

New Ukrainian M4-WAC47 rifle 'a strong political message to Russia'

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The M4-WAC47 rifle is being demonstrated at the UkrOboronServis state-run company's office on Jan. 24.

Photo by **Volodymyr Petrov**
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It is now up to Ukrainian soldiers to decide if the brand new M4-WAC47 assault rifle – a special descendant of the legendary American-made M16 rifle – is good enough to eventually retire their decades-old workhorse Kalashnikovs.

A year after the initial announcement, the first batch of 10 new rifles is now undergoing firing trials by Ukraine's Special Operations Forces, National Guard and Border Service.

Among those, one rifle was also sent to one of the army brigades deployed in the Donbas war zone for assessing its merits and flaws in actual combat, as the UkrOboronProm defense industry concern's spokesperson Roksolana Sheyko confirmed to the Kyiv Post.

Designed by the U.S.-based company Aeroscraft specifically for Ukraine, the new M4 model came into the spotlight last year for being adapted to chamber both old Soviet-era ammo, still extensively used by all Ukrainian troops, and the munitions that are universal for NATO, the standards of which Ukraine seeks to adopt by 2020.

Thanks to this feature, the UkrOboronProm's officials believe, the new M16 pattern weapon within Ukrainian ranks could become a transitional stage that would ease shedding Soviet past in favor of modern Western-style military hardware.

The live fire tests will continue through late April; then, an ultimate decision must be made if Ukraine should join the club of users of the symbolic American assault rifle amid ongoing conflict with Russia.

American brand

The M4-WAC47's history started in early January with the UkrOboronProm's subsidiary company UkrOboronServis signing a memorandum of cooperation with the Aeroscraft, a major aviation and weapons producer founded and directed by Ukrainian immigrant Igor Pasternak.

The California-based company then vowed to provide Ukrainian military with a certain quantity of M4 carbines, a modernized variant of the famous M16 assault rifle, extensively used as primary infantry weapon by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps since 1994, as well as in more than 50 other nations.

The specific Ukrainian model dubbed M4-WAC47 was modified to take standard Soviet 7.62×39 millimeter cartridges used for worldwide-spread Kalashnikov's AK (often wrongfully called AK-47s,) or AKM assault rifles, or RPK hand-held machine

guns, that are still basic for both Ukrainian army and Russian-led troops fighting in Donbas.

On the contrary, all Alliance forces use smaller 5.56×45 millimeter NATO cartridges for this type of arms, including for M4s, as universal standard under the STANAG 4172 regulation, so their troops could share munitions when necessary even if they use different firearms.

This unconformity often causes arms imbalance and logistics issues for Ukrainian troops that are increasingly engaged in regular training and cooperation with NATO forces, as the UkrOboronProm officials say. For instance, Ukrainian servicemen embedded to the LitPolUkrBrig, a combined multinational combat formation consisting of elite troops from Poland, Lithuania (both being NATO members), and Ukraine, generally use Soviet 7.62-millimeter AKM or AKMS rifles, while Poles and Lithuanians adhere to 5.56-millimeter standard with their Beryl guns.

Same troubles were itching Ukrainian minesweepers during their mission with ISAF forces in Afghanistan; upon that, Ukraine, despite the war in Donbas, keeps holding their peacekeeping forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia, cooperating with Western militaries here and there.

Moreover, another joint brigade, this time with two other NATO nations Bulgaria and Romania, can be formed in the nearest future, so the incompatibility of military hardware would continue being a stumbling block.

Besides, many saw a significant symbolic move in providing Ukraine with an American weapon brand that in many ways marks a country's affiliation to the U.S. sphere of influence in opposition to Kremlin's encroachments. As the Aeroscraft's CEO Pasternak told the ICTV channel during his visit to Kyiv on Jan.17, "when you see a Ukrainian soldier with a NATO weapon in his hand, it is a strong political message to Russia."

So the Aeroscraft's idea was, considering Ukraine's long-term strategy of symbiosis with the Alliance, to construct a specific system that can be easily refitted for chambering NATO munitions when the time comes.



A dismantled M4-WAC47 unit is demonstrated at the UkrOboronServis office on Jan 24. (Volodymyr Petrov)

Hybrid weapon

Soon the Aeroscraft got its plan realized; on Oct. 5, 2017, first rifles were demonstrated for TV cameras at the National Guards firing range in Novi Petrivtsi just north of Kyiv.

In general, an M4-WAC47 unit that the Kyiv Post got an insight into at the UkrOboronServis office on Jan. 24 appeared to be a modular and profoundly customizable assault rifle built on well-known Colt's AR-15 platform that is common for the M16 family weapons.

Its basic variant has a 400-millimeter (16-inch) long barrel and is loaded with 30-round box magazine of Soviet 7.62×39 millimeter cartridges. Just like its M4A1 ancestor, its trigger group supports safe/semi-automatic/fully automatic firing modes, ensuring an effective range of 400 meters, an accuracy range of 800 meters, and a cyclic rate of 850 rounds per minute.

The WAC47 variant is somewhat heavier (3.4 kilograms) and longer than the basic M4 carbine. Similarly to its M16/M4 pattern predecessors, the rifle bears a retractable buttstock and a rail integration system (RIS) that supports all widely used accessories such as collimating or optical sight, laser target marker, foregrip, tactical light, or a 40-millimeter underbarrel grenade launcher.

Due to its modular construction, the rifle supports mounting barrels of various lengths ranging from 10.5 inches for a supercompact carbine variant to the most accurate 24-inch models with additional scopes for infantry marksmen. Thus, the UkrOboronProm says, the new WAC47s can be customized as primary infantry weapon for both general and special operation troops of Ukraine while old Soviet ammo still bosses the show.

Upon that, it takes no more than 20 seconds to convert a WAC47 into a standard 5.56×45 NATO assault rifle.

“One just need to unfasten the rifle’s barrel receiver off the platform in a couple of moves,” says the UkrOboronServis representative Serhiy Zhydkov. “And then mount a necessary caliber, a 5.56 NATO barrel in our case. And that’s it, a piece of cake. It can be done immediately in action, without any tools in one’s hands.”

Apart from chambering standard 7.62 Soviet and 5.56 NATO cartridges, the WAC-47 in a similar fashion can be transformed for less popular Soviet 5.45×39 ammo for AK-74 rifles, or for specialized powerful .458 SOCOM cartridges used by U.S. special operations forces.



The UkrOboronServis defense company representative Sergiy Zhydkov dismantles an M4-WAC47 rifle in Kyiv office on Jan. 24. (Volodymyr Petrov)

Perspectives unclear

The WAC47s are not the only American weapons that are expected on Ukrainian soil in the nearest future.

In December 2017, the Trump administration greenlighted providing Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles as part of its military aid, and also approved commercial sales of M107A1 Barrett sniper rifles.

However, despite warm welcome by Ukraine's media and the country's political leadership, the future of the WAC47 in Ukraine remains unclear.

As the firing trials continue through late spring, still pending is the question if Ukraine's Armed Forces, with its 250,000 personnel and \$3.1 billion budget in 2018, can afford general rearmament with the M4s, with its \$700 tag for a basic unit as of 2012 prices. Or, considering the costs, if the WAC47 would rather be a rare exclusive jewel for the country's most elite troops like Special Operations or Airborne Forces.

Besides, as the Drive media outlet's defense reporter [Joseph Trevithick noted in his story on Jan. 18](#), should Ukraine's Armed Forces accept the WAC47s, it would need to completely revise its training and operation procedures to make sure their troops can take care of their new guns properly, since the M16/M4 rifles are known for their inflated cleaning and maintenance requirements as compared to AKs.

Still it is unclear will Ukraine ever be able to produce and maintain M4s for its own army independently under the U.S. license; according to the UkrOboronServis representatives, the M4-WAC47 will be most likely produced in the United States and then assembled by UkrOboronProm enterprises in the foreseeable future.

Besides, Ukraine's perspectives of getting rid of dated Soviet stocks does not inspire much optimism amid weak performance in the country's defense industries.

Ukraine has yet not re-launched its own munitions production, both heavy artillery projectiles or rifle cartridges likewise, neither of Soviet nor of NATO patterns. The country's only munitions plant in the eastern city of Luhansk was lost after Russia's 2014 offensive. In August 2017, the president Petro Poroshenko assigned allocating as many as Hr 1.4 billion (\$48.4 million) from the state budget for getting another ammo factory up, however, since then, no signs of that are inspected so far.

Ukraine has also seen as many as four massive fires at army's largest munition depots since 2014, with the latest incident taking place in late September 2017 in Kalynivka near the city of Vinnytsya 170 kilometers southwest of Kyiv, in which tens of tonnes of ammo were lost.

Meanwhile, immense quantities of surplus old Soviet munitions and arms are transferred from former Warsaw Pact nations Lithuania and Poland. In late November 2017, the Lithuanian government authorized providing Ukraine with weapons to the value of 1.93 million Euros, including 7,000 Kalashnikovs, 2 million cartridges, and also mortars, and anti-tank units.