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TO DO OR NOT TO DO: CURRENT NUCLEAR DEBATES IN UKRAINE

The international order is increasingly failing to deter armed aggression. Russia's war in Ukraine has transformed nuclear weapons from defensive deterrents into tools of political coercion and shields for conventional warfare. Furthermore, the blatant violation of 1994 Budapest Memorandum has severely undermined global trust in non-proliferation treaties. Consequently, as nuclear-armed autocracies use the threat of total annihilation to intimidate democracies, vulnerable states are now debating hosting nuclear weapons on their own soil to secure reliable defence guarantees.

This research examines the evolution of Ukraine's domestic discourse regarding the potential reacquisition of nuclear weapons as a mechanism for deterrence and state survival. Prompted by Russia's armed aggression since 2014 and the full-scale invasion of 2022, the study investigates the consequences of the Budapest Memorandum's failure and the resulting profound disillusionment with international security frameworks. Utilising discourse analysis, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews, the paper tracks shifting paradigms among political elites, security experts, and civil society across three distinct periods: the initial 1990s disarmament, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing post-2022 conflict. The findings highlight a dramatic transformation in public sentiment, accompanied by a surge in public petitions advocating for the denunciation of non-proliferation treaties. Despite escalating rhetoric from the public and certain political figures, official Ukrainian security and foreign policy strategies remain steadfast in their adherence to the NPT. Furthermore, expert interviews and media analyses reveal a lack of consensus regarding Ukraine's actual financial and technical capacity to develop a viable nuclear program. Ultimately, the paper synthesises the core arguments for and against nuclear armament, contextualising these domestic debates within Ukraine's broader search for existential security guarantees and the ongoing pursuit of NATO membership.

Key words: nuclear weapons, security, defence, deterrence, Ukraine, NATO, Russia

Formulation of the problem in general form, its relation to scientific or practical problems. Today, the world is witnessing that the international order, founded on respect for the principle of territorial integrity, cooperative security, and international institutions and regimes, is no longer capable of deterring armed aggression by individual states. Russia's war against Ukraine, underscored by nuclear threats, has shifted nuclear weapons from tools of deterrence to instruments of political coercion and shields for conventional aggression within a state's "sphere of influ-

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ence" (Sinovets 2022). Backed by strategic alliances with China and North Korea, Russia's "nuclear coercion" has fueled global instability and fostered a dangerous sense of impunity among those who possess nuclear weapons – a belief that they can act without consequence (Rizzi 2025).

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has emphasised that the blatant disregard for Ukraine's security obligations under the 1994 Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the NPT, better known as the Budapest Memorandxum, calls into question the entire framework of international treaties on non-proliferation and arms control (Office of the President of Ukraine 2020). This erosion of trust has led the non-proliferation regime into a dangerous impasse.

As nuclear powers modernise and expand their arsenals, it is unsurprising that other states are now prepared to challenge long-standing taboos by debating the hosting of nuclear weapons on their own territories. Ultimately, the core issue of these debates isn't merely the nuclear weapons themselves, but the threat posed by armed autocratic regimes that use the prospect of "total annihilation" to intimidate democracies (Klimaitė-Želvienė 2026; Sky News 2026; The Japan Times 2024), creating an urgent impetus for states to find a more reliable guarantee of national sovereignty and defence (Kulyk 2024; Johnson 2022; Knapp 2026).

Ukraine – one of these countries – finds itself in a distinct and precarious position compared to other potential proliferators. Firstly, it voluntarily renounced the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in favour of the nuclear power, Russia, which, since 2014, has been waging armed aggression against Ukraine. Secondly, Russia, as a State Party to the Budapest Memorandum, has violated its obligations to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, to refrain from interfering in its internal affairs, and to refrain from exerting economic or political pressure or from threatening the use of force. Thirdly, the Kremlin's nuclear rhetoric has led to a restrained reaction from other signatories, primarily the US, to Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine, caution in providing military support, and pressure primarily on the Ukrainian side during peace negotiations, effectively rewarding Russia's brinkmanship. Finally, NATO's closed "open door" to Ukraine, which is seen as a guarantee of security in future, undermines trust in traditional mechanisms based on international law, agreements on guarantees, security, friendship or strategic partnership, even if they are signed by permanent members of the UN Security Council and official founding nuclear powers of the NPT (Umland 2025). Therefore, Ukraine's struggle with Russia's aggression is not merely a territorial dispute but an existential crisis that, in the face of the failure of established international security mechanisms, necessitates a reassessment of national priorities and forces Ukraine to seek new ways and means of self-defence.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Russian nuclear coercion, directed not only against Ukraine but also against other states worldwide, has altered the traditionally cautious attitude toward nuclear deterrence in Europe and beyond. Discussions on nuclear deterrence as an instrument for guaranteeing security and territorial integrity are examined by T. Bunde & M. Onderco (2023a) and Reid (2024). The specifics of national debates over the reassessment of nuclear deterrence in Germany, Poland, Japan, and South Korea are explored in the works of T. Bunde & M. Onderco (2023b), M. Sus & Ł. Kulesa (2023), and T. Kim & D. Y. Lee (2023),

respectively. These studies demonstrate a growing sense of insecurity among countries vulnerable to nuclear blackmail and an intensification of domestic debates regarding approaches to ensuring national security. Thus, the Ukrainian case is not exceptional.

At the same time, given that it is the only country in the world to have voluntarily relinquished its instruments of nuclear deterrence in favour of an aggressor state without receiving hard security guarantees, the course of discussions in Ukraine and the consequences of Russian nuclear brinkmanship for European security and the mechanism of security guarantees are attracting the attention of researchers. This research builds upon foundational works, notably "Nuclear history of Ukraine: A Non-Proliferation Perspective", edited by P. Sinovets (2022), "Inheriting the Bomb" by M. Budjeryn (2022) and the article by P. Sinovets and A. Vicente "The day after: the impact of Russia's invasion on Ukrainian political elites' and public attitudes toward nuclear weapons" (2023). Additionally, the NATO factor as a security guarantee for European states and Ukraine is examined by M. Evangelista (2024), J. Dill, M. Howlett & C. Müller-Crepon (2024), and I. Todorov & N. Todorova (2024).

Research methods. This study aims to extend existing works by integrating contemporary discourse and primary data, utilising content analysis and semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian experts conducted in February 2026.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that despite a proliferation of media commentary and expert op-eds, a significant academic vacuum persists; few dedicated analytical studies have systematically addressed this shift. This paper contributes to the burgeoning body of research regarding the geopolitical consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for national nuclear discourse. In doing so, it offers a necessary empirical update to the study of how prolonged conflict reshapes the nuclear aspirations of a non-nuclear state.

The purpose and tasks of the study. The **purpose** of this research is to explore current nuclear debates in Ukraine and assess the extent to which nuclear deterrence might enhance national security.

To map the arguments for and against reliance on nuclear deterrence among policymakers, experts, and the public, the article's **tasks** are threefold. First, it examines the early debates regarding Ukraine's nuclear status that emerged following Russia's 2014 violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, it analyses how the Kremlin's escalating nuclear rhetoric has shaped a new wave of political and expert disputes within Ukraine. Finally, it identifies the nuances of public discourse on security guarantees since 2014, evaluating whether these arguments correlate with political and expert opinions.

Presentation of the main research material with full substantiation of scientific results.

The early debates on Ukraine's nuclear status

Ukraine never sought to maintain its status as a nuclear-armed successor state to the USSR, nor did it insist on gaining operational control over the nuclear weapons on its territory. The intention to become a non-nuclear state in the future, as proclaimed in the Declaration of National Sovereignty approved by the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council) on 16 July 1990 was driven mostly by the following reasons: the post-Chornobyl sentiments in Ukrainian society, the desire to affirm the Ukrainian Republic's sovereign rights, to mitigate the Western concern over the future of nuclear weapons in Ukraine and gain maximum

support for the newly independent state. At the same time, this non-nuclear pledge was included in the Declaration without any prior expert assessments or broad public discussions (Sinovets 2022, p. 85-86). Internal debates remained confined to pro- and anti-disarmament factions within the Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the military. As Polina Sinovets and others (2022) pointed out, while the state leadership recognised the significant political and economic value of the arsenal and refused to transfer it to Russia without compensation, there was a fundamental lack of consensus regarding the role of nuclear weapons in national security and defence (p. 171–172). Consequently, no formal analysis was conducted regarding Ukraine's potential for nuclear deterrence or its capacity to convert administrative control into full operational control over the weapons inherited from the Soviet era.

Political elites' debate: parliament versus government

This issue returned to the political agenda with the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. In March and July 2014, respectively, two draft laws were submitted to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine by MPs from the "Udar" and "Batkivshchyna" political parties: a draft law on Ukraine's denunciation of the NPT of 1 July 1968 and a draft resolution on the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine declaring the restoration of Ukraine's status as a nuclear power.

Russia's violation of the provisions of the Budapest Memorandum and other acts of aggression against Ukraine's territorial integrity and an attempt to overthrow Ukraine's constitutional order are the primary reasons for initiating these draft laws. The authors of the draft laws argue that the Russian Federation's aggressive actions are driven by its status as a nuclear power, whilst Ukraine voluntarily renounced its nuclear weapons, thus remaining without an effective deterrent tool to prevent Russian hostility (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2014, March 20). Both documents, referring to Article X of the NPT, call on the Ukrainian government to withdraw from the Treaty, characterising Russia's actions as "exceptional circumstances" that have jeopardised Ukraine's supreme interests (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs 1968).

A similar provision was codified in the 1994 Law of Ukraine on its accession to the NPT. It stipulates that any threat or use of force against Ukraine's territorial integrity, inviolable borders, or political independence by a nuclear state, as well as economic coercion aimed at undermining its sovereignty, shall be regarded by Ukraine as "exceptional circumstances" that jeopardise its supreme interests (Art. 4) (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 1994).

Therefore, the draft resolution from the Verkhovna Rada, asserting that developing a nuclear arsenal is the only viable deterrent against continued Russian aggression, advocates for the immediate suspension of the NPT and the urgent launch of a state program to restore Ukraine's nuclear status (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2014, July 23).

The idea of denouncing the NPT and restoring Ukraine's nuclear status was supported by representatives of both radical (Oleg Lyashko's Radical Party, "Svoboda," and "Right Sector") and moderate parties, notably "Udar" and "Batkivshchyna". Even the former Presidents of Ukraine, L. Kravchuk and L. Kuchma, who were involved in Ukraine's nuclear disarmament process, endorsed Ukraine's withdrawal from the NPT as a protest at the failure of the US and the UK to fulfil their obligations under the Budapest Memorandum (Sinovets & Vicente 2023, p. 210). Moreover, in the run-up to the October 2014 parliamentary elections, there was a degree of "militarisation"

in the election manifestos: nuclear weapons and Ukraine's NATO membership were among the top topics discussed by politicians (Shramovych 2014).

Besides some pro-nuclear remarks in media interviews by a few political figures (LB.ua 2015, May 20; Ukrinform 2018, April 11) the President, the Ukrainian government, and the rest of the MPs officially supported Ukraine's membership in the NPT and the preservation of Ukraine's non-nuclear status. Indeed, Petro Poroshenko stated at the end of 2014 that Ukraine's return to nuclear-weapon state status would be "utterly irresponsible" (TSN 2014). The fact that no vote was held on the draft laws demonstrates the lack of widespread support for Ukraine's re-nuclearisation.

At the same time, political leaders and parliamentarians share the view that other guarantor states have a responsibility to support Ukraine and to bring an end to the occupation of Ukrainian territories by Russia, in order to preserve and strengthen the NPT regime (Yevropeiska Pravda 2017; Klimkin 2017, September 22; Klimkin 2017, December 15; LB.ua 2018, July 12).

Another common element is the emphasis on developing Ukraine's own capabilities. In particular, Oleksandr Turchynov, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (2014-2019), stressed that Russia's actions against Ukraine have shown that weapons have once again become the primary factor in international relations. Consequently, the only credible way to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity and democratic development, and to guarantee its long-term independence, is to build a formidable army and acquire advanced weaponry (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine 2015, December 5).

The experts' views

The views of military officials align with this approach, pointing to the necessity of strategic and tactical self-reliance. Indeed, former Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Lieutenant General (retired) Ihor Romanenko, stated that "the aid from Ukraine's allies is negligible compared to the value of the nuclear weapons we surrendered under the Budapest Memorandum". Thus, "we must rely solely on ourselves and work to build up our military potential to counter not only Russia, but any state that may have territorial or other claims against Ukraine," Romanenko concluded (Haizhevska 2018b). Colonel-General Volodymyr Tolubko, who advocated for the preservation of Ukraine's nuclear capabilities and was the architect of the "Nuclear Deterrence Shield", and the former commander of Ukraine's last "nuclear" 46th Missile Division, Major General (retired) Mykola Filatov, note that today the focus should be on creating a "missile shield" comprising high-precision weapons and medium-range missiles (Argument 2015, November 17; Raievskyi & Husiev 2020).

Some military figures have taken a more radical stance, arguing that Ukraine has every reason to withdraw from the Budapest Memorandum and possesses all the necessary capabilities to restore its nuclear status in order to deter a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, without fear of potential international sanctions (Haizhevska 2018a; OBOZ.UA 2018, December 8).

However, many experts in political science and strategic studies contest this view. Volodymyr Horbulin, former advisor to President P. Poroshenko and Director of the National Institute for Strategic Studies (2014–2018), warns that calls to restore Ukraine's nuclear status inadvertently serve Russia's interests. Horbulin contends that withdrawing from the NPT and attempting to develop uranium enrichment capabilities would provide no tactical advantage in the current conflict. Instead, he argues,

such a move would give the Kremlin a "free hand" to escalate the war across all domains while alienating Ukraine's international partners (Argument 2015, March 31).

Similarly, Yuriy Kostenko, who was directly involved in discussions on Ukraine's nuclear disarmament, notes that he historically advocated for disarmament only in exchange for full integration into the European Union and a collective security system. He maintains that without such institutional guarantees, Ukraine cannot offset the security deficit created by the loss of its nuclear deterrent (Argument 2014, April 10). Consequently, both experts suggest that politicians advocating for a nuclear return are either demonstrating a fundamental ignorance of strategic realities or engaging in dangerous political provocation.

Formally, these debates were resolved by Ukraine's 2015 National Security Strategy and 2015 Military Doctrine. Both documents reaffirmed Ukraine's steadfast commitment to the NPT and the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament. Furthermore, these policy frameworks signalled a readiness to support a universal international treaty on security guarantees, particularly for non-nuclear states. Such a treaty would establish a codified list of obligations and enforcement mechanisms, including mandatory sanctions, to be triggered in the event of a violation (President of Ukraine 2015, May 26; President of Ukraine 2015, September 24).

While both strategic documents prioritised peaceful resolutions, they assert that Ukraine will utilise all lawful means to defend its territorial integrity; among the options, Ukraine outlined the following pillars:

– establishing a functional mechanism to guarantee sovereignty and territorial integrity based on the principles of the Budapest Memorandum;

– building a robust network of bilateral and regional defence agreements and alliances, alongside deeper integration with international security organisations to secure external defence guarantees;

– prioritising indigenous capabilities by modernising the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other lawful military formations with advanced weaponry and equipment;

– explicitly reserving the right to participate in collective security systems as a fundamental guarantor of national sovereignty.

At the same time, the 2015 Military Doctrine states that Ukraine reserves the right to use any means necessary to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, leaving "all options on the table" and providing flexibility to adapt its defence posture as existential threats evolve (President of Ukraine 2015, September 24).

The current state of nuclear debate in Ukraine

The full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, marked by widespread civilian atrocities and the high-risk seizure of the Chornobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, has reignited a critical debate over nuclear deterrence as a necessary instrument to stop further aggression and safeguard Ukraine's existence.

Political elites' perception of Ukraine's nuclear option

It is worth noting that this debate in Ukraine is exacerbated by Russian disinformation. On the eve of the full-scale invasion, Russian pro-government media regularly spread President Putin's allegation that Ukraine could develop nuclear weapons with its advanced technical expertise and potential Western support. The Kremlin continues to circulate baseless claims about "dirty bombs" or secret acquisitions from the UK and France to justify its ongoing aggression (The Times of India 2026).

Western media outlets inadvertently amplify these narratives, thereby fostering scepticism toward Ukraine and putting at risk the military aid necessary for its defence. In particular, two cases are worth mentioning in this regard. First, at the Munich Security Conference on February 19, 2022, President Zelenskyy suggested that the failure of the Budapest Memorandum called the entire "1994 security package" into question (Munich Security Conference 2022). In two years of ongoing war, at the European Council summit on October 17, 2024, he presented a strategic dilemma: "either nuclear weapons" or "some sort of alliance" as a protection (Newsweek 2024). Both statements were widely circulated by Russian and Western media, fuelling international concern over Kyiv's potential "nuclear choice".

Responding to the accusations, Zelenskyy emphasised that his message was an argument for NATO integration, not nuclearisation. "Ukraine does not manufacture nuclear weapons," he stated, urging the international community to stop spreading such misconceptions (Ukrinform 2024, October 17).

Ukraine is understandably outraged that some European partners are lending weight to Kremlin insinuations and are completely reneging on their security obligations under the Budapest Memorandum. Indeed, since March 2014, Ukraine has sought consultations under the Budapest Memorandum nearly 20 times. Russia has consistently rebuffed these efforts, maintaining the fiction of compliance (Maksymenko 2022) while simultaneously pressuring Kyiv, which culminated in the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Against this backdrop, President Zelenskyy's address in Munich and Brussels should be understood as a visceral expression of the "despair, fatigue, and frustration" (Erman 2022) and as a reminder of Ukraine's voluntary contribution to the NPT (Budjeryn 2024) that today finds itself in a security vacuum without a reliable deterrence, shared by the Ukrainian leadership and its people. Therefore, these statements can be read as a calculated attempt to reframe the narrative: shifting the perception of Russia's aggression from a localised issue to an existential threat facing the entirety of Europe.

Since the 2022 Russian invasion, President Zelenskyy has been a key figure in debates over Ukraine's security and defence options, both internally and externally. The rhetoric, similar to the presidential one, can be found only in some statements of other Ukrainian politicians (Oleksii Goncharenko, a member of European Solidarity Party; Oleksii Arestovych, a former adviser to President Zelenskyy; Andriy Melnyk, a former Ambassador of Ukraine to Germany), however, representing personal populist positions that have never been considered seriously either by political elites or society (Sinovets & Vicente 2023, p. 214).

The Parliament, with the majority of the representatives of his party, Sluga Naroda (Servant of the People), has not polemicised on nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the immediate financial and military aid provided by the United States and its European allies at the onset of the full-scale invasion has reinvigorated expectations for Ukraine's expedited accession to NATO.

Despite random emotional comments from certain politicians, the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence consistently reaffirm Ukraine's adherence to the NPT, arguing that nuclear weapons will rather create more problems than help end the war in Ukraine (Flot2017 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2024; Hryhoriev 2024). Thereby, the official posture of the Ukrainian author-

ity, codified in the Constitution, the 2020 National Security Strategy of Ukraine and the Military Security Strategy (Military Doctrine) of 2021, is that Ukraine's long-term security must be guaranteed through international alliances.

The strategic pursuit of full NATO membership is traditionally regarded as the paramount guarantee of Ukraine's national security. President Zelenskyy has consistently emphasised that Ukraine chooses Alliance membership over nuclear weapons, asserting that NATO and EU integration are non-negotiable, and that this choice is directly linked to obtaining security guarantees and a deterrent under NATO's nuclear umbrella (Adams 2024; Ukrinform 2024, October 17; Slovo i Dilo 2024; Novyny. LIVE 2024, October 24).

Ukraine's 2020 National Security Strategy and 2021 Military Security Strategy notably omit references to the Budapest Memorandum instead, prioritising the restoration of territorial integrity through a new doctrine of "comprehensive defence and deterrence". This strategy shifts the focus toward consolidating international partnerships and building domestic resilience across the military, the economy, and the population to ensure that the costs of further aggression remain unacceptably high for Russia (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2020; Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2021). Both documents identify the development of deterrence capabilities as the primary task of military security. While the 2020 Strategy reaffirms Ukraine's commitment to non-proliferation, the deliberate use of terms like "deterrence" and "unacceptable losses" creates a degree of strategic ambiguity. In the face of an escalating existential threat, these concepts leave room for further debates regarding the potential role of a nuclear deterrent in Ukraine's long-term survival.

The experts' assessment of Ukraine's nuclear prospects

A broader experts' discussion on the issue of Ukraine's nuclear option has been launched after Russia's invasion. Unlike the period before Russia's war of aggression, the topic received more attention, as reflected in numerous interviews, ops, and commentaries in the media, featuring former politicians and diplomats, the military, analysts, and the general public.

Three central questions define this debate: Does Ukraine possess the legal right to re-nuclearise? Does it have the technical capacity to do so? And, in the absence of nuclear weapons, what alternative security architectures can ensure its survival? These inquiries have elicited a wide range of conflicting perspectives.

For instance, Volodymyr Ohryzko, Ukraine's former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–2010), contends that the failure to uphold the Budapest Memorandum provides Ukraine with the legal grounds to declare itself no longer bound by its previous nuclear obligations (Ukrinform 2024, December 5). This shift in perspective is shared by Volodymyr Yelchenko, former Ambassador to the U.S., Russia, and the UN, who acknowledges that his view on a nuclear deterrent has changed fundamentally. Yelchenko notes that "when you have nuclear weapons, there is, after all, less chance that someone will decide to attack" (Glukhovsky 2025, February 28). Consequently, both diplomats argue that since the reciprocal commitments of the 1994 agreements have been breached, Ukraine is formally entitled to reassess its adherence to them.

Yelchenko, thereby, revived another question of the debates since 2014: whether Russia would have attacked if Ukraine had retained its nuclear weapons. There is no separate discussion on this, although, based on existing publications, the experts' answers may generally be divided into two groups. The first argues that a nuclear

deterrent would have precluded an invasion, since Kyiv "could always speak on equal terms with the Russian Federation and the whole world" (LB.ua 2018; Slovo i Dilo 2021; Shipulia 2025). Such pro-nuclear sentiments are echoed in the statements of some Ukrainian military officials who contend that lasting peace can only be secured by the nation's own arsenal, including ballistic and nuclear weapons (Demyanyk 2025; Zaklinska 2024). From this perspective, Ukraine holds every right, "legal, practical, physical, and moral", to a nuclear deterrent as the most effective guarantor of its sovereignty and a vital asset on the global diplomatic stage (Bondarenko 2024).

Conversely, a second group offers more sceptical assessments, questioning whether a domestic nuclear capability would have effectively shielded Ukraine from Russia's aggression (Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2025, November 20; Online interview with Bielieskov 2026; Online interview with Izhak 2026; Interview with Sinovets 2026; UA3 2026). Moreover, because nuclear proliferation remains a "red line" for Ukraine's partners, accession to NATO is increasingly viewed as the only credible alternative for guaranteeing the nation's survival.

A formal invitation to join NATO occupies the central pillar of President Zelenskyy's "Victory Plan". From his perspective, such an invitation would serve as a definitive signal to the Kremlin that its geopolitical calculations are fundamentally flawed (Office of the President of Ukraine 2024). Despite this, Alliance member states remain hesitant to extend a formal invitation at this stage, prioritising continued military and financial aid over immediate accession (Jozwiak 2025, June 30; Kurenkova 2025). Despite Secretary General Mark Rutte's assurances at the 2024 Washington and 2025 Hague summits regarding the "irreversibility" of Ukraine's accession, many leaders continue to rule out membership as long as the war continues, fearing a direct escalation with Russia (Kunytska 2024; Jozwiak 2025, November 24; Novyny.LIVE 2024).

In effect, this creates a strategic paradox where Ukraine's membership is guaranteed in principle but deferred indefinitely in practice. Moreover, it has caused "strategic ambiguity" in Ukraine and significantly altered domestic discourse. For instance, military expert Oleg Zhdanov argues that "from a military perspective, Ukraine will never be in NATO" (Novyny.LIVE 2024). The others question whether NATO membership is truly a foolproof shield for Ukraine, given Russia's unpredictability and the shifting reliability of the U.S. guarantee of peace and stability.

Public support for NATO integration has seen a volatile but generally upward trajectory, though confidence in NATO as a realistic security provider is more nuanced. To compare, the vast majority of Ukrainians desire NATO membership (47.8% respondents at the end of 2021, but 74.2% in March 2023 and 71.3% in February 2026) (Razumkov Centre 2026), a shrinking minority believes the Alliance will actually provide the necessary security guarantees (54% of respondents in 2023 and 38% in 2025) (Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2023; Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2025, December 29).

This leads to a sobering conclusion: if NATO membership is no longer perceived as a "100% guarantee", the global incentive shifts away from collective defence and back toward the pursuit of an independent nuclear deterrent (Argument 2015, November 17; Novyny.LIVE 2024).

The question of whether Ukraine can realistically initiate a nuclear weapons program remains deeply polarising. While some domestic voices claim that Ukraine retains the necessary foundational production capacity, a consensus among nuclear

physicists, nuclear security and strategic experts asserts that such an undertaking is currently impossible for several definitive reasons (Online interview with Bielieskov 2026; Interview with Sinovets 2026; UA1 2026; UA3 2026; Glukhovsky 2025, April 2; Vons 2025; Kulish 2024).

Firstly, Ukraine possesses neither the industrial facilities for uranium enrichment and plutonium extraction nor the specialised laboratories required for weaponisation (Budjeryn & Bunn 2022; RBC-Ukraine 2025; Raievskyi & Husiev 2020; Novyny. LIVE 2024). There is currently no viable nuclear test site on Ukrainian territory. Furthermore, the country lacks the strategic aviation, specialised technical personnel, and delivery systems necessary to field a functional nuclear force (Suspilne 2021). The industrial-scale development of enrichment capabilities is an exorbitantly expensive endeavour. Ukraine currently lacks the sovereign funds to finance such a complex project alongside its conventional defence needs (Ukrinform 2024, October 19). Accordingly, the experts indicate that Ukraine lacks the core infrastructure required for credible nuclear deterrence, which is complicated to acquire in the short term.

Secondly, none of this can be done in secret. A common expert consensus is that the Ukrainian "clandestine" program is impossible in the current political and security environment: under constant missile pressure and international opposition to the emergence of a new nuclear power. Recognising the breach of the Budapest Memorandum as a systemic failure, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon clarified that it would not grant Ukraine "special concessions" to bypass non-proliferation norms (United Nations 2014). Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2014–2019), warns that any hint of a nuclear program would trigger immediate, large-scale escalation from Russia. Moscow would likely use the move to justify total war, framing its aggression as a necessary measure to ensure "global predictability" (Suspilne 2021).

Thirdly, experts point out that Ukraine is bound by the NPT provisions on uranium enrichment and remains under the strict oversight of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which maintains a permanent presence at all Ukrainian nuclear power plants. Moreover, since the 2022 invasion, according to an interviewed expert, the frequency of unscheduled IAEA inspections has increased significantly, making any diversion of nuclear material for military use technically unfeasible (UA2 2026). Under current conditions, Ukraine's withdrawal from the NPT would bring no benefit; moreover, it would seriously harm Ukraine's interests at the international level, transforming it from a victim of Russia's unprovoked aggression into a pariah that undermines liberal values and the non-proliferation regime (Shipulia 2025). There will also be negative consequences for Ukraine's nuclear energy sector: the NPT withdrawal would result in an immediate halt to all international supplies of nuclear fuel and technology. Given Ukraine's reliance on nuclear energy, this would lead to a total collapse of the national power grid.

Ultimately, this will do nothing to promote Ukraine's security; instead, it will lead to extremely adverse geopolitical consequences and a deteriorating domestic situation, as the country will face "sanctions so severe that we will be left with absolutely nothing" (Slovo i Dilo 2019; Kulish 2024; Interview with P. Sinovets 2026).

Nevertheless, simply dismissing Ukraine's nuclear ambitions as "fantastical" or "unrealistic" does nothing to resolve the country's fundamental security dilemma. If a nuclear deterrent is deemed off the table, the imperative shifts to identifying the alternatives that actually exist.

Table 1

The main arguments for and against Ukraine's nuclear program

Category	Arguments Against	Arguments For
Normative	1. Ukraine's official adherence to the NPT and its norms; 2. IAEA safeguards and nuclear security monitoring	1. Erosion of the NPT; 2. The credibility distrust of non-binding security guarantees; 3. The perceived hypocrisy and double standard of NATO policy regarding Ukraine and nuclear deterence.
Technical	1. Lack of a full nuclear fuel cycle and other core infrastructure required; 2. Absence of strategic delivery systems; 3. No nuclear weapon experts available; 4. Shortage of the sovereign funds	1. The persistence of technical knowledge and specialised skills inherited from the Soviet period; 2. The "primary existential threat" serves as the ultimate catalyst for developing essential technology and infrastructure
Security	1. Russia's ongoing war, 2. Ukraine's dependence on the partners' weapons supplies, 3. International opposition, 4. Escalation risk 5. NATO membership preference	1. A security vacuum; 2. Ukraine turned out to be a buffer zone between NATO and a revisionist Russia; 3. Modernisation and rapid expansion of all nuclear powers' arsenals; 4. Continued Russian aggression with a tendency to escalation; 5. Indefinitely deferred NATO membership
Economic	1. Severe sanctions and economic isolation; 2. An immediate halt of economic and nuclear energy cooperation; 3. Energy collapse	1. Economic cost is secondary to the "primary existential threat"

The alternative, the most criticised among Ukrainian experts, is the creation of a so-called "dirty bomb", pairing high-level radioactive waste with conventional delivery systems, such as combat aircraft or missiles (Davlikanova 2024). While theoretically possible, some experts, like P. Sinovets, head of Odesa Center for Nonproliferation, and O. Izhak, analyst of National Institute for Strategic Studies (NIIS) and Consortium for Defence Information (CDI), cite formidable technical and logistical barriers to its practical use, which include the extreme radioactivity of spent nuclear fuel, the prohibitive mass of the resulting device, making transport nearly impossible, and the total inability to control the radius of contamination (Sinovets et al. 2023; Online interview with Izhak 2026). Beyond these technical hurdles, the strategic and nuclear security experts also emphasise the inevitable diplomatic backlash and the threat of crippling international sanctions, effectively neutralising any tactical advantage (Interview with Sinovets 2026; UA1 2026; UA2 2026).

Another alternative, advanced by Valerii Zaluzhnyi, former Commander-in-Chief and current Ambassador to the UK, advocates for the stationing of allied nuclear assets on Ukrainian soil as a definitive security guarantee (Johnson 2025). President

Zelenskyy also stands up for a "strategic deterrence package" that envisions the deployment of advanced missile facilities by partner states on Ukrainian territory to neutralise the Russian threat (Office of the President of Ukraine 2024). However, Ukrainian security experts argue that this initiative could meet with significant resistance from NATO member states due to its compatibility with the NPT and Russia's aggressive rhetoric, framing the suggestion as a "path to nuclear war" (Cole 2025; Al Mayadeen English 2025).

A further alternative involves developing nuclear capabilities through multilateral European collaboration. Some strategic analysts, like O. Izhak and V. Horbulin, advocate for "allied bridges" – a shared defence framework involving Poland, the UK, and the Baltic states – to establish a nuclear arsenal that extends a protective zone across the European continent (Online interview with Izhak 2026; Zamirska 2025; Shenderovskyi 2025). This mirrors a wider European trend: French leadership is pushing for a continental nuclear guarantee (RFI 2026), while Poland and the Nordic states are re-evaluating their roles in nuclear sharing to counter Russian threats (Weise 2026; Reuters 2026; Rawnsley 2026; Sweden Herald 2026; Anderschou 2026). The experts from the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, NIIS and CDI emphasise that, by integrating into this emerging European security architecture, Ukraine would gain security through shared, multilateral deterrence, effectively mitigating domestic pressure to develop an independent and far more controversial indigenous arsenal (RBC-Ukraine 2025; Shenderovskyi 2025; Espreso 2025; Tiutiunnyk & Horovenko 2026).

Ukraine's nuclear status as seen by society

An analysis of public debates reveals a clear alignment between expert discourse and public sentiment. This shift is not merely academic; it reflects a profound emotional response to the escalating threats against the Ukrainian state and the perceived reliability of its allies. The transformation in how Ukrainians see nuclear weapons began in 2014, triggered by the illegal annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas.

Historically, the nuclear issue was far from a national priority. In mid-1994, polling showed that 50% of Ukrainians supported a non-nuclear status, while only 30% favoured retaining an arsenal (KIIS 2024, December 23). At that time, the nuclear debate was overshadowed by a crushing economic crisis. Furthermore, prior to 2014, a vast majority of Ukrainians maintained a positive view of Russia, regarding it as a friendly neighbour. Consequently, it is unsurprising that in early surveys, only 5% of respondents identified nuclear weapons as a primary concern (KIIS 2024).

By May 2014, public opinion had undergone a dramatic reversal: 43.2% of respondents favoured the re-acquisition of nuclear weapons, while opposition dropped to 36.7%, with 20.2% remaining undecided (Tyzhden 2014). While most Ukrainians remained sceptical about the technical feasibility of such a program (only 6% of the population viewed re-nuclearisation as a practical possibility, while 39% deemed it unachievable) (Tyzhden 2014), the desire for a nuclear shield became a recurring theme in the national discourse.

This shifting sentiment is further evidenced by content analysis of petitions on the Presidential website. Between September and November 2015, a spike in nuclear-related petitions coincided with the intense battles for Maryinka and Shyrokyne. These appeals were a direct response to Russia's efforts to coerce Ukraine into political

concessions, including the implementation of "special status" for the Donbas through constitutional amendments.

A second surge in petition submissions occurred in 2019, following the Kerch Strait incident on November 25, 2018. The seizure of three Ukrainian naval vessels and 24 sailors by Russian forces marked a watershed moment. As then-President Petro Poroshenko noted, this "extraordinary event" was the first instance of overt military aggression carried out by Russia without concealing its national insignia. The subsequent 30-day imposition of martial law, a first in independent Ukraine, fuelled a new wave of petitions (Honcharenko 2025). Although the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs appealed to the guarantors of the Budapest Memorandum for urgent consultations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2018), the international response remained limited to formal condemnations, failing to produce the substantive sanctions Kyiv demanded.

The authors of the petitions have consistently argued that the "inaction" of the Budapest Memorandum guarantors, coupled with Western efforts to normalise relations with Moscow despite the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas, has effectively rendered the document null and void. With external guarantees perceived as a failure, a consensus has emerged among these advocates that a robust domestic deterrent is the only path to lasting peace. Frequently invoking Charles de Gaulle, they assert that a state without nuclear weapons in a nuclear-armed world "is not the master of its own destiny", often concluding that the question of nuclear restoration should be decided by a nationwide referendum.

President Zelenskyy's decision to include a question regarding the Budapest Memorandum in the October 2020 national poll can be viewed as a calculated response to this pressure. Specifically, the fifth question, asking whether Ukraine should demand that all signatories fulfil their obligations, resonated deeply, with 78% of respondents affirming Ukraine's right to invoke those guarantees (Suspilne 2020). While the poll lacked the legal weight of a referendum, it signalled a significant shift in the national mood. However, critics argue that such rhetoric remains largely populist, a tactical manoeuvre by the administration and various politicians to garner attention and exert leverage on the international stage (Sinovets & Vicente 2023, p. 210-211). Strategic and nuclear security experts interviewed for this report confirm that no formal requests have been issued to conduct feasibility studies regarding the technical requirements or capabilities for a domestic nuclear weapons program (Izhak 2026; Sinovets 2026; UA2 2026). This suggests that the current discourse remains largely rhetorical rather than operational.

The 2022 full-scale invasion triggered a renewed surge in nuclear-related activism. While 31 highly emotive petitions were submitted in the first year of the total war, they initially garnered low levels of support. However, in subsequent years, a notable trend emerged: although the volume of petitions decreased, the intensity of public engagement rose sharply, peaking at nearly 10,000 votes per petition in 2024 (see Chart 1). These appeals primarily demand a national referendum on restoring Ukraine's nuclear status as an existential deterrent to ensure the survival of the state against the Russian occupation.

The 2022–2025 petitions offer increasingly sophisticated justifications. They cite the intensifying aggression of the "axis" involving Russia, Belarus, China, North Korea, and Iran, alongside perceived vulnerabilities in Western leadership, most notably the uncertainty surrounding the second Trump administration.

It is worth noting here that similar issues were raised during a public opinion poll on security guarantees for Ukraine after 2022. The proportion of those who support Ukraine's development of nuclear weapons as an effective deterrent and security guarantee has steadily grown: from 53% at the end of 2022 to 73% in 2024 (I-UA.tv 2022; KIIS 2024). The dynamics of public opinion are shown in Chart 2.

Nevertheless, when presented with multiple security frameworks, public preference remains nuanced. Support for the nuclear option drops to 31.1% (New Europe Center 2024; New Europe Center 2025) when placed alongside international coop-

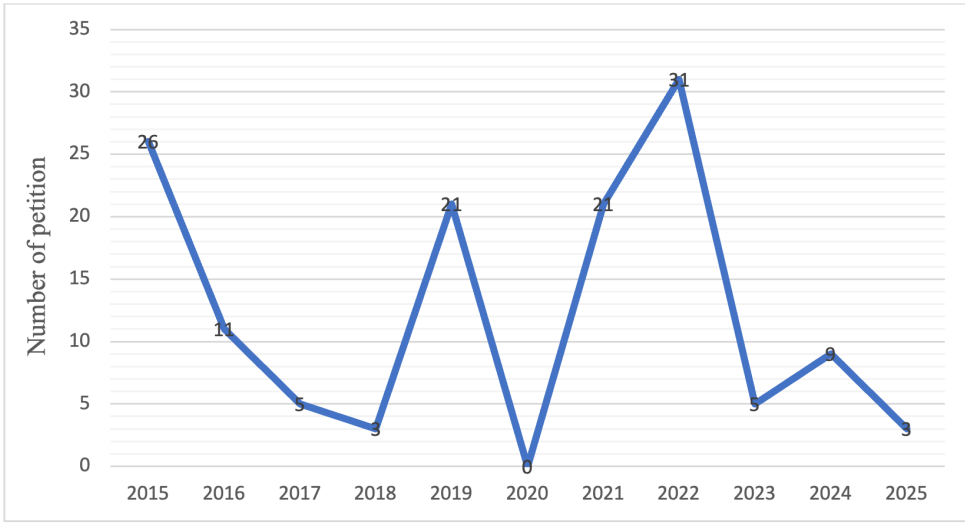


Chart 1. Number of petitions submitted to the official web page of the President of Ukraine (2015–2025)

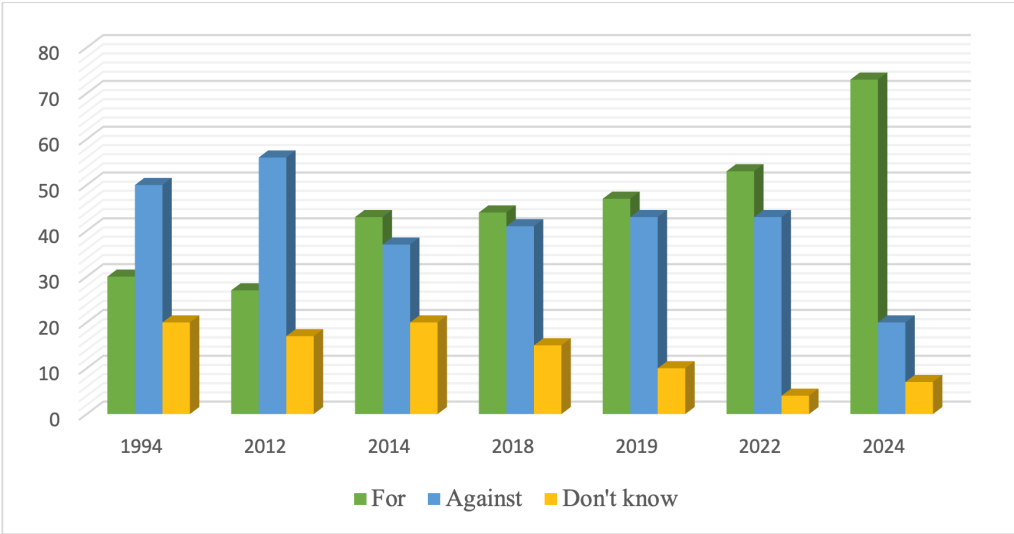


Chart 2. Public opinion on the nuclear status of Ukraine

eration, suggesting that while Ukrainians are frustrated by the pace of Western aid, they still prioritise integration with European partners over isolated nuclearisation. This indicates that nuclear weapons are viewed by many as a "fallback" or insurance policy rather than a first choice. At the same time, P. Sinovets and NIIS experts M. Bielieskov and O. Izhak are in agreement that the "nuclear option" remains an element of the national agenda, likely to resurface should international deterrence and the NPT regime continue to erode or should Russia's aggression escalate further (Interview with Sinovets 2026; Online interview with Bielieskov 2026; Online interview with Izhak 2026).

Research findings and prospects for further research in this area. For decades, Ukraine was heralded as the premier success story for international non-proliferation. However, Russia's protracted aggression since 2014 has shattered this perception, forcing a reassessment of a collision between the enduring role of nuclear weapons in national security, even survival, and upholding international treaties.

The 1994 Budapest Memorandum was originally envisioned as a cornerstone of Ukrainian security strategy. Even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine that sparked several calls for a return to nuclear status, the official Kyiv remained remarkably steadfast in its commitment to the NPT.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion acted as a "critical juncture", fundamentally altering how political elites and society talk about a nuclear deterrent. Empirical research, rooted in the discourse analysis of political elites, experts and public-opinion data, reveals the existence of two seemingly opposing viewpoints within Ukraine.

Many Ukrainians have moved from a period of pride in disarmament to a time of viewing that disarmament as a "historic and strategic mistake", now viewing nuclear weapons as the only tools capable of truly safeguarding independence.

This transition is driven by the visible structural decay of the global security architecture and a widening credibility gap regarding the efficacy of international norms as reliable security guarantees. Chronic delays and specific conditions attached to military aid have created a perception that Western partners are overly sensitive to the Kremlin's "red lines". Furthermore, political pressures, such as efforts to force a lopsided peace deal and the perceived erosion of the NPT, have deepened the security vacuum. Collectively, these factors are driving a domestic surge in support for restoring Ukraine's nuclear status.

With that much of the current rhetoric can be interpreted as strategic signalling. By allowing – or perhaps even encouraging – public debate on nuclearisation, Ukrainian leadership draws attention to the existential threat facing Europe.

Despite regretful sentiments, there is a sober consensus among officials and experts that remains non-nuclear: the technical, economic, and diplomatic hurdles to an indigenous nuclear program are immense. Furthermore, the diplomatic fallout, mostly potential isolation and the erosion of international support, presents a barrier that Kyiv is not yet willing to cross.

In response, most discussions focus on bolstering Ukraine's defensive posture, with a steadfast emphasis that any viable path forward must be paved through collective European partnership.

Ultimately, the Ukrainian national consensus unifying the state, the security experts and the public is that NATO accession and inclusion in an extended deterrence framework are existential imperatives for the country's survival. As long as the path

to NATO remains open and credible, the Ukrainian government will likely remain a steadfast adherent to the NPT.

However, analysts warn that should the security environment continue to erode in the absence of credible guarantees, such as NATO membership, Ukraine may be compelled to initiate a formal feasibility study into the development of a sovereign nuclear deterrent.

This article contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by analysing how Ukrainian political, expert, and public attitudes toward nuclear weapons have evolved in the context of Russian aggression, supporting the thesis that a paradigm shift has occurred concerning non-proliferation and nuclear security guarantees, driven by Russian nuclear coercion.

Drawing on novel empirical insights and arguments, this article also reveals an emerging consensus among Ukrainian elites and society that has been growing since 2014. Furthermore, the study shows that Ukrainian expert discourse is pivoting away from pursuing a domestic nuclear programme or relying on NATO membership as primary security guarantees. Instead, the focus is shifting toward developing advanced national defence capabilities in cooperation with key European partners. This trajectory facilitates Ukraine's integration into a pan-European security architecture, bolstering collective resilience amid a protracted war and escalating Russian threats. Given these dynamics, further research on the interplay between the ongoing war and nuclear signalling remains both timely and necessary.

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РОБИТИ ЧИ НЕ РОБИТИ: ПОТОЧНІ ЯДЕРНІ ДЕБАТИ В УКРАЇНІ

Резюме
Міжнародний порядок дедалі менше справляється зі стримуванням збройної агресії. Війна Росії в Україні перетворила ядерну зброю з оборонного засобу стримування на інструмент політичного примусу та прикриття для звичайної війни. Крім того, відверте порушення Будапештського меморандуму 1994 р. серйозно підірвало глобальну довіру до ДНЯЗ. Як наслідок, оскільки автократії, що володіють ядерною зброєю, використовують загрозу повного знищення для залякування демократій, вразливі держави зараз обговорюють розміщення ядерної зброї на власній території,

щоб забезпечити надійні гарантії оборони. Це дослідження розглядає еволюцію внутрішнього дискурсу в Україні щодо потенційного повторного придбання ядерної зброї як механізму стримування та виживання держави. Спонукане збройною агресією Росії з 2014 р. та повномасштабним вторгненням 2022 р., стаття досліджує наслідки провалу Будапештського меморандуму та спричинене ним глибоке розчарування в міжнародних системах безпеки. Використовуючи дискурс-аналіз, контент-аналіз та напівструктуровані інтерв'ю, автор відстежує зміну парадигм серед політичних еліт, експертів з безпеки та громадянського суспільства протягом трьох різних періодів: початкове роззброєння 1990-х років, анексія Криму 2014 р. та конфлікт, що триває після 2022 р. Результати дослідження підкреслюють суттєву трансформацію громадських настроїв, що супроводжується сплеском публічних петицій, які вимагають денонсації ДНЯЗ. Незважаючи на ескалацію риторики з боку громадськості та деяких політичних діячів, офіційні стратегії України у сфері безпеки та зовнішньої політики залишаються непохитними у своєму дотриманні ДНЯЗ. Крім того, інтерв'ю з експертами та аналіз ЗМІ свідчать про відсутність консенсусу щодо фактичних фінансових і технічних можливостей України для розроблення життєздатної ядерної програми. Зрештою, у статті синтезуються основні аргументи за і проти ядерного озброєння, а також контекстуалізуються внутрішні дебати в межах ширшого пошуку Україною гарантій екзистенційної безпеки та постійного прагнення до членства в НАТО.

Ключові слова: ядерна зброя, безпека, оборона, стримування, Україна, НАТО, Росія.

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