the centre of this discourse: the neutrality advocates talked about the Swiss model as the one that Ukraine needed to pursue. They also pointed to the fact that Ukraine had not been welcomed into NATO and referred to the ‘unwilling West’ as a justification for becoming neutral.¹⁵ At a time when parts of the population and the political establishment were maintaining the image of NATO as a hostile bloc (especially the case after the NATO operation in Serbia in 1999 and the

13 Greene, J., “Russian Responses to NATO and EU Enlargement and Outreach”, Chatham House Briefing Paper, June 2012, p.6, Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0612bp_greene.pdf (Accessed: 1 August 2020)

14 *Between Russia and the West. Foreign and Security Policy of Independent Ukraine*, Derek Müller, Kurt.R. Spillman, and Andreas Wenger (eds.), (Berne, Berlin, Brussels, Frankfurt a. M., New York, Oxford, Vienna: Peter Lang, 1999), p.22.

15 Тарасюк, Б., “Членство в НАТО? Час визначатися!” [Tarasiuk, B., “NATO Membership? Time to decide!”], 11 October 2014, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/boris-tarasyuk-chlenstvo-v-nato-chas-viznachatysya> (Accessed: 28 July 2020)

US-led operation in Iraq in 2003), neutrality had a solid base in Ukrainian society.

In a situation in which NATO membership remained highly contentious, neutrality was portrayed as a tool for eliminating a divisive issue for Ukrainian society and directing its undivided attention and resources to internal transformation. It was also argued that this would have a pacifying effect on Russia, as it would be vivid proof that Ukrainian policy was not anti-Russian. Taking into account certain apprehensions that Ukraine had about the Russian reaction, there was also an idea that some type of international treaty should be signed with Russia, and potentially with NATO or other states as well, that would grant some security guarantees to Ukraine. In a milder version, proponents of neutrality were advocating a short- or medium-term period of neutrality for the time during which Ukraine was conducting reforms and approaching NATO and EU standards.

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The critics of non-bloc status pointed to the fact that Ukraine was opting for neutrality against the backdrop of a general decline in its economic and military potential, which rendered it very vulnerable. The argument went that neutrality could bring benefits only if it was reinforced with a set of necessary legal and institutional mechanisms, as opposed to being merely a product of political conjuncture or pressure from neighbouring states.¹⁶ It was contended that the environment had changed and, unlike at the beginning of the 1990s, when there was hope for a more peaceful and conflict-free future, it was unnatural for Ukraine to stay neutral.

It was argued that neutral status strips the state of its deterrence potential. References to a lack of resources as a rationale for neutrality were criticized by an informed analysis that showed that the defence expenditures of neutral states, on average, exceeded those of NATO members. Some research suggested extremely high costs for operationalizing Ukraine's neutrality

¹⁶ Федуняк, С., “Перспективи позаблоковості України у контексті сучасних тенденцій у сфері безпеки”, Актуальні проблеми міжнародних відносин 2012 [Fedunyak, S., “The Perspectives of Ukraine’s Non-bloc Status in the Context of the Contemporary Trends in the Security Sphere”, *Topical Problems of International Relations 2012*], p.34.

and implementing a different force structure and military organization able to repel aggression from all directions.¹⁷

From non-alignment to a pro-NATO defence posture: Post-2014 debate

After the change of power in Ukraine as a result of Maidan (2013–2014), Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas, a strategic shift occurred from a non-aligned to a pro-NATO defence posture. In December 2014, the Ukrainian parliament passed, and President Petro Poroshenko signed, a

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law abolishing the country’s neutral, non-aligned status on the basis that Ukraine needed ‘to seek better safeguards of its independence, sovereignty, security and territorial integrity’ given Russia’s hybrid war.¹⁸ All strategic documents were updated to reinstate NATO membership as the country’s foreign policy objective. In February 2019, the Constitution was amended with clauses about integration with the European Union and NATO as the country’s strategic choice.

The issue of neutrality was traditionally linked to the Budapest memorandum (1994) that provided for what Ukraine perceived as security guarantees from Russia, the USA, and the UK after it went nuclear free. With the aggression of Russia – one of the guarantors of the Memorandum – the neutrality principle was significantly compromised. In the eyes of the majority of Ukrainians, the argument that Russia would get sufficient assurances if Kyiv abandoned its Euro-Atlantic aspirations but continued with European integration stood no criticism. The pressure that the Russian leadership put on then-President Yanukovich not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013 was an outright and unacceptable manifestation of Russian veto power.

17 Mychajlyszyn, N., “Civil-Military Relations in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Implications for Domestic and Regional Stability”, *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 28, Spring 2002, No 3, p. 467.

18 “Ukraine’s Parliament Drops Non-aligned Status”, *VOA News*, 23 December 2014, Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/ukraines-parliament-drops-non-aligned-status> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

At a time when some high-profile international experts (e.g. John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Henry Kissinger) seemed to be contemplating neutrality as a solution to the ‘Ukrainian crisis’, for the Ukrainian political establishment, and for the majority of its population, neutrality, in general, ceased to exist as a political category. There is a widely supported recognition that being a part of the Euro-Atlantic security system, which provides for clear mutual defence commitments, would serve Ukraine’s interests much better than relying on neutral status, which is never likely to be respected by Russia or to tame its further expansion.¹⁹

Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict on Ukrainian soil, when the adoption of neutrality became irrelevant, this concept has been considerably marginalized from mainstream political discourse and is maintained mainly by pro-Russian forces. In the latest (2019) parliamentary elections, the neutrality concept featured in the manifestos of only two out of twenty-two parties that ran in the elections; the rest supported Euro-Atlantic integration, and a majority of those also supported NATO membership.²⁰ Those two pro-Russian forces, ‘Opposition Platform – For Life’ and ‘Opposition Bloc’, received 13% and 3% of the vote, respectively.

Public opinion polls after 2014 displayed a radical increase in support for NATO accession across the country. At the all-Ukrainian level, the numbers show clear support for accession to NATO. In December 2019, a majority of the population (51%) believed that the best option for guaranteeing security for Ukraine would be accession to NATO. Non-aligned status was supported by 26%, and the support for a military union with Russia and other CIS countries was 5.5%. In comparison, in 2012, only 13% of Ukrainians were in favour of NATO accession, 31% supported the idea of a military alliance with Russia and the CIS countries,

19 “Is Neutrality a Solution for Ukraine?”, *Institute of World Policy Memo*, January 2017, Available at: <http://iwp.org.ua/en/publication/chy-ye-nejtralitet-vyhadom-dlya-ukrayiny-2/> (Accessed: 1 August 2020)

20 Шелест, Г., Герасимчук С., “Зовнішній курс у новій Раді: аналізуємо обіцянки партій”, *Європейська Правда* [Shelest H., Gerasymchuk S., “Foreign Policy in new Rada: analyzing the parties’ promises”, *Yevropeyska Pravda*], 18 July 2019, Available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2019/07/18/7098622/> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

and 31% would choose non-aligned status.²¹

The idea of neutrality resonates most strongly in the east and south of Ukraine, where support for joining Russia-led unions was traditionally prevalent before. While NATO membership is supported in the western (80%) and central (54%) regions, respondents in the south (41%) and east (42%) prefer a neutral status for Ukraine. A military alliance with Russia is supported by 7% of respondents in the south and 14% in the east.²²

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NATO has endorsed Ukraine's security and defence sector reforms through the Comprehensive Assistance Package (since 2016). In June 2020, the North Atlantic Council recognised Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, given Ukraine's significant past and present contribution to NATO operations (peace-support operations in the Balkans, the ISAF and Resolute Support missions in Afghanistan, the NATO Training Mission in Iraq, Active Endeavour, Ocean Shield, and Sea Guardian operations, and NATO Response Force).

The administration of the incumbent President, Volodymyr Zelensky (from 2019), has maintained continuity in foreign and security policy and endorses the pro-EU and NATO strategic course, even though Zelensky's beliefs on the subject initially seemed to be obscure.²³ The pro-

21 "Підтримка громадянами вступу України до НАТО з 2012 року зросла майже на 30%" [Citizens' support for Ukraine's NATO accession has risen for 30% since 2012], Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 23 August 2019, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/pidtrimka-gromadyanami-vstupu-ukraini-do-nato-z-2012-roku-zroslo-mayzhe-na-30> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

22 "Підсумки-2019 й прогнози на 2020-й: громадська думка" [The results of 2019 and the forecast for 2020: public opinion], Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 26 December 2019, Available at: <https://dif.org.ua/article/pidsumki-2019-gromadska-dumka> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

23 Vorotnyuk, M., "In Inauguration Address, Ukrainian President Zelensky Gives Hints About His Policies at Home and Abroad", *Jamestown Foundation EDM*, Vol.16, Issue 75, May 22, 2019, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/>

NATO course is maintained even though there is a feeling that relations with the organization have been somewhat simplistically reduced to the idea that Ukraine should follow NATO standards in its armed forces reforms.²⁴ The concerns about the continuity of this course have caused active political mobilization of civil society and it is likely that this will not allow the neutrality option to resurface on a mainstream political level.

‘Neutralization’ of Ukraine: Problem-solving model or impasse?

In 2014, Ukraine appeared at the centre of the reinvigorated international neutrality debate. The proposition to ‘neutralize’ Ukraine has been prescribed by some international experts and decision-makers as a problem-solving model and a safeguard against Russian expansionist policies. Critiques of this approach entail arguments about the inadmissibility of the existence of veto power by any state against another state’s sovereign decisions. The abandonment of Ukraine under Russian pressure would mean a surrender of Western values and could backfire by weakening the international system.²⁵

The international supporters of Ukrainian neutrality point to what they believe to be Russia’s legitimate security interests. The argument goes that Ukraine’s survival is directly related to its acceptance by Russia.²⁶ The options offered include Ukraine dropping the idea of joining NATO or, in a more far-reaching variation, abandoning integration with the EU altogether.

in-inauguration-address-ukrainian-president-zelensky-gives-hints-about-his-policies-at-home-and-abroad/ (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

24 Vorotnyuk, M. “No reason to believe that Russian strategic calculus as to Ukraine has undergone substantial change”, *UAinFocus*, May 10, 2020, Available at: <https://www.uainfocus.org/post/no-reason-to-believe-that-russian-strategic-calculus-as-to-ukraine-has-undergone-substantial-change> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

25 Ash, T., Gunn, J., Lough, J., et al., “The Struggle for Ukraine”, Chatham House Report, (London: Latimer Trend, 2017), p.2, Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-10-18-struggle-for-ukraine-ash-gunn-lough-lutsevych-nixey-sherr-wolczukV5.pdf> (Accessed: 24 July 2020)

26 Mearsheimer, J.J., “Getting Ukraine Wrong”, *The New York Times*, 13 March 2014, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/getting-ukraine-wrong.html> (Accessed: 28 July 2020)

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In another reading, Ukraine should follow the analogy of Austria, which adopted a neutrality law and a special law precluding its unification with Germany. In this vein, Ukraine can guarantee its statehood through a neutrality status and a law preventing it, or parts of its territory, from joining Russia. Russia, in this case, would be expected to respect this arrangement.²⁹

The Western realist tradition sometimes portrays Ukraine's neutrality and it serving as a buffer between the West and the East as a desirable geostrategic arrangement. Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine are interpreted as 'extreme defensive actions' caused by US incursive behaviour in the Russian

27 Cohen, J., "Here's How Ukraine Can Take Charge of its Fate: By Declaring Neutrality", *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2014, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/28/heres-how-ukraine-can-take-charge-of-its-fate-by-declaring-neutrality/> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

28 Kissinger, H.A., "To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End", *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2014, Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

29 H. Gärtner, "The Model of Neutrality: The Example of East-Central European States," in Herbert R. Reginbogin and Pascal Lottaz (eds.), *Permanent Neutrality: A Model for Peace, Security, and Justice* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), p.100.

neighbourhood.³⁰ In general, advocates of Ukrainian neutrality tend to speak about processes in Ukraine as Western-engineered. There is no genuine belief that pro-NATO sentiments would be the same had the West not supported pro-Western politicians and given massive support to Ukraine.³¹

Criticism of the neutrality option for Ukraine cites neutrality's historically poor track record (cases when neutrality was violated) and the changing nature of neutrality. There is a school of thought claiming that regional integration and the transnational character of threats erodes neutrality in its primary understanding and that the term 'post-neutrality' better conveys contemporary realities. Even though neutral states remain outside of collective defence provisions, their foreign and security policies are intertwined with NATO.³² Both Sweden and Finland enjoy the benefits of close co-operation with NATO and enjoy the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partners. Neutral states are an integral part of the West; they are politically aligned with their Western partners and have full allegiance to shared norms. Moreover, EU membership also rests on solidarity and mutual defence, as Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union provides that, if an EU member is subjected to armed aggression on its territory, other EU countries have an obligation to aid. Thus, pure neutrality on the European continent is non-existent and absolute 'neutralization' of Ukraine is unrealistic.

There are also Ukraine-specific parameters, both international and domestic, that make the Ukrainian case stand out. There should exist a set of factors for the external recognition of neutrality, otherwise neutrality might remain mere wishful thinking. These include sufficient military capabilities to deter or repel aggression, having reliable security guarantees from powerful partners, avoiding antagonizing the great powers, and

30 "Professor Stephen Walt on the Crisis in Ukraine", 25 March 2014, Available at: <https://bostonglobalforum.org/news-and-events/events/professor-stephen-walt-on-the-crisis-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

31 John Mearsheimer, speech at the panel "Russia, Ukraine and the West: Is Confrontation Inevitable?", Chatham House, 25 June 2014, Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/russia-ukraine-and-west-confrontation-inevitable> (Accessed: 9 July 2020)

32 A. Cottey, "Introduction: The European Neutral States." in Andrew Cottey (ed.), *The European Neutrals and NATO: Non-alignment, Partnership, Membership?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.8.

location in a strategically unimportant or secure environment in the midst of a collective defence system.³³ All of these factors are problematic for Ukraine. Moreover, neutrality, in historical perspective, proved to be costly in terms of the need for permanent accommodations, compromises, and the search for acceptance by the great powers.³⁴

It is also argued that the ‘benign’ geographic positioning of Austria, Switzerland, and Ireland allowed them to maintain an unchanged understanding of neutrality, while Sweden’s and Finland’s turbulent security environments in the Baltic sea have incited them to move from a wider, classical neutrality to a more narrow military non-alignment.³⁵ Ukraine, from this perspective, is destined to be searching for safeguards for its security within the Euro-Atlantic security system in order to withstand Russian military probing and intimidation. No other country has such a geostrategic and even spiritual significance for Russia’s self-perception as does Ukraine. The proposed classical model of neutrality for Ukraine falls short of recognizing this inherent limitation. While European neutral states are surrounded by like-minded democratic partners and the probability of military conflict is non-existent, Ukraine faces different realities.

The example of neutral countries providing an important bridge for East–West dialogue during the Cold War is instructive, but there is no evidence to indicate that Ukraine could effectively

the argument, externally imposed neutrality would carry a negative connotation of the ‘neutralization’ of Ukraine to the benefit of external powers at the expense of its own interests.

serve as a connecting link between the two. Ukrainian neutrality would not be driven by some sort of moral purpose – which is a part of neutral states’ identity – but, rather, would be a defensive introvert posture aiming to pacify a regional hegemon. To sum up the argument, externally imposed neutrality would carry a negative connotation of the ‘neutralization’ of Ukraine to the benefit of external powers at the expense of its own interests.

33 A.Hyde-Price, “Geopolitics and the Concept of Neutrality in Contemporary Europe,” in Heinz Gärtner (ed.), *Engaged Neutrality: An Evolved Approach to the Cold War* (Lanham: Lexington, 2017), p.127.

34 *Ibid.*, p.128.

35 *Ibid.*, p.123.

Conclusion

The neutrality (or non-alignment) security option and ideas of integration with NATO have, for years, maintained their conflicting presence in the public discourse of Ukraine. After the early neutrality years, often characterised as a ‘romantic’ period in Ukrainian self-identification, there followed a period of a more critical appraisal of its strategic realities, as seen through the country’s ‘special relations’ with NATO. Integration with the West was deemed to be conducive to the post-Communist transit and democratization of Ukraine, as well as for ameliorating relations with Russia by pragmatizing the bilateral dialogue and remedying Ukraine’s security vulnerabilities. The Euro-Atlantic integration course, which has established itself as a political mainstream since 2002, has seen periodical disruptions. Non-bloc status was instrumentalized by the political class under President Kuchma, at the end of his tenure, during the post-Orange revolution period, owing to the internal political divisions, and continued under President Yanukovich. It served as an escape strategy for a leadership disgruntled with the democratization pressure of the West and as an appeasement against Russian assertiveness.

After the start of the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2014, the neutrality option was definitively taken off the agenda for the Ukrainian leadership and the largest share of society. Among the results of Russian aggression has been the creation of a foreign policy and security consensus on NATO membership as a strategic goal. Non-alignment might have seemed a prudent approach when Ukraine was striving to avoid becoming collateral damage of the Russia–West confrontation and the idea of Russia attacking Ukraine militarily was practically inconceivable. Perceptions have now changed remarkably and neutrality, instead of being a legitimate component of the security debate or a useful commodity for maximizing security, was, in the end, marginalized and seen as a product of Russian coercion.