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Nato Enlargement From A Ukrainian Perspective

This article addresses the issue of NATO enlargement in relation to Ukraine from the Ukrainian perspective, raising the question of why Ukraine's foreign policy has fluctuated significantly regarding NATO membership since gaining independence. In order to explore this question, the research employs a qualitative case-study approach that combines discourse analysis and comparative historical analysis. This study is based on a careful reading of Ukrainian national security documents since the early 1990s, scrutinising official discourse, and utilising public opinion data to demonstrate how leaders' perceptions of internal and external pressures shape the country's foreign policy course. Analysed through the neoclassical realist theoretical approach, the findings show how Ukraine's periodic foreign policy shifts stem from the leadership's interpretation of internal and external conditions, particularly pressures exerted by Russia and the West, unstable public opinion, and divisions within the political elites. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Ukraine's complex path to NATO membership since gaining independence in 1991 and offers an innovative perspective on NATO enlargement by shifting the focus from NATO's decision-making to the deliberations within the candidate states themselves.

Keywords
Ukraine, NATO, Russia, neoclassical realism

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union enabled Ukraine to emerge as an independent actor within the international system. Following the end of the Cold War, Russia gradually recovered from the economic and political consequences of the collapse of the USSR, whereas NATO and the European Union expanded their cooperation with Central and Eastern European states, including those that previously belonged to the so-called Soviet sphere of influence. While Russia's position on NATO oscillated between cooperation and criticism, Ukraine's increasingly clear Euro-Atlantic aspirations significantly intensified the Kremlin's determination to preserve its influence over what it perceived as its rightful sphere of influence.

Since gaining independence, Ukraine has been positioned between two competing poles: the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia. While Kyiv persistently sought cooperation with both, growing internal and external pressures ultimately made this balancing strategy impossible to maintain. Facing such a strategic dilemma, Ukraine gradually reoriented its foreign policy trajectory towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Before adopting a firm Euro-Atlantic course, Kyiv's policy towards the Alliance had shifted repeatedly throughout the post-Soviet era, moving from neutrality to multi-vector balancing and, finally, to a single-vector foreign policy.

Structural realism alone is insufficient to account for the profound changes in Ukraine's strategic orientation towards the Atlantic Alliance, as it cannot adequately explain how political leaders interpreted systemic pressures through the constraints of domestic politics. This theoretical shortcoming justifies the adoption of neoclassical realism, which takes into account both systemic pressures and domestic political factors. This article addresses this theoretical challenge by examining why and how the Ukrainian perception of NATO underwent major changes since its independence, and which factors contributed to these shifts, reorienting Kyiv from cautious relations with NATO to the strategic objective of becoming a full NATO member. Accordingly, the main hypothesis of this article is that Ukraine's fundamental foreign policy shifts were not simply caused by changes in leadership, but rather by the way each president interpreted pressures within the international system and translated them through domestic constraints. Among the factors affecting changes in foreign policy were the external threat posed by Russia's increasing power and

influence in the region, as well as the proliferation of Western norms within Ukrainian society, particularly among the public and political elites.

There is an extensive body of literature on the evolution of Ukraine's foreign policy and NATO-Ukraine relations, which reveals that the country's geopolitical course has been shaped by a combination of internal political constraints and external pressures since independence. Many scholars adhere to the viewpoint that Ukraine's foreign policy has progressed through phases of strategic neutrality, multi-vector balancing, and the gradual development of relations with Euro-Atlantic institutions before adopting a firm single-vector course towards the West after the events of 2014.

Existing scholarship provides several perspectives for deciphering the evolution of NATO-Ukraine relations. One school of thought emphasises institutional adaptation, strategic pragmatism, and the strategic calculations of political leaders in response to international pressure emerging from Russia and the West (Bukkvoll, 1997; Tür, 2000; Deugd, 2007; Wilson, 2010; Mankoff, 2014; Ekman, 2023; Jureńczyk, 2024). These authors present Ukrainian leaders as pragmatic actors whose foreign policy decisions were shaped by changing regional security conditions. Whereas Bukkvoll, Tür, and Deugd focus on Ukraine's cautious and multi-vector foreign policy during the first years of independence, Wilson, Mankoff, Ekman, and Jureńczyk emphasise Russia's growing influence, coercive policies, and other structural constraints shaping Ukraine's foreign policy choices. A second school of thought underscores identity, norms, and societal transformation as the central drivers of Ukraine's trajectory towards NATO (Simon, 2009; Shyrokykh, 2018; Moshes & Nizhnikau, 2022). These scholars argue that strategic calculations alone cannot explain foreign policy dynamics. Instead, they emphasise the transformation of national identity, democratic norms, and public aspirations that occurred in Ukraine. Collectively, these two schools of thought make valuable contributions to understanding the evolution of Ukraine's foreign policy. However, they tend to prioritise either strategic adaptation in response to structural pressures or identity-based explanations. This leaves room for the systematic integration of both systemic-level and domestic-level factors, which this article seeks to address by applying a neoclassical realist framework.

Notwithstanding the broad literature devoted to the competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine, the latter is frequently treated

as a passive arena and often omitted as a full-fledged actor, the position of which should be explicitly taken into consideration. Consequently, it is important to analyse Ukraine's perception of NATO enlargement throughout its independence. Although most explanations of NATO-Ukraine relations primarily focus on NATO enlargement, great-power competition, and presidential decision-making, few studies combine systemic and domestic factors to explain the fundamental shifts in Ukraine's foreign policy over time. This article contributes to the literature by systematically applying neoclassical realism to explain how national leaders interpreted systemic pressures through domestic variables, resulting in different foreign policy trajectories towards NATO. It also demonstrates how neoclassical realism explains long-term foreign policy change in post-communist transition states, and why similar systemic pressures produced different foreign policy outcomes across all Ukrainian presidencies.

1. Theoretical approach

The theoretical perspective employed in this article is neoclassical realism. Gideon Rose (1998, p. 152), one of the founders of this theory, indicates that while a state's position in the international system and its relative material capabilities remain important in shaping foreign policy, the political leaders' and elites' perceptions and interpretations of systemic pressure, as well as domestic politics cannot be overlooked. Therefore, neoclassical realism is a combination of three interrelated levels: 1) the international level, which provides data on the general environment and a state's position within the system; 2) the state level, which includes state institutions, available resources, public opinion, and elites' attitudes; 3) the individual level, which concerns leaders' perceptions and interpretations.

Within the scope of this study, systemic pressures are identified through changes in the international security environment, including NATO enlargement, Russia's regional ambitions and foreign policy, and other major geopolitical events. Domestic filtering variables comprise public opinion, elite cohesion or fragmentation, and state capacity, all of which mediate national leaders' responses to external pressures. Finally, leaders' perceptions are examined through presidential speeches, official Ukrainian policy documents, strategic state documents, and official NATO documents.

Given the frequency with which the leaders of Ukraine have adjusted the country's NATO policy in accordance with Russia's growing power and related pressures, domestic complications regarding a consensus on Ukraine's foreign policy, and unstable public opinion, neoclassical realism is the most appropriate framework to elucidate the link between these external and internal factors.

2. Methodology

The article employs a qualitative case-study approach, focusing specifically on the foreign policy behaviour of all presidents of independent Ukraine. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive examination of how political elites interpreted external and domestic pressures within the international system and subsequently formulated a foreign policy strategy considered most suitable for the overall geopolitical context. Furthermore, the research was conducted through a combination of discourse analysis and comparative historical analysis in order to identify patterns of evolution in Ukraine's policy towards NATO during the periods of different administrations.

Discourse analysis served to evaluate how national leaders justified their foreign policy choices in response to shifts in the international security environment. To identify leadership perceptions and subsequent reorientations in foreign policy trajectory across different presidential administrations, the study devotes particular attention to references concerning security threats, Euro-Atlantic integration, Ukraine's national interests, NATO, and Russia within both policy documents and official speeches. Subsequently, a comparative historical analysis was applied to assess presidential interpretations and to examine how similar systemic pressures, operating under divergent domestic political conditions, resulted in distinct foreign policy trajectories.

The study examines official Ukrainian documents, NATO declarations, presidential and political elites' speeches, and significant political decisions. The official Ukrainian documents, NATO records, and key political decisions are compiled in Appendix B. These sources were selected because they directly articulate Ukraine's security priorities, foreign policy objectives, and official positions towards the Alliance under each presidential administration, thereby providing empirical evidence of leaders' perceptions and foreign policy shifts

throughout the examined period.

These sources are complemented by public opinion data on attitudes towards NATO membership, obtained from national surveys and compiled in Appendix A, as well as scholarly interpretations from existing literature. Public opinion data serve as an indicator of the domestic filtering variable of public opinion, allowing the article to examine how public attitudes towards the Alliance influenced leaders' foreign policy choices. Meanwhile, academic literature is utilised to ensure analytical accuracy regarding the interpretation of official documents, political circumstances, and major foreign policy developments.

Through this qualitative analysis, the study demonstrates how Ukraine's foreign policy towards NATO evolved by examining the mechanisms through which leaders interpreted systemic pressures through domestic filtering variables, notably public opinion, elite cohesion, and state capacity.

3. Leonid Kravchuk: Vision of Ukraine as a Friendly Actor in the International System

The first president of independent Ukraine was Leonid Kravchuk, whose term of governance spanned from 1991 to 1994. A close scrutiny of the fundamental documents adopted during his presidency reveals that Kravchuk's perception of the new international order was somewhat idealistic, as he did not perceive any significant external threats to the state.

The evidence of this idealistic perception is clearly reflected in several documents adopted in the early 1990s, such as the Law "On the Defence of Ukraine" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1991a) and the Resolution "On the Nuclear-Free Status of Ukraine" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1991b), in which Kravchuk's administration pursued a friendly foreign policy towards other countries and demonstrated a strong willingness to discard nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet Union. Slightly later, following the Budapest Memorandum (United Nations, 2021, pp. 168-182), Ukraine successfully relinquished its nuclear warheads in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This decision remains one of the most debated issues in Ukrainian history, particularly

regarding whether it was necessary and whether it could have helped prevent Russian intervention in 2014 and 2022. However, as the official documents show, this was a deliberate decision by Ukraine, endorsed by its legislative bodies.

During Kravchuk's presidency, the Ukrainian government also shaped the country's attitude towards international military cooperation and security interactions. Such legal acts as the Resolutions "On the Military Doctrine of Ukraine" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1993b) and "On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1993a) explicitly outlined Kyiv's non-bloc posture and expressed its opposition to the positioning of any international military forces on the territory of Ukraine. Moreover, in the latter Resolution, Kyiv emphasised the importance of relations between Ukraine and Russia and expressed its aspiration to serve as a mediator between Russia and Central-Eastern Europe.

This aspiration led to Ukraine's participation in the activities of both the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). By signing the CIS Agreement, which affirmed cooperation among the post-Soviet states and the recognition of each other's sovereignty and the inviolability of their borders (Agreement Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991), Kravchuk sought to balance between the newly independent countries that emerged from the former Soviet space and to maintain Ukraine's sovereignty. Simultaneously, Kyiv desired to engage in cooperation with NATO to establish a connection with the West.

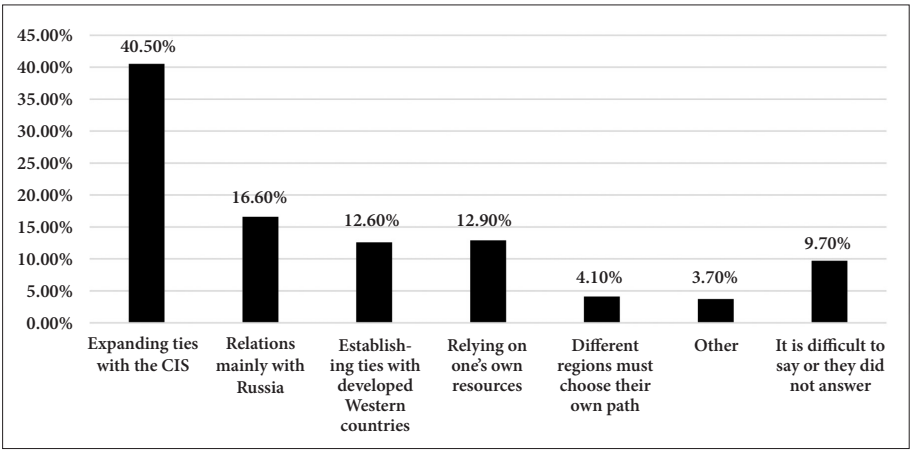
Thus, relations between NATO and Ukraine began developing almost immediately after Ukraine gained independence. The first agreement on cooperation with the Alliance, namely the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), was signed in December 1991 and aimed at fostering cooperative relations with post-Soviet and former Warsaw Pact states (NATO, 2022). Furthermore, the NACC paved the way for the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP), launched in 1994, which played a crucial role in establishing a mechanism through which NATO fostered military cooperation with the post-Soviet states, bringing its participants closer to the Alliance.

Although broader practical cooperation within the PfP programme developed during Leonid Kuchma's presidency, the initial groundwork was laid during Leonid Kravchuk's presidential term. As Tür indicates (Tür, 2000, pp. 27-28), President Kravchuk had

never been opposed to cooperation with NATO and never denied the possibility of Ukraine's future membership. This point explains why Ukraine became the first CIS member to join the PfP.

However, while Kravchuk's government did not reject the possibility of Ukraine's future membership in NATO, Ukrainian society, right after the demise of the USSR, was still very sceptical about such a significant reorientation of the country's foreign policy (Figure 1). As a result, Ukrainians were more inclined towards closer cooperation with the CIS and Russia rather than with the West.

Figure 1. **Public opinion on Ukraine's foreign policy during Kravchuk's presidency (1991-1994)**



Note. Author's compilation based on data from Vorona and Shulga (2012, p. 12).

Overall, after the demise of the USSR, Ukraine found itself in a new international order, where Russia, as a former great power, was significantly weakened, and the West was considerably stronger. Although independent Ukraine occupied an important geostrategic position for both of these poles, Kravchuk's perception of the new international order can be described as friendly, conceiving the East and the West as potentially reliable partners for cooperation rather than sources of an immediate threat. In addition, the population's scepticism about Euro-Atlantic institutions and its strong support for the CIS and Russia significantly impacted the country's foreign policy position. From the perspective of neoclassical realism, the combination of a low level of threats, domestic scepticism, and weak state capacity led Kravchuk's administration to choose a policy of non-alignment

and pragmatic balancing between Russia and the West. This case demonstrates how relatively weak systemic pressures were filtered through domestic filtering variables, particularly limited state capacity and public scepticism, resulting in Kravchuk's cautious approach towards the Alliance during the first years of Ukraine's independence.

4. Leonid Kuchma: Vision of Ukraine Within the Former Soviet Space

After the term of Leonid Kravchuk's presidency came to an end, his successor became Leonid Kuchma, whose presidency lasted from July 1994 to January 2005 and left a profound mark on the foreign policy of Ukraine.

Initially, Kuchma's administration was sceptical about cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, as the newly elected president held that any enlargement of the Alliance would cause nothing but danger to regional security (Deugd, 2007, p. 66). Consequently, Kuchma initially embraced Kravchuk's foreign policy framework, adhering to the state's neutrality and maintaining a delicate balance between the East and the West. However, the watershed moment that changed Kuchma's perspective was U.S. President Bill Clinton's visit to Kyiv in May 1995, during which his arguments persuaded Ukraine's leadership to adopt a warmer approach towards NATO. In March 1996, Kuchma stated: "Ukraine, in principle, does not oppose the idea of expanding NATO as an organisation that unites democratic countries. The decision to join military-political structures, including NATO, is the right of any state, and no-one can veto this sovereign right… Ukraine is no exception" (Pustovoit, 1996). This constituted the first serious pronouncement about the potential membership of Ukraine in NATO.

At the same time, Russia was gradually re-emerging as a great power, and its aspirations to preserve influence over the post-Soviet space could not leave Moscow indifferent to the closer rapprochement between Ukraine and the Alliance. Therefore, fully realising the seriousness of the situation, Kuchma – following Kravchuk's "double-track diplomacy" – adopted a multi-vector foreign and security policy (Deugd, 2007, p. 78), which allowed Ukraine to cooperate with the West while avoiding direct conflict with Russia. Constructive relations with the West were also considered a necessary counterbalance to the CIS, enabling Ukraine to feel more secure against the threat of being

absorbed into the Russian sphere of influence.

Becoming more inclined towards NATO, Ukrainian participation in the PfP gradually became more active. As Bukkvoll indicates (Bukkvoll, 1997, p. 365), during the first presidency of Kuchma, Ukraine participated in numerous operations under the PfP, progressively earning recognition as a reliable partner of NATO.

During Kuchma's presidency, Ukraine adopted several fundamental legislative acts that defined its foreign and security policy between 1994 and 2005. The first crucial piece of legislation was the Constitution of Ukraine, adopted on June 28, 1996 (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1996). Article 17 of the Constitution once again entrenched the non-bloc or neutral status of the state, whereas Article 18 endorsed cooperation with international institutions. Another important legislative act was the 1997 Law "On the Concept (fundamentals of state policy) of national security of Ukraine" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1997), which formally legitimised the participation of Ukraine in joint events with the CIS and the PfP, paving the way for a customised interaction with NATO, namely the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership.

The 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between NATO and Ukraine was one of the most significant developments in NATO-Ukraine relations (NATO, 1997), which facilitated and formalised regular consultations and cooperation on a wide range of political and security issues between them. According to this Charter, both participants affirmed their mutual determination to assist and strengthen their security through improving their relations. Furthermore, in 1998, Ukraine developed a solid plan for enhancing numerous areas of interaction with NATO, which was explicitly laid out in the State Programme of Cooperation between Ukraine and NATO for the Period until 2001 and then prolonged for 2001-2004. However, the culmination of the Ukrainian strategic reorientation under Kuchma's presidency was the adoption of the 2003 Law "On the Foundations of Ukraine's National Security" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2003) that defined Ukraine's full integration into the European Union and NATO as its national priorities.

Nevertheless, while developing closer relations with the West, Kuchma experienced considerable political and economic pressure from Russia, which ultimately resulted in the abandonment of Ukraine's plans to integrate into NATO and the EU after numerous negotiations with Russian President Putin (Deugd, 2007, p. 97).

In addition, a majority of Ukrainians remained opposed to NATO membership during 2002 and 2004, as demonstrated in Appendix A, which also posed an impediment to integration.

Following the logic of neoclassical realism, President Kuchma pursued a strategy of multi-vector balancing to maintain workable relations with both Russia and the West, and as such, to counteract Russian influence. Kuchma's open and pragmatic disposition to both the East and the West made this balancing policy possible. However, the closer cooperation Ukraine had with NATO, the greater the tensions with Russia became. As systemic pressures intensified, they were filtered through domestic variables, such as economic dependence on Russia, insufficient public support for NATO, and Kuchma's pragmatic leadership. As a result, by the end of Kuchma's term, Ukraine maintained a strategy of multi-vector balancing rather than pursuing full Euro-Atlantic integration.

5. Viktor Yushchenko: Vision of Ukraine Within the Euro-Atlantic Sphere

On the eve of Viktor Yushchenko's presidency, regional tension surrounding Ukraine intensified as competition between the West and Russia grew more rapidly, ultimately leading to the Orange Revolution. Both poles attempted to influence the outcome of the 2004 elections, and this time the victory was secured by a pro-Western statesman, Viktor Yushchenko.

Throughout the term of his presidency, Yushchenko was a staunch proponent of integrating Euro-Atlantic institutions into the foreign policy agenda (Wolczuk, 2005, p. 1): the European Union and NATO. In February 2005, when Yushchenko was asked in Brussels whether Ukraine sought NATO membership, the president declared: "Certainly. If that were not our goal, there would have been no reason for me to be here… We proposed a broad formula that ultimately leads to the prospect of NATO membership" (Volynskyi, 2005). This declaration demonstrates that Yushchenko regarded NATO membership as a strategic objective of Ukraine's foreign policy. Consequently, there was a transition from Kuchma's multi-vector policy to Yushchenko's single-vector foreign policy orientation. However, his decisions and actions were significantly constrained by the constitutional amendment adopted in December 2004, which resulted in a systemic shift from a

presidential-parliamentary to a parliamentary-presidential model. As such, the distribution of power in decision-making processes became divided among the President, the Prime Minister, and the Verkhovna Rada (Simon, 2009, p. 2).

Yushchenko's engagement in Ukraine's foreign policy, and NATO in particular, was evident from the very beginning of his presidency. On 21 April 2005, Ukraine and NATO held a meeting where they decided to begin "Intensified dialogue", leading to deeper political, financial, military, and security cooperation with the possibility of future NATO membership (NATO, 2005). After that meeting, Yushchenko's administration developed the Ukraine-NATO Target Plan for 2005 within the framework of the Ukraine-NATO Action Plan (President of Ukraine, 2005), the purpose of which was to outline the framework for domestic reforms (encompassing military, political, and economic dimensions) to align Ukraine closer with NATO standards. Subsequent Target Plans were issued every year until 2009.

During his entire presidency, Yushchenko sought both to unite different internal political blocs to reach a consensus on NATO-EU integration and to persuade the public about Ukraine's prosperous future with the West (Simon, 2009, p. 2), but his attempts yielded mixed results. A fragile stability seemed to be achieved in 2007 when Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Arseniy Yatsenyuk (Verkhovna Rada Speaker) supported Yushchenko, and together, they requested a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008.

At the Bucharest Summit, NATO members pledged to support both Ukraine and Georgia on their way to NATO with a significant statement, "[Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO" (NATO, 2008a). However, the decision regarding MAP granting was postponed until the later meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers in December 2008, whose assessment was positive about Ukraine's progress, but not enough to grant a MAP (NATO, 2008b). Notwithstanding, NATO committed to continuing support for Ukraine, complementing the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, and developing an Annual National Programme for the enhancement of reforms.

The NATO-Ukraine Annual Target Plan for the Year 2009 (NATO, 2009b) explicitly outlined a roadmap of reforms in different sectors that were necessary on Ukraine's way to full-fledged NATO membership. At the same time, in the Declaration to Complement

the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership (NATO, 2009a), NATO and Ukraine consented to intensify their interaction within NATO-Ukraine relations and to assist Ukraine in implementing political, economic, and defence reforms.

However, fierce competition among the ruling elites and Russian interference in internal politics throughout Yushchenko's presidency contributed to widespread ambiguity among the Ukrainian population, which by the end of his term remained predominantly opposed to NATO (Appendix A). The factors shaping public attitudes towards NATO were not merely political but also economic. Russia served as a crucial supplier of subsidised energy resources, such as natural gas. Consequently, as Shyrokykh notes (Shyrokykh, 2018, p. 835), influential business groups played a pivotal role among domestic actors because they benefited directly from this economic relationship. Their heavy reliance on cheap gas supplies prompted these business elites to prefer Russian resources over Euro-Atlantic integration.

According to the neoclassical realist perspective, Yushchenko's pro-Western strategic vision was significantly impeded by domestic filtering variables, most notably weak state capacity, economic dependence on Russia, and a polarised outlook among elites and the public. Consequently, although NATO increased its support, thereby rendering systemic conditions more favourable, Ukraine was unable to translate these external opportunities into deeper Euro-Atlantic integration during Yushchenko's presidency.

6. Viktor Yanukovych: Balancing Act between Russia and the West

Viktor Yanukovych's arrival to power as the fourth President of Ukraine in 2010 was secured by strong support from the eastern and southern regions of the country. Because the Party of Regions led by Yanukovych achieved a majority of votes in Parliament, the 2004 amendments to the Constitution were reverted (D'Anieri, 2023, pp. 171-172), allowing the newly elected president to significantly consolidate power. Subsequently, Yanukovych's administration immediately abandoned Yushchenko's single-vector foreign policy and paved the way back to an approach highly reminiscent of Kuchma's, namely, a multi-vector policy designed to benefit from both the East and the West.

The population in eastern and southern Ukraine played a substantial role in Yanukovych's electoral victory, viewing him as a hope for a brighter future and more intensive cooperation with Russia. At the very beginning of his presidency, some analysts even believed that Yanukovych might be more successful in cooperating with Europe than his predecessor, partly due to his stable relations with Russia (Wilson, 2010, p. 1). As such, the first step towards closer cooperation with Moscow was taken on 21 April 2010, when the Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the presence of the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine was signed (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2010a), also known as the Kharkiv Accords. Slightly later that year, at a meeting with Medvedev on May 17, Yanukovych clarified his approach to Ukraine's security policy, stating: "This year, Ukraine will solemnly celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration on State Sovereignty, which first proclaimed our goal of becoming a non-aligned state… Today, Ukraine finally has all the opportunities to implement this goal in its foreign policy" (UNIAN, 2010). This message was directed at both NATO and the CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization), emphasising that Ukraine sought to pursue a policy of non-alignment and did not seek membership in either alliance.

Yanukovych's intentions were epitomised by the core law of his presidency governing both domestic and foreign policies, which was the Law "On the principles of domestic and foreign policy". This was the key document that underpinned a non-bloc status with the further continuation of partnership with NATO and other military-political blocs (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2010b). The same position was reinforced in the 2012 Military Doctrine of Ukraine (President of Ukraine, 2012).

As Yanukovych abandoned the trajectory of integration into NATO, the cooperation between Ukraine and the Alliance was significantly reduced, preserving interaction only in specific technical areas (Vladyka, 2025, p. 14): technical assistance; peacekeeping operations; modernisation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; joint training activities, exercises, and the exchange of experience in the military field; and cooperation within NATO trust funds aimed at supporting defence reforms. Also, the preceding year's Annual National Programme on Ukraine's Preparation for Membership in NATO was replaced by the Annual National Programme of Cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, thereby excluding any

reference to potential integration.

However, the major struggle during Yanukovych's presidency emerged around the dilemma between economic cooperation with the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and the European Union Association Agreement. This situation generated considerable pressure on Yanukovych, as he endeavoured to appease Russia, the European Union, the Ukrainian population, business elites, and the Parliament. Facing severe economic problems along with considerable pressure from Moscow, Yanukovych ultimately chose Russia, following the Cabinet of Ministers' decision to suspend preparations for the Association Agreement (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2013) – a decision that led to the Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) and the subsequent partial occupation of Ukraine's territory by Russia.

Both the domestic and foreign policy of the Ukrainian government during Yanukovych's presidency became less appealing to the Ukrainian population with each passing year. However, as portrayed in Appendix A, Yanukovych's rhetoric about closer cooperation with Russia and maintaining distance from Euro-Atlantic institutions was successful among Ukrainians until the Revolution.

In neoclassical realist terms, Yanukovych's administration attempted to balance between two competing poles. As systemic pressure from Russia gradually intensified, it was filtered through domestic filtering variables, namely the president's electoral base, business elites' economic incentives, and a divided public opinion. As a result, Yanukovych chose closer cooperation with Russia over deeper integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, precipitating the Revolution of Dignity and the collapse of his administration.

7. Petro Poroshenko: Vision is Interrupted by External Pressures

After the collapse of Yanukovych's regime, the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko assumed office during an exceptionally difficult period, marked by a profound transformation of the international environment: Russia's annexation of Crimea, military involvement in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and a severe threat to the previously established international order. As a result, the trajectory of foreign policy under Poroshenko became decisively single-vector – specifically pro-EU and pro-NATO. This

orientation was also reflected in Poroshenko's discourse. In December 2014, he stated: "I plan to reform the country so that it meets EU and NATO standards, which coincide by 99%... When Ukraine meets these criteria, I think this will happen within 5-6 years – the people of Ukraine will decide on NATO membership" (European Pravda, 2014). This statement indicates that Poroshenko considered reforms to be the necessary step towards eventual NATO membership. Moreover, the new Parliament, elected in October 2014, was likewise primarily pro-Western, and as such, Poroshenko's political bloc consolidated power in order to pursue EU and NATO membership aspirations without much opposition (D'Anieri, 2023, p. 231).

In fact, the dissolution of the pro-Russian government and Russia's illegal occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory turned both the Ukrainian population and the political elites against Moscow. Jeffrey Mankoff (Mankoff, 2014, pp. 61, 68) in his article "Russia's Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine" – a title that speaks for itself – argues: "By annexing Crimea and threatening deeper military intervention in eastern Ukraine, Russia will only bolster Ukrainian nationalism and push Kyiv closer to Europe … Russia may have won Crimea, but in the long run, it risks losing much more: its once-close relationship with Ukraine, … ". Thus, Poroshenko and most influential Ukrainian political elites (except for a small number who retained the narratives of the former Party of Regions) set their course firmly towards Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Having established the foreign policy agenda, Poroshenko's administration adopted a range of significant documents between 2014 and 2019 to improve Ukraine-NATO relations after the policies of the previous government. Shortly after becoming President, Petro Poroshenko made some amendments to the Law "On the Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine" and "On the principles of domestic and foreign policy" (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014), which reiterated Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic space and inscribed the objective of deeper cooperation with NATO. Another fundamental document was the Decree "On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2015a), the essence of which identified Russia as an aggressor, laid out measures necessary to improve defence capabilities and restore the country's territorial integrity, and defined membership in NATO and the EU as Ukraine's national strategic objectives. The Military Doctrine of Ukraine was also revised and replaced (President of Ukraine, 2015b),

highlighting the significance of closer cooperation with the EU and NATO and underscoring the need for reforms in the security sector so that it would correspond to the EU and NATO standards. Finally, the implementation of Poroshenko's decisions to deepen cooperation with NATO and comply with its standards was reflected in the Decree "On the Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2016). The Bulletin was developed by Ukrainian and NATO experts and presented a clear roadmap consisting of five strategic objectives to implement military reforms with the support of the EU and NATO.

A particular emphasis was placed on strengthening cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, and this priority was reflected in the "Annual National Cooperation Programme Ukraine-NATO" (2015-2016), as well as the "Annual National Programme under NATO-Ukraine Commission" (2017-2019). In addition, the watershed moment that clearly affirmed Ukraine's determination towards Euro-Atlantic institutions was the constitutional amendment on NATO and EU membership in 2019, whereby Ukraine's foreign policy became irreversible, with constitutional priorities to attain NATO and European Union membership (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019).

Domestically, both the political elites' attitudes and public opinion underwent a significant transformation (Appendix A). The departure of Yanukovych's administration substantially decreased pro-Russian support within Ukraine's government, whereas the shift in public opinion likely occurred in part because opinion polls were conducted without the occupied territories. Thus, Poroshenko's transition from Yanukovych's multi-vector policy to a firm single-vector one was owing to the support gained from both the political elites and the population. Through the lens of neoclassical realism, this shift can be explained by the convergence of systemic pressures and domestic-level factors. In this context, Russian aggression triggered unprecedented systemic pressure, which was filtered through domestic variables, such as strengthened state capacity, enhanced elite consensus, and increasing public support for the Alliance. Consequently, Poroshenko was able to translate these external pressures into a foreign policy firmly oriented towards Euro-Atlantic institutions, actively pursuing closer integration with NATO and the European Union.

8. Volodymyr Zelenskyy: Firm Vision of Ukraine as a NATO Member

The next President of Ukraine became Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose electoral campaign appealed strongly to the public, thereby providing him with considerable support during the 2019 presidential elections. Indeed, Zelenskyy's presidential campaign pledged numerous positive changes across different sectors, but most importantly, he was resolute in his intention to end the war that had begun in 2014 and to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity (Zelenskyy, 2019).

Firstly, Zelenskyy avoided any strong declarations regarding Ukraine as a future member of NATO because, as Ekman argues (Ekman, 2023, p. 239), he initially concentrated on employing a softer position towards the Russian Federation in the hope of achieving a sustainable peace. Moreover, in order to ease the tension between Ukraine and Russia and to secure a favourable basis for ceasefire negotiations, Zelenskyy's administration adhered to three primary approaches (Moshes & Nizhnikau, 2022, p. 3): 1) the removal of the formulation "Russia is an aggressor" from official rhetoric; 2) the partial accommodation of some of Russia's interpretations by avoiding fully assigning responsibility for the conflict to Russia; 3) the reactivation of the Minsk negotiation process with the goal of achieving a ceasefire. Although the plan to stop the war was placed at the forefront of Zelenskyy's agenda, its implementation proved unsatisfactory and was complicated by various impediments.

A key effort undertaken by the parties to the conflict was the resumption of negotiations on conflict resolution through the Minsk process and the Normandy Format. However, these diplomatic efforts proved largely unsuccessful. A fragile ceasefire agreement in Donbas was reached within the 2020 Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), but it was repeatedly violated (Moshes & Nizhnikau, 2022, p. 5). These frustrations gradually convinced Zelenskyy that Russia was not interested in a negotiated peaceful resolution and reinforced his decision to strengthen Ukraine's orientation towards closer cooperation with Euro-Atlantic institutions – a decision that was consistent with the views of both the public and most influential political figures. This transformation was also reflected in Zelenskyy's public statements in December 2021: "Our Euro-Atlantic course remains the same. Support for this course keeps growing in Ukrainian society… I believe that Russia has pushed Ukraine into NATO. I believe that today Russia

is "paving" Ukraine's difficult way to NATO" (President of Ukraine, 2021b). This statement demonstrates that Zelenskyy viewed Russia's growing pressure as reinforcing Ukraine's commitment to NATO and the European Union.

One of the first and highly significant decrees during Zelenskyy's presidency that emphasised the importance of Ukraine's relations with the EU and NATO was the 2020 Decree "On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2020) that remains valid today and outlines the priorities of the national interests, among which are the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and integration into the European Union and NATO. Slightly later, given the exacerbation of the external threat from Russia, the government adopted the Decree "On the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2021a), explicitly describing the short, medium, and long-term actions to enhance the military sector and to create a comprehensive system of national defence, and identifying the attainment of NATO membership as one of the strategic objectives of Ukraine's military strategy. Apart from the legal acts that Ukraine adopted with the purpose of becoming closer to NATO, the state also continued developing relations with the Alliance through the Annual National Programme under the auspices of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, thereby expanding the range of new cooperative sectors.

These Ukrainian aspirations for NATO membership and closer cooperation with the Alliance were cited by the Russian Federation as reasons for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which it launched on 24 February 2022. Following this turn of events, Ukraine turned to its European partners, the United States, and other allies for military and financial assistance, simultaneously intensifying its diplomatic efforts to secure NATO membership. Accordingly, one of the first significant steps was Ukraine's application for accelerated accession to NATO on 30 September 2022. Numerous states, primarily in Eastern Europe, strongly supported Ukraine's move, but at the same time, other members expressed their concern and decided to wait on immediate accession (Jureńczyk, 2024, p. 56). Nevertheless, the application clearly demonstrated Ukraine's firm commitment to the Alliance, which, in its view, could provide the most robust security guarantee against Russia. Demonstrating their continued support, NATO members established the NATO-Ukraine Council at the Vilnius Summit, creating a forum for equal participation, enhanced political consultation, and practical cooperation between Ukraine and the Alliance (NATO, 2023).

Many states continue supporting Ukraine through military, financial, humanitarian, and political assistance during the war. Numerous high-level meetings, including NATO Summits, are held to coordinate assistance for Ukraine against Russian aggression. In this context, Ukraine's course towards NATO has become irreversible, especially given continuous Russian attacks against the civilian population. Public support for NATO has also significantly increased since the start of the full-scale invasion. Ukrainian society, as depicted in Appendix A, expresses unprecedented support for NATO integration.

According to the neoclassical realist perspective, the overwhelming systemic pressure caused by Russia's full-scale invasion was filtered through domestic filtering variables, including strong public support, elite consensus, and the leader's revised perception of the international security environment. Given the aforementioned transformations, Zelenskyy was able to set Ukraine on an irreversible course towards Euro-Atlantic integration, determinedly advancing the state's aspiration for NATO membership.

Conclusions

A comparative analysis of all Ukrainian presidential administrations provides a comprehensive overview of how the state's policy towards the Alliance evolved. While each president operated under distinct international conditions, similar external pressures produced divergent foreign policy orientations, insofar as they were filtered through changing domestic conditions. Under the Kravchuk's and Kuchma's presidencies, relatively limited systemic pressures and domestic constraints led to a cautious approach regarding Western integration and a strategy of multi-vector balancing. During Yushchenko's administration, however, growing pro-Western aspirations were constrained by limited public support and elite fragmentation. Subsequently, Yanukovych reoriented Ukraine towards a non-bloc status in response to increasing Russian pressure and domestic political constraints. Afterwards, the intensification of systemic pressure caused by Russia's aggression in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022 fundamentally transformed both elite and public perceptions, enabling Poroshenko and Zelenskyy to consolidate a firm Euro-Atlantic orientation. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Ukraine's policy towards NATO was shaped not simply by changes in

leadership, but rather by the way each president interpreted systemic pressures through domestic constraints, thereby supporting the article's principal hypothesis.

Through the application of neoclassical realism, the evolution of Ukraine's foreign policy since independence reveals a trajectory predominantly shaped by balancing between the West and Russia – namely, hedging between two competing poles. As Iván Gonzalez-Pujol explicitly defines (Gonzalez-Pujol, 2024, p. 194), hedging is "a strategy for managing competing national interests during conditions of uncertainty regarding the future distribution of power". In this context, Ukrainian presidents sought to preserve strategic flexibility by adapting external strategies to evolving international and domestic conditions. However, the analysis demonstrates that the intensification of Russia's coercive policy in 2014, and particularly in 2022, undermined the viability of this strategy, prompting Ukrainian leaders to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration more decisively.

Consequently, the factors shaping Ukraine's foreign policy evolved across presidential administrations. During the first presidencies, the state's cautious stance was sustained primarily by domestic constraints, such as limited state capacity, insufficient public support for the Alliance, and the desire to preserve cooperation with Moscow. As Russia regained its strength, systemic pressures simultaneously became more noticeable, although their influence was consistently filtered through domestic variables, including public opinion, elite attitudes, and the interpretations of individual leaders. The fundamental shift in orientation occurred after 2014 and especially after 2022, when public and elite support for Euro-Atlantic integration became significantly stronger. Thus, the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic politics explains the notable shifts in Ukraine's position towards NATO.

Overall, this analysis highlights the analytical significance of neoclassical realism. Instead of scrutinising systemic pressures and domestic politics separately, neoclassical realism integrates both dimensions to explain why similar international conditions resulted in divergent trajectories under different presidential administrations. At the same time, it shows that the viability of hedging as a foreign policy strategy can be undermined under conditions of protracted asymmetric security pressure. Given Ukraine's experience, hedging may be an effective strategy in the short term; however, it gradually becomes difficult to maintain when both geopolitical scales are profoundly transformed by security threats.

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Declarations of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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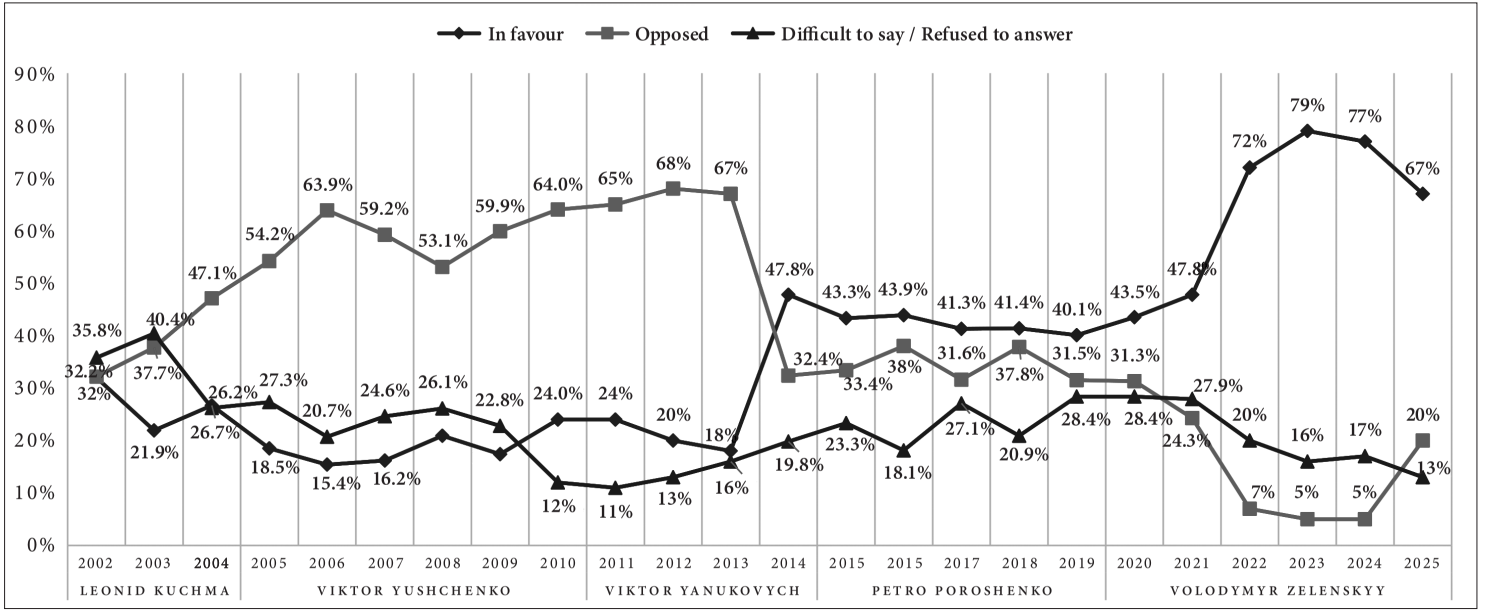
Figure 2. **Public attitudes towards NATO membership in Ukraine (2002-2025).**



Note. Author's compilation based on data from Slovo i Dilo (2021) and the Rating Group (2024, 2025).

Appendix B

Table 1. **Evolution of Ukraine's policy towards NATO (1991-2025)**

	General attitude towards NATO	Key policy documents and agreements	Impact on NATO-Ukraine relations	Major interactions with NATO
Leonid Kravchuk (1991-1994)	Non-bloc and idealistic outlook; commitment to maintaining balanced relations between the East and the West; avoidance of alignment combined with no opposition to future membership in NATO	Law "On the Defence of Ukraine" (1991); Resolution "On the Nuclear-Free Status of Ukraine" (1991); The CIS Agreement (1991); Resolution "On the Military Doctrine of Ukraine" (1993); Resolution "On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy" (1993)	Establishment of diplomatic and consultative relations; formulation of the first framework for cooperation with NATO	Participation in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991); initial preparations for the Partnership for Peace (1994)
Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005)	Multi-vector and pragmatic approach; marked by initial scepticism followed by progressive cooperation to modernise Ukraine's security sector	Constitution of Ukraine (1996); Law "On the Concept (fundamentals of state policy) of national security of Ukraine" (1997); Law "On the Foundations of Ukraine's National Security" (2003)	Institutionalisation of the mechanism for regular consultation and cooperation; formal recognition of priorities to become a member of NATO	More active participation in the Partnership for Peace (from 1994); Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between NATO and Ukraine (1997); State Programme of Cooperation between Ukraine and NATO (1998-2001 and 2001-2004)
Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010)	Single-vector orientation towards Euro-Atlantic institutions; firmly pro-NATO foreign policy	No major domestic legislation concerning NATO was adopted	Strengthening ties with NATO through the "Intensified Dialogue", annual Target Plans, and support for national reforms; recognition of Ukraine's aspirations	Launch of the "Intensified Dialogue" (2005); Ukraine-NATO Target Plans (2005-2009); Bucharest Summit (2008); Declaration to Complement the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership (2009); NATO-Ukraine Annual Target Plan for the Year 2009 (2009)

Viktor Yanukovych (2010-2014)	Non-bloc trajectory characterised by the rejection of NATO membership; closer relations with Russia alongside limited cooperation with NATO	Kharkiv Accords (2010); Law "On the principles of domestic and foreign policy" (2010); Military Doctrine of Ukraine (2012)	Removal of NATO integration from the foreign policy agenda; reduction to limited cooperation	Annual National Programme of Cooperation between Ukraine and NATO (2010-2013); participation in peacekeeping operations, training activities, exercises, and the exchange of experience; modernization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; cooperation through NATO trust funds
Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019)	Single-vector (pro-NATO and pro-EU) framework; NATO viewed as a key guarantor of Ukraine's security; attainment of full membership defined as a strategic objective	Law "On the Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine" (amendments, 2014); Law "On the principles of domestic and foreign policy" (amendments, 2014); Decree "On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine" (2015); Military Doctrine of Ukraine (2015); Decree "On the Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine" (2016); Constitutional amendment establishing NATO and EU membership as national objectives (2019)	Immediate resumption of NATO-Ukraine relations following the preceding administration's multi-vector trajectory; overall improvement in NATO-Ukraine bilateral cooperation	Annual National Cooperation Programme Ukraine – NATO (2015-2016); Annual National Programme under the NATO-Ukraine Commission (2017-2019)
Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2019-present)	Initially cautious, with a gradual shift towards NATO; adoption of a firm single-vector trajectory following unsuccessful negotiations, particularly after the outbreak of the full-scale war	Decree "On the National Security Strategy of Ukraine" (2020); Decree "On the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine" (2021)	NATO defined as a necessity for Ukraine's security; deepening of military and political cooperation; removal of the MAP requirement; irreversible Euro-Atlantic trajectory	Annual National Programmes (2019-2025); official application for NATO membership (2022); participation in high-level NATO meetings; The NATO-Ukraine Council (2023-present)

Note. Author's compilation