Transformation Under Fire – An Analysis of Ukraine's Security Sector Since 1991

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January 2025

IISS
The International Institute for Strategic Studies

Acronyms

AA	Association Agreement
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
BT	Border Troops
CAP	Comprehensive Assistance Package
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
EOP	Enhanced Opportunity Partner
EU	European Union
EUAM	European Union Advisory Mission
EUBAM	European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine
EUMAM	European Union Military Assistance Mission
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GS	General Staff
IAG	Irregular Armed Group
JATEC	NATO–Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre
JFO	Joint Forces Operation
KGB	Committee for State Security
MVS	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NPU	National Police of Ukraine
NSATU	NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine
SDR	Strategic Defence Reviews
SBGS	State Border Guard Service
SBU	State Security Services of Ukraine
TDF	Territorial Defence Forces
VFLC	Voluntary Formations of Local Communitie

Contents

Cover

Ukrainian civilians participating in a training exercise of the Territorial Defence Forces in January 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. (Photo by Sean Gallup via Getty Images)

Executive Summary

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, significantly escalating the lower-intensity conflict ongoing in the country's east since February 2014. The resilience Ukraine displayed during the first months of the invasion surprised many: Kyiv had been expected to fall within days. To understand why Ukraine was able to defend its territory against overwhelming material odds, it is instructive to look back at the development of Ukraine's security sector. Since 1991, Ukraine's security sector has undergone a profound transformation in response to transitions, crises and, finally, full-fledged armed conflict. This report, which was finalised as the third year of full-scale Russian aggression draws to a close, discusses the changes to Ukraine's security sector since its independence from the Soviet Union, specifically examining military and paramilitary forces.

This report details the challenges associated with transforming part of the former Soviet Union's security apparatus in the framework of a wider transition process. It therefore emphasises the prioritisation of internal over external security threats during the period 1991–2014, which resulted in the deterioration of the Armed Forces of Ukraine's capabilities. Subsequently, it details some of the transformations and reforms implemented in Ukraine's security sector in response to the multi-level crises in 2014, including the 'Revolution of Dignity,' Russia's annexation of Crimea and Moscow's aggression in the Donbas. During the subsequent period, reforms focused heavily on increasing the effectiveness of military and paramilitary forces. Moreover, the report outlines the emergence of irregular armed groups, widely known as the volunteer battalions, and their later integration into the formal security sector. In combination, the transformations achieved during this time greatly contributed to Ukraine's resilience against the full-scale invasion in 2022. It then examines how the lessons learned from lower-intensity conflict in the Donbas, as well as the specific characteristics of the current war, have shaped the Ukrainian security sector since 2022. This includes a broad involvement of different military and paramilitary formations in defence, ranging from the armed forces to border guards, and the strengthening of the territorial-defence system. The report also details the reforms implemented to achieve closer Euro-Atlantic reintegration, including current efforts to transform Ukraine's law-enforcement sector, as well as increasing cooperation with NATO.

Lastly, the report draws on one specific element of security-sector transformation, namely the reintegration of war veterans in a post-conflict scenario, to illustrate the wider economic, security and institutional considerations for Ukraine's future security sector. In this regard, it touches on the current shortcomings in the debate around veteran reintegration and outlines the risks that failing to adequately plan for the reintegration of former fighters, as part of a broader transformation of the security sector, bears for Ukraine's internal and external security. The report therefore calls for more strategic planning and leadership in designing Ukraine's future security sector.

Introduction

As we approach the fourth year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the prospects for an immediate political settlement or even temporary ceasefire appear slim. The two sides have been locked in a bitter war of attrition along a largely static frontline that stretches more than 1,000 kilometres through Ukraine. While the initial, unexpected success of Ukraine's incursion into the Russian Kursk *oblast* in August 2024 showed that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government retained enough capacity to carry out limited offensive military actions, Kyiv has been slowly losing territory in the Donbas region since early 2024. Both sides seem to be playing for time, with Ukraine hoping to hold the defensive line until more Western aid arrives and the Russian economy collapses, and Moscow that war fatigue and Western disunity will push Ukraine towards a ceasefire. President Vladimir Putin insists on Ukraine withdrawing its forces from territories partially occupied by Russian forces and abandoning its NATO aspirations as preconditions for a ceasefire, while NATO membership is firmly anchored in Zelenskyy's victory plan. Although, at the time of writing, prospects of a negotiated ceasefire seem distant and the impact of Trump's presidency on this and NATO membership are uncertain, thinking ahead to a post-'hot conflict' stage is warranted.[1]

While the difficulties of attempting reform under conditions of war are widely recognised,[2] Ukraine has undertaken various attempts in line with its aspirations to join the European Union.[3] While these have been wide-ranging, the security sector has been a key focus. Therefore, discussing scenarios for Ukraine's security transformation, including the fate of the many men and women who have joined military and paramilitary formations since February 2022, is a timely endeavour. Moreover, this transformation, which among other aims intends to bolster provision of security to both the civilian population and the state, should not be delayed until after hostilities cease, not least considering the boost it would provide to Ukraine's resilience.[4] There is widespread agreement that the military situation could quickly change, leading to an abrupt end of hostilities, even if temporarily. This could come about as a result of significant reduction in Western military aid or, as some more optimistic analysts in Kyiv believe, an economic meltdown and subsequent regime change in Russia.[5] In either case, this would lead to a new 'line of contact' with, more likely than not, some Ukrainian territory remaining under Russian occupation.[6] Thinking ahead to the transition of Ukraine's security sector after active conflict is therefore crucial.

This report, written as the third year of full-scale Russian aggression draws to a close, outlines Ukraine's security sector through its various developments since 1991. In its conclusion, it proposes broader economic, security and institutional considerations for Ukraine's future security-sector transformation, using a crucial but overlooked aspect – the reintegration of war veterans – as an example. In line with this, this report focuses on the human, rather than military-hardware, dimension of security-sector transformation. Transformation of a country's security sector typically takes place in the aftermath of conflicts or as part of democratic transitions.[7] This process broadly aims at producing a security sector that is effective, affordable, accountable and transparent.[8] When implemented in the aftermath of a violent conflict, reform of security institutions is often accompanied by related priorities, such as the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of former fighters.[9] Ukraine has undergone some level of security-sector transformation since 1991, with the context of each period – ranging from the democratisation process after achieving independence in 1991 to periods of active and frozen conflict since 2014 – influencing the top-down reforms or bottom-up adaptations.

1. Transformation Through Transition: 1991–2014

The transformations of Ukraine's security sector after 1991 took place within the context of the country's democratic-transition process after the Soviet Union's collapse. These transformations and reforms deeply influenced the state of Ukraine's national-defence capabilities, whose weaknesses were exposed in the early days of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014. Ukraine lost Crimea almost without any armed resistance, but thwarted Putin's ambitious goal of creating 'Novorossia', an area of Russian influence covering southeastern Ukraine. While Ukraine's inheritance of the second-largest segment of the former USSR's military forces and military-industrial complex provided the foundation of its security sector, this legacy has proven the main obstacle for subsequent reforms during Ukraine's democratic transition process.

1.1 The 1990s: Grappling with Soviet Legacy

The Soviet legacy negatively affected early efforts at developing Ukraine's defence sector. Firstly, in the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine,[10] the Ukrainian parliament claimed Ukraine's 'right to its own armed forces' but notably did not claim its intention to subordinate the Soviet military force deployed on Ukraine's territory.[11] This initially allowed Moscow to retain direct control of all military and security structures based in Ukraine. It was only one year later, on 24 August 1991 (three days after the attempted *coup d'état* in Moscow),[12] that the Ukrainian parliament adopted the Act of Independence[13] and formally declared its control over all military formations on Ukrainian territory. However, after the Soviet Union's collapse in December 1991, it took months to establish effective control and years to transform the now-nationalised part of the Ukraine-based Soviet army into the national armed forces of Ukraine.[14]

This process was further complicated by other key provisions of the 1990 Declaration outlining Ukraine's neutrality and non-nuclear status, which had substantial long-term implications for national-security decisions. Although Ukraine's formal declaration of neutrality (more precisely, of non-participation in military alliances) helped Kyiv reject the Kremlin's invitation to join the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, it led to long-lasting uncertainty in defence policy.[15] The decision to undertake nuclear disarmament illustrates this. While it seemed the logical decision at the time, Ukraine received little in return for giving up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal.[16] While the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which Ukraine signed in exchange for giving up the arsenal, did provide security assurances from other nuclear states, including the United Kingdom, the United States and Russia, this clearly did not deter one signatory (Russia) from militarily attacking Ukraine, nor trigger other signatories, including the UK and the US, to fulfil their commitments towards Ukraine.[17]

1.1.1 Soviet Legacy: Assets vs Liabilities

Ukraine inherited the second-largest part of the Soviet army and its military-industrial complex. While in theory this promised a valuable foundation for the development of Ukraine's national-defence system and the newly formed Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), Ukraine failed to transform it effectively. The sheer size of the inherited army and weapons arsenal was a key obstacle for an effective reform process. In 1991, Ukraine hosted five ground armies (military formations, composed of two or more corps), four air armies, one air-defence army, one strategic-rocket army, 21 divisions, one army corps, three airborne brigades, 34 military-educational establishments, logistics and support units, and command-and-control headquarters of three military districts, numbering about 780,000 troops in total.[18] The force package also included the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal and substantial numbers of military equipment, including battle tanks and combat aircraft (see Table 1), as well as enormous

stocks of small arms and ammunition, some of which had accumulated for decades and some deposited in Ukraine during the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Warsaw Pact countries.[19] However, these weapons deposits became unusable as they reached the end of their shelf life, requiring significant expenditures for their destruction, and so proved a liability rather than an asset.[20]

The portion of the Soviet military-industrial complex inherited by Ukraine – which in total represented around 30% of Soviet defence companies as well as research and design facilities[21] – also eroded over time. These produced components for factories outside Ukraine and were, in turn, heavily dependent on the foreign supply of components for military equipment and weapons' production and the maintenance of military equipment and weapons.[22] In particular, more than 70% of Ukrainian companies depended on Russia for most necessary parts. Ukraine's defence industry therefore deteriorated as cooperation between the two countries decreased.[23] This was compounded by a focus of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence (MoD) on reducing its stockpiles, rather than acquiring new weapons, and a lack of funding for weapon maintenance and modernisation. Moreover, regional states perceived Ukraine as a competitor rather than partner for their own defence industries. The resulting lack of business then forced widespread closures,[24] which contributed to the severe deterioration and decline of the AFU's available equipment after 1991 (see Table 1).

1.1.2 Reforms to Establish Control and Institutions

Reform efforts in the first months after independence focused on ensuring basic control over the security sector on Ukrainian soil. New structures, such as the MOD and the General Staff (GS) of the AFU, were established, necessary legislation was adopted (often by translating Soviet documents), and structures underpinning the national defence sector were either created or re-organised. The first Military Doctrine (1993)[25] outlined a set of wide-ranging tasks and priorities which, while well-intentioned, did not consider the available economic resources. Subsequently, attempts were made to streamline the ongoing transformation into a reform programme. Under the leadership of Leonid Kuchma, three concepts and programmes were drafted during the period 1995–2000, which were aimed at developing a smaller Soviet-type army and mainly focused on reducing military units, personnel, and equipment.[26] In line with this and against a backdrop of limited external military threats and an economic crisis, which saw GDP drop almost 50% during the period 1991–95,[27] the government aimed at reducing military expenditure. The first wave of reforms during the period 1997–99 saw military expenditure drop from 2.8% of GDP to 1.9%.[28] Coupled with other chaotic 'reform' efforts and ineffective resource management, this caused the combat readiness of the AFU to severely decline (see Table 1).[29]

Table 1: **Strength of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 1993, 2000, 2006, 2010 and 2013**

	June 1993	August 2000	March 2006	November 2010	November 2013
Military personnel (active)	438,000*	303,800*	187,600	129,925	129,950
Battle tanks (incl. in storage)	5,700	3,895	3,784	2,988	1,110
Armoured infantry fighting vehicles (incl. in storage)	3,450	3,048	3,043	3,028	1,484
Large-calibre artillery (incl. in storage)	3,600	3,680	3,705	3,351	1,952
Combat aircraft (incl. in storage)	1,340	911	373	211	221
Military expenditure (% of GDP)	**0.35**	**2.15**	**2.39**	**1.90**	**1.58**

*Excluding the Strategic Nuclear Forces and Black Sea Fleet.

Figures for each year (excluding military expenditure as a percentage of GDP) are based on the cut-off month for data collection of the corresponding issue of *The Military Balance*.

Sources: IISS, *The Military Balance 1993–1994*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2000–2001*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2006*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2011*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2014*; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex, Accessed through World Bank.

Following the next State Program (1997), which quickly lost relevance due to its unrealistic objectives and deadlines, reform efforts continued to focus mainly on structural changes (like replacement of military districts and logistic commands), to further cut expenditures. While aligning with the principles of ensuring an affordable security sector (given that 80% of the defence budget was previously spent on personnel maintenance, including salaries)[30] this further weakened the AFU. However, a positive development for reform efforts during this period was increasing cooperation with NATO. For instance, Ukraine's involvement in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme and broader bilateral cooperation with NATO countries exposed Ukraine to Western nations' successful experience of defence reforms.[31] Moreover, Ukraine's participation in international peacekeeping operations and international military exercises since 1992 allowed more than 44,000 soldiers to gain first-hand experience of Western best practices.[32] However, the lack of clear political guidance, Soviet-style bureaucratic inertia, and insufficient funding posed significant challenges to adopting Western standards.

1.2 Frequent Changes in Political Leadership: Reforms from 2001–14

Reform efforts undertaken during Kuchma's second term paved the way for further transformation. The 'State Program of Reform and Development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2001–2005' (approved in 2000) fundamentally updated the 1997 Program with a focus on designing an economically viable and modern AFU: mobile, well armed, well equipped, properly supplied and well trained. Moreover, this programme outlined the move towards an all-volunteer force, manned with soldiers who signed contracts with the armed forces (henceforth: 'professional soldiers') rather than conscripted soldiers.[33] Structurally, the AFU was divided into three functional modules: the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces (35%), the Main Defence Forces (40%), and the Strategic Reserves (25%).[34] However, the AFU remained underfunded with the government providing only 50% and 60–70% of the approved defence budget in 2000–02 and 2003–04 respectively.[35] Despite this, the MoD Board assessed in December 2005 that the programme had created 'sufficient foundation for the next stage of military reform'.[36]

Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, alongside Ukrainian prime minister Viktor Yanukovych and Russian President Vladimir Putin, at a military parade in Kyiv on 28 October 2004.

(Photo by Sergei Supinsky/AFP via Getty Images)

The 'State Program of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Development for 2006–11', implemented under president Viktor Yushchenko, substantially changed the proposed model of the future AFU based on the basic results of the 2004 Strategic Defence Review (SDR),[37] and in light of the political changes after the Orange Revolution. NATO membership was declared a foreign-policy priority and reforming Ukraine's security sector in line with NATO standards became an integral part of Ukraine's strategic course for Euro-Atlantic integration.[38] Crucially, this reform programme properly assessed the state of the AFU, estimated annual defence budgets for 2006–11 with fixed budget lines and target programmes, detailed expected results and deadlines and was based on a more realistic threat assessment.[39] The State Program continued the downsizing process but preserved combat units and limited the extent of personnel reduction from an initially planned 75,000 to 40,000

by the year 2015 (as required by the SDR). Moreover, the first proper steps were taken to develop a volunteer, professional force with a considerable mobilisation reserve. This included, for example, two other initiatives of shortening the length of conscript service and pilot projects of manning two infantry brigades exclusively with professional soldiers. While not all the programme's objectives were achieved amid limited fund allocation,[40] significant progress was made compared to previous efforts.[41]

This changed when pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych took power in 2010, heralding a period of scattered and unsystematic attempts at reform. While the next cycle of the SDR was completed by late 2009, the drafts of the Defence Bulletin and the Reform Program for the subsequent four years were left for approval until after the 2010 election. President Yanukovych decided to abandon Ukraine's aspirations of joining NATO,[42] rendering the SDR and draft Program largely irrelevant. Consequently, these documents were amended and published three years later.[43] The last pre-war 'State Program of Reformation and Development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2014–2017' was approved only in September 2013 and abandoned shortly after. This illustrates that the 'reforms' in 2012–13 were conducted without any systemic plan. The Yanukovych government's declaration of Ukraine's non-aligned status, declared in 2010 to improve relations with Putin, exacerbated this.[44] Despite this U-turn, practical cooperation with NATO never stopped.[45] For instance, only two out of 13 international military exercises in 2013 with AFU participation were conducted with the Russian military, while nine were conducted with NATO.[46] This political instability and vacillation between alignment with Russia or the West has been a key obstacle to effective reform of the security sector since 1991.

1.3 Prioritising Internal Over External Security Threats

The Soviet legacy of Ukraine's security sector also heavily influenced the transformations of the internal security sector during this time. The culture of using the internal security sector for repression of the civilian population persisted after independence, meaning that establishing control over the security services under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVS) was a key priority. Internal-security-sector structures received more financial assistance than the MoD and AFU as internal security threats were prioritised.[47] The internal security sector actually grew after the Soviet Union's collapse, as it did in other post-Soviet states; by 2000, two-thirds of the militarised forces on Ukrainian soil were in the internal-security sector.[48] The Soviet state-oriented and militarised structures and working culture of law-enforcement and state-security agencies remained largely unchanged.[49] Despite the political declarations and the adoption of national legislation in accordance with international conventions, practical actions remained mainly symbolic and aimed at maintaining the status quo.[50] For instance, the MVS remained the 'ministry of militia' and was led primarily by ministers in uniform up until 2014. The strong vested interest of both the ruling elites and internal security agencies' top leadership to preserve a control mechanism over the political opposition undermined efforts to develop a democratic policing system. It is therefore unsurprising that Ukrainians expressed an apathy and hostility towards law-enforcement agencies.[51] The changing political leadership throughout the period 1991–2014 similarly affected reforms of the internal security sector by allowing key actors to slow reform implementation.[52]

For example, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which was created on a basis of the Soviet KGB, preserved most of its features as a militarised special service with police functions, despite numerous transformations in the 1991–2014 period. Ironically, the failure to demilitarise the internal security structures turned out to be an advantage for Ukraine's ability to mobilise the internal security sector (i.e., non-AFU units) when countering Russian hybrid aggression in 2014. On the other hand, the State Border Guard Service (SBGS), which transformed from the KGB-subordinated Border Troops into a special law-enforcement body, had to make rapid adjustments after 2014; it was now required not only to guard the border against elements such as the smuggling of weapons and illegal entry, but to defend the border against a military threat (see below).

Zooming in on the Border Guards: from KGB-subordinated Border Troops to a special law-enforcement body

In 1991 the Ukrainian Border Troops (BTs), like other newly established security structures, inherited both the name and the main features of the Soviet militarised border-control system. At that time, a military structure was probably the most appropriate model to deal with the challenge of the uncontrolled movement of illegal migrants, armed gangs and smuggled goods, including weapons, explosives and drugs, along roughly 5,000 km-long borders with former Soviet republics, which at the time lacked formal delimitation and distinct demarcation. The active armed conflict in neighbouring Moldova (1990–92) further exacerbated these risks. Up until 2003,[53] the BTs counted among its functions repelling 'an incursion of armed formations' and 'prevent[ing] armed provocations' on a state border.

The initial stages of development and transformation (1991–2000) of the BTs were quite similar to those of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). However, unlike the AFU, the total strength of the BTs grew from 25,000 in 1992 to 50,000 in 2000 and that enlargement partly absorbed the upshots of the AFU personnel reduction. In 2000, the Ukrainian government started the transformation of the BTs into the State Border Guard Service (SBGS), which included amendments of the legislation, procedures and structures, and was formally completed in 2003 by the adoption of the law on 'State Border Service of Ukraine'.[54]

In the period of 2003–14, the SBGS made remarkable profess in demilitarisation and adopting European standards for a border-control service, with assistance from Ukraine's international partners, especially the EU and its Frontex and EUBAM missions (European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine). In 2014, however, the SBGS's significantly reduced military component created enormous difficulties, as it was forced to defend its installations and personnel from the attacks of relatively small and light-armed groups on the Russia–Ukraine border alongside its normal border-control duties. This experience did not result in reversing the previous reforms, but did lead to an adaptation to Ukraine's new security environment. After 2014 the SBGS has thus remained a law-enforcement agency with a significantly increased military component (a rapid reaction force, rather than a regular warfighting force).[55]

1.4 Ukraine's Security Sector on the Eve of Russian Aggression

The transition that Ukraine underwent from 1991–2014 was shaped and limited by frequently changing political leadership with changing views regarding Ukraine's alignment between the West and Russia. This was compounded by other obstacles, including resource constraints and, in the early years, the Soviet mentality persisting in Ukraine's security sector. A key reform aim during this time was to transform the inherited Soviet army into Ukraine's armed forces, on the assumption that a changed security and geopolitical environment required downsizing and reducing military expenditure. Critically, this caused the combat readiness of the AFU to deteriorate significantly. On 28 February 2014, the newly appointed minister of defence Ihor Teniukh notably disclosed that only 5,000 troops in Ukraine were available to fight.[56] Other elements of security-sector reform also fell short. This included establishing civilian control over the security sector, which was emphasised as important in the 'Concept of National Security of Ukraine' (1997) and the law 'On Democratic Civilian Control of State Military Organization and Law Enforcement Bodies' (2003).[57] In line with this, the internal-security sector, including the police forces and the SBGS, attempted to grapple with the Soviet legacy of these institutions. Yet this aspiration remained largely theoretical. The case of the SBGS strikingly illustrates the security reality of Ukraine and the consequent limitations of reforms recommended by Western partners. As mentioned previously, it and similar institutions were better funded than the AFU and continued to be used as tools for maintaining internal stability, highlighting the prioritisation of internal over external security threats that further characterised Ukraine's security sector in 2014.

Transformation Through Crises: 2014–22

This chapter traces the evolution of the principal security-sector actors involved in Ukrainian defence from the onset of Russian aggression in 2014 to the full-scale invasion in February 2022 under conditions of active and frozen conflict. Ukraine experienced multiple crises during the period 2014–22, which triggered significant transformations in the security sector. The events at Euromaidan starting in November 2013 led to major reforms, chiefly in the law-enforcement sector. Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the war in the Donbas kickstarted similarly extensive transformations in the military sector. The sudden escalation of Russian aggression and the poor state of the AFU motivated a desire for closer relations with NATO and triggered the emergence of a volunteer movement, including the formation of irregular armed groups.

2.1 Ukraine's Police After the Euromaidan: From *Militsiya* to National Police of Ukraine

The violent suppression, starting on 30 November 2013, of peaceful protests against president Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU led to a period of mass protests, substantial civil-society mobilisation, and a systematic crackdown on protesters by the Berkut riot police and other law enforcement actors.[58] The killing of 114 people[59] caused public outrage and a substantial decrease in trust in the law-enforcement sector. This triggered a widespread reform effort by the MVS and the police forces subordinated to it, leading to structural changes.[60]

Berkut riot police throwing a Molotov cocktail at protesters during the Euromaidan protests on 19 February 2014 in Kyiv

(Photo by Alexander Koerner via Getty Images)

The heavy-handed police response demonstrated the need to demilitarise the Ukrainian police forces.[61] Accordingly, reform – implemented through the law 'On the National Police' (2015) – focused on replacing the militarised *militsiya* with the National Police of Ukraine (NPU) under civilian leadership, eliminating militarised units such as the Berkut riot police, and introducing the citizen-oriented patrol police.[62] The latter was conceptualised with strong support from the US government and former Georgian officials, and is widely perceived as the most successful element of police reform.[63] Yet the war with Russia hindered the phasing out of militarised policing units. While new policing structures addressed some of the identified shortcomings,[64] the old *militsiya* culture persisted, owing, in part, to a flawed vetting process of former officers. The law mandated that officers undergo an evaluation before being admitted to the NPU.[65] This process, which also included evaluating the officer's professionalism by examining whether compromising information was found and whether disciplinary offences or human-rights violations had been committed, was flawed due to a lack of subsequent civil-society oversight. Ultimately, only 8% of former *militsiya* officers were dismissed and around half of those returned to the NPU after courts ruled their dismissal unlawful.[66]

The Euromaidan crackdowns further highlighted the need to abolish the close ties between the police and MVS, in order to curtail the use of police as a coercive tool for political elites.[67] Accordingly, the law 'On the National Police' mandated that the head of the newly created NPU must be from outside the Ministry.[68] Moreover, the law, drafted with contributions from civil society and the international community,[69] also granted

unprecedented oversight powers to the former. Civil society was to participate in the police commissions tasked with vetting former militia members and with recruitment of officers for the patrol police.[70] Through this process, the police began to be framed as a society-oriented rather than a state-oriented institution,[71] which was facilitated by designating public trust as a key performance indicator.[72] Yet implementation of the latter was slow,[73] and the MVS retained significant influence over the NPU despite no longer formally heading the institution. It remained the largest domestic funder of the NPU, and civil-society participation in police commissions was insufficiently implemented once the international community ceased leading the processes. This resulted in fewer dismissals of former militia officers, and crucially allowed the Ministry to retain a degree of influence over the NPU's personnel.[74]

2.2 The Armed Forces of Ukraine: Transforming in Response to Russian Aggression

Following a period of political upheaval during Euromaidan,[75] the presence of irregular pro-Russian formations in Crimea in February 2014, as well as in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in April, soon spiralled into a conflict with direct involvement of Russian Armed Forces.[76] The period that follows is framed by the decision to initially label the Ukrainian response as an anti-terrorist operation (ATO), which classified the events as an issue of internal security and put the State Security Services of Ukraine (SBU) in charge of the response, rather than a war with the armed forces in the lead.[77] This is illustrative of the poor state of the Ukrainian military in 2014, which necessitated substantial reforms intended to improve the AFU's combat readiness.[78]

2.2.1 Increasing AFU Capabilities and Changing Threat Perceptions

Russian aggression highlighted significant shortcomings in Ukraine's defence sector and fundamentally changed Ukraine's threat perception. This triggered a range of reforms, initially under president Petro Poroshenko, including a focus on increasing personnel and the relocation of armed-forces units towards the country's east. In 2014, due to prior ambitions of developing a small and professional army, the AFU was significantly under-resourced. In fact, only 5,000–6,000 soldiers out of an estimated 120,000–130,000 were reportedly ready for combat.[79] Yet the early months of the Donbas war emphasised the need for reserves and high personnel numbers for deployment to the combat zone. In response, Ukraine moved towards a hybrid-force system made up of mobilised as well as contracted professional soldiers.[80] In the spring of 2014, conscription was reinstated to generate reserves, and 90,000 people were mobilised through the hybrid system. By February 2016, after seven waves of mobilisation, the AFU was composed of 250,000 soldiers, including civilian personnel.[81] The 2014 onset of Russian aggression therefore led to a significant increase of combat units, mainly land forces (see Figure 2).

The strategic documents finalised between 2016 and 2020, which kickstarted the reform process, clearly reflect this changing threat perception.[82] These culminated in the new Strategic Defence Bulletin of Ukraine in 2016, mapping the priorities for the military until 2020. Subsequently, the 'State Program for the Development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine until 2020' (2020 State Program) outlined the roadmap for these reforms.[83] These documents emphasised the significance of external threats, and determined Russia as a military adversary for Ukraine.[84] In response, operational headquarters were set up in the eastern cities of Chernihiv, Dnipro City, Rivne and Odessa.[85] This ensured the presence of Ukraine's military in the east when Russia launched its 2022 full-scale invasion, which was a key factor in explaining Ukraine's much-improved resilience.

2.2.2 Alignment with the West: Implications for Reforms

The firm recognition of Russia as a military threat caused Ukraine to clearly align itself with the West, which triggered reforms aimed at closer cooperation with NATO and the EU. Domestically, aspirations for EU and NATO membership were enshrined in the constitution in 2019.[86] The 2020 State Program subsequently outlined as key strategic goals the development of a command-and-control system in line with NATO standards and the creation a professional army, as well as broader interoperability of the AFU with NATO and

EU armies.[87] For its part, the Alliance scaled up its support to Ukraine in 2016 through the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP).[88]

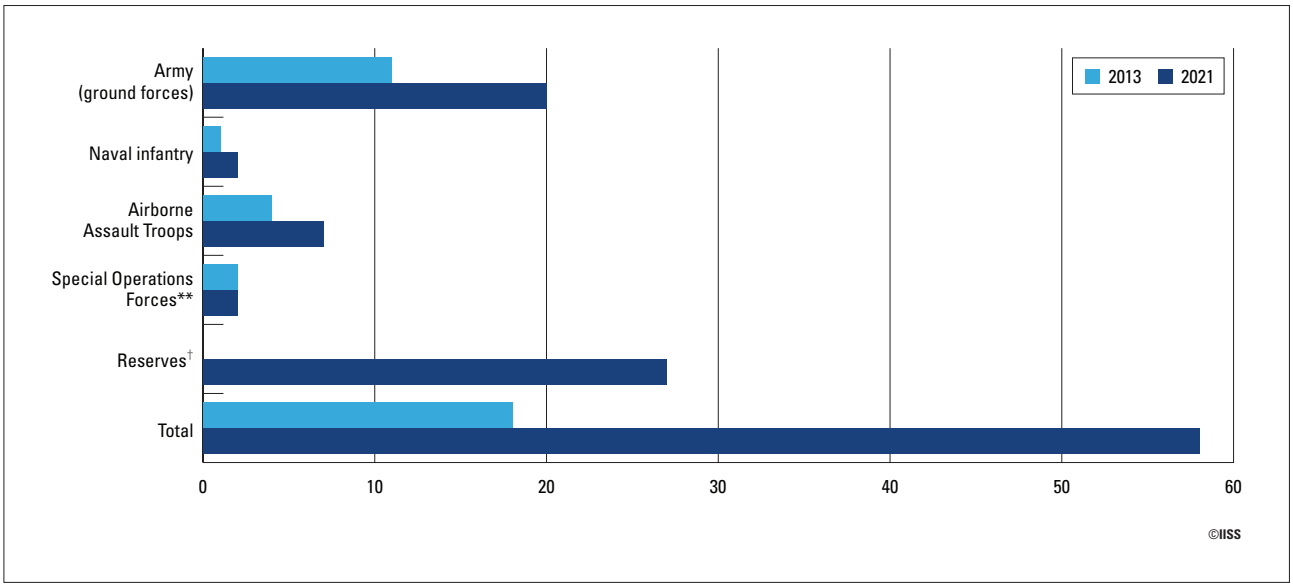
Subsequently, reforms of the AFU were implemented in line with these aspirations. On the administrative level, the General Staff of the AFU was reorganised into a J-structure, meaning that functions and responsibilities were allocated across sub-divisions of the AFU in a manner consistent across NATO armies.[89] Moreover, a degree of civilian control was established over the MoD through the law 'On National Security' (2018), which mandated the appointment of a civilian minister.[90] The implementation of this was mixed, however: from 2014–19 Stepan Poltorak, who had retired from the military to fulfil the civilian requirement, headed the MoD. President Zelenskyy then appointed the first truly civilian minister, Andrii Zagorodniuk, who was shortly thereafter replaced by retired general Andrii Taran.[91] On the operational level, first steps were taken towards creating decentralised command structure that delegated decision-making power to more junior officers.[92] Reform efforts therefore focused on developing a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps based on Western models.[93] The experience in the Donbas had clearly demonstrated the importance of mission command, and the increased training exercises with NATO since 2014 began instilling these principles into the AFU.[94]

The experience in Donbas also inspired the creation in January 2016 of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) as an independent branch of the AFU. Their subsequent development to achieve NATO standards, facilitated by closer cooperation with NATO and participation in joint training exercises, has greatly contributed to the effectiveness of the Ukrainian defence forces from 2022. The 140th Special Operations Forces Centre, which in 2019 passed NATO certification allowing it to be deployed as part of the Alliance's response force, clearly demonstrates this.[95] In recognition of Ukraine's efforts, the Alliance designated Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunity Partner (EOP) in 2020, granting preferred access to activities aimed at achieving interoperability, including training exercises.[96]

2.3 The Emergence of Irregular Armed Groups

The early months of the Donbas war highlighted the limited support the AFU received before 2014; armed forces soldiers were deployed to the frontline lacking basic equipment. The AFU launched an appeal for donations and, in response, Ukrainians not only donated in

Figure 2: **Number of selected combat units in particular services of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, 2013 and 2021***



Note: Due to data availability and relevance, the scope of this graphic is limited to ground forces, naval infantry, Airborne Assault Troops and Special Operations Forces.
*'Combat units' include regiments and brigades.
**In 2013 the Special Operations Forces were part of the Army (ground forces).
†2013 value for Reserves is unknown due to a lack of data.
Source: IISS, *The Military Balance 2014*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2022*.

swathes, but also set up crowdfunding campaigns for non-lethal military equipment.[97] A volunteer movement emerged, through a combination of bottom-up and top-down initiatives, in response to the understaffing and under-equipment of the AFU: citizens began providing logistical, material and non-military support to the armed forces and military volunteers, while others started forming irregular armed groups (IAGs), prominently referred to as volunteer battalions.[98] Some came out of the self-defence forces at the Euromaidan protests,[99] some emerged out of existing right-wing paramilitary organisations, and others were created with direct support from oligarchs, or the MVS and MoD.[100] The government therefore allowed IAGs to form which, partly due to the bottom-up nature of their formation, acted with a high degree of autonomy in the war's early phases.[101]

Regardless of their origin and functions, which ranged from regular policing functions to combat activities,[102] these lightly armed formations are widely credited with giving the Ukrainian state valuable time to organise its response to Russian aggression.[103] Crucially, these battalions enjoyed a much-higher degree of public trust and proved more popular among recruits than the AFU. The AFU's bureaucratic and lengthy recruitment processes undoubtedly contributed to this, as did the perceived greater discipline, conditions and equipment of the volunteers, not least due to their links with civilian-volunteer groups.[104] These battalions were characterised by considerable autonomy and informal command structures during the period 2014–15, which made them highly suitable for the dynamic nature of the early war. Yet as the Ukrainian's state monopoly on violence became fragmented,[105] establishing control over the IAGs became necessary, not least to ensure compliance with the Minsk agreements reached in 2015.[106]

In response, the Ukrainian government began integrating these battalions – estimated to comprise around 29,000 soldiers – into existing security structures.[107] Battalions were mostly integrated into the MVS's National Guard, a militarised law-enforcement agency, or operated as special police battalions under regional police commands.[108] Other groups became subordinated to the MoD in a more centralised, albeit slower process, and continued to operate as territorial defence battalions.[109] Integration was a way to legalise these formations and merge them with the regular armed forces, and allowed the government to supply them with the heavy weapons and arms necessary for combat.[110] Units that rejected integration were demobilised. Notably, many voluntary battalions retained considerable autonomy even after integration.[111] The different paths taken by the Azov Brigade and the Ukrainian Volunteer Army demonstrate that integration success varied.

Varying degrees of integration success

The 'Azov Brigade' and the 'Ukrainian Volunteer Army' both emerged as far-right leaning, irregular units during early 2014, yet had very different trajectories. Azov was officially founded on 5 May 2014 after forming during the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv. It quickly began receiving right-wing politicians' financial support. On 20 May, Azov announced that they were open to volunteers.[112] By the summer, Azov was upgraded to a regiment with around 450 members, and wquickly became a Special Purpose Regiment, subordinated to the National Guard with 800 members.[113] Over time, Azov transformed from a voluntary battalion into a regular National Guard unit complying with NATO standards and is therefore a successful case of integration.[114] Despite

Members of Right Sector protesting in Kyiv on 29 April 2015 against the request for disarmament issued by the General Staff of the AFU.

(Photo by Vladimir Shtanko/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

integration, the unit retained its distinct identity as well as a separate command and training approach. In line with this, Azov established a sergeant school in 2016, combining the lessons of the Donbas war with Western military-education standards.[115]

Similarly, 'Right Sector' emerged out of an informal network of Euromaidan activists in late November 2013. In April 2014, its members were present in the Anti-Terrorist Operation zone and in July 2014, the 'Volunteer Ukrainian Corps' was officially formed under the miliary command of Right Sector political leader Dmytro Yarosh. After disagreements with his political party, Yarosh formed the 'Ukrainian Volunteer Army', taking most members of the 'Volunteer Ukrainian Corps' with him.[116] This group, made up of various battalions, largely resisted integration. Although some battalions, such as 'Aratta' and the '5th battalion', were officially demobilised, they allegedly held on to light weapons, explosives and portable anti-tank weapons and continued recruitment and training activities.[117] In September 2019, the Aratta battalion was demobilised. Yet the Ukrainian Volunteer Army remained outside of the state security structures until it was finally integrated as the '67th Separate Mechanised Brigade', subordinated to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, after the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022. Notably, the 67th Brigade was disbanded in April 2024 after an audit uncovered severe shortcomings in its performance and conduct.[118]

The integration of these battalions shaped the Ukrainian security sector in three ways. Firstly, the demilitarisation efforts undertaken after the Revolution of Dignity were to some extent reversed. The incorporation of volunteer battalions into the MVS led to a revival of the National Guard,[119] while some battalions were formed into special-purpose police battalions, which also included large numbers of police officers.[120] Much of the NPU's leadership staff was recruited from ATO veterans, and these special-purpose police battalions went on to form a significant part of the NPU.[121] Secondly, the battalions' high degree of autonomy and decentralised decision making, for example in battlefield tactical decisions, arguably contributed to the AFU later embracing these decentralised processes.[122] Finally, the volunteer phenomenon paved the way for the total-defence approach implemented after 2022, which was institutionalised through the 'On the Fundamentals of National Resistance' law.[123] Finalised in January 2022, this law provides for future volunteer mobilisation through the Territorial Defence Forces (TDF) as a separate branch of the AFU.[124] The less centralised decision-making processes within battalions and the total-defence approach shaped Ukraine's resilience to Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

2.4 Ukraine's Security Sector: Transforming Amid Russian Hybrid Aggression

The period 2014–22 saw an acceleration of security-sector reforms, triggered by the multiple crises since 2014, including the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war in the Donbas. This necessitated improved readiness of the AFU for armed conflict with Russia and a firm orientation towards the West, in particular NATO and the EU. Successful reforms of the external security sector included the increase of unit strength, the creation of the SOF, first steps taken towards a establishing a Western-style NCO corps, and the TDF system. Shortcomings pertained to civilian oversight of the security sector, as illustrated by the frequent appointments of retired military officials during this period. Reforms implemented in the internal-security sector were partly successful, as shown by the well-received patrol police. However, these remained somewhat superficial and some of the problems inherent in the system were left unaddressed, as highlighted by the low dismissal rates of former members of the militia after 2014.

3. Transformation During Wartime: 2022–24

In late 2021, Russia began building up troops on its border with Ukraine[125] and on 24 February 2022 launched a full-scale invasion – labelled a 'special military operation'. Russia unleashed air strikes and ground attacks from its north and south, as well as the occupied areas of east and north-east Ukraine.[126] Ukraine declared martial law the next day and general mobilisation of select categories of soldiers and reservists took place throughout the country.[127] The transformations since 2022 have taken place in the framework of a high-intensity and land-centric war against an enemy with a numerical advantage. The result has been a total-defence approach, which has seen wide-scale mobilisation of the security sector and society at large, as well as a degree of structural decentralisation, whether on the battlefield or in terms of recruitment or crowdfunding of military equipment. Geopolitically, this period is also characterised by a decisive turn towards Euro-Atlantic integration, which represents a significant motivation for reform implementation.

3.1 Moving Towards Total Defence

Building on the lessons learned in the Donbas before 2022, the full-scale invasion triggered a total-defence approach which saw a broad mobilisation of the military and civilian sphere in defence of Ukraine.[128] Initially, mobilisation called on soldiers with combat experience (those who had previously been conscripted), followed by reserve officers. While all men of fighting age are barred from leaving Ukraine, young men under the age of 25 remain currently protected from being drafted.[129] In line with the Strategic Defence Bulletin of 2012 and given the continued need for increased personnel numbers, the mobilisation entailed the involvement of the security sector in its broadest definition in defence and combat activities.[130] Moreover, it emphasised the importance of, and cemented, the new system of national resistance, the foundations for which were put in place in early 2022, and which facilitated Ukraine's resilience. Concurrently, the nature of the war, the resulting widespread security-sector involvement and the continued participation of volunteers have arguably contributed to a level of decentralisation within the security sector.

3.1.1 Broad Security Sector Involvement in Defence

In the war's initial months, general mobilisation took place to substantially increase the size of the AFU from around 260,000 personnel to 700,000.[131] More recently, in April 2024, a mobilisation law was passed to generate more personnel power, which lowered the drafting age from 27 to 25 (but which notably did not address nor regulate the important topic of demobilisation).[132] Alongside these mobilisation drivers, other security-sector actors have also been actively engaging in Ukraine's defence by other means. Since the declaration of martial law, the MVS-subordinated National Guard has been operationally subordinated to the AFU.[133] Moreover, units from different security services – including from the NPU and the SBGS – are often working together on the frontline. Over time, these different units have essentially turned into light-infantry forces that carry out similar tasks in combat.[134] For instance, regular units from the AFU, National Guard units, the TDF, SBGS units and special police battalions from the NPU were jointly involved in defending the city of Chernihiv in 2022.[135] Figure 3 shows the personnel numbers and proportion of select security-sector services currently defending Ukraine, highlighting the diversity of these units.

The collaboration of different units originating from different services in combat has demonstrated their varying levels of training and equipment. This has highlighted the importance of joint training and working towards mutual interoperability,[136] but has also allowed Ukraine to capitalise on the units' diverse skills and backgrounds.[137] In the long term, the broader security sector and its widespread involvement in defence-related activities will raise questions regarding reintegration of Ukrainian servicemen and women into civilian life, as well as the return to civilian tasks, alongside military ones, for civilian security-sector services such as law enforcement (see below).[138]

The changing role of the law-enforcement sector

The addition of a wide range of new tasks, both civilian and military, has profoundly transformed law-enforcement agencies such as the National Police of Ukraine (NPU), State Border Guard Service (SBGS) and State Security Services of Ukraine. In addition to their usual functions, these entities are investigating war crimes, restoring order in the liberated territories, supporting front-line units and, now being more heavily armed, engaging in active combat.[139] For instance, the *Offensive Guard* recruitment campaign in 2023 led to the mobilisation of different assault brigades under various Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MVS) institutions, such as the SBGS-subordinated Steel Border Brigade and the NPU-subordinated Liut Brigade.[140] Liut is a special-police assault brigade, made up of civilian recruits as well as police officers. Importantly, its members remain outside the AFU, have received substantial pay rises and are guaranteed employment in the NPU after the end of hostilities.[141] This increasing engagement in defence-related activities is likely contributing to the militarisation of law-enforcement agencies, such as the NPU. While this bears important considerations for future security-sector reform efforts,[142] it is currently having a positive impact. Given its increasing engagement in assisting citizens, for example through involvement in emergency response and their presence in border and liberated areas, the police has been organically transforming into a citizen-oriented entity.[143] As a result, public trust has increased substantially since the full-scale invasion, from 38% in 2021 to 57% in December 2023.[144] This changing role should be considered in designing Ukraine's post-war security sector reform.

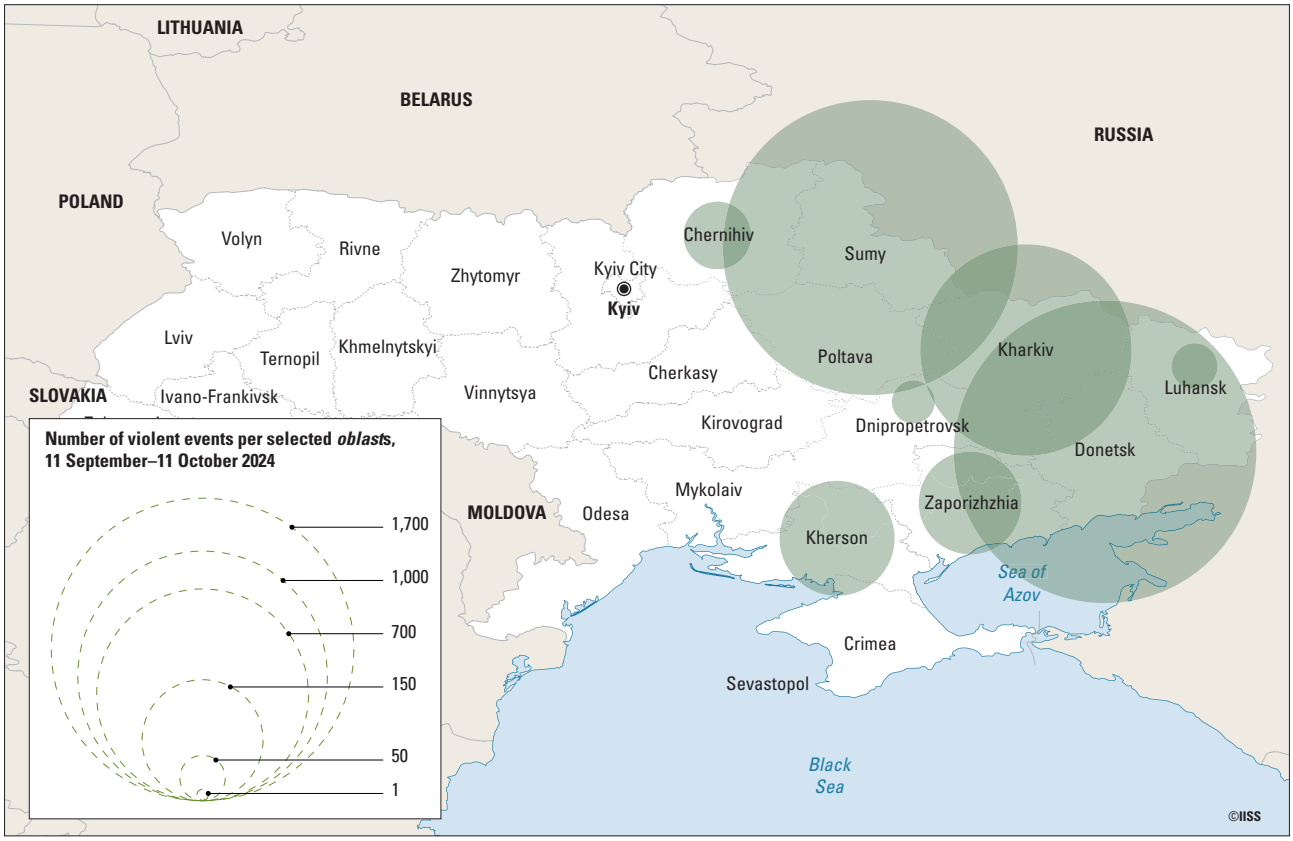
3.1.2 The Importance of Territorial Defence

The system of national resistance, further cemented since 2022,[145] structurally changed the security sector by institutionalising the TDF as a separate branch of the AFU, to be made up of reservists and volunteers.[146] The TDF system aims to coordinate the mobilisation of volunteers through the civilian-military/paramilitary Voluntary Formations of Local Communities (VFLC), in direct response to the lessons learned with the volunteer experience after 2014.[147] The VFLC report to the nearest TDF battalion commander, but are not considered military personnel and are thus not exempt from being drafted for military service.[148] Territorial defence was decisive in the first months of the full-scale invasion, in part due to rapid mobilisation. By 26 February, 50,000 Ukrainians had signed up and by May, 110,000 Ukrainians were in the TDF.[149] In response to Russia concentrating its efforts on the east and south of Ukraine (see Map 1), and Ukraine's approach of maintain a continual frontline, the role of the TDF began to shift. In May 2023, they began being deployed outside of their territories and were used to plug holes in the frontlines and to reinforce regular units engaged in high-intensity operations.[150] Figure 3 clearly demonstrates the importance of the TDF in Ukraine's defence, with its recruits accounting for the same share of total-ground force strength as the regular AFU units in 2023. The TDF system has undoubtedly been crucial in allowing broader mobilisation and organising the defence contributions of everyday Ukrainians. Moreover, the absorption of many TDF units into the regular armed forces in 2024 (see Figure 3) is a testament to the improved combat readiness of these units.

Civilians being trained in combat as part of a TDF training exercise in early February 2022.

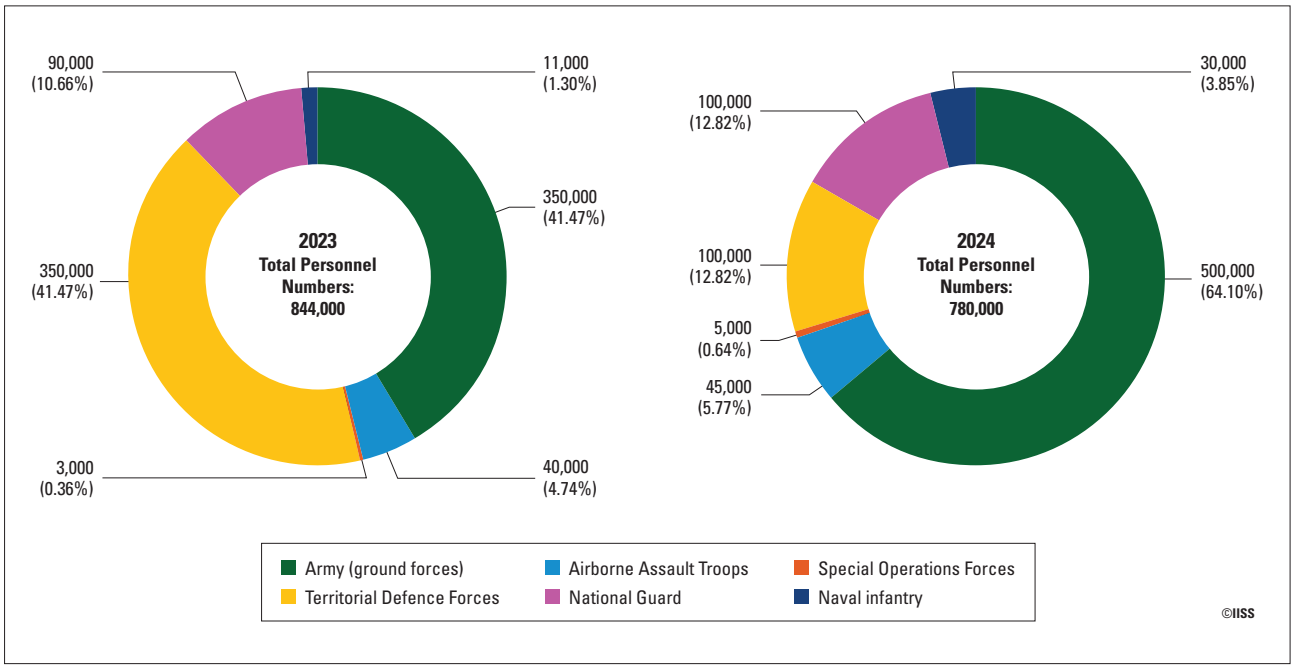
(Photo by Dominika Zarzycka/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Map 1: **Main areas of fighting in Ukraine, September–October 2024**



Notes: This map is based on the *Ukraine Black Sea* Dataset from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acleddata.com. The dataset was accessed on 21 October 2024. Violent events are defined as including the event types 'Battles' and 'Explosions/Remote Violence', covering the period 11 September–11 October 2024. This decision was taken, after consulting the ACLED methodology and coding decisions for the conflict in Ukraine, to display the main areas of fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces.
Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), www.acleddata.com (accessed 16 October 2024).

Figure 3: **Estimated proportions of selected services in overall ground-force strength, 2023 and 2024**



Notes: Due to data availability and relevance, the scope of this graphic is limited to ground forces, Airborne Assault Troops, Special Operations Forces, Territorial Defence Forces, the National Guard and naval infantry. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding differences.
Sources: IISS, *The Military Balance 2025*; IISS, *The Military Balance 2024*.

3.1.3 Volunteers and Increasing Decentralisation

Building on the legacies of the volunteer movement and the progress made towards mission command before 2022, the security sector has embraced further decentralisation, driven by the geographically dispersed nature of the war and the involvement of a wide range of units from different security services. The latter encourages a degree of decentralisation to allow for effective decision-making and collaboration.[151] Widespread civil society involvement in defence activities, including their contributions to procuring and providing equipment for the combatants, has also influenced this.[152] This increasing civil-society involvement is a further step towards a more accountable security sector. Decentralisation has also manifested itself in the autonomous decision-making processes of volunteer units, including in their selection of activities, coordination with other units, and tactical judgements,[153] and in supplementary unit-level training, which depends quite heavily on the commander.[154] Additionally, many units have implemented their own recruitment and procurement – the latter through crowdfunding and with assistance from civil-society organisations[155] – amid the government's resource constraints.[156] Crucially, this has allowed immediate procurement needs to be prioritised by individual units, and the Ministries' centralised procurement to focus on broader strategic aims.[157] Decentralisation is recognised as a key advantage over Russia and arguably bears considerations for future reform[158].

3.2 The Prospect of Euro-Atlantic Integration: Reform Acceleration

Prospects for EU membership and closer relations with NATO have become important drivers of reforms and transformations in the security sector.[159] EU and NATO support in reforming Ukraine's security sector is in turn contributing to its increasing efficacy. Significant reform efforts of the law-enforcement sector are currently underway to ensure alignment with EU standards. To this end, the 'Overarching Strategic Plan for Reforming the Law Enforcement Agencies' was approved by presidential decree in May 2023.[160] In addition to emphasising the importance of democratic principles such as rule of law, civilian oversight and human rights, the document crucially outlines the importance of ensuring improved collaboration between the different components of the Ukrainian security sector.[161] This is particularly important considering the involvement of the entire security sector in response to Russian aggression. Moreover, the EU is providing substantial support to the Ukrainian security sector, chiefly through the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) and the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM). The former has been supporting civilian security-sector actors, for instance in drafting the Overarching Strategic Plan, while the latter was established in October 2022 with the specific mandate of providing training to the AFU. The EUMAM has trained in total 60,000 Ukrainian troops between late 2022 and mid-2024.[162]

NATO strengthened its support of Ukraine's security sector in 2023 by turning the Comprehensive Assistance Package into a multi-year programme to ensure longer-term support aimed at achieving interoperability and transforming security-sector institutions.[163] The provision of military assistance and training has been scaled up. The UK has trained 45,000 soldiers as part of *Operation Interflex*,[164] while the US National Guard has trained 20,000.[165] In sum, more than 100,000 Ukrainians – or around 20% of Ukraine's total ground force in 2023 – have received military training in NATO member states, including through EUMAM. This has allowed for NATO's operational standards, such as decentralised leadership, to become internalised in Ukrainian forces.[166] Ukraine had reviewed 318 of 335 NATO standards by February 2024 and aims to review 51% of all NATO standards by late 2026.[167] To strengthen cooperation and further streamline support, including training, the Alliance is setting up a new command, the NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (NSATU).[168] Additionally, a NATO–Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) will soon be set up in Poland to allow for further joint training, as well as analysis of and exchange on Ukraine's combat experience.[169] Increasing cooperation with its Western partners is providing both motivation for reform implementation and opportunities to increase exposure to partner countries' good security-sector governance principles.

4. Challenges for Post-war Security Sector Transformation

Even though, as of December 2024, options for a ceasefire are rarely openly discussed in Kyiv or even in Western capitals, it seems necessary to consider how an end to hostilities would impact the efforts to transform Ukraine's security sector, not least to avoid a situation where the government and the international community are caught unprepared. As was highlighted in previous chapters, reforms and transformations of Ukraine's security sector have been undertaken in periods of frozen and active conflicts. Among key challenges going forward will be reducing the size of the military while continuing the structural-reform efforts in line with closer Euro-Atlantic integration and retaining the ability to re-mobilise soldiers at short notice in case of a new acute threat. However, future reform efforts will be constrained by various factors, including economic and security considerations as well as institutional challenges. These are elaborated herein using one vital aspect pertaining to such transformation – the reintegration of war veterans – as an example for broader considerations around the future of Ukraine's security sector.

Civilians participating in a training exercise of the Kyiv TDF on 22 January 2022.

(Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

4.1 Economic Challenges

Significant economic resources are needed to transform a security sector after conflict, including for demobilising and reintegrating former combatants.[170] A primary driver for a reduction in the size of the security sector is therefore financial. For the 2025 fiscal year, Ukraine plans to spend UAH2.2 trillion (USD53.66 billion) or about one-third of GDP on defence. Approximately 55% (UAH1.2trn, USD26bn) of this is earmarked for the salaries of around one million Ukrainians who are part of the security sector.[171] Western donors, primarily the US and the EU, fund a large part of this overall budget. Even if the current level of international support can be maintained, a significant part of that funding would be re-oriented towards reconstruction efforts after hostilities cease. This presents the challenge of planning for a significant downsizing of its military in the middle of a fight for survival, while moving forward with reform efforts geared towards the country's future integration into NATO and the EU.

Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) (i.e., the process of reducing military strength after the end of conflict) is – at a time when the *mobilisation* of additional fighters is the primary concern – not high on the agenda. However, Ukrainian policymakers and representatives of civil society, which includes a number of veterans associations, agree that the country urgently needs a new veterans policy.[172] Like many other aspects of Ukraine's legal framework, the 1993 law 'On the Status of War Veterans and Guarantees of their Social Protection'[173] dates back to the early 1990s and is rooted in concepts of Soviet welfare policy.[174] It stipulates that war veterans should receive medical, educational, transportation and housing benefits.[175] The Ukrainian government was already struggling to provide these benefits to the veteran population, which consisted of around 670,000 individuals, including 440,000 Donbas-war veterans, before the full-scale invasion. The situation has since worsened.

The large-scale mobilisation since February 2022 has further compounded the challenge and highlights the importance of planning ahead. For now, the veteran population has grown by 'only' between 100,000 and 200,000 soldiers, most of whom were discharged due to combat-related physical and psychological injuries. This number could grow to one million combatants and five million beneficiaries, including dependents, who would be eligible for benefits by the end of hostilities.[176] This would put massive strains on an already overburdened state bureaucracy. Moreover, most future veterans will be in their mid-thirties and mid-forties when they leave active service, so the focus needs to be on creating economic opportunities rather than providing welfare benefits.[177] In mid-August 2024, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced a new veterans policy which addresses a number of demands made by civil society, and in a October 2023 policy paper discussed in detail the demands of veteran integration, in particular regarding improved service delivery and a focus on income generation.[178]

4.2 Security Challenges

Moreover, Ukraine's internal and external security challenges should be factored into thinking about future security-sector transformation, including veteran reintegration. Current thinking about veteran reintegration exemplifies this. For instance, the new veterans policy does not approach the issue as an element of security sector-transformation, and thus far, does not consider how military reserve duty might be structured in the future, or what kind of force size Ukraine will require after the end of hostilities. The new policy embraces a decentralised approach, delegating responsibility for the reintegration of the veterans to the municipalities in line with international models of community-based reintegration.[179, 180] Notably, it aims to assist veterans alongside other vulnerable groups, such as returnees.[181] While this might seem appropriate for the current caseload, it requires more financial resources than traditional programs targeting individual veterans. There is also the risk that more prosperous local governments provide better services than poorer ones, which could create tensions and threaten national cohesion.

The experiences from other post-conflict countries show that the failure to properly organise and fund the reintegration of combatants carries significant risks for a country's internal stability, in particular where former fighters feel that they have risked their lives without sufficient recognition or recompense. In Ukraine, the gap between fighters, and their families, and those who have evaded military services is already growing and creating tensions.[182] Reforms of the mobilisation law aiming to increase the numbers of recruits are highly unpopular as are crackdown on deserters. Meanwhile, soldiers in many frontline units cannot rotate due to a lack of fresh troops and equipment.[183] These tensions are likely to increase, in particular if the current round of fighting ends with another 'frozen conflict' along the lines of the Minsk agreements.

Socio-economic challenges will likely compound this challenge: while the military base salary at the end of 2024 was UAH33,000 (approximately USD800) per month,[184] various incentives can increase this to up to USD3,500 per month for soldiers seeing active combat duty on frontlines.[185] Given that the average monthly salary in Ukraine was UAH23,000 (about USD550) during the same period,[186] it will be hard for former fighters to maintain a similar income after transition to civilian life. Focusing on economic opportunities in the new veteran's strategy therefore seems to be the right move, but it remains to be seen how this could be financed at the scale needed.

A possible alternative would be to join other uniformed services such as the police, the border guards or the state emergency services. This could allow veterans to retain government salaries and might facilitate their re-mobilisation in case of a new conflict, but would not ease the budgetary strain. In addition, the transition from military to civilian security provision might require both a vetting process and significant retraining efforts. As military values often differ from those required for, for example, community policing, this transition is worth considering alongside broader reform efforts of the civilian security sector.[187] This challenge is compounded by low public trust in the police and border guard (48% and 54% respectively, though these figures have significantly increased during the full-scale invasion).[188] While there appears to be political

will to continue law-enforcement reforms in line with EU aspirations,[189] balancing this need to 'demilitarise' institutions such as the police service with the creation of jobs for former fighters and the need to maintain a high readiness for renewed armed conflict will be an important consideration for Ukraine's internal and external security.

Meanwhile, the risks of a failed demobilisation process for internal stability should not be underestimated. Some former fighters might drift towards criminal activities due to a combination of lack of suitable employment opportunities, disaffection from society and psychological trauma.[190] Another complicating factor is the large number of small arms and light weapons, ammunition and explosives held by both members of the security forces and civilians. Prior to February 2022, Ukraine already had an active black market for weapons and was a transit point for the proliferation of arms from the Caucasus to the EU.[191] This dynamic changed with the full-scale invasion. The limited evidence available suggests tight control over the large numbers of Western-supplied weapons, but this is not the case for the large numbers of Russian-made weapons captured on the battlefield by Ukrainian forces.[192] Law-enforcement officials in Kyiv already point towards increasing seizures of weapons and explosives from soldiers on holiday from frontlines, while civilians also increasingly acquire weapons. Research suggests that Ukrainians with combat experience are five times more likely than other civilians to have a firearm at home.[193]

Disenfranchised former fighters and the widespread availability of weapons could potentially be a very dangerous combination, with possible pathways ranging from organised crime to mercenary activities outside of Ukraine and even, in some extreme scenarios, the formation of irregular armed groups outside the command of the government in Kyiv.[194] Combined with the risk of the politicisation of veteran-reintegration issues, given that former fighters are widely recognised to make up an important constituency in future elections, this highlights the importance of carefully planning for future challenges surrounding Ukraine's internal and external security within broader security-sector transformation efforts.

4.3 Institutional Challenges

Finally, institutional challenges and considerations arise when thinking ahead to Ukraine's future security sector, including veteran reintegration. While some elements of the government's vision for the future of the security sector can be derived from policy documents such as the 'Victory Plan' presented in the Ukrainian parliament in October 2024, the details remain unclear. This might be prudent for military planning, but is problematic for issues such as veterans policy, as the management of expectations is an important element in any DDR process. Institutionally, the overall responsibility for this topic rests with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, while most of the actual services provided to former fighters are delivered by other line ministries, including those responsible for social policy, health and economy. The ministries responsible for defence and internal affairs have been largely absent from these discussions, and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs has been suffering from frequent changes in leadership since 2022.[195] This institutional setting is quite different from many other countries, where post-conflict demobilisation is often coordinated by a unit placed directly under the office of the president or prime minister.

Ukrainian policymakers are aware of the strategic importance of this issue but reluctant to address it, while the country's international partners do not consider it a priority. Among representatives of the international community in Kyiv, DDR is predominantly seen as a largely technical matter, best left to specialised international organisations. However, as shown by the long list of failed DDR programmes, some of which have contributed to reigniting wars, this issue is too sensitive to be left to the 'experts' alone. It would be prudent for Ukraine's international partners to encourage more Ukrainian leadership in this crucial area, which forms an important part of wider security-sector transformation efforts. Alongside Ukraine's dynamic civil society, Western governments should therefore increase their efforts in ensuring that post-conflict planning for veteran reintegration is prioritised alongside broader efforts to transform and reform Ukraine's security sector in line with NATO and EU standards.

Notes

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Acknowledgements

IISS–Europe acknowledges the financial support of the German Federal Foreign Office in producing this research paper, including for a workshop that helped inform the paper's contents.

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