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Public Opinion on Ukraine's NATO Membership as an Indicator of the Reception and Limits of State Strategic Communication Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

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The article examines public opinion on Ukraine's NATO membership as an indicator of the reception, limits and managerial deficits of state strategic communication. The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that support for Euro-Atlantic integration in Ukraine has not developed linearly: before 2014 it remained unstable and regionally polarized; after Russia's aggression in 2014 it underwent the first major turning point; and after the full-scale invasion in 2022 it turned into a much broader supra-regional consensus. The methodology combines secondary analysis of sociological data, historical-political periodization, comparative analysis of regional dynamics and elements of causal-historical reconstruction. The empirical base includes studies on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, research on Ukrainian public opinion under wartime conditions, and survey data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, Razumkov Centre, Kyiv Security Forum, New Europe Center, IRI/Rating Group, NDI and other sources. The article distinguishes between event-driven and communication effects: the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the full-scale invasion are treated as security shocks that themselves changed threat perceptions, while strategic communication shaped the interpretation of these shocks, the stability of the Euro-Atlantic course and public trust in NATO. Three stages in the transformation of public opinion are identified: pre-war fragmentation with pronounced regional polarization; the turning point after Russia's aggression in 2014; and the formation of a supra-regional consensus after 2022, accompanied by a new gap between support for membership, trust in the Alliance and belief in the realistic prospect of accession. The scientific novelty lies in treating public opinion not as direct proof of the causal impact of communication, but as an indicator of its reception, limits and managerial deficits. The practical significance of the findings is that state strategic communication should move from a mobilizing message about NATO as a non-alternative choice toward an explanatory model that clarifies the accession procedure, allied conditions, the role of military assistance and the limits of NATO's responsibility.



KEYWORDS

public opinion, NATO, strategic communication, international relations, Euro-Atlantic integration, regional differences, public administration, Ukrainian security policy.



Громадська думка щодо членства України в НАТО як індикатор рецепції та меж результативності стратегічних комунікацій держави

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Досліджено громадську думку щодо членства України в НАТО як індикатор рецепції, меж і управлінських дефіцитів державних стратегічних комунікацій. Актуальність теми зумовлена тим, що підтримка євроатлантичної інтеграції в Україні протягом тривалого часу не була лінійною: до 2014 року вона залишалася нестабільною і регіонально поляризованою, після російської агресії 2014 року зазнала першого перелому, а після повномасштабного вторгнення 2022 року перетворилася на значно ширший надрегіональний і загальнонаціональний консенсус. Методологія дослідження поєднує вторинний аналіз соціологічних даних, історико-політичну періодизацію, порівняльний аналіз регіональної динаміки та елементи причинно-історичної реконструкції. Матеріальну базу становлять праці про взаємозв'язок громадської думки й зовнішньої політики, дослідження української громадської думки в умовах війни, а також соціологічні дані КМІС, Фонду «Демократичні ініціативи», Центру Разумкова, Київського безпекового форуму, New Europe Center, IRI/Rating Group, NDI та інших джерел. У статті розмежовано подієвий і комунікаційний ефекти: анексія Криму, війна Росії проти України на Донбасі й повномасштабне вторгнення розглядаються як безпекові шоки, які самі змінювали сприйняття загрози, тоді як стратегічні комунікації впливали на інтерпретацію цих шоків, сталисть євроатлантичного курсу та довіру до НАТО. Виокремлено три етапи трансформації громадської думки: довоєнну фрагментацію з виразною регіональною поляризацією; перелом після початку російської агресії 2014 року; формування загальнонаціонального консенсусу після 2022 року з одночасною появою розриву у показниках між підтримкою членства, довірою до Альянсу та вірою в реалістичність вступу. Наукова новизна полягає в обережному використанні громадської думки не як прямого доказу причинного впливу комунікацій, а як індикатора їхньої рецепції, меж і управлінських дефіцитів. Практичне значення результатів полягає в обґрунтуванні потреби переходу від мобілізаційного повідомлення про безальтернативність НАТО до пояснювальної моделі, яка розкриває процедуру членства, умови союзників, роль військової допомоги та межі відповідальності Альянсу, реальні перспективи членства.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

громадська думка, НАТО, стратегічні комунікації, міжнародні відносини, євроатлантична інтеграція, регіональні відмінності, публічне управління, безпекова політика.

1. Introduction

The dynamics of public support for Ukraine's NATO membership were not linear. Until 2014, it remained unstable and regionally polarized; the Russian aggression of 2014 caused the first break, and the full-scale invasion of 2022 transformed support for membership into a much broader public consensus. However, even high support for membership does not automatically imply trust in NATO or belief in the feasibility of rapid accession.

For decades, Ukrainian society has received conflicting signals about NATO: a partnership without membership, an attempt at a Euro-Atlantic pivot, non-alignment, a return to NATO, constitutional irreversibility, and military integration after 2022. The instability of these signals influenced public perception, but did not exhaust the reasons for the change in attitude towards NATO.

To avoid communication determinism, event and communication effects are distinguished. The annexation of Crimea, Russia's war against Ukraine in the Donbas, and the full-scale invasion were security shocks that themselves changed citizens' perceptions of the source of the threat. Strategic communications shaped the interpretation of these events in the political and security sphere: they explained the significance of NATO, linked security experience to political orientation, maintained course stability, and reduced the gap between public expectations and the Alliance's actual decisions.

In research and applied assessments, public opinion is often interpreted as a direct indicator of the success or failure of strategic communications. This logic simplifies causality: public opinion is viewed as an indicator of the reception, limits, and managerial deficiencies of a state's communications policy, rather than as direct evidence that communications caused a change in support for NATO.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical basis of the study is based on works on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy. T. Risse-Kappen proved that the influence of public opinion on foreign policy depends on the domestic political structure and channels of interaction between society and the authorities [1]. D. Foyle showed that elite beliefs act as an intermediate variable between public sentiment and foreign policy decisions [2]. In the case of Ukraine, public opinion not only reacts to state messages, but also limits or stimulates changes in the state narrative. M. Baum and P. Potter systematized the interaction of mass media, public opinion and foreign policy, emphasizing the role of the information environment [3]. J. Kerzer and T. Zaitsoff proposed a bottom-up approach in which citizens are not passive recipients of elite signals, but can themselves form pressure on foreign policy [4]; which allows us to explain the two-way nature of the process after 2014 and 2022: the security experience of society influenced the state course no less than the state course influenced society.

The hierarchical model of J. Hurwitz and M. Peffly shows that specific foreign policy positions are based on deeper value orientations and perceptions of the international environment [5]. A. Berinsky proves that events, war losses and elite signals change support for security decisions [6]. O. Holsti and J. Zaller complement this logic through the analysis of stable foreign policy orientations and mechanisms of mass opinion formation [7; 8]. The Ukrainian case requires a distinction between long-term identity factors, event shocks and communication frameworks in which citizens interpret NATO.

O. Haran analyzes the change in Ukrainian public opinion regarding the European direction and shows that war, revolutions and foreign policy choices interact with national identity [9]. E. Klein and G. Pleines draw attention to the methodological difficulties of researching public opinion in Ukraine under war conditions, including access to occupied territories, migration, and changes in the sample base [10]. A. Nychyk analyzes public opinion on war and peace, which is important for understanding the connection between support for NATO and security expectations [11].

The empirical block of literature is formed by sociological research by Ukrainian and international centers. The Democratic Initiatives Foundation recorded a radical change after 2014: in 2012, 13% chose NATO membership as the best guarantee of security, in May 2014 – 33%, in December 2014 – 44%, in November 2015 – 46%, in June 2017 – 47% [12]. KIIS in 2023 showed very high support for membership – 89% in the event of a referendum [13]. In 2025, KIIS recorded 84% of those who want to see Ukraine as part of NATO, but a lower willingness to demonstrate a proactive position in a referendum [14].

The data for 2024–2026 record a new phase in public perception of NATO. The Razumkov Center and the Kyiv Security Forum record the preservation of high support for the Euro-Atlantic course, but also its fluctuations under the influence of war, expectations of aid and international politics [15; 16]. The New Europe Center in 2026 drew attention to mixed attitudes: 68.9% support Ukraine's accession to NATO, 54.7% trust the Alliance, and 41.5% do not trust it [17]. Such data give grounds to consider support for membership and trust in NATO as different indicators of public attitude.

The generalization of the sources gives grounds to single out a methodological gap. Polls sufficiently fully record the level of support for NATO, and the theoretical literature explains the interaction of public opinion and foreign policy. The question of how to use public opinion as an indicator of the reception of strategic communications without turning it into simplified evidence of direct causality between a state message and a change in public position remains less well studied.

3. Problem Statement

The study aims to assess the dynamics of public opinion regarding Ukraine's membership in NATO in 2012–2026, taking into account the historical and political context of 1991–2011 as an indicator of reception and the limits of effectiveness of state strategic communications.

The object of the study is Ukraine's public opinion regarding NATO membership. The subject of the study is the dynamics of support for NATO, its regional specificity, its connection with state strategic narratives, domestic political crises, security shocks and trust in the Alliance.

To achieve the goal, the following tasks were set: to summarize the main stages of change in public opinion regarding NATO; to distinguish between event and communication effects; to show the role of the Soviet legacy and regional political socialization; to assess the significance of the Russian aggression of 2014 and 2022; to systematize regional data; to explain the gap in 2024–2026 between support for membership, trust in NATO and expectations of the realism of accession.

4. Methods and Materials

The methodology combines secondary analysis of sociological data, historical and political periodization, comparative analysis of regional dynamics and elements of causal-historical reconstruction. Secondary analysis was used to compare levels of support for NATO in different periods. Periodization made it possible to distinguish the pre-war stage, the turning point of 2014, consolidation after 2022 and a new stage of 2024–2026, associated with trust in NATO and membership expectations. The period 1991–2011 was used as the context for the formation of initial distrust of the Alliance: the main empirical array is based on comparative sections of 2012–2026 and is verified by separate preliminary measurements of public opinion.

The material base consists of theoretical works on public opinion and foreign policy [1–8], research on public opinion in Ukraine during the war [9–11], sociological data from Ukrainian and international centers [12–17; 24], as well as control sociological cross-sections used to check the consistency of the conclusions [18–23; 25–28].

5. Results and Discussion

The available data do not provide grounds to quantitatively separate the net effect of communications from the effect of war, occupation, military assistance, or disappointment with the pace of partners' decisions. Therefore, a direct causal effect of state communications on the growth of support for NATO is not proven. Public opinion is used as an indicator of how society accepts, rethinks, or limits the state's Euro-Atlantic narrative (Table 1).

In the article, strategic communications are not measured as a set of individual campaigns, commercials, or information products. The subject of assessment is the reception of the state's communication framework regarding NATO, that is, the extent to which public indicators of support for membership, trust in the Alliance, regional acceptability, and expectations of accession are consistent with the state's political signals and practice of interaction with NATO.

Table 1. Distinguishing between event and communication effects in the dynamics of public opinion regarding NATO

Component	Content	Examples	How considered in the analysis
Event shock	Changing security experiences regardless of state messages.	Occupation of Crimea, Russia's war against Ukraine in Donbas, full-scale invasion.	Considered as an independent factor in changing public opinion.
State narrative	Explaining why NATO serves Ukraine's security interests.	Rejection of non-alignment, constitutional course, 2022 application for membership	Assessed through the consistency and clarity of the communication framework.
Regional reception	Different acceptance of NATO in macro-regions.	Different West, Center, South and East by 2022.	Tested through regional sociological data.
Institutional trust	Assessing NATO as an organization, not just supporting membership.	Support for accession higher than trust in the Alliance in 2026.	Shows a new communication gap.
Reverse influence of public opinion	The state adapts the narrative to changing public sentiment.	Constitutional consolidation of the course after growing support.	Considered as endogeneity, not as one-sided causality.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [1–8; 12–17].

Table 1 distinguishes five components that determine the interpretation of public opinion dynamics. Changes in support for NATO are not interpreted as a direct consequence of communication policy: event shocks, state narrative, regional reception, institutional trust and the feedback effect of public sentiment form an interconnected system. In it, strategic communications perform not a causal-mechanical, but an interpretative and managerial function.

Public opinion on NATO goes beyond the attitude towards a specific international organization. It captures whether society perceives collective defense as a response to its own security problem, whether it trusts the state's explanation of foreign policy, and whether it considers membership realistic. Therefore, public opinion can be used as an indicator of the reception of strategic communications, but not as their net result.

After 2014, the growth in support for NATO cannot be explained only by the state's communication efforts. The immediate source of change was Russian aggression, which reshaped the perception of the threat. The role of strategic communications was to link the security shock with a stable understanding of NATO membership as a political goal, rather than a temporary response to war.

After 2022, support for NATO became widespread, but public expectations shifted from the need for membership to the Alliance's readiness to make a political decision. The speed of military assistance, the Alliance's readiness for decisive action, the realism of Ukraine's invitation, and NATO's ability to fulfill its security role became important. The effectiveness of strategic communications at this stage cannot be measured solely by support for accession; indicators of trust, understanding of the membership mechanism, and the state's ability to explain the limits of Ukraine's influence on the Allies' decisions are needed.

Until 2014, Ukrainian society did not have a stable majority in support of NATO accession. The reasons were the Soviet legacy (stereotypes of NATO perception), the lack of a coherent state narrative, political exploitation of the topic, regional differences, and the lack of direct experience of collective defense.

Previous measurements confirm that low support for NATO preceded the 2012 cutoff. According to the Pew Research Center, in September 2009, 51% of Ukrainians opposed joining NATO, while only 28% supported such a move. The regional division was already pronounced then: in the West, the majority supported accession, while in the East and South, opposition to membership dominated [29].

The regional gap was fundamental. In 2012, relative support for NATO as a security guarantee existed only in the West, where 37% chose it; in the Center, the figure was 14%, in the South – 7%, in the East – 2%, and in the Donbas – 1% [12]. Such data show that the problem was not limited to a lack

of information. It was about different political socializations, different historical perceptions, and different perceptions of Russia as a threat or a partner.

The period 2002–2010 created a formal signal in support of NATO accession, but did not ensure its sustainable public acceptance. The narrative of support for NATO accession existed, but the elite and media split neutralized its effect. Political forces focused on the southeastern electorate used the topic of NATO as a marker of identity conflict. Non-alignment in 2010–2014 consolidated public distance from the Alliance, as the state itself ceased to explain NATO as a security perspective.

The Russian aggression of 2014 was the first strong event shock. It changed the image of the main threat and sharply strengthened the perception of NATO as a potential security guarantee. According to the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, the share of citizens who considered NATO membership the best guarantee of security increased from 13% in 2012 to 33% in May 2014, 44% in December 2014, 46% in November 2015, and 47% in June 2017 [12].

Regional heterogeneity persisted. In June 2017, 81% of residents in the West, 68% in the Center, 20% in the South, and 32% in the East chose NATO membership as a security guarantee [12]. In a hypothetical referendum during the same period, 71% of residents in the West, 52% in the Center, 25% in the South, and 32% in the East would have voted “yes” [12]. After 2014, the national dynamics changed, but the regional structure of distrust did not disappear. In 2014–2021, the connection between public opinion and state communications was two-way. The state returned to the Euro-Atlantic course and more actively explained it, but the turn itself was a response to a change in security experience and a gradual change in public sentiment. The constitutional consolidation of the course in 2019 no longer reflected an initial communication attempt, but the institutionalization of a new political majority.

The full-scale invasion of 2022 created a second, much deeper turning point. NATO began to be perceived as a symbol of collective security, practical military assistance and guarantees, the absence of which became obvious after the start of full-scale aggression. In 2023, KIIS recorded 89% support for joining NATO in the event of a referendum; even in the Eastern macro-region, support was 79%, while in the West – 93% [13; 24].

Data from 2025 confirm the persistence of high levels of support and a new differentiation. KIIS recorded that 84% of Ukrainians want to see Ukraine part of NATO, but the readiness for active referendum voting is lower [14]. The New Europe Center in 2026 recorded 68.9% support for NATO membership, 54.7% trust in the Alliance, and 41.5% distrust [17].

The gap between support for membership and trust in NATO has direct managerial implications. Support for membership may remain high, while trust in the Alliance depends on the assessment of its practical behavior: the volume of assistance, the speed of decisions, readiness to invite Ukraine, and the ability to deter Russia. The New Europe Center records that trust in NATO is associated with support for Ukraine, defense capabilities, and expectations of security guarantees, while distrust is associated with perceptions of insufficient assistance, slowness, and lack of determination [17].

After 2022, strategic communications cannot be limited to proving the need for NATO. For most of society, the need for NATO is no longer the main subject of persuasion. The new task is to explain the membership procedure, the reasons for the slowness of allied decisions, the content of military assistance through NATO mechanisms, the boundaries between membership and partnership, and the difference between support for the Alliance and the political decision to join.

It is advisable to present the time dynamics of support for NATO not as a single statistical series, but as a sequence of turning points. Table 2 does not form a homogeneous sociological series, since the centers used different wording of questions. Therefore, within each indicator, the type of measurement is indicated: attitude towards membership, security guarantee, referendum readiness, or institutional trust. Such a construction makes it possible not to mix different types of measurement and at the same time to record the change in the scale of support from the pre-war negative background to the military consensus and the further differentiation between support for accession and trust in NATO.

According to Table 2, this is not a linear increase in support, but a change in the type of public demand. In 2009–2012, NATO did not have the status of a dominant security guarantee for the majority of citizens. After 2014, support increased due to a reassessment of the source of the threat, but it has not yet become a full national consensus. After 2022, NATO membership has become the dominant security orientation. The data for 2025–2026 indicate that support for accession is no longer a sufficient indicator of the effectiveness of communications: it must be compared with trust in NATO, willingness to vote in a referendum, and an assessment of the realism of membership. The regional dimension requires separate consideration, since until 2022 it determined the main limit to the effectiveness of

state strategic communications. National averages smoothed out the different political socializations of macro-regions: the West and the Center were more likely to adopt the narrative of support for NATO accession, while the South and the East maintained their distance from the Alliance for longer.

Table 2. Dynamics of support for Ukraine's membership in NATO by selected sociological cross-sections

Year/period	Indicator and measurement type	Value	Analytical value
2009	Support/opposition to NATO membership [29] Type: attitude towards membership	28% in favor / 51% against	Low support for membership and strong regional polarization before the non-alignment period.
2012	NATO as the best security guarantee [12] Type: security guarantee	13%	Initial negative background and weakness of the support framework for NATO accession.
May 2014	NATO as the best security guarantee [12] Type: security guarantee	33%	First effect of Russian aggression and reassessment of threats.
December 2014	NATO as the best security guarantee [12] Type: security guarantee	44%	Consolidation of the first turning point after Crimea and Donbas.
November 2015	NATO as the best security guarantee [12] Type: security guarantee	46%	Stabilization of a new level of support.
June 2017	NATO as the best security guarantee [12] Type: security guarantee	47%	NATO's advantage over other security options, but with regional gaps.
May–June 2023	Support for accession in the event of a referendum [13; 24] Type: referendum readiness	89%	Formation of a supra-regional consensus after a full-scale invasion.
January 2025	Desire to see Ukraine as part of NATO [14] Type: general orientation	84%	High support for the course, but lower readiness for active referendum participation.
2026	Support for accession / trust in NATO [17] Type: membership / institutional trust	68.9% / 54.7%	The emergence of a gap between support for membership and trust in the institution.
February 2026	Support for accession to NATO, KBF / Razumkov Center [16] Type: general support for accession	71.3%	Maintaining high support, but below peak military values.
April 2026	Voting for accession to NATO in a referendum, KBF / Razumkov Center [30] Type: referendum readiness	59.3%	Lower figure due to different wording of the question; not mechanically comparable to 71.3%.

Source: Compiled by the author based on [12–17; 24; 29; 30]. Data from different centers are not fully comparable due to different question wording and methodology.

Until 2014, regional differences were so significant that the national average did not provide a complete picture of the real state of public support. After 2014, the West and the Center quickly switched to support for NATO, while the South and the East remained heterogeneous and only after the full-scale invasion did a majority of supporters of NATO accession form there as well.

Responsible actors must coordinate messages so that the Euro-Atlantic course is not perceived as dependent on short-term political conjuncture. The regional dimension can no longer be described by the pre-war scheme of opposing the West and the East in relation to NATO. After 2022, it lost its explanatory power, although certain regional differences in trust, war experience, sources of information, and expectations of assistance remain significant.

Communication policy should work separately with three different indicators: support for membership, trust in NATO, and belief in the realism of accession. Some citizens may support accession as the best security model, but distrust NATO due to the slowness of assistance or doubt that the Allies will make a political decision. Ignoring this gap weakens state messages, as they cease to correspond to the real state of public expectations.

A counterfactual constraint is also necessary: even a more consistent state narrative before 2014 did not mean automatic Ukraine's accession to NATO. The position of partners, the Russian factor, and the level of reforms retained their own significance. Stronger communication could have reduced regional gaps earlier, increased public readiness for membership, and reduced the political vulnerability of the NATO topic in internal struggles.

Surveys by IRI/Rating Group, NDI, Center for Insights in Survey Research, KIIS, Razumkov Center, and materials from the Mission of Ukraine to NATO confirm the persistence of high support for the Euro-Atlantic course, but at the same time demonstrate the methodological heterogeneity of indicators: some measure referendum readiness, some measure foreign policy orientations, and some measure trust in allies [18–23; 25–28]. These data reinforce the conclusion about the persistence of the pro-Euro-Atlantic orientation, but do not eliminate the need to distinguish between the wording of questions, methods, and types of measured indicators.

6. Conclusions

Public opinion on NATO does not prove the direct causal impact of strategic communications, but it captures their reception, limits and management deficits. This approach avoids the simplification that automatically attributes the growth of support after 2014 and 2022 to state communications.

The dynamics of support for NATO provide grounds for distinguishing three stages of its transformation. Before 2014, low support, Soviet legacy, regional polarization and contradictory state narratives dominated. After 2014, Russian aggression became the first event shock that sharply increased the perception of NATO as a security guarantee, but did not eliminate regional gaps. After 2022, a supra-regional consensus was formed on the desirability of membership, but it is not identical to unconditional trust in NATO or confidence in rapid accession.

The connection between public opinion and state communications was two-way. The state influenced public opinion through communications, but at the same time changed the narrative in response to security shocks and public demand. The constitutional consolidation of the course towards NATO, the application for membership and the strengthening of communication support were both a consequence and a factor in changing public orientations.

Regional data show a sharp heterogeneity of public opinion towards NATO by 2022. After the full-scale invasion, the gap between macro-regions significantly narrowed, but this does not eliminate the need for regionally adapted communication. It must take into account different war experiences, different intensity of information influence, different levels of trust in Western institutions and different expectations regarding security guarantees.

The main challenge for 2024–2026 is the gap between support for membership, trust in NATO and belief in the realism of accession. The state's strategic communications should shift from a general mobilization message about NATO's lack of alternatives to an explanatory model that reveals the membership procedure, the need for consensus among allies, what military assistance through NATO mechanisms means, what are the limitations of a non-membership partnership, and why support for the Alliance does not always equate to a willingness to accept Ukraine into NATO.

Further research should be aimed at quantitatively distinguishing between event and communication effects. This requires panel data, experimental surveys, regional comparisons of information sources, and analysis of changes in trust in NATO following specific information messages or policy decisions by allies.

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