

Professional Military Education in Ukraine: Transformation, Challenges, and Strategic Implications

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Abstract: This article examines the transformation of Ukraine's professional military education (PME) system against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Drawing on policy documents, institutional analyses, and contemporary reforms, the study analyzes the evolution of Ukrainian military education from its Soviet legacy to its current alignment with NATO standards. The research employs document analysis of Ukrainian defense policies, international assessment reports, and comparative studies of military education systems. The findings reveal that Ukraine has undertaken significant reforms since 2014, accelerated by the full-scale invasion in 2022, to integrate NATO educational standards, establish a comprehensive PME framework with tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and develop institutional capacity for international collaboration. The article identifies persistent challenges including the need to balance education versus training approaches, overcome hierarchical Soviet-era institutional cultures, and manage the integration of wartime experience into curricula. The study concludes that Ukraine's PME transformation represents a critical case study in defense institution building during active conflict, with implications for NATO's Eastern Flank security architecture.

Keywords: Professional military education, Ukraine, NATO integration, defense reform, Russian-Ukrainian war, military transformation

1. Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 and escalated dramatically with the full-scale invasion of February 2022, represents the largest conventional conflict in Europe since World War II (National Defence University of Ukraine, 2023). Beyond the immediate battlefield dynamics, this war has fundamentally challenged assumptions about modern warfare, including the nature of professional military education (PME) systems and their role in building resilient defense institutions. As Ukraine's National Defence University course program states, the war is "waged not only on the battlefield, but also in other areas" (NDUU, 2023, 2), making PME a critical component of national defense capability.

Professional military education serves as the foundation for developing competent military leaders capable of operating in complex, multidomain environments. According to Crosbie et al. (2019, 44), PME is "not uniform—and not simple," requiring careful balance between technical training and strategic education. For Ukraine, this challenge is compounded by the need to simultaneously defend against Russian aggression while transforming its military institutions from Soviet-era structures to NATO-compatible systems.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the transformation of Ukrainian military education, examining its historical foundations, current structure, reform trajectory, and future challenges. Using the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion) framework, this study draws on Ukrainian policy documents, international assessments, and comparative analyses to provide a comprehensive overview of Ukraine's PME system. The research addresses three central questions: (1) How has Ukraine's PME system evolved from its Soviet legacy to its current configuration? (2) What reforms have been implemented to align with NATO standards, particularly since 2014? (3) What challenges and opportunities characterize the ongoing transformation of Ukrainian military education during active conflict?

2. Methods

This study employs qualitative document analysis as its primary methodological approach. The research analyzes multiple categories of documents:

Primary Ukrainian policy documents include the "Concept of Transformation of the Military Education System" (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2022), the "Policy of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine in the Realm of Military Education" (Ministry of Defence, 2021), and the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Military Education and Science" (Verkhovna Rada, 2021). These documents establish the legal and policy framework for PME transformation.

Institutional curricula and course programs from the National Defence University of Ukraine (NDUU, 2023) provide detailed insight into current educational content, including the L1-L5 PME course structure and alignment with NATO planning processes (Joint Operation Planning Process, Military Decision Making Process, Troop Leading Procedures).

International assessment documents include the FOI Memo 7899 on EU military advisory missions (Karlsson, 2023), the institutional audit of Ukrainian military education conducted with NATO support (Mirnenko et al., 2021), and the DEEP (Defence Education Enhancement Programme) reports (NATO, 2018).

Scholarly analyses include Gerasymchuk's (2008) research on Ukrainian military education reform, Kladnik's (2015) SWOT analysis of Slovenian military education with relevance to post-Soviet contexts, and the comparative study by Crosbie et al. (2019) on NATO military education.

Presentation materials from Volodymyr Mirnenko, Director of the Department of Military Education and Science at the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (2023), provide contemporary official perspectives on reform achievements and future plans.

Document analysis was conducted using thematic coding to identify patterns in reform objectives, structural changes, institutional challenges, and international collaboration mechanisms. Triangulation across document types enhanced validity, while attention to the temporal context (pre-2014, 2014-2022, and post-2022 periods) allowed for analysis of transformation dynamics.

3. Results

3.1 Historical Evolution of Ukrainian Military Education

Ukraine inherited its military education system from the Soviet Union upon independence in 1991. According to Gerasymchuk (2008, 2), the Soviet system was characterized by "a certain degree of conservatism, unification, authoritarian and technocratic leadership style, isolation, lack of self-motivation." The system included 34 military schools and academies on 78 higher education institutions—far more than Ukraine's post-Cold War needs.

The early reform period (1992-1996) initiated by Minister of Defence Order No. 133 sought to transform officer education, establishing the Academy of Armed Forces of Ukraine. However, Gerasymchuk (2008, 3) notes that these reforms faced opposition from the "old Soviet school," with arguments against reduced numbers of institutions and the introduction of "Western" educational approaches. By 1994, the Ministry of Defence adopted a compromise approach—a "mix of Soviet and Western approaches" that preserved elements of the hierarchical, technocratic system.

The 1997 Concept of Higher Military Education, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers, established strategic goals for further transformation, including fulfilling state demand for qualified military specialists and creating a comprehensive military education system (Gerasymchuk, 2008, 4). However, economic constraints and the persistence of Soviet-era mentalities limited progress. As Gerasymchuk (2008, 4) observes, "the philosophy of anti-intellectualism, rooted in the Soviet sphere, still thrived" during this period.

The post-2014 period marked a significant inflection point. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine, Ukrainian military education reform accelerated dramatically. According to the Ministry of Defence White Book (2021, 45), the reform agenda focused on "systemic changes in military education of Ukraine and establishment of military culture based on Euro-Atlantic values and principles."

3.2 Current Structure of Ukrainian Professional Military Education

Ukraine's current PME system comprises a three-tiered structure aligned with NATO's educational levels: tactical, operational, and strategic (Mirnenko, 2023, 7). The system operates through formal education (recognized educational programs leading to state qualifications) and informal education (professional development courses leading to professional certifications) (Mirnenko, 2023, 5).

Institutional Framework: The system includes two academies (National Defence University of Ukraine and Ukrainian Military Medical Academy), one military university (Kharkiv National Air Force University), four military institutes, and military faculties within civilian universities (Mirnenko, 2023, 4). The National Defence University of Ukraine serves as the flagship institution for operational and strategic-level education, offering L3 (Joint Staff Officers Course, 60 ECTS), L4 (Higher Command and Control Course, 60 ECTS), and L5 (Strategic Level Command and Control Course) programs (Mirnenko, 2023, 7).

Educational Levels: The Ukrainian PME system now explicitly defines three educational levels aligned with NATO Bi-SCD 075-007 "Education and Individual Training" standards (Mirnenko, 2023, 8):

- Tactical Level (L1A, L1B, L1C): Focuses on Troop Leading Procedures (TLP) and Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), preparing company and platoon leaders.
- Operational Level (L2, L3): Emphasizes operational planning through Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP), preparing staff officers and brigade commanders.
- Strategic Level (L4, L5): Addresses national security policy, strategic resource management, and comprehensive defense implementation.

NCO Education System: A parallel structure for non-commissioned officers has been established, ranging from basic leadership courses to advanced and highest-level programs at the National Defence University (Mirnenko, 2023, 6). This system reflects NATO's emphasis on professionalizing NCO corps.

3.3 Alignment with NATO Standards

Ukraine's PME system has undergone substantial alignment with NATO standards across multiple dimensions:

- **Curricula Development:** Educational programs for L1A through L4 levels now incorporate NATO planning and decision-making processes. As documented in NDUU course materials, the L3 curriculum includes modules on leadership, critical thinking, international security environment, joint forces operations, operational level planning, and operations planning and execution using JOPP (NDUU, 2023, 9). This curriculum mirrors NATO L3 course structures;
- **Quality Assurance:** The Ministry of Defence conducted its first institutional audit of the military education system from October to December 2020, involving SMEs from the United States, Canada, Lithuania, Germany, and Denmark (Mirnenko, 2023, 2). The audit assessed program compliance with NATO Bi-SCD 075-007 requirements and identified areas for improvement in curriculum development, faculty training, and infrastructure modernization;
- **Language Training:** The Roadmap for Language Training Enhancement (2021-2025) establishes progressive language proficiency targets. For strategic-level PME, requirements progress from SLP-1 (2022-2023) to SLP-1+ (2023-2024) to SLP-2 (2024 onward), supported by language courses of up to four months duration (Mirnenko, 2023, 18);
- **Faculty Development:** According to Mirnenko (2023, 18), a NATO member-state patronage system supports Ukrainian military education institutions through faculty training in NATO procedures, curriculum development, infrastructure modernization, and PME course certification preparation.

3.4 Key Reforms and Achievements

The period 2020-2022 witnessed accelerated reform implementation. Notable achievements include:

- **Legislative Framework:** The Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Military Education and Science" (December 2021) established legal foundations for PME transformation, including formal recognition of three PME levels (tactical, operational, strategic) and integration with higher education standards (Mirnenko, 2023, 2);
- **Higher Education Standards:** Amendments to higher education standards for specialties No. 253 (Military Command and Control) and No. 254 (Support of Forces) in April 2022 aligned military education with national higher education qualifications while incorporating military-specific competencies (Mirnenko, 2023, 2);
- **Concept of Transformation:** The Cabinet of Ministers Resolution on the "Concept of Transformation of the Military Education System" (December 2022) outlined comprehensive reform objectives, including:
 - Joint training of Armed Forces with other defense sector agencies under unified command,
 - Single military education system for defense and security sector personnel based on L1-L5 PME courses,
 - Centralized defense personnel training at operational level,
 - Unified curricula for tactical-level defense personnel training.
- Course duration alignment with NATO member states;
- Implementation of "career-long learning" principle;
- Mutual recognition of certificates with NATO military education institutions (Mirnenko, 2023, 20),
- **Wartime Adaptation:** Since February 2022, Ukraine has integrated combat experience into PME curricula. According to NDUU (2023, 1), the updated course program emphasizes "real examples of warfare in different domains" and features instructors "with combat and practical experience." The involvement of officers and NCOs with real combat experience as mentors has become a priority (Mirnenko, 2023, 1).

3.5 International Support Mechanisms

International assistance has been crucial to Ukrainian PME transformation:

- **NATO DEEP Program:** Since 2012, NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme has supported Ukrainian PME reform through three pillars: curriculum development (what to teach), faculty development (how to teach), and institutional capacity building at ministry, officer, and NCO levels (FOI, 2023, 7). According to Keagle and Petros (2010, 46-63), DEEP emphasizes a consultative process responsive to local needs;

- Operation UNIFIER: The Canadian-led multinational training mission (2015-2022) contributed to capacity building, security sector reform, and interoperability enhancement, focusing on specialized training, medical support, explosive ordnance disposal, and broader training on ethics, communications, and marksmanship (FOI, 2023, 7). Lake (2021) noted that UNIFIER contributed to cultural shifts in Ukrainian forces, including increased initiative and mission command approaches;
- EU Support: Prior to the full-scale invasion, the EU had "agreed in principle" to establish an EU Advisory Mission for military training in Ukraine (EUATM), focusing on PME reform (FOI, 2023, 1). According to German and Tyushka (2022), this mission would have represented a new generation of EU military missions, shifting focus from civil security sector reform to military education.
- Patronage System: A structured patronage system now coordinates assistance from NATO member states, with each higher military education institution having a patron (group lead) and co-patrons (LoE leads) responsible for faculty training, curriculum development, infrastructure modernization, and certification preparation (Mirnenko, 2023, 18).

4. Discussion

4.1 Balancing Education and Training

A central tension in PME reform identified in the literature concerns the balance between education (developing strategic thinkers capable of critical analysis) and training (developing precise technical skills). According to Kaurin (2017), most PME programs find it "too ambitious" to achieve both goals simultaneously.

Ukraine's current approach attempts to integrate both dimensions. The National Defence University course program explicitly seeks to "form critical thinking and functional abilities [author's emphasis] to detect, deter, and strike hybrid military threats in a complex, dynamic, and globally integrated environment" (Ministry of Defence, 2022). This dual focus reflects awareness that modern warfare demands both cognitive sophistication and technical competence.

However, challenges remain. The 2020 institutional audit found that Ukrainian PME programs had not met defined milestones, recommending that to "achieve cultural and attitudinal changes for greater interoperability with NATO colleagues," programs should be translated "into clear competences, skills, values and ethics" for future officers (Mirnenko et al., 2021, 18). This suggests ongoing difficulties in operationalizing educational objectives.

4.2 Overcoming Soviet Institutional Legacy

The Soviet legacy in Ukrainian military institutions represents a persistent challenge. According to Labarre and Jolicoeur (2016) and Young (2018), Soviet-era decision-making processes were "compartmentalized and hierarchical," impeding institutional cooperation. This legacy affects PME implementation: coordination among different educational institutions remains problematic, and skepticism toward Western culture and performance measures has historically hindered reform efforts (Gerasymchuk, 2008; Jolicoeur, 2018).

The challenge extends beyond institutional structures to mindset. Ivanović (2020) argues that Ukrainian PME requires a shift from "what to think" to "how to think"—an approach foreign to Soviet tradition. Lake (2021) captured this challenge succinctly: "Ukrainian forces are good at checklists, but the mindset part is harder."

The integration of wartime experience may provide opportunities to address this cultural challenge. As noted by Blackwell (2022) and Collins (2022), Ukrainian forces' demonstrated ability to exercise initiative and autonomous decision-making at lower command levels suggests cultural shifts are occurring, potentially accelerated by the exigencies of war.

4.3 International Assistance and Local Ownership

International PME assistance programs face inherent tensions between hierarchical capacity-building approaches and genuine local ownership. Iñiguez de Heredia (2021, 301) critiques such programs for imposing "externally derived understandings of what constitutes proper capacity," creating power hierarchies, and failing to establish genuine capacity due to strategy deficiencies and local resistance.

Ukraine's experience with international assistance reveals both benefits and risks. On one hand, UNIFIER and DEEP contributed positively to Ukrainian capabilities. The increased confidence and empowerment observed in Ukrainian forces have been attributed, in part, to these assistance measures (Blackwell, 2022; Michaels, 2022). On the other hand, Jolicoeur (2018) identified that Ukraine faced a "flood of different programs" and could not "process the offers fast enough," creating dilemmas regarding resource allocation and local ownership.

The current patronage system attempts to address these tensions through structured coordination. However, as Labarre and Jolicoeur (2016, 142) warn, when external parties "are sometimes put in a position to make substantive or programmatic decisions on behalf of the requesting party, the legitimacy of reform efforts is diminished."

4.4 Wartime Transformation and Future Challenges

The full-scale invasion has fundamentally altered the context for PME reform. The immediate priority shifted from capacity-building to direct military assistance, but the long-term imperative of strengthening PME remains. Several challenges are emerging:

- **Integration of Combat Experience:** Ukraine faces the challenge of systematically incorporating wartime lessons into curricula. The involvement of officers and NCOs with combat experience as mentors represents a significant innovation (Mirnenko, 2023, 1). However, formalizing these experiences into educational programs while maintaining academic rigor requires careful design;
- **Expanded Student Cohorts:** Post-war conditions will likely see increased enrollment in PME programs, requiring capacity expansion without compromising quality. Mirnenko (2023, 20) envisions programs "tailored to individual needs" that balance education and training "without unrealistic pressure on the PME system";
- **Language Proficiency:** Achieving language proficiency targets (SLP-2 for strategic level by 2024) while conducting wartime operations presents implementation challenges. The single program "Foreign Language" approach attempts to standardize language training across PME levels (Mirnenko, 2023, 19);
- **Interagency Integration:** The concept of a unified military education system for defense and security sector personnel (including Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interior, State Security Service, and External Intelligence Service) represents an ambitious goal requiring coordination across institutional boundaries (Mirnenko, 2023, 20).

4.5 Comparative Perspectives

The Ukrainian experience resonates with broader patterns in post-Soviet military transformation. Kladnik's (2015) SWOT analysis of Slovenian military education identified similar challenges: lack of a central pedagogical and scientific research institution, absence of publicly accredited educational programs, and the need for integration with civilian higher education systems.

Šlekys (2020) observes that Lithuania's military education system was initially "copied and pasted" from US systems, which facilitated NATO accession but delayed development of indigenous military education culture. Ukraine's more gradual, hybrid approach may offer advantages in preserving institutional authenticity while achieving interoperability.

4.6 Implications for NATO and European Security

Ukraine's PME transformation carries implications beyond its borders. According to the National Defence University course program (2023, 2), "the combat experience gained by Ukraine at such a heavy price is important not only for us, but also for our partners," enabling the alliance to "significantly strengthen the deterrence potential and jointly develop an antidote to the aggressive intentions of authoritarian regimes."

For the EU, a future PME mission in Ukraine could represent a strategic shift toward supporting military education in the Eastern Neighborhood (FOI, 2023, 10). More broadly, successful PME transformation in Ukraine would demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated NATO-Ukraine defense cooperation and provide a model for other partner countries.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of Ukrainian professional military education reveals a system in profound transformation, shaped by historical legacy, international partnership, and the crucible of war. Since 2014, and especially since 2022, Ukraine has implemented significant reforms to align its PME system with NATO standards, establishing three-tiered educational structures (tactical, operational, strategic), integrating NATO planning processes, and developing institutional capacity for international collaboration.

Key findings include:

1. Historical path dependency remains significant, with Soviet-era institutional cultures and mindsets presenting persistent challenges to reform, though wartime experience appears to be accelerating cultural change.

2. Structured reform framework now exists through legislation, policies, and institutional mechanisms that codify PME transformation objectives and timelines.
3. International partnership has been crucial, with NATO DEEP, Operation UNIFIER, and emerging EU engagement providing expertise, training, and institutional support.
4. Integration challenges persist, particularly regarding balancing education and training approaches, overcoming hierarchical institutional cultures, and maintaining local ownership while leveraging international assistance.
5. Wartime adaptation offers unprecedented opportunities to integrate combat experience into PME curricula and accelerate cultural change, though it also creates capacity pressures and implementation challenges.

The transformation of Ukrainian military education represents a critical component of broader defense institution building. As the National Defence University course program states (2023, 2), the goal is to "develop new approaches that will protect our world from existing threats and new destabilization situations". For Ukraine, for NATO, and for European security, the success or failure of this transformation will have lasting implications.

Future research should examine: (1) the systematic integration of wartime lessons into formal curricula; (2) the effectiveness of international assistance mechanisms in promoting genuine local ownership; (3) comparative analysis of PME transformation across post-Soviet NATO member states and partners; and (4) the relationship between PME reform and operational effectiveness, particularly regarding initiative and mission command in Ukrainian forces.

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