



Report



EURO-ATLANTIC FUTURE OF UKRAINE AND EASTERN EUROPE: VIEWS FROM VISEGRAD

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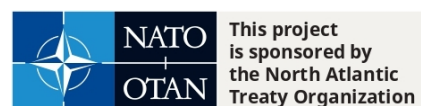
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About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



Euro-Atlantic Future of Ukraine and Eastern Europe: Views from Visegrad

The workshop series, held across two online sessions, delved into the intricacies of NATO's Open-Door policy and the potential for future eastern enlargement. Over the course of four dynamic debates per session, experts, students, and practitioners explored the multifaceted challenges and opportunities associated with NATO's evolving role. Discussions centered on Ukraine's potential accession, the strategic complexities posed by internal member state dynamics, and the broader geopolitical context influencing NATO's expansion. Key themes included the democratic and security reforms required of aspirant countries, regional perspectives within the alliance, and the implications of space and cyber operations. The series also offered a unique view into career paths within NATO, providing practical advice and personal insights from current employees. This comprehensive dialogue highlighted both the promise and complexity of NATO's future enlargement and its implications for global stability and security.

Historical and Contemporary Reflections on NATO Accession – Poland's Experience

A discussion on Poland's NATO accession provided historical context for current debates surrounding Ukraine. Poland's integration was marked by the challenge of establishing democratic control over its armed forces and navigating the requirement for unanimous support across NATO members. Participants noted that while Ukraine aspires to a swift invitation to join, significant political, security, and technical challenges remain. Comparisons to past accession disputes, such as Macedonia's name dispute, illustrated the complexities of unanimity.

The conversation emphasized that trust among member states and strong bilateral relationships are crucial for NATO cohesion, especially during crises. The alliance’s nuclear capabilities, capacity-building programs, and the importance of maintaining trust within formal structures were examined as critical elements of NATO’s approach to new members.

Careers in NATO?

In a dedicated session on employment opportunities within NATO, a current employee shared her personal journey and offered valuable insights for aspiring applicants. She outlined various pathways to join NATO, including internships, roles through allied commands, participation in the Young Professionals Programme (YPP), and opportunities facilitated by local government channels. Drawing from her own experience, she emphasized the importance of building relevant skills and gaining exposure to international and security-focused environments. Her practical advice resonated with attendees, shedding light on navigating the complex application process and maximizing opportunities for engagement within NATO’s diverse and dynamic structure. She also emphasized how Czechia and other smaller European countries are less represented within the alliance in terms of the number of employees.

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U.S. and European Dynamics

This part of the workshop reflected on U.S. and European dynamics regarding NATO. The speaker emphasized that while Ukraine’s strategic value is evident, discussions about NATO membership can only progress after the de-escalation of the conflict and the extensive reforms required; she stressed the need

for a comprehensive peace process and suggested that EU accession could lead the way for Ukraine. The U.S.'s shifting focus toward Asia while maintaining a strong European presence was identified as a potential challenge to NATO's cohesion.

The speaker underscored that despite differing levels of commitment among member states, NATO has proven resilient in adapting to internal and external challenges. The debate revealed that while complex and fraught with obstacles, Ukraine's membership path reflects broader challenges for NATO's future strategy and evolving global security role.

Student Debate on Ukraine's Prospects in NATO

The debate invited students to share their perspectives on the potential for Ukraine's accession to NATO. The students were divided into smaller groups to interact, debate and get to know each other. Central to the discussion was the contention that Hungary represents a significant obstacle to Ukraine's eastern enlargement due to its complex relationship with Ukraine and differing priorities within NATO. Concerns about Hungary's alignment with Russia on some policies were noted, raising questions about its influence on NATO's cohesion regarding Ukraine's integration.

Participants also discussed the role of anti-war governments within NATO, emphasizing that some member states' internal political dynamics make them cautious about expanding the alliance amidst ongoing conflict. Conversely, Poland emerged as a potential advocate for Ukraine's integration, with students noting its historical support for Eastern European allies and its capability to facilitate Ukraine's broader integration into the European Union (EU) and, eventually, NATO. Poland's strategic position and leadership within Eastern Europe were considered critical in navigating Ukraine's path forward.

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that the reintegration of territories currently under Russian control and disputed border areas would need to be resolved before accession could move forward. The conversation underscored the notion that democratic reforms, political stability, and border integrity are prerequisites for NATO membership.

Further considerations on Ukraine’s accession highlighted a perceived democratic deficit within the country and the need for reforms in governance and political leadership. This was framed within the broader context of Ukraine’s post-war rebuilding efforts and the geopolitical implications of its integration into Western institutions. Additionally, China’s increasing global influence was flagged as a secondary factor that NATO must consider when navigating Ukraine’s

accession, reflecting broader strategic complexities in the alliance’s eastern enlargement strategy.

NATO Space Operations and Security

The speaker introduced the NATO Space Centre and their implications for security and defence. The discussion highlighted the challenges posed by the lack of dedicated NATO space assets, as all equipment is contributed by member states.



This necessitates a high degree of cooperation and willingness among nations to share sensitive data. The broader issue of space militarization was explored, emphasizing that space has become an increasingly critical operational domain requiring robust protections for NATO's space assets.

Concerns about space debris were raised, with predictions that space operations could become significantly more challenging within a decade due to orbital congestion. The workshop participants debated whether an attack on a NATO member's satellite would invoke Article 5 of the NATO Charter, underscoring uncertainties about extending collective defense to outer space and the potential implications for terrestrial conflicts.

The presentation also touched upon the contributions of private actors, such as Elon Musk's Starlink initiative, which provided internet services to Ukraine during the conflict. Musk's negotiations with the U.S. government over the costs associated with this support illustrated the complexities of public-private partnerships in defense contexts and the power wielded by influential non-state actors. This conversation highlighted governments' difficulties when dependent on private sector contributions for critical infrastructure.

Visegrád Group and NATO Enlargement

The speaker presented a V4 perspective on NATO enlargement, particularly emphasizing regional security concerns and evolving threat perceptions. He described how the geopolitical landscape for the V4 countries—comprising Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary—shifted following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. This aggression reshaped threat perceptions, leading to a renewed focus on security and stability, particularly in relation to Ukraine's role as a "buffer state" between NATO and Russia.

The debate highlighted differing views within the CEE on how to handle Ukraine's NATO aspirations. While Czechia, Poland, the Baltics, and Romania see Ukraine as a crucial defense line against Russian influence, Slovakia and Hungary have expressed more cautious or conflicting positions, driven in part by domestic political narratives and regional considerations. Participants agreed that NATO's integration of Ukraine must balance geopolitical interests with internal cohesion and the broader goal of regional stability.

Attention was given to transnational challenges such as migration and the necessity for NATO to maintain internal stability while addressing external crises. The discussion underscored the importance of deepened cooperation and trust-building within the alliance, emphasizing that strategic unity is essential for effective collective action.

Participants explored the idea that debates on Ukraine's NATO membership should extend beyond binary considerations of whether it is realistic or not, focusing instead on what Ukraine's post-war recovery and economic landscape will entail. Security guarantees short of full membership, alternative forms of association, and preconditions for integration were proposed as areas warranting further exploration.

Hungary's Foreign Policy and NATO Relations

The last speaker traced Hungary's foreign policy evolution, characterized by economic pragmatism and a realist approach. He explained that since 2014, Hungary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has prioritized trade alongside classical diplomacy, a shift driven by economic crises and shaped by Fidesz's governance priorities. Hungary's "Eastern Opening" policy, though often framed as Russia-centric, includes significant investment from South Korea, China, and Germany. The session discussed Hungary's approach to nuclear energy, supported by Russia

but facing resistance from the EU, as a symbol of Hungary's complex international positioning.

The debate also focused on the strained relationship between Hungary and Ukraine, focusing on the treatment of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine and language laws that have exacerbated tensions. Despite these issues, Hungary remains committed to NATO obligations, with a substantial rearmament program and increases in defense spending. The debate highlighted Hungary's strategic contributions to NATO missions in the Balkans and the Baltics and the challenges posed by its divergent policies within the EU.

Conclusion

The workshop series was attended by twelve students from the V4 countries, who then all arrived for a final closing event in Prague. There, they had a chance to meet, network and debate further the issues of NATO's future challenges and possible enlargement. During the public debate, the timely topics of the Georgian and Moldovan elections were discussed and their impact on NATO and the EU in the future. Furthermore, the impact of the US election, again, a highly topical issue, was discussed with the possible impact on NATO and its enlargement in the future. The closing event then forged new connections amongst the students, who are future professionals in the field of security and international relations.