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# Keeping Pace: Ukraine's Foreign Service Reforms

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**A**midst the war in its eastern regions with Russia-backed militants, Ukraine is struggling to maintain the functionality of the state. The ongoing reform of its diplomatic service is intended to make its foreign policy more efficient and fit for the purpose of keeping Ukraine on the international agenda and securing the cohesion of the West against revisionist Russia, an issue commonly linked to the survival of the state. This reform is not an easy endeavor, though,

## BOTTOM LINE

- Along with the new army, the new diplomatic sector is a “defender” of the pro-European Ukrainian state.
- The reformed foreign service has already achieved key goals on the “second front.”
- Despite progress in the diplomatic sector, corruption and lack of resources hinder modernization.

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the problem of the public sector's unhealthy performance is a truism casually referred to in the country. With the adoption of the long-awaited law on diplomatic service in June 2018, the situation in the diplomatic realm in Ukraine might be changing for the better.

The tasks Ukrainian diplomacy faces at the moment are manifold: it has to not only uphold the country's interests against Russia's direct military aggression and malevolent influence, but also cope with creeping "Ukraine fatigue" abroad that elements of the international audience have visibly surrendered to. The domestic dimension matters, too. In a country where Maidan—a popular revolt against a corrupt government set off by the latter's U-turn in canceling the signing of an Association Treaty with the EU—introduced the notion of a total reset of power, reformists walk on untested grounds of reforms, trying to overcome the resistance of the old system that is eager to fight back.

The word "new" is part of the vocabulary of the changing country. The "new army" reanimated from obsolescence into a capable force has become a synonym of resolve and courage and boosted Ukrainian morale. "New school" is a symbol of ambitious education reforms aimed at making Ukrainian education competitive, and

instilling children with European values and patriotism. In the same vein, diplomacy is striving to become "new," too, and get its new face—the one that will reflect the country's European quest and its break with the past. The new symbolism of the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), adopted in 2014, testifies to this urge. Shaped like a sail, *it says*: "Ukraine is a ship. The people's will is its wind. The MFA is the sail taking us back to Europe."

By 2018 there had already been a sense of urgency to reform the diplomatic service, which was impossible without the proper legal framework. The previous law from 2001 was widely acknowledged as outdated. With the adoption of the new law on civil service in 2016, a companion law on diplomatic service was certain to follow. After some delays and ping-ponging between the Parliament and the President, the law on diplomatic service was adopted in June 2018.

The discussions around this reform expose the chronic nature of many problems that Ukrainian foreign policy endures and its high position in the hierarchy of state interests. Reform of the diplomatic service is acknowledged as no less important than reform of the army. For political scientists studying the impact of war on discourse, Ukraine gives plenty of food for

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analysis. Rhetorically, the diplomat is equated to warriors. “The diplomatic corps is our army, too, but on a different frontline—the frontline of foreign policy,” [President Petro Poroshenko maintained](#) when talking about the need to update the law on the diplomatic service. According to Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, “Ukrainian diplomacy is to be a second front,” [he said](#). “[The mission of] diplomat is to be a sworn brother for the Ukrainian soldier.” In addition, Speaker of Parliament Andriy Parubiy described the new law as “[new sharp weapons](#)” that diplomats will have at their disposal in protecting Ukrainian national interests. After the military parade on 24 August 2018—Ukraine’s independence day—Poroshenko told a gathering of Ukrainian ambassadors about “the pride that ... we managed to create a new diplomatic army.”

In a very characteristic move, diplomats [made a visit to Avdiivka](#), which is on the frontline with the Russia-backed separatist republics, regarded as a “gesture of solidarity, fighting [alongside] Ukrainian fighters” and as a means of obtaining firsthand information from the front lines.

Despite the increased attention that diplomacy received, it was not until 2018 that the change in the diplomatic realm became palpable. Before, for

reformists and members of civil society who struggled tooth and nail for a more democratic Ukraine inside the country, many internal developments looked disheartening. While Russian aggression was noted as a serious threat in an anonymous poll of 34 Ukrainian ambassadors by the Institute of World Politics in 2016, the leading diplomats primarily referred to domestic factors as the main impediment to successful Ukrainian diplomacy. They pointed to domestic politics (lack of progress in reforms and political scandals) and the diplomatic apparatus’s limited resources—financial, human, and technical—when asked about key obstacles to Ukrainian foreign policy being [carried out effectively](#).

Vacant ambassadorial positions and, more broadly, the perceived lack of qualified personnel to advance the Ukrainian cause

were alarming (in January 2018, the MFA noted that positions for heads of diplomatic missions in 17 countries were vacant, some since 2014). In interviews with the media, MFA officials admitted that roughly one third of diplomats did not meet the [requirements of the service](#). Several scandals connected to the exposure of some Ukrainian diplomats’ illegal activities resonated negatively.

Despite the personal commitment of a large number of Ukrainian diplomats,

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both in the central apparatus and serving abroad, notable examples of professionalism in the Ministry's pro-reformist camp were overshadowed by cumbersome performances of "old guard" holdovers. Some of them have been unenthusiastic, at best, about the notion of new generation public diplomacy and the strenuous efforts it requires; at worst, some were political appointees from the previous era who had received their positions as a reward for certain shadowy favors and used their positions with business interests in mind.

Also, the draft law on diplomatic service was further slowed when Parliament added a clause about a larger consultative role for its committee on foreign affairs in the selection of key diplomats, and the President vetoed the law in this form.

With the long-awaited adoption of the law on diplomatic service and the increased budget for the diplomatic service, the situation may now be changing. The new law opened the doors for several crucial improvements.

Among the new achievements is scheduling the rotation of diplomats in advance, which was never fully in place in Ukraine. Also, Ukrainian embassies and consulates abroad finally have the option to hire service staff locally (not only Ukrainian citizens). This decision allows for saving funds and becomes a

qualitative shift from the Soviet tradition where the diplomatic machinery was afraid of external subversive influences. Another novel idea might be the possibility of appointing ambassadors whom remain resident in Ukraine, in particular cases when resources are strained.

Almost half of diplomatic positions abroad became open for external competition, meaning the diplomatic service benefits not only from the skills of career diplomats, but can also engage professionals with specific skills from outside the system. Also, for the very first time, the MFA is going to introduce a system of annual evaluation, a tool which is intended to fire unqualified personnel.

Importantly, among other positive changes is a higher budget for the diplomatic service which means an increase in salaries for diplomatic personnel and covering embassies' expenditures. As [President Poroshenko admitted](#), "it was a very difficult decision to take money from defense and finance foreign policy; but it was symbolic—foreign policy for us is a part of defense". The new law will also address the problem of medical insurance for diplomats abroad.

The changes made seem obvious in their logic and it is troubling to think how the system worked before. The

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new law was commended by diplomats as a tool “to get rid of ballast” as it provides a clear [system of evaluating](#) diplomats. For instance, Andriy Deshytsia, the foreign minister in 2014 and current Ambassador to Poland, called the law a “[step forward](#)” that paves the way for dramatic changes in the diplomatic staff.

Not everybody is convinced of the depth of the reform, though, as seen in an Op-Ed by an anonymous diplomat published in *Yevropeyska Pravda* (European Truth) at the end of August. The criticism was that while diplomats’ professional training has improved, it remains inadequate; that language skills are required, but not provided for; that career growth is not secured; and the opening of diplomatic positions to professionals “from the street” demotivates career diplomats. Also, the criticism was stirred by the fact that the Presidential Administration [approves candidacies](#) of upper-echelon diplomatic ranks, implying that appointments are subject to personal loyalty to the head of state. In turn, the President has rebuked this criticism pointing out that this provision is in line with the Constitution and the division of powers entailed in it; yet the President himself [vetoed an earlier variant](#) of the law where Parliament assigned itself a big say in the process of appointing ambassadors and heads of Ukrainian missions to international organizations, etc.

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Though these developments are very important, no less crucial are the strategic shifts: the constitution was amended to include provisions about the irreversibility of Ukraine’s course towards joining the EU and NATO, rendering once powerful concepts of multi-vector or non-bloc, neutrality marginalized. Ukrainian officials

promote as a main diplomatic achievement the fact that the principle “Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine” has become the axiom of international politics. Entry into force of the Association Agreement with the EU, visa-free regime with the EU, keeping the international consensus on anti-

Russian sanctions intact against all odds, getting to a level when the issue with the supply of defensive lethal weapons to Ukraine from key partners was solved, and the progress with granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Constantinople Patriarchate are the much-celebrated milestones of Ukrainian foreign policy in the last years and months.

There are real threats for Ukrainian statehood of all sorts. The inevitable militarization of society, rising populism ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, and painful economic reforms disadvantaging the weakest are some of them. But as was rightly pointed out in the [Chatham House report](#),

“Ukraine is no longer the country that it was in 2014. It has acquired the sense of national purpose that eluded it for most of its history”. Time will show if Ukrainian diplomacy proves up to standard to answer this purpose.◆

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