
Ukraine and Georgia : what are their chances with NATO?

By Fyodor Lukyanov
RIA Novosti - 7/3/2008

As the NATO summit in Bucharest draws nearer it is becoming ever more evident that Tbilisi and Kiev's hopes to be put on the NATO Membership Action Plan are not going to come true. Neither the spirited bid by the Georgian President, nor the joint appeal by the heads of all the branches of the Ukrainian government have convinced the Western leaders.

How does one account for NATO's wobbly position? Could it be that NATO has heeded Russian arguments and come to question the rationale of further expansion to the East? Not likely. Nobody in Brussels and the capitals of the member countries is going to abandon the widely touted idea that the North Atlantic Alliance brings nothing but peace, democracy and prosperity to its neighbors.

In Georgia at least there is a consensus in favor of NATO membership. As is known, the situation in Ukraine is different.

The decision to bring CIS countries into the NATO orbit is a matter of controversy within the alliance. American strategists believe there are no grounds for any doubts: are Georgia and Ukraine all that different from Estonia and Poland? In fact Ukraine is the second state (after Poland) whose admission might make military sense along with political sense. It is a country with a large population (capable of sending considerable numbers of soldiers to man the operations, something NATO has problems with) and it is strategically situated. All the other newcomers make a largely symbolic contribution to NATO's military capability.

The Europeans are less enthusiastic mainly because they fear the Russian reaction. True, until recently diplomats and experts said that Russia had opposed the membership of Central European and the Baltic countries, but eventually resigned to the waves of expansion. This view is expressed today too. For example, noted American analyst Ron Asmus, the head of the Marshall Fund European office, in an article in the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs*, suggests that the West should not be unduly concerned about Moscow's reaction.

On the whole, however, such arguments are not made very frequently because Russia's tough position on Kosovo has demonstrated that the style and character of the Kremlin's foreign policy have changed.

Georgia's and Ukraine's motives are clear. Georgia thinks NATO membership is the only safeguard against the "Russian threat". In addition, Tbilisi hopes that NATO would help it to restore territorial integrity. In reality, the result may become counterproductive as a Georgian rapprochement with NATO could prompt Moscow to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, something it is not yet ready to do now.

The Ukrainian leaders, especially President Viktor Yushchenko, also consider NATO membership to be an "anchor" which would finally seal Kiev's position within the Euro-Atlantic space and in the process cement the patchy state. Yet

the desired result may or may not materialize. The common Ukrainian identity is emerging with difficulty, but it is a natural process of "growing together". An attempt to prod this process could create a backlash.

The decision not to rush things, which the leading powers seem to be leaning towards, is due to a number of factors.

First, NATO faces a far more important and pressing task: the hostilities in Afghanistan where, as NATO strategists admit, the alliance may suffer a defeat. That would be a catastrophic if not a fateful blow at its prestige. And that will be the focus of the discussions in Bucharest. In Afghanistan, by the way, Russia and NATO share the same goals even though they are not fighting shoulder to shoulder.

Secondly, the change of power in Moscow holds out a promise that the atmosphere in the relations between Russia and the West may change. The signs are that the outgoing president is going to end his dialogue with the West on a more constructive note than his Munich speech last year. Otherwise why attend the Bucharest summit at all? And his successor will certainly be more reticent simply because the two Russian leaders have different characters, although no fundamental change of position can be expected. In any case, starting the engagement with the new Russian leadership by openly ignoring its objections is not a very good idea.

Besides, if NATO in Bucharest grants the applications from Kiev and Tbilisi in the presence of Vladimir Putin, that will end in a huge row and would be perceived by the Russian President as an open insult.

Third, the developments inside the candidate countries provide formal rounds for a postponement. The crackdown on the Georgian opposition in November last year and doubts about the fairness of presidential elections in January have shown that Georgia's democratic record is not as stellar as its patrons would like to think.

In Ukraine the level of pluralism is incomparably higher, but the ruling elite there is in a permanent political crisis. It is no secret that the "like-thinking leaders" - Prime Minister Tymoshenko and President Yushchenko - are at daggers drawn. The prospect of the dissolution of parliament and a new snap election is again mooted in Kiev. In this situation, the NATO theme merely adds to tensions in the relations between the parties.

All these circumstances combine to prompt caution in deciding on the "road maps" for Ukraine and Georgia. There is no doubt, however, that the topic will be on the agenda.

Among the more credible candidates for US Presidency, at least two would champion further NATO enlargement. They are the Republican John McCain and the Democrat Hillary Clinton. Barack Obama's foreign policy views are less obvious. But the fact that Zbigniew Brzezinski and his son Mark are among his advisers suggests that Obama's policy on that issue would not be different from the previous policy.

So the new Russian President should steel himself for serious political battles. The next NATO summit in April 2009 will be timed to the 60th anniversary of the alliance. The organizers will surely be tempted to mark that red-letter day in some memorable way.

Fyodor Lukyanov is Chief Editor of the journal Russia and Global Affairs. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not

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