

# A future EU mission to the Ukrainian professional military education sector

Malin Karlsson

ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Just days before the invasion, the Ukrainian foreign policy minister, Dmytro Kuleba, had announced that the European Union (EU) agreed “in principle” on a military advisory and training mission (EUATM) to Ukraine (Reuters 2022, February 21). The proposed purpose of the mission was to assist in reforming the Ukrainian Professional Military Education (PME) sector. After the invasion, the question of how to strengthen Ukraine’s long-run defence capacity, for instance through PME assistance, was overshadowed by questions of how to support Ukraine in defending itself. The EU’s answer included imposing sanctions against Russia and, for the first time, sending lethal equipment to a neighbouring country (Council of the EU 2022, February 28).

Although the war may have pushed EUATM off the agenda for the time being, the security situation underscores how important it is to have a well-functioning PME sector in order to be prepared for sudden aggression. An EUATM would be the first EU mission of its kind and could constitute a new generation of military missions (German and Tyushka 2022). This memo seeks to take a first step in understanding the aims of a PME-oriented mission, as well as to explore the constraints and opportunities that a mission would face. The memo builds on an analysis of policy documents, news reporting and academic literature. In addition, three explorative conversations with high-level practitioners have been valuable in attaining a contextual understanding. The findings of the analysis lead to several policy considerations that are summarised at the end of this paper.

## THE EU’S ANSWER TO UKRAINE’S REQUEST

In mid-2021, Ukraine requested an EU military training mission to its PME sector. The request echoed a similar appeal made after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea

and aggression in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 (German and Tyushka 2022). At the time, the EU member states could not agree on a military mission but established the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM), which focuses on civilian security sector reform (SSR) (Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al. 2016). The EU’s response aligned with its overall restrained approach toward Russia (Nováky 2015).

The 2021 Ukrainian request for an EU mission to the PME sector, like the 2014 request, revealed disagreements among EU member states. However, this time the disagreements centred on how to carry out the mission rather than the need for it. Before the Russian invasion, the EU had considered two main policy alternatives, namely assistance through an EUATM, or PME support through the off-budget funding instrument, the European Peace Facility (EPF).<sup>1</sup> Both these options fall under the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As in the case of the EUAM, some member states were worried that a high-profile mission such as the EUATM would antagonise Russia, while others stressed the need for the EU to show solidarity with Ukraine.

Thus, supporting the Ukrainian PME sector would represent a change in the EU’s exclusively civilian-sector focus in Eastern Europe. Except for Operation Althea, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, all current military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions are located in Africa. Tracey German and Andriy Tyushka (2022) suggest that EU assistance to the military sector could enhance the general security situation in Eastern Europe. Some EU member states share this conclusion, advocating that the EU should shift its focus to the Eastern neighbourhood. An EUATM in the PME sector could indicate and assist in such a strategic shift.

Whereas PME is a pillar in any defence sector, there are different perspectives on what type of PME best

<sup>1</sup> Two other options have been discussed and dismissed. The third option entailed adding a military component to the pre-existing civilian EUAM in Ukraine. The fourth option proposed sending military advisors to the EU delegation in Kyiv.

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contributes to forming capable military leaders. The next section considers the tension between education and training in PME, a tension that a future EU mission must be aware of to avoid setting unattainable or contradictory goals. The ensuing section is an analysis of the local Ukrainian context in which a future EU PME training mission would operate.

### **PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION**

A well-functioning PME system is crucial for military leaders to cope with an increasingly complex operational environment (Paterson 2019). PME can also help to improve interoperability (Crosbie et al., 2019), in other words, the ability of “forces, units or systems to operate together to achieve common objectives” (NATO in Hagström Frisell and Nykvist 2021: 1). Some states and international organisations, such as the US and NATO, are assisting foreign partners’ PME sectors as part of wider security sector reform initiatives. The aim of this assistance is to enhance interoperability and instil values of civilian democratic control of the military (Jalili 2015; Keagle and Petros 2010). According to the US National Defense Strategy, “PME is to be used as a strategic asset to build trust and interoperability across the Joint Forces and with allied and partner forces” (US Department of Defense 2018: 8). Thus, as a strategic asset as well as force multiplier, PME is perceived to improve the chances of battlefield success and is regraded as a capacity-enhancing measure (Crosbie et al. 2019; Toronto 2015).

Hence, PME has a crucial role in the defence sector, but there are different interpretations of what is needed for this role to function at its best. One dividing line concerns whether to emphasise either educating military officers to become able strategic thinkers or professionalising the military through training. Those who emphasise the training approach maintain that the main content of PME should be to build precise technical skills. This view sees PME as “an initiation into a professional community of practice” (Kaurin 2017), which requires a focus on training rather than education (Clark 2020).

Those who emphasise education uphold that a core element of PME is to focus on mindsets to form military leaders prepared to navigate and take appropriate action in unpredictable operational environments (Goode 2019; Clark 2020; Crosbie et al. 2019; Jalili 2015; Last 2016). For instance, due to the complex operating environment, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff propose that PME aims to foster the “development of strategically minded joint warfighters, who think critically and can creatively apply military power to inform national strategy [and] conduct globally integrated operations” (US CJCS 2020). Likewise,

NATO sees education as a pillar of interoperability and recognises that interoperability, beyond the alignment of technical aspects, concerns changing human mindsets (Keagle and Petros 2010; Paget 2016; Keagle 2012). Ukrainian scholars have identified the need for a similar focus on mindsets, as the strictly hierarchical mindset inherited from the Soviet era has remained influential in the Ukrainian PME (Ivanovich 2020).

At the same time, due to the top-down military culture, with its frictions between individualism and authority, most countries have faced difficulties in implementing the educational philosophy (Goode 2019). Furthermore, programmes that focus on training sometimes contain elements and goals that are reached through education and vice versa. In this regard, Pauline Kaurin (2017) warns that achieving the aim of both the education and training approaches is overly ambitious for most PME programmes. Therefore, any PME model needs to find the right balance between education and training (Kaurin 2017; Kelley and Johnson-Freese 2013).

In sum, when launching a mission that aims to support the Ukrainian PME sector, the EU should be aware that “PME is not uniform – and is not easy” (Crosbie et al. 2019: 44). Without this awareness, there is a risk that the mission will fail from day one due to unrealistic expectations.

### **Professional Military Education in the EU**

There is considerable variation in how the PME sector functions across countries, including among NATO and EU members (Crosbie et al. 2019). The absence of a shared best practice for PME in the EU implies that it is not clear what the EU’s concept for a PME mission in Ukraine would look like (Calldo-Muñoz and Utero-González 2019). There are, for instance, cultural differences in how the EU states approach military leadership (Paile 2011; EEAS 2021: 4).

However, the EU is gaining experience that could be valuable for a PME mission in Ukraine. For instance, the EU has started investigating training requirements in leadership and management for civilian and military personnel who partake in CSDP missions. Part of these efforts is a European Union Military Staff report (EEAS 2021) that proposes a common core curriculum for training for CSDP missions. The curriculum balances the educational and training aspects of PME, and proposes that activities should be tailored to the individual based on “military ranks, roles and functions in the operational environment” (EEAS 2021: 4).

The EU has also taken initiatives to standardise military education and integrate it into civilian higher education.

In this regard, the Bologna Process has been an important precedent (Caldo-Muñoz and Utero-González 2019). However, the member states' implementation of these initiatives have been uneven (Paile 2016).

### Professional Military Education in Ukraine

The Ukrainian policy documents that direct the PME system have been developed with the European higher education system in mind. Ukraine began reforming its PME sector in 1992, with the aim of moving away from the fragmented PME system inherited from the Soviet Union (Gerasymchuk 2008). Since 2018, the Ukrainian PME programme has included a new system of leadership courses at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Focusing on, among other things, decision-making and operational planning according to NATO standards, the courses are the foundation of the PME system in Ukraine (Mirnenko et al. 2021; see Table 1).

**Table 1:** The professional military education system in Ukraine<sup>2</sup>

Course name	Targeted level	Content
Higher Command Studies Course (L-4)	Strategic	The national security policy process
Joint Staff Planning Process (L-3)	Operational	Operational planning according to NATO standards, Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP)
Command Staff Course (L-2)	Tactical	Military decision-making according to the NATO standard, Military Decision-making Process (MDMP)
Basic Officer Leadership Course (L-1A) + Speciality Training Course (L-1B)	Tactical	Military decision-making process according to NATO standard, Troop Leading Process (TLP).

The main aim of Ukrainian PME caters to both education and training approaches, as the courses seek to:

*form critical thinking and functional abilities [author's emphasis] to find, deter and strike back hybrid military threats in complex, dynamic and globally integrated environment, because the Ukrainian Armed Forces need leader officers who are intellectually superior to an enemy" (MoD 2022, January 11).*

In 2020, when the new PME programme was still in the piloting stage, the MoD implemented an audit (MoD 2020, August 3; Mirnenko et al. 2021). The audit

found that the programme was not meeting identified milestones. Therefore, the audit recommended that, to "pursue cultural and attitudinal changes to become more interoperable with NATO counterparts", there is a need to translate the programme "into clear competencies, skills, values and ethos" for future officers (Mirnenko et al. 2021: 18). The audit proposed that NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Program (DEEP) would aid in reviewing the curriculum of the courses, as well as "standardise NATO operations planning training requirements" at the various educational institutions (Mirnenko et al. 2021: 19).

Whereas NATO has been involved in the Ukrainian higher education sector for almost a decade, Ukraine has identified a need for further foreign assistance to make the PME system more efficient and interoperable with NATO methods and practices (MoD 2021). The MoD found that the DEEP programme had allowed reflection "about systemic changes in the military education of Ukraine and establishment of [...] a military culture based on Euro-Atlantic values and principles" (MoD 2020, August 3). In light of further reflection on PME reform, the MoD maintained that there "are plans for the engagement of foreign advisors and partners in the organization of the educational process" (MoD 2022, January 11). According to conversations with practitioners, an EU mission to Ukraine would focus on both the decision-making level by assisting the Ukrainian MoD in PME reform as well as the institutional education level.

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Ukraine is a young democracy that is striving for strengthened civilian control of the security sector and enhanced interoperability with NATO. PME assistance may help address these issues. However, research disagrees on whether PME assistance can transmit democratic civil-military relations (Krieger 2018; Mujkic et al. 2019). Obstacles to the success of external PME assistance to foster democratic civil-military relations are, for instance, cultural and institutional differences (Krieger 2018).

#### Cultural differences?

Literature on SSR in Ukraine, and other parts of Eastern Europe, highlights how the lingering Soviet legacy in the state institutions makes it difficult to implement a NATO/EU model for the security sector, including the PME sector. While this literature emphasises the incompatibility between the inherited Soviet defence institutions and Western ones (see Young 2018), as discussed in this section, some of the vulnerabilities in the Ukrainian PME sector are also prevalent in Western institutions.

The Soviet legacy has hindered institutional collaboration in the Ukrainian security sector due to pipelined and hierarchical decision-making (Labarre and Jolicoeur 2016; Young 2018). The lack of coordination between various teaching institutions could be a challenge for an EU mission to the PME sector (conversation with practitioner). Already in 1992, Ukrainian PME reforms attempted to meet this same challenge, but there are indications that suspicion of Western culture and effectiveness measures hampered these efforts (Gerasymchuk 2008; Jolicoeur 2018).

Prior to the Russian invasion, there appeared to be an unprecedented will at the level of both the political and military leadership to undertake reform to enhance interoperability (Jolicoeur 2018; conversation with practitioner). However, there have been uncertainties over the commitment to change at the educational institutional level (Jolicoeur 2018). An EU mission would need to be cognisant that all parts of the PME system may not subscribe to the problem formulation as defined at the political-strategic level or agree on the best way forward.

The challenges that arise from the Soviet legacy are exemplified by the most recent international capacity-building efforts in Ukraine. Before the Russian invasion, the above-mentioned NATO DEEP programme and a Canadian-led military mission called UNIFIER focused on enhancing Ukraine’s interoperability with NATO (see Table 2), including promoting a military ethos comprising shared values. Former UNIFIER task force commander Lieutenant Colonel Melanie Lake (2021: n.p.) summarised one of these challenges: “The Ukrainian forces are good at checklists, but it is the mindset piece that is harder to implement”. Ukrainian scholars also suggest that the need for modernisation in the PME sector extends beyond institutional reform to a change of mindset, from ‘what to think’ to ‘how to think,’ an approach alien to the Soviet tradition (Ivanovich 2020; see Labarre and Jolicoeur 2016).

The Soviet legacy is certainly a threshold for external assistance to overcome. However, it would be a mistake to see all problems in the PME sector as emanating from this factor. Some challenges are found in PME sectors across the world. For instance, military organisations within

**Table 2:** International PME assistance in Ukraine before the Russian invasion<sup>3</sup>

	UNIFIER	NATO DEEP
<i>Aim</i>		
Aim	Build capacity, assist in security sector reform, increase interoperability, deter Russian aggression, increase the success and survivability of the Ukrainian armed forces.	Assist in PME reform. Build capacity through defence education to enhance being “intellectually interoperable with the NATO peers”.
Form of assistance	Military training mission.	Policy programmes.
<i>Scope</i>		
Time frame	2015– paused as of February 12, 2022.	2012– <sup>4</sup> .
Contributing countries	Canada, Denmark, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States.	Led by Ukraine’s neighbours: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Supported by: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Slovenia, UK, US and Switzerland. Other NATO members also assist.
Activities	Specialised and narrow training (such as medical assistance and explosive ordnance disposal). Broader training (such as security sector reform, sommunications, ethics and marksmanship).	<u>Three pillars:</u> Peer to peer Mentoring; Curriculum Development (What to Teach); Faculty Development (How to Teach). <u>Three levels:</u> MoD (advice on PME reform); Officers' level (institution building); Non-Commissioned Officers' level (NCO) (combat training program, train the trainers, professional NCO career system, PME for NCOs).

<sup>2</sup> Author’s compilation based on Swedish Defence Force (2019); Canadian Department of National Defence, (2020); Jackson (2017); NATO (2018).

<sup>3</sup> The author has been unable to confirm the current status of the programme.



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the EU and NATO are also struggling with interagency collaboration (Keagle and Petros 2010). Optimally, external assistance is not a one-way endeavour, but an opportunity for reciprocal exchange in the search for mutually relevant best practices. To reach this win-win situation, both the EU and Ukraine must be open to learning from each other's experiences.

Some commentators have made early reflections on the impact of the external military capacity-building assistance on the Ukrainian battlefield. The defence capacity displayed by the Ukrainian armed forces (UAF) after February 24, 2022 has been seen as an indication that UNIFIER and DEEP have left a positive imprint. These assistance measures have for instance been credited with enhancing trust and empowerment within the UAF, which has facilitated autonomous decision making by lower chains of command. These aspects are part of a concept called 'mission command'.

The implementation of the mission command concept has allegedly meant a cultural shift in the Ukrainian armed forces (Blackwell 2022, March 9; see also Collins 2022, March 8; Michaels 2022, April 13). According to commentators, the UAF's capacity to defend multiple fronts has therefore increased (Berthiaume 2022, April 24). In addition, international training in matters such as how to fight urban warfare and counter hybrid warfare, have been deemed as helpful for Ukraine's endurance (Kuzio 2022, April 21). While these observations suggest that NATO and UNIFIER have made a positive contribution, it is too early to tell what impact these assistance measures may have had in isolation from other factors.

### **Capacity-building and local ownership**

Capacity-building efforts, of which PME assistance is a subtype, are often criticised for being hierarchical and ignoring the particularities of the local context and culture. Even though the EU's military training missions have increasingly emphasised the centrality of local ownership, some researchers raise concerns that these developments could have results contradictory to the EU's approach:

... [it] continues to impose externally derived understandings of what proper capacity is; it implies the creation and reproduction of power and hierarchical relations between the EU and the target states that are deemed 'incapable'; and no actual capabilities end up being built, because of both the flaws in the strategy and the contingencies and resistances found in its application (Iníguez de Heredia 2021: 301).

James Keagle and Tiffany Petros (2010) credit the NATO DEEP with being sensitive to local needs, as the process is consultative. It is up to the host state to decide the extent of the assistance required and the level of cooperation it can uphold (Keagle and Petros 2010). Nonetheless, there are risks that the programme is not tailored to the needs of the host state but rather to the abilities of the assisting states. If the external party perceives little engagement from the local education institution, the risk of foreign ownership of the reform process increases. For instance, the external party "is sometimes put into the position of making content or program decisions on behalf of the requesting [local] party, which reduces the legitimacy of reform efforts" (Labarre & Jolicoeur 2016: 142).

However, the UAF experiences also present opportunities to move beyond hierarchical capacity-building to instead focus on mutual learning and exchange. For example, the Canadian-led UNIFIER mission has been learning from the Ukrainian forces, especially about defence in hybrid warfare (Lake 2021). While the UNIFIER example is mainly occupied with training, there are areas suitable for mutual exchange also in the PME-domain.

A further challenge concerning capacity-building through PME is that the Ukrainian institutions might be overwhelmed with international assistance. Pierre Jolicoeur (2018) has identified that one constraint to the DEEP initiative was the sheer number of teaching events and programmes. Faced with a plethora of different programmes, Ukraine could not "process the offers quickly enough" (Jolicoeur 2018: 116).

Prior to the Russian invasion, the difficulties in absorbing the assistance had already caused two potential dilemmas for Ukraine. First, Ukraine had to cooperate with these initiatives to indicate its Western allegiance, while at the same time sacrificing time, resources and opportunities to defend its border. As a result, Ukraine only contributed a symbolic number of UAF members to the DEEP (Jolicoeur 2018: 118).

A second dilemma was that NATO's and Ukraine's desires for results undermined local ownership of PME sector reform. Similar issues have been raised in NATO member countries. For example, Deividas Šlekys (2020) emphasises that the education system in Lithuania was "copied and pasted" from the US system. On the one hand, this facilitated the country's entry into the alliance and made the reform process efficient. On the other, according to Šlekys (2020), it meant that for a long time Lithuania did not develop its own military educational culture.

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## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

After the Russian invasion, external support to Ukraine has changed the emphasis from capacity-building and NATO interoperability to the provision of military equipment and other means of assistance to meet immediate needs. However, if the security situation permits and it is in line with the political priorities of both parties, an EU mission to the Ukrainian PME sector may become relevant again. To be prepared for the day when the Ukrainian request for PME assistance re-enters the agenda, EU member states are invited to consider the following aspects:

- It is important not to overwhelm Ukraine with international assistance, as this could undermine its defence capacity as well as local ownership of reform processes.
- Many international organisations and states will likely want to assist Ukraine. As a result, coordination between international efforts is essential so as to not overwhelm the Ukrainian partners.
- There are opportunities for a PME mission to take advantage of and find synergies with already existing processes to strengthen PME within the EU. It is important to clearly define the mission's educational and training efforts as well as how they together contribute to the mission aim.

- Focusing on mutual learning and exchange is a practical strategy for enhancing local ownership and legitimacy in international-Ukrainian cooperation.
- There will be a need to formally integrate war recruits and military units that have been mobilised during the war into the Ukrainian Armed Forces. A mission to the PME sector could assist in this process.
- The number of students enrolling in a post-war situation is likely to increase. A programme that is tailored to the needs of the individual could build on the students' war experience and thereby find a balance between education and training without putting unrealistic pressure on the PME system.

Finally, even if a mission to Ukraine does not take place, there are other states in the European neighbourhood that could benefit from EU assistance in their PME sectors (see Kozina 2020; Munteanu 2019). For some of these states, if their political climate permits, EU assistance in the PME sector could be a potential step in their accession process. On a strategic level, EU PME support in these states could also potentially enhance military interoperability and common defence capabilities in the European neighbourhood. ■

*Malin Karlsson* holds a PhD in International Relations and is an analyst at FOI.

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