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THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES (1991–2021)

INTRODUCTION

The role of the army in the political life of society is increasing in the context of escalating social conflicts, economic crises, and political instability. This phenomenon is particularly characteristic of societies in transition, where socio-political relations are transforming, or at crucial historical moments when the very existence of a state is threatened, and traditional political forces are unable to address existing problems.

Over the thirty years of its history, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) have undergone complex and controversial development, influenced by the country's socio-economic challenges and foreign policy factors. Since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the AFU has demonstrated a rapid revival of its combat capabilities. Along with other structures of the security and defense sector, the army has become a key factor in preserving the country's independence and democratic development.

Given that the Armed Forces of Ukraine are currently facing the world's largest nuclear power alone, it is extremely important to study the process of their formation, as well as the problems and challenges that the Ukrainian army has encountered since Ukraine's independence.

In our study, we applied both general scientific and specialized historical and political science methods. General scientific methods (such as deductive and inductive reasoning, analysis, and synthesis) served as essential cognitive tools to implement the principles of historicism, systematic approach, and objectivity. General and specialized historical methods (including historical-typological, statistical, comparative-historical, and problem-chronological methods) allowed us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the problem of the AFU.

The empirical basis of the article includes various types of documents such as legislative acts of Ukraine, statistical data, memoirs of Ukraine's military leaders, and periodicals.

A wide range of publications by Ukrainian and foreign researchers, analysts, and military specialists are dedicated to the process of creating and developing the Armed Forces.

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Certain aspects of the formation of the armed forces are detailed in the memoirs of the heads of Ukraine's military departments who were directly involved in government decision-making (Morozov, 1996; Zhyvytsia, 2001; Lopata, 2002; Zaluzhnyi, Shaptala, 2021).

The works of Ukrainian and foreign researchers reflect the process of forming the Ukrainian army, establishing its material and technical base, financing the defense sector, and managing Ukraine's nuclear disarmament (Mearsheimer, 1993; Dick, 1994; Perepelytsia, 1998; Papikian, 2007; Kostenko, 2015; Shevchuk, 2019; Tkachuk, 2019).

THE CREATION OF THE ARMY AND THE FIRST DEFENSE CONCEPTS

The foundation for establishing the Armed Forces of Ukraine as an integral institution of the state was laid by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine's resolution on August 24, 1991, titled "On Military Formations in Ukraine" (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro viiskovi formuvannia*, 1991). This document addressed two key issues:

– The subordination of all military formations stationed on the territory of Ukraine to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine;
– The establishment of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine.

This resolution marked the beginning of the development of the AFU. The next step in establishing the AFU was taken by the Verkhovna Rada on October 11, 1991, when it approved the general "Concept of Defense of the State and Building of the Armed Forces of Ukraine" and created the Defense Council of Ukraine, along with approving the composition of its members (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro Kontseptsiiu oborony ta budivnytstva Zbroinykh Syl Ukrainy*, 1991).

The Concept was based on two principles: the non-nuclear status of the state and Ukraine's commitment to not joining any military bloc (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro dodatkovi zakhody shchodo zabezpechennia nabuttia Ukrainoiu beziadernoho statusu*, 1992). But, going beyond the chronological limits of the article, it is worth recalling, the provision on the non-nuclear status was already enshrined in the "Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine" (adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR on July 16, 1990) (*Deklaratsiia*..., 1990).

The Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine proclaimed that Ukraine would become "a permanently neutral state that does not participate in military blocs" in the future. This declaration, adopted during the final months of the USSR's existence, cast doubt on the possibility of a unified foreign policy by the Soviet center. The mention of non-aligned status was intended to ensure Ukraine's avoidance of participation in any new military blocs that might emerge on the territory of the former USSR and was not directed against cooperation with NATO. In this context, its historical significance was limited. It soon became clear that neutrality and non-alignment were impractical for a country with Ukraine's geopolitical significance. Had Ukraine adopted a neutral status, Russia would have been obliged to immediately withdraw the Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol. Therefore, Ukraine did not adopt a neutral status but instead adopted a non-aligned status due to Russian

pressure. As it turned out, this non-aligned status did not provide Ukraine with guarantees of national security. Simultaneously, the Defence Concept stipulated that the AFU should consist of four components: Ground Forces, Air Force, Air Defence Forces, and Navy. On December 13, 1991, President Leonid Kravchuk was declared Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

A milestone date in the formation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was December 6, 1991, when the Verkhovna Rada adopted the laws "On Defense of Ukraine" and "On the Armed Forces of Ukraine" (*Zakon Ukrainy Pro oboronu Ukrainy*, 1992).

On 19 October 1993, the Military Doctrine of Ukraine was adopted. It emphasized that Ukraine's strategic task in the field of defense is to protect its state sovereignty and political independence, as well as to preserve territorial integrity and the inviolability of its borders (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro Voiennu doktrynu Ukrainy*, 1993).

At the end of 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, a strategic grouping of troops consisting of three military districts (Transcarpathian, Kyiv, and Odesa) and the Black Sea Fleet remained on the territory of Ukraine. This included three combined arms armies, two tank armies, an army corps, four air armies, a separate air defense army, a missile army, the Black Sea Fleet of the USSR, two missile warning system nodes, and other military formations. The total number of personnel was more than 800,000; there were 6,500 tanks, over 7,000 armored infantry and armored personnel carriers, more than 1,500 aircraft (fighters, attack aircraft, strategic bombers, reconnaissance, military transport aircraft, etc.), helicopters (attack, multipurpose, etc.), 350 ships, and 1,272 nuclear warheads of intercontinental ballistic missiles. In addition, the Armed Forces of Ukraine retained a significant amount of the most advanced weapons and military equipment of the time (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro poperednii zvit Tymchasovoi slidchoi komisii*, 2019).

According to most military experts, this potential was sufficient to create a powerful national Armed Forces and address social issues. The sale of surplus property, weapons, and military equipment provided sufficient funds for the modernization of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

However, the Ukrainian leadership was unable to resolve these issues, especially against the backdrop of a deep economic crisis. Therefore, the Ukrainian authorities proclaimed the so-called "principle of reasonable sufficiency" and began "bringing the combat potential to a sufficient level" (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro Kontseptsiiu oborony ta budivnytstva Zbroinykh Syl Ukrainy*, 1991).

This initiated a process of massive reduction in both the number of troops and their combat capabilities without any medium-term forecasting of the risks to the state's defense capability or the potential for ensuring social adaptation for the personnel.

DISARMAMENT AND UKRAINE'S RENUNCIATION OF NUCLEAR STATUS

By 1992, Ukraine's disarmament had moved to a practical stage. A trigger for this was the Verkhovna Rada's ratification in June of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which defined the maximum levels of armaments and military equip-

ment for the countries of Eastern Europe. This treaty was signed by 16 NATO countries, the Warsaw Pact countries, and the USSR in November 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the collapse, Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states distributed quotas for the maximum number of military equipment units among themselves. This document set limits for the signatory countries in terms of the number of military equipment and weapons.

The goal was stated to be "to prevent any military conflicts in Europe." In practice, compliance with the terms of the treaty would have significantly limited the offensive capabilities of European armies.

Naturally, Ukraine had much more weaponry than what was required by the Europeans, and so, starting on 18 August 1992, the Ukrainian authorities began to destroy the "excess" military equipment. By the end of 1996, 5,300 tanks, 2,400 armored combat vehicles, and 477 combat aircraft had been dismantled and put out of action as part of the agreement. The size of the Armed Forces was set at 0.8–0.9% of the country's population, which meant it was supposed to be around 400,000–420,000 people at that time. Ukrainian law enforcement officials believe that the army was deliberately brought to a state of decline. In June 2020, the former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zamana, was notified of being suspected of treason. The State Bureau of Investigation believes that he, along with former defense ministers Pavlo Lebedev and Dmytro Salamatin, and under the leadership of former President Viktor Yanukovych, deliberately reduced the size of the army and diminished its combat readiness (*Zamana pro pidozru...*, 2019).

Nuclear disarmament of Ukraine became a separate item in international agreements. For the first time in history, a state renounced the possession of nuclear weapons at the legislative level.

In 1991, Ukraine inherited the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world, after the United States and the Russian Federation. It consisted of five divisions of the 43rd Missile Army of the former USSR. The Ukrainian army was equipped with strategic missile complexes, both stationary in silos and mobile missile systems. In total, Ukraine had 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles. The control system for these missile systems was centralized, with the combat control center located in Russia. Ukraine also had 2,500 tactical nuclear weapons. The Air Force possessed 44 strategic bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro poperednii zvit Tymchasovoi slidchoi komisii*, 2019).

Moreover, the tactical nuclear weapons that Kyiv could have used without Moscow's control had been exported to Russia before July 1992, based on the agreement "On Joint Measures on Nuclear Weapons" signed on 21 December 1991 in Alma-Ata by Kravchuk, Yeltsin, Shushkevich, and Nazarbayev. This document regulated the transport of tactical nuclear weapons from the territories of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to Russia for their destruction. The number of missiles transported remains unknown. Although Ukraine had the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world at the time of the collapse of the USSR, these weapons were not under Ukrainian control. They were commanded from Russia, and the President of the Russian Federation had the "nuclear suitcase." All attempts by the first president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, to obtain the "nuclear button" – the technical ability to block the launch of nuclear

missiles from Ukrainian territory without his consent – were unsuccessful, as Moscow categorically refused to grant this capability (Kostenko, 2015).

In exchange for nuclear disarmament, Ukraine received security guarantees formalized in the Budapest Memorandum (which turned out to be purely symbolic in the spring of 2014). This agreement was signed on 5 December 1994 by the leaders of Ukraine – Leonid Kuchma, the United States – Bill Clinton, Russia – Boris Yeltsin, and the United Kingdom – John Major. Kyiv also received some financial assistance from the United States as compensation, plus preferential energy supplies from Russia, including fuel for nuclear power plants.

The process of disarmament in Ukraine was unique in modern world history both in terms of scale and the number of measures taken. In a relatively short period, the country gave up nuclear weapons and reduced its armed forces by three times.

The issue of the division of the USSR's Black Sea Fleet and the formation of the Ukrainian Navy could be the subject of a separate study. In the context of this article, it is worth noting that the division of the Black Sea Fleet in 1997 was one of the key factors of tension between the two states, as Ukraine received only 18.3% of the fleet, including the most outdated ships, while Russia received 81.7% (*Istoriia ZSU*, 2020). Despite the agreement, Russia retained control over most of the ships and infrastructure, effectively limiting Ukraine's ability to use the fleet to protect its national interests. However, as the future has shown, even more dangerous was the continued basing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory under interstate agreements. All of this created the conditions for Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing attacks on Ukrainian territory.

ATTEMPTS TO MODERNIZE THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

The starting point of the next stage in the development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is considered to be the approval of the State Programme for the Construction and Development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine until 2005 by President Leonid Kuchma on 20 January 1997 (*Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy Pro rishennia Rady natsionalnoi bezpeky i oborony*, 2000).

The military and political *leadership* tried once again to adjust the directions of army development and outline the prospects for the modernization of weapons and military equipment. However, in the context of chronic underfunding, all this was nothing more than a declaration of intent. In 1992, 2.1% of GDP was allocated to the army, but by 1999, it was already down to 1.3% (*30 rokiv Nezalezhnosti*, 2021).

Nevertheless, some changes did begin. In 1998, a new system of military-administrative division of Ukraine's territory was introduced. Instead of military districts, operational commands were established. Functionally, they became operational and strategic associations designed to perform operational, mobilization, and territorial defense tasks within the limits established for them, as well as technical, logistical, medical, and other types of support for troops (forces) located in their territories, regardless of departmental subordination, in peacetime and wartime.

In addition, new functional components of the AFU were created based on existing units and subunits, depending on the level of personnel training and the technical condition of the equipment: Deterrence Forces, Rapid Reaction Forces, and state border protection units.

The size of the Armed Forces was significantly reduced once again. Following the proposals of the President of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted a resolution on 22 December 1998 approving the following strength of the Armed Forces: as of 31 December 1998 – 320,000 servicemen and 100,000 employees; as of 31 December 1999 – 310,000 servicemen and 90,000 employees (*Postanova Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy Pro chyselnist Zbroinykh Syl Ukrainy*, 1999).

The second edition of Ukraine's Military Doctrine was published on 15 June 2004. Unlike the previous edition, this document omits any reference to Ukraine's intention to remain a neutral, non-aligned state (*Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy Pro Voiennu doktrynu Ukrainy*, 2004).

The next stage of the reorganisation of the Armed Forces took place between 2001 and 2005, when new structures were created again. These were the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces, the Main Defence Forces, and the Strategic Reserves.

In 2004–2005, the Armed Forces of Ukraine were transformed from a four-branch to a three-branch structure by merging the Air Force and the Air Defence Forces into a single branch, the Air Force, which consisted of three air commands (West, South, Centre) and the Crimea tactical group.

It is notable that the structure did not include an "East" command. Logically, this command should have been responsible for the eastern direction of Ukraine's defence, including Donbas (the East Operational Command was created only in January 2015 by spinning off part of the territory from the South Operational Command).

THE INFLUENCE OF PRO-RUSSIAN LEADERSHIP ON THE CONDITION OF THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE

As of 2010, when Yanukovych came to power, the Land Forces had:

- 17 combat brigades (2 tank, 8 mechanized, 1 airborne, 2 airmobile, 1 missile, and 3 artilleries);
- 14 separate combat regiments (1 mechanized, 1 airmobile, 2 special purposes, the Presidential Regiment, 3 rocket artillery, 3 anti-aircraft missiles, 2 helicopter regiments of army aviation, and 1 electronic warfare regiment);
- 9 separate combat support regiments (4 engineering, 4 communications, and 1 radiation, chemical, and biological defense);
- Other separate units and institutions at the regimental level and below (*Istoriia ZSU*, 2020).

At the same time, the degradation of the military training system continued. In a short time, the number of higher military educational institutions and military departments in civilian universities was halved – from 60 to 31. In fact, each branch of the Armed Forces was left with only one primary institution for officer training. The

exception was the Land Forces, which, as of 2011, included the Hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi Army Academy and the Odesa Military Academy.

The army suffered its most significant decline since independence in 2013. President Viktor Yanukovych signed the country's budget, which allocated less than 1% of GDP for defense, and the number of Armed Forces personnel was reduced to just 168,000 (*Proekt Zakonu Ukrainy Pro chyselnist Zbroinykh Syl Ukrainy*, 2013).

This was, in fact, the final collapse of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, allegedly influenced by Moscow. It is worth noting that the defense ministers from 2012 to 2013, Dmitry Salamatin and Pavel Lebedev, were Russian citizens. Their plans were extensive, and by 2015, Ukraine was not supposed to have a combat-ready army at all. Consequently, in a short period, five anti-aircraft missile brigades were reduced, three brigades were reorganized into regiments, and 12 anti-aircraft missile regiments were disbanded.

As of 2013, the number of personnel in the Land Forces was only 57,000. They were equipped with 686 T-64 tanks of various modifications, 72 Mi-8 and Mi-24 combat helicopters, 2,065 armored combat vehicles, and 716 artillery systems (cannons, mortars, and multiple launch rocket systems) (*Bila knyha*, 2011).

In the Air Force, the main organizational unit was the brigade, which included two or three aviation squadrons and support units. As a result of downsizing and reorganization, as of 2013, the Air Force had six brigades and one separate tactical aviation squadron, three transport air brigades, and one training squadron (subordinated to the Kharkiv Air Force University), as well as a separate regiment of remotely piloted aircraft with morally and physically outdated drones.

This was not the end of the reduction in forces. In February 2012, during a meeting with the Air Force command, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Colonel General Volodymyr Zamana, was tasked with preparing proposals to disband the Air Force as a branch of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with the necessary justification. He planned to completely eliminate reconnaissance aviation, consolidate all military transport aircraft at one Boryspil airfield, and close military airfields in Havryshkivka, Melitopol, and Vasylkiv, among other measures (*Shchodo znyzhennia (chastkovoi vtraty) oboronnoho potentsialu Ukrainy*, 2014: 28).

RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION AND THE RESTORATION OF THE UKRAINIAN ARMY'S COMBAT CAPABILITY

Russia's military aggression in 2014 opened a new chapter in the history of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Thanks to fundamental changes in government policy and the active involvement of ordinary citizens, the Ukrainian army regained its combat capability. It became a true institution for the defense of Ukrainian statehood and, in the eyes of its citizens, acquired the status of the nation's backbone. The Armed Forces began to engage in the anti-terrorist operation on 8 April 2014, following a decision by acting President Oleksandr Turchynov. The operation lasted until 30 April 2018. Afterward, the Joint Forces Operation was launched in eastern Ukraine. The goal of this operation was to restructure the Anti-Terrorist Operation by introducing martial law

or a state of emergency and transferring control from the Security Service of Ukraine, which had formally led the Anti-Terrorist Operation, to the Joint Operational Headquarters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. However, the first operations in Donbas often failed due to the disorganization of the Ukrainian military, betrayal within the headquarters, and the skillful use of local residents by the separatists.

Volunteer battalions of the National Guard and the Ministry of Internal Affairs came to the rescue in that situation and were used to liberate the occupied settlements in the summer of 2014. The Armed Forces were restructured and strengthened through six waves of mobilization. Almost 200,000 soldiers were drafted, which allowed for the formation of new brigades and battalions. In addition, the authorities reintroduced conscription and formed a new branch of troops: the Special Operations Forces.

In the spring of 2014, the Ukrainian army suffered enormous losses as a result of Russia's seizure of Crimea. In addition to losing weapons (the occupiers, for example, did not return a single S-300 anti-aircraft missile system), the Ukrainian army lost bases, warehouses, powerful defense industry facilities, and a research center in Feodosia. In September 2015, a new Military Doctrine of Ukraine was developed and adopted, in which Russia was officially named the main strategic threat to the country's national security (*Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy Pro rishennia Rady natsionalnoi bezpeky i oborony Ukrainy*, 2015). In February 2019, the Verkhovna Rada amended the Constitution by 334 votes, enshrining Ukraine's course for full membership in the European Union and NATO (*Zakon Ukrainy Pro vnesennia zmin do Konstytutsii Ukrainy*, 2019).

The Military Doctrine of Ukraine, as a national security concept, was repealed and replaced by the Military Security Strategy on 25 March 2021 (*Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy. Pro rishennia Rady natsionalnoi bezpeky i oborony Ukrainy Pro Stratehiiu voiennoi bezpeky Ukrainy*, 2021). According to the Strategy, the priorities for achieving the goals of state policy in the areas of military affairs, defense, and military development include: implementing unified management for the preparation and conduct of Ukraine's comprehensive defense; strengthening the institutional capabilities of the Ministry of Defense and other defense governance bodies; and building combat-ready Armed Forces and other defense components capable of fulfilling their missions.

At the time of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, the development of the new Ukrainian army was actually based on two main criteria: compliance with NATO standards and sufficient funding. The latter indicator speaks for itself. While, as of 2013, the Ministry of Defense's funding was less than 1% of GDP, at the time of the full-scale war, the budget for the security and defense forces was 5% of GDP.

With regard to the standards of the North Atlantic Alliance armies, the Ukrainian military leadership has been working in this direction since 2016. By the beginning of 2021, the transition of military command and control bodies to function as part of NATO-standard structures was completed.

This model means that representatives of all branches of the Armed Forces are included in the command-and-control bodies at the headquarters level. Additionally, in 2020, the functions of the Chief of the General Staff and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces were separated, five new commands were created (Medical Forces, Joint Forces, Logistics Forces, Communications and Cyber Security Forces), and military ranks and the logistics system were changed.

CONCLUSIONS

The Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) have undergone a complex and multifaceted development path from gaining independence in 1991 until 2021. During this period, they faced numerous challenges and problems that significantly affected their ability to ensure the defense of the state.

Since the establishment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 1991, the army has faced the need for a fundamental transformation. The first years of independence were marked by significant organizational difficulties, low funding, and personnel problems. Throughout most of the period under study, the AFU faced chronic underfunding, which led to obsolete military equipment and insufficient logistical support. Military budgets did not meet the needs of a modern army, making it much more difficult to fulfill defense tasks. The pro-Russian leadership of the state at that time bears a great deal of responsibility for this.

However, starting in 2014, in response to Russian aggression, large-scale reforms were launched, including the modernization of military equipment, the professionalization of military personnel, and the alignment of standards with NATO. Between 2014 and 2021, significant efforts were made to professionalize the army and integrate NATO standards. This included training military personnel under international programs, participation in joint exercises, and the gradual adaptation of military structures to NATO requirements.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to analyze the development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the period from 1991 to 2021 and to assess the key problems and challenges that influenced their formation and functioning. The research hypothesis is that the development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was shaped by internal factors such as chronic underfunding, Ukraine's disarmament, organizational difficulties, the influence of pro-Russian leadership, and the implementation of reforms in 2014–2021, as well as external factors, particularly Russian aggression since 2014. The influence of the international community also played a significant role.

Keywords: The Armed Forces of Ukraine, disarmament, Russian aggression, army professionalization, NATO standards

SIŁY ZBROJNE UKRAINY: PROBLEMY I WYZWANIA (1991–2021)

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest analiza rozwoju Sił Zbrojnych Ukrainy w okresie od 1991 do 2021 roku oraz ocena kluczowych problemów i wyzwań, które wpłynęły na ich formowanie i funkcjonowanie. Hipoteza badawcza zakłada, że rozwój Sił Zbrojnych Ukrainy był kształtowany przez czynniki wewnętrzne, takie jak chroniczne niedofinansowanie, rozbrojenie Ukrainy, trudności organizacyjne, wpływ prorosyjskiego kierownictwa oraz wdrażanie reform w latach 2014–2021, a także czynniki zewnętrzne, w szczególności agresja rosyjska od 2014 roku. Znaczącą rolę odegrał również wpływ społeczności międzynarodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Siły Zbrojne Ukrainy, rozbrojenie, agresja rosyjska, profesjonalizacja armii, standardy NATO

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