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### **NATO-Ukraine talks, issues and challenges**

During the last two months Ukraine and NATO reaffirmed their common will many times. Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko said on August 2017 during the "Independence Day" celebration, that the country had one path forward: "Our Ukrainian caravan is on a roll and we have one road to travel upon a wide Euro-Atlantic highway, leading to membership in the European Union and NATO" he said during a speech in Kiev [Kenneth Rapoza, Ukraine's President Says It Again: Country Will Absolutely Join NATO, Fight Russia, Forbes, 25 August 2017].

On that occasion, for the first time, troops from NATO countries participated in a military parade in Kyiv; this kind of behavior is not only symbolic, but is also a tangible mark of presence of NATO troops and its partners, to reassure the public opinion and the Ukrainian government. It is not the first time that Poroshenko alluded to his government's desire to join the Western military alliance: "We destroyed the visa curtain with the West, and it is now de facto and de jure our break with that evil empire," Poroshenko said, reiterating similar guarantees of NATO desires made in July with NATO Sec. Gen. Jens Stoltenberg [Roman Goncharenko, NATO representative in Kyiv: We support Ukraine every day, DW, 23 August 2017].

Indeed, Ukraine and NATO confirmed their ambitions in July 2017 to embark on a path to getting NATO membership by 2020. In the meeting on July 10 in Kiev, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg have stated that only Ukraine and NATO have the right to decide on Ukrainian access, a significant message towards Russia to not interfere in NATO-Ukraine relations. This process will have to follow the footsteps of Montenegro that joined in June 2017 after a route started in 2009 through the admission to the MAP. This roadmap is to be implemented despite the consciousness of the reality on the eastern regions of the Ukraine where clashes continue daily and the repeated accusations from both sides of violation of the Minsk II agreement, don't allow to initiate a real process of dialogue for each side.

In addition, Ukraine represents an historical and cultural knot that is difficult to untie for Putin, whose still labels Ukrainians as "Little Russians". The challenge facing the path of NATO and Ukraine is fragile and crucial, especially if it is to avoid compromising the difficult relations between Russia and its neighbors in Eastern Europe, with potential consequences on other international scenarios (such as for example in the Middle East). This awareness will be parallel to the efforts to stabilize Ukraine's domestic situation and to address the key territorial dispute that remain a huge obstacle for NATO membership.

Ukraine and President Petro Poroshenko will also confront the internal economic stabilization that after the difficult 2014-2015 years, has recovered its GDP growth of 2% in 2016. Economic and

structural reforms, which have provided encouraging signals especially for the short term, will need improvement and consolidation to support long-term challenges, especially in terms of tax effectiveness with the fiscal framework that targets a reduction of the deficit to 2 % of GDP by 2020 [Ukraine Economic Update – April 2017, World Bank, 4 April 2017].

Necessary reforms that will have to be implemented despite the consensus drop of the Poroshenko government, and which will inevitably be inherited by future governments as well. With the Ukrainian crisis, Putin has shown the most aggressive and bewildering mindset of a Russia active to reaffirm itself as a superpower, even regional, and which hardly leaves room for maneuver to the states of the former Soviet Union. Russia perceives the NATO moves in aggressive terms, but the Atlantic Alliance has repeatedly stated that no action is being taken to intimidate or encircle Russia. In addition,

NATO declared that military and civilian co-operation practices between NATO and Russia were suspended only in response to its aggressive actions in Ukraine, while at the same time, underlining how the NATO-Russia Council (the last on July 2017 where the discussions were also for Ukraine) was a platform for meaningful dialogue, not to be interrupted, in order to reduce the risk of escalating conflictual situations. The next years will be crucial for Ukraine that will have to demonstrate its capability and strength to develop a quality change in its economic, military, political and territorial sectors in order to be capable to become an autonomous and decisive actor in Europe and trying to avoid the wave of nationalist populism that hit some Eastern European countries (Hungary, Poland, the Baltics).

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