

Niklas Manhart

Going East: An assessment of NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia

Essay

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the Georgian conflict in August 2008 a heated debate about the necessity of further NATO enlargement has emerged. The prospects for Georgia and Ukraine of their candidacy being moved to the next stage is fading, although both countries were promised membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest. In this essay I will outline the developments to date, present the arguments against and in favour of enlargement and argue that ultimately, despite its high-blown rhetoric, NATO is unlikely to grant Georgia and Ukraine membership in the near future.

2. Developments to date

Relations between NATO and Ukraine began to develop soon after the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Since then they have deepened steadily in a multilateral institutional framework. As early as 1992, only one year upon achieving independence, Ukraine participated in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NAAC, renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, EAPC, later) for cooperation on political and security issues. Two years later, on 8 February 1994, Ukraine was the first of the former Warsaw Pact members to join the Partnership for Peace. Over the years Ukraine has been an active participant in peacekeeping and counter-terrorism operations within the sphere of PfP (since May 1997 integrated in the EAPC). Two years later, on 9 July 1997, the former President of Ukraine L. D. Kuchma and NATO heads of state and government signed the NATO-Ukraine Special Partnership Charter in Madrid. While this Charter did not provide for any security guarantees, it allowed Ukraine to call for NATO support if it perceived a threat to its national security. The NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) was also established as a forum for periodical consultation on security issues as well

as for the implementation of the Charter's provisions. In Brussels, the ongoing institutionalisation of the relationship between NATO and Ukraine was interpreted as reflecting a general intent to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration, although the Ukrainian leadership seemed to instrumentalise NATO against Russian pressure (White et al., 170). Ukraine also preferred cooperation over integration in order to pursue economic links with Russia. This erratic political course ended only when Viktor Yushchenko was confirmed president in 2005. By this time, the outlook on NATO membership for Ukraine was more promising for three reasons. First, in 1999 the Membership Action Plan (MAP) concept had been created at the Washington Summit of NATO in order to improve candidacies with institutional reforms. Through various steps, such as the adoption of the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan in 2002 and an "Intensified Dialogue" in 2005, NATO tried to help Ukraine achieving the necessary standards for the MAP. Second, NATO granted accession to three other former Eastern Bloc countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in 2004. And third, following the "Orange Revolution" in 2005, democratic leaders in Ukraine became more serious about seeking NATO membership. This led to a formal request for a MAP in January 2008, a national referendum notwithstanding.

The relations between Georgia and Ukraine followed a similar pattern. Georgia joined the NAAC and the PfP programme at the same time as Ukraine, in 1992 and 1994 respectively. In 1999, Georgia started contributing peacekeepers to the NATO force in Kosovo. Three years later, Georgia officially declared its intention to join NATO. After the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, NATO's focus shifted to the Caucasus and cooperation broadened alongside Georgia's domestic reform process. In 2004, NATO agreed on an Individual Action Plan for Georgia and also offered an "Intensified Dialogue" on the requirements for membership. Georgia's aspirations

were nurtured by a national referendum in January 2007, when an overwhelming majority of the Georgian population voted in favour of NATO integration.

In April 2008, however, Georgian as well as Ukrainian hopes for a move to MAP stage were blocked by France and Germany at the NATO summit meeting in Bucharest. In spite of the combined efforts of the Bush administration and of some NATO members with experience under Soviet rule, the talks were effectively postponed until the next meeting in December 2008. But in the meantime Europe's security landscape had changed permanently. Russia, possibly seizing this insecurity by the Alliance, engaged in an armed conflict in Georgia in August 2008. Although a NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) was established in the wake of the conflict to support Georgia, Georgian and Ukrainian hopes faded. Instead of "beefing up" the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions, as Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had promised in the run-up to the summit on 3 December 2008 (De Hoop Scheffer, 2008), the NATO members denied the two countries an implementation of MAP and only promised long-term assistance. Although the US promptly signed a "Charter on Strategic Partnership and Security" on 19 December 2008 with Ukraine to confirm their support, the Alliance is unlikely to resume talks on a MAP for Georgia and Ukraine at their next meeting in April 2009. NATO members currently seem too divided on this issue.

3. Arguments for NATO enlargement

Advocates of further NATO enlargement claim that the Alliance needs to send a clear message that it is not intimidated by Russia. Conservative US politicians in particular believe that Moscow's aggressive foreign policies of the last years must be responded to with a firm hand. As the Georgian conflict has shown, Russia seems more than willing to interfere with the national sovereignty of its neighbours. An

upgrade of their institutionalised relations with NATO might offer Georgia and Ukraine some kind of deterrence against Russian military coercion. Condoleezza Rice, former US secretary of state, stated that “a strategic partnership with Ukraine will enhance regional security” (Kellerhals Jr., 2008). This argument is supported by the current Ukraine administration. In a letter to the NATO Secretary General from January 2008 it is argued that Ukraine “stands for strengthening regional security” and is “willing to counteract common threats to security under equal conditions” (Yushchenko, 2008). Clearly, this message is aimed at its menacing Eastern neighbour, although the letter goes on to claim that the Euro-Atlantic integration policy is “not directed against third countries”.

Georgia enjoys a similar strategic importance. Its location between the Black Sea, Russia, Armenia and Turkey makes it a transport corridor and a gateway from the Black Sea to the Caucasus. Admittedly, its membership in the Alliance would not have major military consequences. Georgia is a small country, and its military forces are relatively weak. Politically, however, admitting Georgia would be an important step (Larrabee, 361). NATO would advance unequivocally into the former Soviet space, far more than with the admission of the Baltic states in 2004.

There is also hope that consolidating a pro-Western, democratic Ukraine would indirectly encourage democratization in Russia. Ronald D. Asmus believes that without NATO membership, Ukraine would drift back into autocracy, and Georgia, the former liberal democratic experiment, would “lose reform momentum and teeter toward failure” (Asmus, 2008). He makes the case that Russia, using its energy supplies and influence, would “emerge as an authoritarian capitalist alternative to the West, attracting autocratic leaders throughout Europe and Eurasia. Rather than a

renaissance of the transatlantic alliance, the result would be a retreat of democracy and a further splintering of the democratic West.”

4. Arguments against NATO enlargement

Critics of further NATO enlargement fear that Russian animosities would increase to a critical point. In the past, Russia has countered the expanding NATO influence in Eastern Europe with greater military integration in other former Soviet republics, increasing its military presence in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia (Gibler and Sewell, 421). As Karabeshkin and Spechler (314) argue, NATO enlargement is perceived negatively by almost all political forces in Russia. Whereas Russian sentiments to a possible EU expansion seem lukewarm, there is great concern among the “great power Eurasianists” (see Wallander, 2000), the so-called “*derzhavniki*”, that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia would diminish Russia’s global influence as well as worsen its geopolitical situation. Liberals believe that enlargement could damage the prospects of democracy in Russia. There is political consensus that it would lead to the emergence of new divisions in Europe. The authors also claim that Russian interests in Ukraine are stronger than in the Baltic states: the Russian Black Sea Fleet is still stationed in its naval base in Sevastopol in Ukraine, the two countries’ military facilities are closely integrated and there are exceptionally dense human contacts across their borders (Karabeshkin and Spechler, 322-323). Arguably, NATO membership for Ukraine would constitute a serious blow to the Russian mental and physical landscape. But Russia also has strategic interests in Georgia. After embarking an armed conflict over Abkhazia and Ossetia and subsequently recognizing their independence, it is unlikely that Russia would let NATO take hold of the two republics. The question must then be raised, if other NATO members would be willing to go to war over an armed attack to Ukraine

and Georgia in accordance with Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, especially as a number of European states depend heavily on Russian fossil fuels, Germany in particular. As the recent gas dispute with Ukraine has shown, Russia is willing to instrumentalise their energy supplies for strategic purposes with no hesitation. Therefore, slowing down membership prospects for Georgia and Ukraine would send an accommodating message to Moscow. In France and Germany there is also concern that Ukraine and Georgia are simply not ready for NATO membership. In spite of repeated claims of its administration, Ukraine is still divided on this issue. As a poll in 2006 has shown, only 17 percent of the population supported NATO membership. If a referendum were to be held, more than 50 percent would have voted against membership (Bychenko, 20-21). White et al. (170) argue that as long as NATO membership remains an elite-driven project, the Alliance will remain reluctant to incorporate Ukraine. The continuous political conflict in the pro-western Yushchenko-Tymoshenko partnership also undermine hopes of closer ties with the West. In Georgia, the political situation does not look any more promising. President Mikheil Saakashvili faces strong domestic opposition and his leadership is considered to be fragile. There are claims that his use of force in Ossetia was not least a means to divert criticism and unify the country. Overall, there is agreement among NATO officials that Ukraine and Georgia need to undergo a number of reforms before they are able to present a convincing candidacy for NATO (White et al., 173).

5. Conclusion

The next NATO summit meeting will be held in April 2009. But as three other events will draw upon themselves all of the Alliance's attention, it is doubtful that enlargement will be placed high on its agenda. First, there is NATO's 60th birthday to

celebrate. Second, France is to be reintegrated fully into the military wing of the alliance. Third, US relations with NATO will be the responsibility of the new Obama administration. President Obama's stance on enlargement will play an important role, although he will likely pursue the policies of his predecessor. His new Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, has already given an indication of her support of Ukraine and Georgia when she nominated the respective presidents for the Nobel peace prize in 2005. Washington's influence, however, remains limited, because every NATO country must ratify enlargement. And as Germany and France will not allow for the implementation of a MAP in the near future, the US are trying to make Ukraine and Georgia ready for membership through other means like the NUC and the NGC. But even US officials are aware that it would take years before Georgia and Ukraine are ready. Despite its commitments, NATO is unlikely to make Georgia and Ukraine members any time soon.

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