SECURITY AND DEFENSE

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A KEY FACTOR OF UKRAINE'S MILITARY INTEROPERABILITY WITH NATO

Abstract. The piece examines the role of language training of military personnel as one of the key factors in achieving interoperability between Ukraine's military and NATO. It argues that the ability of military personnel to communicate effectively in English is essential for participation in multinational operations, military exercises, staff work, and broadly – for technical, procedural and doctrinal interoperability.
Keywords: interoperability, NATO, language training, military education, multinational military exercises.

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ВОЛОДІННЯ ІНОЗЕМНОЮ МОВОЮ ЯК КЛЮЧОВИЙ ФАКТОР ВІЙСЬКОВОЇ ВЗАЄМОСУМІСНОСТІ УКРАЇНИ З НАТО

Анотація. У тезах розглянуто роль мовної підготовки військовослужбовців як одного з ключових факторів досягнення взаємосумісності української армії з НАТО. Автор стверджує, що здатність військовослужбовців ефективно комунікувати англійською мовою є необхідною для міжнародних операцій, багатонаціональних навчань, штабної роботи, а також у більш широкому контексті – для досягнення технічної та процедурної взаємосумісності.
Ключові слова: взаємосумісність, НАТО, мовна підготовка, військова освіта, міжнародні військові навчання, професійна військова освіта.

Since 2019, when the provisions on "irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine" were included in the Constitution of Ukraine [1], all the branches of power have been obliged to sustain the ongoing drive for Ukraine's NATO integration despite the possible changes in the political landscape. Apart from the doctrinal level, the grassroots support for NATO membership rose dramatically since russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reaching up to 80% among the citizens of Ukraine [2]. Still, the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius reiterated that "Ukraine's future is in NATO", but yet again, similarly to that of the Bucharest Summit, without citing the specific dates or conditions. Thus, it can be concluded that Ukraine has mostly met the political prerequisites for joining, and the decision on its admission or non-admission to NATO membership is purely politically motivated and blocked by the absence of unanimity among the Member States.

However, apart from the issue of political integration, Ukraine can continue to strive for greater technical integration, which doesn't require membership and encompasses three core areas: technical interoperability (systems and networks), procedural interoperability (tactics, techniques, and procedures), human interoperability (common language of operations and training) [4].

Operational interoperability directly depends on a country's military personnel's proficiency in NATO's official languages, primarily in English (although French is also an official language, and some NATO members opt for its use in procedures and operations). While interpreters are useful during exercises, in combat conditions they slow down interaction, create risks of error, and complicate the transmission of classified information. Therefore, direct communication between military personnel is necessary for joint operations and rapid decision-making at military headquarters and command and observation posts.

In this regard, language proficiency is essential for Ukraine's cooperation with NATO and engagement in the Organisation's operations and trainings. The level of language proficiency also has an impact on doctrinal interoperability with NATO, as a shortage of personnel capable of working with NATO documentation slows down the implementation of the required standards. Although Ukraine has taken a huge step forward in this regard, having adopted, as of early 2024, 88% of the required standards under the Ukraine-NATO Partnership Goals and, in total, 315 NATO standards, still, this number accounts for some 28% of all NATO standards [5].

In order to reach sufficient interoperability with NATO, according to analytics, at least 90% of key military personnel should possess language proficiency at the STANAG 2222 level [6]. The Roadmap for Improving Language Training in the Armed Forces of Ukraine for 2021–2025 by the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine [7] envisages a gradual increase in language proficiency requirements based on position, while the General Staff of Ukraine declared a goal of ensuring English proficiency among all military personnel by 2026. However, given such trends as the general level of language proficiency in society, the scale of the military conscription process, which affected not only soldiers and NCOs but also reserve officers, who had never served in the military forces and received their rank along with higher education, promotion of NCOs and soldiers to officers' positions – this goal appears to be challenging, if at all realistic in the short run.

In summary, Ukraine's successful integration into NATO requires not only the political will of all the Member States but also the achievement of interoperability between the Armed Forces of Ukraine (in the broad meaning) and those of NATO countries; this entails the standardisation of procedures, joint exercises, and effective communication – none of which is possible without adequate language training for military personnel of Ukraine. The current percentage of proficient users among Ukrainian officers is not sufficient for this purpose yet.

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