

# Ukraine's NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) Debates

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is expected to address Ukraine and Georgia's requests to upgrade their relationship with the alliance at its Bucharest summit in April 2008, even if a direct response is not forthcoming. Ukraine submitted its official request to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in January, setting off a new round of debates discussing the credibility of Ukraine's ambitions to become a full-fledged member of the Euro-Atlantic community.

The debate over a Ukrainian MAP began in May 2002, when Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) approved a strategy later signed by President Leonid Kuchma stipulating Ukraine's objectives to become a full NATO member. Given substantial problems with democracy, human rights, and media freedoms within Ukraine, this ambition (considered mostly as an element of Kuchma's multi-vector policy) was not addressed by NATO at the time.

Following the Orange Revolution, President Viktor Yushchenko declared his desire to move forward toward NATO membership. NATO formally invited Ukraine to enter into an "Intensified Dialogue" (ID) at its meeting in Vilnius in April 2005. This created a forum to discuss Ukraine's membership aspirations and the reforms necessary without prejudicing an eventual decision by the alliance. A meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission also agreed on a series of concrete and immediate measures to enhance cooperation supporting Ukraine's reform priorities. Ukraine has pursued its

“Intensified Dialogue” with NATO for almost three years now, despite the fact that other former ID countries passed through this arrangement within one or two years.

MAP is a more advanced format of relationship between NATO and aspirant countries; in fact, it grants a country NATO candidate status. It was launched in April 1999 to assist aspirant countries in their preparations by providing advice, assistance, and practical support on all aspects of NATO membership.

Ukraine missed an opportunity to gain MAP in 2006 due to infighting between its domestic political elites and their inability to achieve consensus on foreign policy priorities. At the ministerial session of the Ukraine-NATO commission held in Sofia, Bulgaria in April 2006, Ukrainian foreign minister Borys Tarasyuk was assured that NATO recognized the country’s significant progress in holding free and democratic elections. If the newly formed democratic government had confirmed its aspiration to membership in the alliance, a decision on a MAP vis-à-vis Ukraine would have been adopted even prior to the November 2006 NATO summit in Riga.

In the first half of 2006, NATO-Ukrainian relations suffered a serious setback when planned military exercises in Ukraine with contingents from NATO’s leading states were cancelled. The exercises were called off because the Ukrainian parliament failed to adopt a law on the admission of foreign military units to Ukrainian territory. The disruption of these exercises was accompanied by well-organized protests in the Crimea against the arrival of foreign military personnel who were supposed to take part in the exercises. Officials in Kyiv lost both the parliamentary and public debates, while the protest organizers, with organizational and media backing from the Russian Federation, successfully publicized the mass and passionate nature of anti-NATO attitudes in Ukraine within the country and abroad.

The failure to form a “coalition of democratic forces” frustrated plans to join MAP in 2006. Instead, a coalition of political forces who were against Ukrainian NATO membership created the government (the “anti-crisis coalition” of the Party of Regions, the Communist Party, and the Socialist Party). The issue of MAP accession was withdrawn from the agenda in July. In September 2006, Prime Minister Yanukovich said in Brussels that it was necessary to “pause” Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration and to separate the issue of NATO membership from cooperation with NATO.

Due to the Yanukovich government’s position, Ukraine’s relationship with NATO remained restricted to an intensified dialogue. The main problem, however, was not that Ukraine had slowed down its integration with NATO but that the government lacked the ability to implement a clear and coherent foreign policy.

The situation changed after the pre-term parliamentary elections of September 30, 2007, when the political forces that supported the Orange Revolution in 2004 reconfirmed their credibility by winning a very slim majority in the new parliament (228 seats out of 450).

The Ukrainian government that was formed in December under the leadership of

Yulia Tymoshenko cited preparation for NATO membership as one of its objectives. In the coalition agreement, the majority factions, “Yulia Tymoshenko’s Block” and “Our Ukraine – Self-Defense,” agreed that applying for a MAP would be one of their short-term foreign policy priorities. The same provision was articulated in the new governmental program.

In January 2008, President Yushchenko, Prime Minister Tymoshenko, and Parliament Chairman Arseny Yatsenyuk made public a joint letter to NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer declaring Ukraine's readiness to receive a MAP and requesting a decision to that end by the alliance at its Bucharest summit in early April. Elaborating on the letter, the Presidential Secretariat deputy chief responsible for foreign policy, Oleksandr Chaly, told journalists that the key policy issue was to upgrade the format of NATO-Ukraine relations, since the potential of the 2004-2007 intensified dialogue had been almost fully exhausted. Chaly made an explicit distinction between membership and the MAP process, which he described as one stage toward the ultimate goal of membership. Declining to forecast a timeframe for attaining MAP, he underscored the need to develop internal political support in Ukraine for NATO membership. At the end of the MAP process, the membership issue would be put to a referendum.

Ukraine’s case differs from all other NATO aspirant countries due to its lack of a domestic consensus on membership. The Party of Regions, which received 34 percent of the vote and is the largest opposition party in parliament, strongly argues against NATO membership and MAP accession. It believes that this would be premature and does not correspond to public opinion (25-32 percent of the population currently supports NATO accession, with about 50 percent opposed).

This argument is being used by skeptics within NATO who believe that Ukraine is not yet ready for MAP, but the fact is that NATO member states have not yet reached a consensus on Ukraine’s MAP accession. Most member states have not declared their position openly, instead stressing the need to reach a consensus with the entire alliance. However, the position of key players is evident in most cases.

The United States has supported Ukraine’s eventual NATO membership, regardless of the domestic conjuncture in Ukraine. President George W. Bush signed the NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007 backing NATO membership for Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia. The bill authorized U.S. funds for military assistance to these five states in order to implement democratic and economic reforms. All three major presidential candidates--John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama – have publicly backed Ukraine’s MAP ambitions. Speaking at the conference “New Ukraine in the New Europe” in February 2008, U.S. Ambassador William Taylor predicted “good news” for Ukraine in Bucharest.

Additional NATO member states have indicated their support for granting Ukraine MAP, namely Poland, Canada, Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania. Other member states have expressed their support while avoiding open statements on the matter, for

example the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic.

There are no NATO member states delivering a clear “no” to Ukraine’s request. However, several important Western European states have assumed reluctant or ambivalent positions. Germany, France, Spain, Italy, and Belgium are among them. Ultimately, they seek to postpone the decision for after the Bucharest Summit, while carefully examining the stability of Ukraine’s government, testing Ukraine’s consistency, and watching how the situation in Russia unfolds as it inaugurates a new president. The Russian factor remains important due to Russia’s vocal opposition to NATO enlargement and Ukraine’s eventual accession.

Germany’s position is the most important and sensitive one due to the interconnection of domestic, regional, and Russian (energy) factors. German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Kyiv on February 14 and met with President Yushchenko to elaborate on his country’s position. The leading German party is primarily concerned whether “Ukraine’s MAP accession contributes to security and stability in the region.” This diplomatic wording conceals the grave concerns of Berlin and other capitals that granting MAP to Ukraine will further disrupt relations with Russia while failing to guarantee that Ukraine will stay on track and not reconsider its plans (as happened before). According to unofficial reports from sources in Kyiv, the German minister suggested that Ukraine should not expect a decision in Bucharest, as NATO member states need more time to discuss the issue and Ukraine needs to prove its consistency.

The participation of Ukraine in all four NATO-led foreign military operations (where it is the only non-member country to do so) is a positive factor in favour of the positive treatment of Kyiv by NATO members. At the same time, Ukraine is reluctant to consider increasing its presence in Afghanistan within the International Security Assistant Force (ISAF). It is unlikely that this position will be changed in the short-term due to Ukraine’s psychologically sensitive “Afghan syndrome,” inherited during the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.

The factor of Georgia can also be considered. Both Ukraine and Georgia have applied for MAP, and any decision made by the alliance will most likely deal with them simultaneously. Most observers believe that either a positive decision will be granted for both, or that both cases will be postponed. Controversial developments in Georgia indicating an erosion of democratic institutions in the fall of 2007 may not only have negatively affected the chances that Georgia would be offered a MAP at the Bucharest summit, but those of Ukraine as well.

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