



e-ISSN 3041-2498

Public Management and Policy

<https://www.eu-scientists.com/index.php/pmap>


Evolution of Ukraine's State Strategic Narratives Regarding NATO Membership in 1991–2025

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Research Article

DOI:

[10.70651/3041-2498/2026.4.23](https://doi.org/10.70651/3041-2498/2026.4.23)

Received:

19 March 2026

Accepted:

21 April 2026

Published online:

25 April 2026

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The article examines the evolution of Ukraine's state strategic narratives on NATO membership in 1991–2025. The relevance of the study stems from the fact that Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic course was shaped not only by defence reforms, diplomatic negotiations and NATO decisions, but also by the state's capacity to consistently explain the purpose of membership, the security threat, national agency and the expected political outcome to domestic and external audiences. Drawing on strategic narrative theory, historical-political periodization, elements of discourse analysis of official documents, sociological measures of public reception and limited comparative contextualization, the article identifies five stages: inertial partnership without a coherent membership narrative; the declarative Euro-Atlantic turn of 2002–2010; non-alignment as a state counter-narrative in 2010–2014; return to NATO after Russia's aggression in 2014; and wartime synchronization of the state narrative, public security experience and practical cooperation with NATO after 2022. The effectiveness of strategic communication is operationalized through narrative coherence, institutional continuity, societal reception, external resonance and policy conversion. The article argues that the weakness of Ukraine's strategic communication before 2014 cannot be explained only by external information influence or the caution of NATO member states. Its internal cause was the inconsistency of the state narrative, which for a long time failed to connect systemic, identity and issue-policy levels of Euro-Atlantic explanation. After 2022, the narrative became more effective due to the convergence of political will, wartime experience, institutional irreversibility, public demand for collective security and NATO's practical support; however, membership remains dependent on allied decisions and cannot be reduced to communication quality alone.



KEYWORDS

international relations, social communications, strategic narratives, NATO, Euro-Atlantic integration, strategic communication, public administration, Ukrainian foreign policy, security policy.



Еволюція державних стратегічних наративів України щодо членства в НАТО в 1991–2025 роках

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СТАТТЯ	АНОТАЦІЯ
Дослідницька DOI: 10.70651/3041-2498/2026.4.23 Отримана: 19.03.2026 р. Прийнята: 21.04.2026 р. Опублікована: 25.04.2026 р. Авторське право © 2026 автора  Цей твір ліцензовано на умовах Ліцензії Creative Commons «Із Зазначенням Авторства – Некомерційна 4.0 Міжнародна» (CC BY-NC 4.0).	Досліджено еволюцію державних стратегічних наративів України щодо членства в НАТО у 1991–2025 роках. Актуальність теми зумовлена тим, що євроатлантичний курс України формувався через внутрішні реформи, міжнародні переговори та рішення Альянсу, а також через здатність держави послідовно пояснювати суспільству й зовнішнім партнерам мету членства, безпекову загрозу, яку воно усуває, власну суб'єктність і очікуваний політичний результат. На основі теорії стратегічних наративів, історико-політичної періодизації, елементів дискурс-аналізу офіційних документів, соціологічних вимірів суспільної рецепції та обмеженого порівняльного зіставлення виокремлено п'ять етапів: інерційне партнерство без цілісного наративу членства; декларативний євроатлантичний поворот 2002–2010 років; позаблоковість як державний контрнратив 2010–2014 років; повернення до курсу на НАТО після початку російської агресії в 2014 році; синхронізація державного наративу, суспільного досвіду та практичної взаємодії з НАТО після 2022 року і заявка на членство. Результативність стратегічних комунікацій операціоналізовано через когерентність наративу, інституційну сталість, суспільну рецепцію, зовнішній резонанс і політичну конверсію. Слабкість українських стратегічних комунікацій до 2014 року не зводилася до зовнішніх інформаційних впливів чи стриманості держав-членів НАТО. Внутрішня вразливість полягала в непослідовності державного наративу: системний, ідентичнісний і прикладний рівні пояснення євроатлантичного курсу тривалий час не були узгоджені. Після 2022 року державний наратив щодо членства в НАТО став більш когерентним завдяки поєднанню політичної волі, воєнного досвіду, інституційної незворотності євроатлантичного курсу, суспільного запиту на колективну безпеку та практичної підтримки Альянсу. Водночас питання членства, заявка на яке Україна подала офіційно, залежить від рішень союзників і не може пояснюватися лише якістю стратегічних комунікацій.



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

міжнародні відносини, соціальні комунікації, стратегічні наративи, НАТО, євроатлантична інтеграція, публічне управління, зовнішня політика України, безпекова політика.

1. Introduction

Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration has long developed in a context of a gap between formal institutional interaction with NATO, domestic political competition, regional heterogeneity of public opinion, and caution among key Alliance member states. In these circumstances, strategic communications could not perform only an informational function. They should create a clear political framework in which NATO membership was explained as a response to a specific security problem, and not as a situational foreign policy slogan.

Until 2014, Ukraine had not formed a stable institutionally supported narrative framework regarding NATO. The state developed a partnership with the Alliance, declared Euro-Atlantic intentions, moved towards non-alignment, and after Russian aggression, returned to the course for membership. The instability of signals reduced the persuasiveness of communications for both the domestic audience and the allies.

After 2022, the narrative changed qualitatively. NATO membership has ceased to be perceived solely as a matter of party struggle or geopolitical choice between the West and Russia. It has become part of the experience of state survival, defense engagement with allies, and discussions about future security guarantees. However, such a transformation does not imply automatic causality between a stronger narrative and membership. The decision to join NATO depends on the consensus of allies, the security environment, political conditions, and risk assessments. Ukraine–NATO relations are usually described in terms of diplomatic decisions, defense reforms, or external constraints. The change in the state strategic narrative often remains a peripheral element of analysis, although it has legitimized the course, public support, and foreign policy position. The narrative does not replace the institutional conditions of membership, but sets a framework within which a political decision becomes socially and diplomatically justified.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical basis of the study is the concept of strategic narrative. L. Rozell, A. Miskimmon and B. O'Loughlin define strategic narratives as a way for political actors to form a common understanding of the international order, their own role and specific political goals [1; 2]. For the analysis of Ukrainian material, it is important to distinguish three levels: systemic, identity level and applied. The systemic level explains the vision of the international order; identity – the place of the state in this order; applied – a specific policy on a particular problem.

Collective work on strategic narratives in international relations connects such constructions with the expectations of other actors, the limits of a legitimate decision and ways of interpreting events [3]. The Ukrainian direction of NATO is not limited to military-technical compatibility or formal membership criteria. It has been included in broader discussions about Ukraine's place between Russia and the West, the limits of sovereignty and the nature of the security order in Europe.

R. Krebs argues that national security narratives structure the political space, determining which arguments are perceived as legitimate and which are marginalized in the political debate [4]. In this perspective, the multi-vector nature of the 1990s and early 2000s was not reduced to diplomatic balancing. It limited the political imagination: NATO membership did not acquire the status of an alternative security goal, because the state narrative did not present it as an urgent and understandable solution.

E. Subotic connects foreign policy changes with the need for a new self-description of the state [5]. Normative changes or strategic documents did not ensure a stable perception of NATO without restructuring the identity level of the narrative. In such a logic, strategic communications go beyond informing and acquire a managerial content, since they are associated with the formation of political meanings.

T. Risse reveals the role of argumentation and persuasion in world politics [6]. For NATO, this logic is reinforced by the consensual nature of the Alliance's decisions. The strategic narrative of a candidate state should work not only for the internal society, but also for the allies, who assess the risks, the stability of the political course and the consequences of potential membership.

F. Schimmelfennig argues that norms, arguments and rhetorical commitments create political pressure on institutions, but do not replace material conditions and consensus [7; 8]. For the Ukrainian

case, this approach is important as a safeguard against communication determinism: a convincing narrative would not guarantee NATO membership in the absence of the allies' willingness to accept risks, but a contradictory narrative reduced the possibility of using the open-door policy.

P. D'Anieri explains the inertia of Ukrainian foreign policy by balancing between Russia and the West, regional differences and the struggle between models of state development [9]. P. Ekman describes the foreign policy reorientation after 2014, where the war became the source of a new political identity [10]. This perspective explains the deeper break in the strategic narrative after 2014 compared to previous declarative turns. M. Webber and J. Sperling consider the issue through the mechanism of collective securitization of NATO [11]. A. Wolff analyzes the future expansion of NATO after the Ukrainian crisis and emphasizes the limits of the open-door policy in the context of an acute conflict with Russia [12]. These works set the external contour of the analysis: the strategic narrative does not operate in a vacuum, but in an environment of institutional and security constraints.

Ukrainian studies of Ukraine's relations with NATO form the historical basis of periodization. T. Meleshchenko systematizes the problems and prospects of the partnership [13]. L. Aleksiyevevs and M. Aleksiyevevs consider the transformation of relations in 1991–2019 as a sequence of stages of rapprochement, rollback, and re-institutionalization of the Euro-Atlantic course [14]. V. Gorbulin's works and materials of the National Institute of Strategic Studies link NATO with the problem of Ukraine's security subjectivity [15; 16]. Ukrainian studies form the historical and political context of the analysis, allowing us to trace the evolution of Ukraine's relations with NATO from partnership to a strategic course for membership and to link changes in the state narrative with the transformation of the state's security priorities. Official documents of NATO and Ukraine constitute the primary material for the study. The 1997 Charter recorded a special partnership without the prospect of membership [17]. The 2002 NATO-Ukraine Action Plan first gave Euro-Atlantic aspirations a programmatic form and linked them to full integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures [17]. The 2008 Bucharest Declaration recognized Ukraine's future membership, but left it without temporal and procedural certainty [18]. The 2023 Vilnius Summit abolished the requirement to complete the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as a separate stage on the path to accession. The 2024 Washington Declaration confirmed that Ukraine's path to NATO membership is irreversible [19; 20]. Ukrainian regulations record the change in narrative in the legal sphere. The 2010 law established non-alignment [21]. The 2019 constitutional amendments gave the course towards the EU and NATO the status of a strategic constitutional landmark [22]. The 2020–2021 strategies clarified the security and foreign policy dimensions of this course, and the Communication Strategy for Euro-Atlantic Integration until 2025 established the need for separate management of communication support [23–25]. The current state of Ukraine–NATO relations is officially described as a deepened partnership with a political perspective of membership, but without a completed accession procedure [26]. On September 30, 2022, Ukraine submitted an official application for accelerated accession to NATO, moving the issue of membership from the level of a strategic goal to the level of a formal political procedure.

A review of the literature provides grounds to highlight an insufficiently developed aspect of the problem. Existing works explain strategic narratives as a general theoretical category, NATO enlargement as an institutional process, and Ukrainian foreign policy as a balancing field. The question remains less explored as to how Ukraine's state narrative regarding NATO changed at the systemic, identity, and applied levels, and how this change correlated with operational criteria for the effectiveness of strategic communications.

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of the study is to determine the stages of evolution of Ukraine's state strategic narratives regarding NATO membership in 1991–2025 and to assess their role in the formation of effective strategic communications regarding the Euro-Atlantic course.

The object of the study is the state policy of Ukraine regarding Euro-Atlantic integration. The subject of the study is the content, consistency and transformation of Ukraine's state strategic narratives regarding NATO membership.

To achieve the goal, the following tasks were set: to clarify the concepts of strategic narrative and strategic communications in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration; to distinguish the systemic, identity and applied levels of the state narrative; to operationalize the effectiveness of strategic communications; to identify the stages of change in the state narrative regarding NATO; to demonstrate

the application of elements of discourse analysis to key official documents; to assess the public reception of the narrative according to sociological dimensions; to compare the Ukrainian trajectory with the limited comparative context of other post-socialist states.

4. Methods and Materials

The research methodology combines historical and political analysis, qualitative discourse analysis of official documents, periodization, comparative analysis and elements of process tracing. Historical and political analysis was used to reconstruct changes in the state policy towards NATO. Discourse analysis was applied to a corpus of documents that formulated the status of Ukraine, the goal of cooperation with NATO, the image of the security environment and the expected political outcome.

The corpus of primary materials includes the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership of 1997, the Ukraine-NATO Action Plan of 2002, the Bucharest Declaration of 2008, the legislative consolidation of non-alignment in 2010, the abolition of non-alignment status after 2014, the legislative restoration of the course for membership in 2017, the constitutional amendments of 2019, the National Security Strategy of 2020, the Foreign Policy Strategy of 2021, the Communication Strategy on Euro-Atlantic Integration until 2025, and the documents of the NATO summits in Vilnius in 2023 and Washington in 2024 [17; 18; 21–29].

The analysis procedure included four steps. The first step determined the level of narrative: systemic, identity, or applied. The second one fixed the dominant formula: partnership, balancing, membership, non-alignment, irreversibility, or military integration. The third one determined the type of audience: internal, external, allied, or mixed. The fourth one assessed operational indicators of the effectiveness of strategic communications.

The coding unit was not a separate token, but the connection between the document formula, the political status of Ukraine in relation to NATO, the target audience and the expected result. This approach reduces the risk of replacing discourse analysis with a simple retelling of documents: each interpretation is correlated with a specific documentary marker and is further compared with institutional decisions and sociological dynamics.

5. Results and Discussion

The effectiveness of strategic communications is not identified with the fact of joining NATO. Such an identification would be methodologically incorrect, since membership depends on the consensus of allies, the military-political situation and the institutional conditions of the Alliance. Instead, effectiveness is understood as the ability of the state narrative to ensure the coherence of the course, institutional stability, public reception, external resonance and political conversion in the state's decisions and formats of interaction with the Alliance.

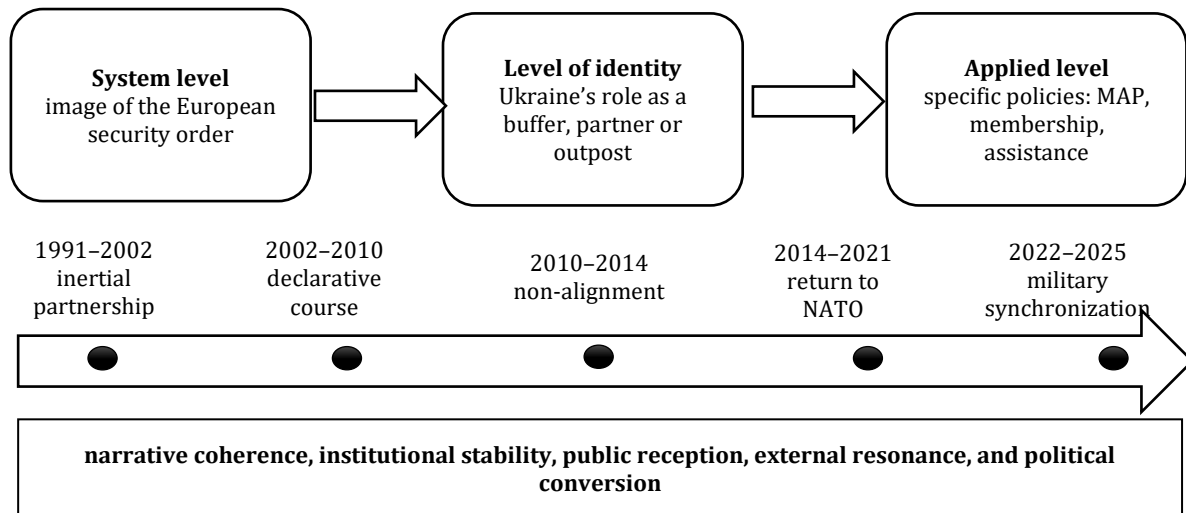
The comparative dimension is of an auxiliary nature. The Ukrainian case is briefly compared with Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia not to prove direct causality, but to identify the difference between narrative stability, external security constraints and institutional results. The limitation of the study is that it does not measure the quantitative impact of individual communication campaigns and does not substitute the analysis of narratives for the study of defense reforms or the positions of NATO member states (Table 1).

A three-level model of strategic narratives clarifies the Ukrainian trajectory. At the systemic level, the state formulates the desired European security order: balancing between centers of power, non-alignment, collective defense, or integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. At the identity level, Ukraine's role is determined: buffer, partner, eastern flank, outpost, or future member of the Alliance. At the applied level, specific policies are articulated: participation in NATO programs, obtaining a MAP, abolishing non-alignment, constitutionally enshrining the course, submitting an application, or enhancing compatibility. Until 2014, these levels often did not coincide. Ukraine could develop applied cooperation with NATO, but systematically remain within the framework of multi-vectorism, and not identity-wise position itself as an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic space. After 2022, these levels were synchronized under the influence of military experience: the systemic level was based on opposing Russian aggression, the identity level was based on Ukraine's role as a state protecting the eastern frontier of European security, and the applied level was based on military assistance, compatibility, and political advancement towards membership (Figure 1).

Table 1. Operationalizing the effectiveness of strategic communications on NATO

Criterion	Content of the criterion	Indicators in the Ukrainian case	Methodological limitation
Narrative Coherence	Consistency of explanation of the purpose of membership, its threats and expected positive outcome.	Lack of simultaneous promotion of membership and non-alignment; coordination of documents and public messages.	Does not guarantee automatic increase in NATO support or decision.
Institutional Stability	Staying the course through regulations, strategies and repeated state formulas.	Constitutional consolidation of the course, strategic documents, consistent diplomatic statements.	May be a consequence of already changed public opinion.
Public Reception	Degree of acceptance or rejection of the narrative by citizens.	Support for membership, readiness to vote “yes” in the referendum, trust in NATO, regional differences.	Depends on the course of the war, NATO position and identity factors.
External Resonance	Reflection of the Ukrainian framework in NATO documents and practices.	Formulas on the future of Ukraine in NATO, the Ukraine-NATO Council, rejection of the MAP.	Allies may support Ukraine without consent to membership.
Political Conversion	Transition of the narrative into concrete decisions and mechanisms.	Abolition of non-alignment, amendments to the Constitution, strategies, cooperation programs, application for membership	Decisions may be a reaction to the war or to a change in elites.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [1–8; 17–33].

**Figure 1. A three-level model for analyzing Ukraine's state strategic narrative regarding NATO**

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [1–3].

Analysis of official documents shows that the change in narrative did not consist in the emergence of new terms, but in the restructuring of the connection between the image of order, Ukraine's self-description and specific policy towards NATO. The 1997 Charter established a special partnership, but left Ukraine in the position of a partner without the prospect of membership. The 2002 Ukraine-NATO Action Plan changed the applied level, as it linked cooperation to the goal of full integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures. The 2008 Bucharest Declaration provided an external formulation of future membership, but without procedural certainty. Legislative non-alignment in 2010 changed the framework from integration to distancing from the Alliance. The abolition of non-alignment in 2014 and the legislative resumption of the course towards membership in 2017 returned NATO to a systemic security framework. The constitutional consolidation of the 2019 course and the documents of 2020–2021 strengthened the identity and applied levels of the Euro-Atlantic orientation. After 2023–2024, a stronger formula of political irreversibility appeared in NATO documents, but it retains the condition of consensus among allies and fulfillment of criteria (Table 2).

Table 2. Narrative interpretation of key Ukraine-NATO documents

Document/period	Narrative level	Dominant formula	Analytical value
Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, 1997	Systemic and applied	Partnership without membership	Ukraine is recognized as an important partner, but is not positioned as a future member of the Alliance.
NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, 2002	Systemic and applied	Full integration into Euro-Atlantic structures	The membership course takes on programmatic form, but is not yet supported by a stable public consensus.
Bucharest Declaration, 2008	Applied and External	Future membership without MAP	The formula for future membership creates expectations, but does not provide an institutional trajectory.
Law on the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy, 2010	Systemic	Non-alignment	The state legally establishes its distance from military-political alliances.
Law on Refusal of Non-Alignment, 2014	Systemic and applied	Exiting the non-alignment framework	Russian aggression changes the legitimizing grounds of the security course.
Law on Foreign Policy, 2017	Applied	Deepening cooperation with NATO for membership	The membership course returns to the legislative foundations of foreign policy.
Constitutional Amendments, 2019	Identity and applied	Strategic course towards full membership	Euro-Atlantic integration becomes an element of the constitutional self-description of the state.
Communication Strategy until 2025, 2021	Applied	Managing support for the Euro-Atlantic course	Communications are formalized as a separate direction of public administration.
Vilnius and Washington Summits, 2023-2024	External and applied	Abandonment from MAP; an irreversible path	The narrative acquires external resonance, but the condition of the allies' consent remains.

Source: Compiled by the author based on [17–29].

To verify the discourse-analytic procedure, key documents were compared according to the same logic: documentary formula, narrative level, target audience, and interpretation. Such a matrix does not claim to be a complete corpus analysis of all state messages, but it shows what textual markers the periodization is based on and why each stage received the corresponding narrative characteristic (Table 3).

The period 1991–2002 was a stage of institutional rapprochement without a clear narrative goal of membership. Ukraine joined NATO cooperation formats, but the state self-description remained associated with multi-vectority, caution towards Russia and the search for a balance between different centers of power. In the systemic dimension, this framework did not shape the image of NATO as a single or priority security response. Rather, it left NATO as one of the external partners.

At the identity level, Ukraine did not position itself as a future member of the Euro-Atlantic community. The 1997 Charter enshrined a special partnership, but it was dominated by a formula of cooperation, not integration irreversibility. The applied level was more active than the systemic one: cooperation programs existed, but were not supported by a political narrative of membership as a security necessity.

The effectiveness of strategic communications during this period was low not because individual campaigns failed, but because there was no subject of sustained communication. The state could not convincingly explain membership, since it did not formulate it as a strategic goal itself.

The 2002 NSDC decision on the Euro-Atlantic course and the Ukraine-NATO Action Plan changed the applied level of the narrative, but did not ensure a complete restructuring of the systemic and identity levels. The state began to talk about NATO as a strategic goal, but the public explanation of this turn remained weak, elite-fragmented and politically vulnerable. The period of Viktor Yushchenko's

presidency strengthened the articulation of the course towards NATO membership, but faced resistance from some elites, regional polarization and a lack of stable inter-institutional coordination [27].

Table 3. Discourse analysis matrix of key documentary formulas regarding NATO

Document/ period	Formula in the document or its content	Level of narrative	Audience	Interpretation
Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, 1997	Ukraine's special partnership with NATO	Systemic and applied	Mixed	Cooperation is legitimized, but membership is not formulated as a political goal.
NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, 2002	Full integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures.	Systemic and applied	Mixed	The course takes on a programmatic form, but remains elite and insufficiently socialized.
Bucharest Declaration, 2008	Future membership of Ukraine and Georgia; MAP as the next step.	External and applied	External and internal	External recognition of the perspective is not accompanied by procedural certainty.
Law of 2010	Non-participation of Ukraine in military- political alliances.	Systemic	Internal	The state legalizes the counter- narrative of distancing itself from NATO.
Law of 2014	Rejection of the non- alignment policy.	Systemic and applied	Internal and external, allied	Russia's aggression destroys the legitimization basis of the non- aligned framework.
Law of 2017	Deepening cooperation with NATO with the aim of membership.	Applied	Internal and allied	The course for membership returns to the legislative architecture of foreign policy.
Constitutional Amendments of 2019	Strategic course for full membership in NATO.	Identity and applied	Mixed	Membership moves from a party program to a constitutional self- description of the state.
Communication Strategy until 2025	Communication support for Euro-Atlantic integration as a management direction.	Applied	Internal	The explanation of the course is institutionalized as a separate function of public administration.
Vilnius 2023 and Washington 2024	Rejection of MAP; Ukraine's irreversible path to Euro-Atlantic integration.	External and applied	Allied and mixed	The Ukrainian framework receives a stronger external resonance, but does not eliminate the conditions of consensus of the allies.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [17–29].

The 2008 Bucharest Summit had a double effect: it externally confirmed the prospect of Ukraine's membership, but left it without a procedural instrument. This uncertainty undermined the persuasiveness of the internal narrative, since it was difficult for the state to prove the realism of the course if the allies themselves were not ready to provide a procedural instrument [18].

The effectiveness of communications during this period was partial. The membership narrative emerged, but did not become institutionally stable and did not turn into a public consensus. At this point, a key weakness became apparent: applied policy progressed faster than the change in the state's identity and systemic self-description.

The non-alignment of 2010 had a dual status: a legal decision and a state counter-narrative to the previous Euro-Atlantic framework. It redefined Ukraine's security as distancing itself from military-political alliances, rather than as a gradual entry into the collective defense system. At the systemic level, this restored the idea of the possibility of balancing between Russia and the West. At the identity level, Ukraine was again described not as a future member of the Alliance, but as a non-aligned state [21], despite the fact that at that time it was actively absorbed into the sphere of Russian influence.

Such a decision had a communication effect regardless of the volume of information campaigns. It legitimized doubts about NATO and gave a signal from the state that membership is not a prerequisite

for security. The events of 2014 demonstrated the limitations of this logic: non-alignment did not protect Ukraine from aggression, and therefore its legitimization potential was radically undermined.

Within the framework of the proposed operationalization, this period has the lowest indicators of coherence and institutional stability of the Euro-Atlantic narrative. It was not about the weakness of individual communication campaigns, but about the state's temporary rejection of the membership framework itself.

The occupation of Crimea and the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in the Donbas changed the conditions for the formation of the state narrative. Russian aggression has destroyed the argument that non-alignment reduces risks. The rejection of non-alignment status in 2014 and the legislative consolidation of the membership course in 2017 have formed a new framework: collective defense began to be presented as a logical response to a proven threat [28; 29].

The constitutional changes of 2019 have become an important institutional marker. Euro-Atlantic integration has ceased to be just a government or presidential program and has become part of the constitutional self-description of the state, which has increased the institutional stability of the narrative, although it has not eliminated the problem of different public reception in macro-regions [22].

The strategic documents of 2020–2021 and a special communication strategy until 2025 have transferred the Euro-Atlantic course to the plane of public administration. For the first time, an attempt was made not only to declare a direction, but also to systematically manage communication support, determine audiences, messages, channels, and expected effects [23–25].

The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 created a new quality of narrative. NATO began to be perceived not as an abstract foreign policy choice, but as an institutional form of the security that Ukraine lacked at the time of the aggression. Military assistance from member states, deepening interoperability, and the creation of new formats of interaction strengthened the external resonance of the Ukrainian narrative.

This period most clearly shows the limits of strategic communications. The Ukrainian narrative became stronger, internal support was higher, interaction with the Alliance was deeper, but membership remained a politically unresolved issue. The Washington formula of an irreversible path increases symbolic certainty, but the invitation depends on the consent of allies and the fulfillment of conditions. The final formula should be cautious: a better narrative increases legitimacy and negotiating power, but does not eliminate structural constraints (Table 4) [19; 20].

Public reception confirms that the transformation of the narrative had not only a normative but also a mass dimension. Until 2014, support for NATO accession remained low, and the direction itself was rigidly tied to regional, linguistic, and party lines of demarcation. After 2014, the share of supporters of membership increased, but regional asymmetry remained significant. After 2022, support for NATO became nationwide, although the indicators of the South and East continue to demonstrate a lower intensity of support compared to the West and Center (Table 5).

Table 4. Sociological verification of public reception of the NATO membership narrative

Period/source	Support indicator	Regional cross-section	Analytical value
To the Revolution of Dignity, KIIS Summary	Support for NATO membership ranged from 15% to 20%.	Regional identity polarization was decisive.	The membership narrative lacked a stable public base and remained politically vulnerable.
January 2020, Razumkov Center	49.8% of all respondents would vote for membership, 29.8% against.	West – 73.2%, Center – 57.4%, South – 31.9%, East – 24.8%.	After 2014, a relative majority of supporters was formed, but the regional divide remained.
September 2024, Razumkov Center	72.1% of all respondents and 86.0% of potential referendum participants would support membership.	Among potential referendum participants: West – 95%, Center – 88.5%, East – 78%, South – 64%.	Public reception became nationwide, but the South remained a weaker point of support.
2024, Three Dimensions of KIIS	84% of respondents would like to see Ukraine in NATO.	The absolute majority supports membership in all macro-regions.	After 2022, NATO ceased to be just a party marker and became part of the security consensus.

Source: Compiled by the author based on [30–33].

Table 5. Limited comparative comparison of Ukraine's narrative trajectory with other post-socialist cases

Case	Narrative Trajectory	External Constraints	Institutional Outcome	Analytical Conclusion
Romania	Euro-Atlantic integration in the 1990s was gradually associated with modernization, Western orientation, and security guarantees.	Lower level of direct military pressure from Russia; favorable enlargement window in 2004.	NATO membership since 2004.	Narrative consistency worked in tandem with a more favorable security environment and the Alliance's readiness for enlargement.
Bulgaria	Euro-Atlantic integration was included in the broader post-socialist course of entry into Western institutions.	Political disputes existed but did not block the membership trajectory.	NATO membership since 2004.	Communication consistency was reinforced by the institutional window for enlargement.
Georgia	After the Rose Revolution of 2003, the identity narrative of Western choice and security integration intensified.	The 2008 war, territorial conflicts, and allied caution reinforced structural barriers.	Membership not granted, currently the government has reversed course on NATO	A strong narrative and practical cooperation do not eliminate geopolitical and security constraints.
Ukraine	A long phase of multi-vectorism, declarative turn, non-alignment, return after 2014, military synchronization after 2022.	Russian aggression, regional heterogeneity, allied caution.	Deep integration without membership as of 2026.	The weakness of the early narrative reduced the legitimacy resource, but the failure to join is not explained by communications alone.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [7–12; 18; 34–36].

Sociological dynamics clarify causality. The growth of support after 2014 and 2022 cannot be explained only by the quality of state communications: the decisive factor was the experience of Russian aggression. However, without an institutionally consistent narrative, this experience would not necessarily be converted into support for a specific foreign policy decision. Public reception is viewed not as evidence of the effectiveness of campaigns, but as an indicator of whether the state framework, security experience, and mass perception of the threat coincided.

6. Conclusions

The evolution of Ukraine's state strategic narratives towards NATO can be explained through a three-level model of systemic, identity and applied narrative. This framework shows that the problem was not a lack of information campaigns, but a long-standing gap between institutional cooperation with the Alliance, the state's self-description and specific membership policies, strategic uncertainty, etc.

The proposed operationalization of strategic communications effectiveness through coherence, institutional stability, public reception, external resonance and political conversion demarcates the quality of narrative and political outcome. Until 2014, Ukraine had low coherence and an unstable institutional framework, as periods of declarative Euro-Atlantic course alternated with multi-vector and non-alignment.

After 2014, Russian aggression destroyed the legitimacy of non-alignment and strengthened the state narrative of membership. After 2022, there was a synchronization of political will, military experience, practical interaction with NATO and public demand for collective security. The increasing effectiveness of the Euro-Atlantic narrative is explained by the convergence of security experience, institutional irreversibility and a massive reassessment of NATO's role, rather than by autonomous improvements in information campaigns.

Sociological measurements confirm the change in public reception: from low support before 2014 due to regionally heterogeneous growth after the outbreak of the war to widespread support after a full-scale invasion. At the same time, public support is not a self-sufficient mechanism for accession, since

the decision on membership remains dependent on the political will of the Allies and the assessment of security risks.

A comparison with Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia showed that narrative consistency is an important but insufficient condition for membership. It matters only in combination with a favorable security environment, institutional readiness and political will of the Allies. Therefore, Ukraine's failure to join NATO by 2022 cannot be explained only by the weakness of communications, but this weakness reduced the state's legitimization and negotiation resources.

Even the most convincing strategic narrative is not able to replace the political will of the allies or eliminate their fears about the consequences of the Alliance's expansion. At the same time, a contradictory or unstable narrative weakens Ukraine's ability to use its own normative arguments and appeal to NATO's already proclaimed principles.

The need for institutional support for strategic communications regarding NATO is obvious. The relevant actors are the President of Ukraine, the National Security and Defense Council, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, specialized coordination structures, Ukrainian missions to NATO and regional authorities. The channels should be strategic documents, political statements, public diplomacy, information campaigns, educational programs, media and digital platforms. Feedback is provided by sociological measurements, regional support indicators, monitoring of trust in NATO, and analysis of the external resonance of Ukrainian formulas in Alliance documents and practices.

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