

Ukraine's Membership in NATO?

NATO-Ukraine Meeting in Tallinn

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Global Research, November 14, 2008

[RIA Novosti](#) 14 November 2008

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Ukraine: how far is it from Tallinn to NATO?

The sixth NATO-Ukraine meeting took place in Tallinn on November 12-13 seemingly to get a feel for Kiev's membership qualification progress.

Such meetings have been held annually since 2002 (with the exception of 2007) in the form of consultations. But the last meeting was special. Although its official agenda did not include Kiev's membership, or its adopting NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), no one doubted that such a discussion was inevitable. It was also not accidental that U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates arrived at this semi-formal event sponsored by the Estonian International Center for Defense Studies and the Defense Ministry.

In the first place, Gates was not planning to go – the event was not a high priority meeting, but, as a Pentagon spokesman said, the August crisis in Georgia induced him to demonstrate U.S. support for Ukraine and other former Soviet republics wishing to integrate with the West.

NATO's defense ministers do not have the authority to admit new members to the bloc. This is the prerogative of the heads of state and government who make their decisions based on NATO foreign minister recommendations. The foreign ministers are expected to meet in Brussels in December to decide whether or not to give Ukraine the go-ahead.

The MAP is a sort of road map with assignments (army reform, weapons inventory, compatible national legislation, administration reform, etc.) whose fulfillment qualifies a country to face those sitting in judgment in Brussels. All the decisions that follow are taken by consensus. And here is the rub for Washington. It is trying to force Kiev's and Tbilisi's membership at any meeting and against all odds. Tallinn was to give recommendations to NATO's ministerial gathering in December.

Gates' words "integrate with the West" are worth remembering. Gates used them in an interview with journalists as soon as he arrived in Tallinn and many times during and after the consultations – they were also a parting shot when he flew off. He said that "Russia has no need to impede a sovereign country to more fully integrate with the West. Doing so is not a threat to Russian security."

But it is known that Russia has never raised any obstacles to anyone's integration with the West. On the other hand, it has never hidden its opposition to the tightening of NATO's grip on its "southern underbelly" by admitting Ukraine and Georgia. For Moscow, as for many others, NATO and the West are not the same things as Gates is trying to make them out.

These tactical slips in propaganda are a common occurrence, but they are primitive. The U.S. has never been particularly sophisticated in its propaganda (the Pentagon is a glaring example) but when it begins to rush, it gets in trouble.

Now it is trying to rush Kiev into NATO, well aware that the prospects will cool after Barack Obama is inaugurated next January. Obama has not yet indicated in any way or anywhere his specific attitude to whether NATO should speed up its march on Russia's Black Sea flank or not.

The second reason for the haste is the presidential transitional period. This period between two U.S. presidents is always a nervy time. All administrations want to saddle the "successor" with their unfulfilled obligations and plans. When these are signed and sealed, the person coming in is essentially unable to ignore them. A presidential election in Ukraine late in 2009 or early in 2010 is another factor adding to the drive. That Yushchenko will be no more is obvious, but whether or not he is succeeded by Yulia Tymoshenko is unclear.

Judging by remarks from Obama's foreign policy experts, they advise him to go slow on Ukraine's admission, but not to give an outright no. Putting Ukraine or Georgia on a MAP in December 2008 is an almost impossible task, believes Steven Pifer, a professor at Washington's Brookings Institution. "Rather than pursuing a quest certain to end in diplomatic failure, Washington needs Plan B. It should try to shape a December outcome that sends positive signals to Kiev and Tbilisi while making it clear that NATO does not concede Ukraine or Georgia to Russia's geopolitical orbit," he said.

In Tallinn it became clear that Ukraine and Georgia were now farther from NATO than they were in Bucharest in April of this year, when pressured by Germany and France, the NATO summit gave no green light either to Kiev or Tbilisi.

As a matter of fact, Russia need not set much store by the words either of German Chancellor Angela Merkel or French President Nicolas Sarkozy that neither Ukraine nor Georgia would join NATO in the foreseeable future, at least not too soon. But not too soon is not never. No one is against the admission of Ukraine or Georgia as such. The stumbling block lies elsewhere. Europe does not want a Ukraine under Yushchenko or a Georgia under Saakashvili in NATO. Mikheil Saakashvili's aggression in South Ossetia has marred his chances of membership. Now that the facts are out even Estonia's Defense Minister Jaak Aaviksoo told journalists: "We must admit that trust in Tbilisi is at a low point. In the view of some countries, Georgia is unpredictable." The Bush administration alone now believes in a democratic Georgia. But in Georgia, if public opinion polls are anything to go by, most of the population is at least not against membership.

The scene in Ukraine is more mixed. Even the NATO leadership realizes that it will be the Yushchenko administration who will join the bloc and not Ukraine in which 70% of the population are against this "fighting partnership." The conflict among its leaders is fraught with unpredictable results for the country, up to and including a split in the political system and the state as a whole. Few like admitting a politically incapable president, with a lame parliament and an over-ambitious premier, with its permanent infighting and economic chaos. If you add to all this a scandal over Ukrainian arms supplies to Sudan despite a UN embargo, then even the most vocal Yushchenko supporters in NATO will be unlikely to swallow this cocktail without getting a severe hangover.

If Kiev and Tbilisi fail to start travelling towards a MAP in December, they still may do so next April, when NATO's 60th anniversary summit will be held in Strasbourg, France, and Khel, Germany.

To be fair, it should be mentioned that the first to start hitching up Kiev to NATO was Moscow's big-time ally Leonid Kravchuk, rather than Viktor Yushchenko, followed by Leonid Kuchma. Right after the Belovezhskaya Pushcha Pact, Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (now the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council). In 1994, Ukraine was the first among CIS countries to sign NATO's Partnership for Peace Program. In 1997, it concluded a Special Partnership Charter with NATO and set up a NATO-Ukraine Commission. In 2002, it adopted a NATO-Ukraine action plan. Yushchenko is following a well-trodden path.

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