

The Evolution of Ukrainian Intelligence: From Adaptation to Autonomy

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Catarina Bento



1. Introduction

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point in the evolution of Ukraine's intelligence services. The exposure of extensive Russian infiltration within Ukraine's security apparatus, combined with the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas, revealed critical institutional weaknesses and underscored the need for a comprehensive intelligence reform. Over the following decade, Ukrainian intelligence institutions underwent a profound transformation, evolving from organisations constrained by their Soviet legacy into a central pillar of Ukraine's national defence.

This transformation was made possible in large part due to sustained cooperation with the U.S., particularly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Through intelligence sharing, operational training, institutional reforms and technological support, Ukraine was able to develop increasingly sophisticated intelligence capabilities that have proven to be fundamental in countering Russian military operations and enhancing battlefield effectiveness.

However, the return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 has renewed debates concerning American strategic commitments towards Ukraine. Temporary disruptions in intelligence sharing highlighted Ukraine's continued reliance on American strategic capabilities while reinforcing the importance of institutional resilience and diversification.

This brief argues that the ongoing evolution of Ukrainian intelligence should be understood not only as a response to Russia's aggression, but also as a strategic response to geopolitical uncertainty, in particular to changing U.S. political and security commitments. In this context, this brief examines the extent to which geopolitical instability has accelerated institutional innovation and strategic adaptation.

2. Ukrainian Intelligence Before Trump's Second Mandate

Ukraine's intelligence services underwent a profound transformation from Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the beginning of Donald Trump's second presidential term in 2025. The annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in the Donbas exposed the vulnerabilities of Ukraine's intelligence services, which retained many characteristics of its Soviet legacy.

Since then, Ukraine has undergone an extensive modernisation process supported by the United States as well as other Western partners. Even though intelligence cooperation between the U.S. and Ukraine can be traced back to Ukraine's independence in 1991, this relationship fundamentally changed after 2014. Washington increasingly viewed Kyiv not merely as a recipient of intelligence assistance but as a frontline partner confronting Moscow's military and intelligence activities. As a consequence, this shift resulted in expanded intelligence sharing, institutional reform and operational cooperation designed to improve Ukraine's resilience against Russia's aggression.

The CIA played a particularly significant role in rebuilding Ukraine's intelligence capabilities. By investing millions of dollars to establish a network of secret intelligence (SIGINT), electronic surveillance and secure communications, the CIA enabled Ukraine to intercept Russian military communications and monitor troop movements more effectively. In addition, the CIA also trained elite Ukrainian intelligence personnel in espionage, counterintelligence and covert operations.

The modernisation of Ukrainian intelligence was followed by broader military reforms that emphasised interoperability with NATO standards. According to Dr Jack Watling, a Senior Research Fellow for Applied Military Sciences at the Royal United Services Institute, Ukraine's greatest strength lies in developing institutions capable of continuous learning and rapid adaptation. Intelligence has become fully integrated into operational planning, allowing the combination of human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) with real-time battlefield reporting to support military decision-making. This approach

enabled Ukraine to respond quickly to evolving Russian tactics and contributed significantly to its successful defence during the early stages of the war.

By Trump's second presidency, Ukrainian intelligence had evolved into one of Europe's most capable wartime intelligence services. Furthermore, the intelligence relationship had become increasingly reciprocal. Ukraine has become an important producer, providing valuable insights into Russian military doctrine, cyber operations, electronic warfare and influence campaigns that benefited the United States, and more broadly, NATO.

Nevertheless, despite these remarkable advances, Ukraine's intelligence capabilities remained closely intertwined with U.S. strategic support. Consequently, while Ukraine had developed considerable institutional resilience before Trump's second mandate, its intelligence architecture continued to rely on sustained U.S. cooperation. This dependency became increasingly significant as political uncertainty in Washington, with Trump's second mandate, began to affect broader U.S. security commitments, raising questions about the future reliability of intelligence sharing and the need for Ukraine to further diversify its intelligence partnerships.

3. Intelligence Cooperation under Political Volatility

The return of Donald Trump to the White House introduced a renewed degree of uncertainty into U.S. – Ukraine relations. One month after taking office, in February 2025, a public confrontation between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office resulted in the temporary suspension of U.S. intelligence cooperation with Kyiv, fueling concerns about the future of American support for Ukraine. This episode clearly illustrated how intelligence cooperation can become an instrument of diplomatic leverage, exposing Ukraine's continuing dependence on American strategic capabilities while accelerating efforts to strengthen its own intelligence autonomy.

Political volatility has reinforced Ukraine's determination to reduce critical vulnerabilities through partner diversification and institutional adaptation. Rather than relying exclusively on U.S. intelligence, Ukrainian services have expanded cooperation with European intelligence agencies, thereby reflecting a broader strategic objective: maintaining Western intelligence cooperation while ensuring that potential political disruptions do not compromise national security.

Importantly, the resilience displayed by Ukrainian intelligence during periods of political uncertainty was itself a product of earlier U.S. assistance. Translated in CIA's focus on developing Ukraine's institutional capacity rather than creating permanent operational dependence. Since 2014, Ukraine has acquired the analytical expertise and organisational flexibility necessary to continue operating effectively even when intelligence sharing becomes less predictable.

In this context, whereas Kyiv initially functioned primarily as a recipient of Western intelligence, it has now increasingly become an indispensable intelligence partner for the West, as well.

4. Intelligence Transformation as Geopolitical Adaptation

The halt of US support on matters of intelligence was the cause of several military setbacks for Ukraine during 2025. The main example of this was the withdrawal from Russian territory around the area of Kursk, where the Ukrainian army had managed to penetrate in 2024. On top of this, several policy decisions by the new Trump Administration further reduced the trust of Kyiv. Among these was the naming of Tulsi Gabbard as head of National Intelligence, someone who had received accusations of being compromised with Russia. There was also the general attitude of aggressiveness by the Trump Administration toward Ukraine in general. When it comes to intelligence sharing, trust is a fundamental element. Without it, any attempts at a correct flow of intelligence will have severe limitations. It got to a point where not only Ukraine but other allies were warning that they would stop sharing some sensitive information with the US for fear of leaks.

This policy change was seen by most of the Ukrainian leadership as almost a betrayal by their once American partners. As a result, Ukraine started to develop its own intelligence doctrine characterised by three key points: the diversification of intelligence partners, the decentralisation of its intelligence operations, and the development of self-sufficient capacities.

Firstly, while the relationship between Ukraine and the United States has experienced many setbacks, the general relations and trust situation with its European partners has increased. Right now, the Ukrainian leadership seems more interested in strengthening its position among its allies in Europe and Canada than in moving closer to Washington. Among these partners, the one that has shown a bigger willingness to share intelligence has been France. In January 2026, President Emmanuel Macron declared that now France was the biggest provider of intelligence to Ukraine, having surpassed the United States; more specifically, France now provides two-thirds of its intelligence to Kyiv. While it is difficult to prove if this fact is empirically true, the fact that Macron himself made these declarations gives them a relatively high degree of credibility. Other partners like Poland, Britain and the Baltics have also guaranteed that Ukraine does not fight in the dark. On top of that, the European Union is developing its own network of satellites to reduce the influence of Starlink and Elon Musk on Ukraine.

Beyond diversifying its international partnerships, Ukraine also transformed the internal organisation of its intelligence system by adopting a more decentralised and adaptive model. The experience gained since 2014, and particularly during the full-scale invasion, demonstrated that intel-

ligence was most effective when rapidly disseminated to frontline commanders rather than confined within hierarchical structures. Ukrainian intelligence agencies increasingly integrated real-time battlefield reporting with SIGINT, HUMINT, OSINT and drone reconnaissance, enabling tactical units to make informed decisions with greater speed and flexibility. This shortened the intelligence cycle and enhanced Ukraine's ability to respond to evolving Russian tactics, particularly in an operational environment characterised by electronic warfare and rapidly changing frontline conditions. The result was an intelligence architecture built around continuous learning and operational adaptability rather than rigid command structures.

At the same time, political uncertainty surrounding continued U.S. support accelerated Ukraine's efforts to develop more self-sufficient intelligence capabilities. While American and allied assistance remained indispensable, Kyiv increasingly invested in strengthening its own technological and institutional capacities to reduce critical dependencies. This included expanding domestic signals intelligence, cyber capabilities, electronic warfare systems and the use of commercially available satellite imagery, as well as further integrating unmanned aerial systems into intelligence collection. Ukraine also continued to develop its own analytical expertise, allowing intelligence products to be generated and disseminated with greater independence from external partners. Rather than seeking strategic autonomy in the sense of replacing Western cooperation, these efforts aimed to enhance institutional resilience by ensuring that temporary disruptions in foreign intelligence support would not fundamentally undermine Ukraine's ability to collect, analyse and exploit intelligence in support of military operations.

5. Strategic Implications

5.1 Ukraine

For Ukraine, the experience of fluctuating U.S. support reinforces the importance of continuing to build an intelligence architecture capable of operating effectively under conditions of strategic uncertainty. While intelligence cooperation with the United States is likely to remain indispensable, Kyiv's long-term security increasingly depends on reducing critical dependencies through the expansion of domestic intelligence capabilities and the diversification of international partnerships. Sustained investment in cyber intelligence, signals intelligence, satellite reconnaissance, unmanned systems and analytical capacity will be essential to maintaining operational effectiveness. At the same time, preserving close intelligence cooperation with both the United States and European allies will remain a strategic priority, ensuring that Ukraine benefits from collective intelligence while continuing to contribute its unique operational expertise to the broader Euro-Atlantic security community.

5.2 United States

For the United States, the Ukrainian case highlights the strategic value of sustained and predictable intelligence cooperation with key partners. Since 2014, intelligence sharing has not only enhanced Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression but has also generated significant benefits for the United States itself. Ukraine has provided unparalleled insights into Russian military doctrine, electronic warfare, cyber capabilities and battlefield innovation, improving Western understanding of a near-peer adversary. However, the temporary suspension of intelligence sharing in 2025 demonstrated how political volatility can undermine allied confidence and weaken the credibility of long-term security commitments. Although intelligence cooperation ultimately resumed, the episode underscored the importance of insulating critical intelligence partnerships from short-term political disputes to preserve both operational effectiveness and strategic trust.

5.3 European Union

For the European Union, the uncertainty surrounding U.S. security commitments has reinforced the need to assume greater responsibility within the European intelligence landscape. While European intelligence services played an increasingly important role in supporting Ukraine during periods of political uncertainty in Washington, the experience also exposed persistent capability gaps in areas such as satellite intelligence, strategic surveillance and intelligence coordination. Strengthening cooperation among European intelligence agencies, investing in shared intelligence assets and improving institutional coordination through both the European Union and NATO would reduce dependence on U.S. capabilities while enhancing the resilience of the broader European security architecture. Rather than replacing the transatlantic partnership, greater European intelligence capacity would complement it, contributing to a more balanced and resilient system of collective security.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of Ukrainian intelligence since 2014 illustrates how external threats and shifting alliance dynamics can drive profound institutional transformation. Russia's aggression exposed the structural weaknesses of Ukraine's Soviet-era intelligence services, while sustained cooperation with the United States enabled the development of increasingly sophisticated capabilities in intelligence collection, analysis and operational planning. By the beginning of Donald Trump's second presidential term, Ukraine had emerged as one of Europe's most capable wartime intelligence actors and an increasingly valuable intelligence partner for the broader Euro-Atlantic community.

However, the political uncertainty introduced by the Trump administration demonstrated that intelligence cooperation is not solely deter-

mined by military necessity but also by political trust and strategic commitment. The temporary suspension of U.S. intelligence sharing highlighted Ukraine's continued dependence on American capabilities, while simultaneously accelerating efforts to diversify partnerships, decentralise intelligence operations and strengthen indigenous capabilities. Rather than reversing the progress achieved since 2014, these developments reinforced Ukraine's institutional resilience and capacity for adaptation.

Ultimately, the Ukrainian case demonstrates that intelligence resilience depends not only on technological capabilities or external assistance, but also on the ability of institutions to adapt to an evolving geopolitical environment. As Russia's war against Ukraine continues and uncertainty over Western security commitments persists, the future effectiveness of Ukrainian intelligence will rest on maintaining strong partnerships with both the United States and Europe while continuing to expand its own autonomous capabilities. In this respect, Ukraine's intelligence transformation represents not only a response to Russian aggression but also a model of institutional adaptation to geopolitical uncertainty.