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Ukraine sets sail for the West

Key Points

- Following its return to power in September 2007 parliamentary elections, the Orange coalition led by Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has set out an ambitious pro-Western policy course.
- Tymoshenko has visited EU officials in Brussels, has agreed World Trade Organisation membership and has formally requested accession to a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).
- However, strong domestic opposition and the influence of [Russia](#), which is keen to keep [Ukraine](#) within its sphere of influence, could still halt these pro-Western moves and return the country to political instability.
- Forging ahead after the political storm that threatened to sink their strategic dream of close alignment to the West, the forces of Ukraine's 2004 Orange revolution are once again courting the EU and NATO. Centred around President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who was restored as premier in December 2007 following success in the previous September's parliamentary elections, the new 'Orange' government is seeking to steer a path away from Russia's sphere of influence.

Tymoshenko paid a successful visit to Brussels on 28-29 January where she met with NATO and EU officials while a formal written request was sent to NATO on 16 January, seeking accession to a Membership Action Plan (MAP) when the NATO members next meet at a summit in Bucharest in April. Similarly, following 14 years of negotiations, World Trade Organisation (WTO) membership was finally approved on 5 February, with tacit EU support.

Yet despite these significant steps, the Tymoshenko government only has the backing of a very slim coalition parliamentary majority and considering Ukraine's recent history of political paralysis and largely anti-Western opposition, the risk remains that the pro-Western path could yet be scuttled. Likewise, [Russia](#), who seeks to keep the former-Soviet states firmly within its sphere of influence, is likely to attempt to prevent a Western integrated [Ukraine](#).

Westward Ho!

Many former-Soviet bloc states, including [Ukraine](#), have looked upon NATO membership as a stepping-stone towards eventual EU membership. This is largely because NATO is a different vessel as it has maintained an open door policy towards aspiring countries, while the criteria for joining NATO are easier to fulfil than those for the EU. These are the factors behind the Orange powers recent charm offensive towards the transatlantic security organisation illustrated by the request by Tymoshenko, Yushchenko and parliamentary speaker Arseniy Yatsenyuk on 16 January to be invited into a Membership Action Plan (MAP), generally considered the final leg of the voyage towards full membership, at NATO's April summit in Bucharest.

[Ukraine](#) , along with fellow post-Soviet state [Georgia](#) , joined NATO's Intensified Dialogue in 2005/06, the precursor to a MAP. However, NATO remains undecided about the merits of inviting [Ukraine](#) into a MAP because of the ramification on NATO's relations with [Russia](#) and low popular support in [Ukraine](#).

Nevertheless, the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament's National Security and Defence Committee, Anatoly Hrytsenko, expressed optimism about NATO's support for a MAP this year on 17 January. "The likelihood of (Ukraine's) admission is around 70 per cent. The majority of NATO member-states will unconditionally back Ukraine's joining MAP".

International support for Ukraine's accession also exists. The United States is a strong leader among NATO members who support a MAP for [Ukraine](#). Influential US Senator Richard Lugar, head of the Senate's Foreign Affairs committee, visited [Ukraine](#) and [Georgia](#) in January and proposed a Senate resolution on 31 January entitled NATO Membership Action Plan Endorsement Act of 2008. Former US ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer, now a senior adviser at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, also tells *Jane's* : "We told Ukrainian officials in early 2003 that the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan agreed at the November 2002 Prague summit was 90-95 per cent of a MAP. The main difference was in the title."

Alongside the quest for NATO membership Kiev has also sought to strengthen its position with other Western and global institutions. On 5 February, [Ukraine](#) signed an agreement with the WTO that will see them join the organisation by July 2008. Ukraine's membership of the WTO on 5 February will also be followed by the creation of a free trade zone with the EU later this year.

Likewise, the Privileged Partnership to be negotiated this year by the EU and [Ukraine](#) will replace the outdated 1998-2007 Partnership and Co-operation Agreement.

Domestic mutiny

Despite all the outward signs of progress, the current administration's pursuit of Western integration could still be set adrift by uncertainties surrounding Ukraine's domestic policies. The opposition Party of Regions is an increasingly outspoken opponent of NATO-membership, with its members of parliament actively preventing President Yushchenko from delivering his state of the union address on 5 February, leading to scuffles in the parliamentary chamber.

Similarly, public support for NATO membership in [Ukraine](#) currently stands at 25 per cent, largely through a lack of education on the matter which has allowed the view that NATO would mean engagement in [Afghanistan](#), a country which holds bitter memories for many post-Soviet countries following the 1979-1988 campaign there.

Despite the government's assurances that a final decision on NATO membership should be made in a referendum, the moves towards a MAP have caused concern

among the opposition. This provides it with ammunition, and considering the razor-thin parliamentary majority the government holds (228 of 450 seats), instability here could severely retard progress towards a Western-focused foreign policy. The recent political instability seen in [Georgia](#) illustrating the harm such uncertainty can have on pro-NATO policy.

Storm brewing

Aside from domestic concerns, [Russia](#) is adamantly opposed to NATO enlargement into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Its ability to combat Ukraine's NATO aspirations would primarily operate through three policies. Firstly, Russia's ability to use its energy resources against [Ukraine](#), although this weapon is diminishing. Moscow's attempt to use energy pressure against [Ukraine](#) in January 2006 led to international condemnation. Similarly, Ukraine's membership of the WTO ahead of [Russia](#) gives Kiev greater leverage over [Russia](#) in gas negotiations.

The second option could be to use Ukraine's ethnic-Russian minority. This section of the population were mobilised in the Crimea, preventing NATO and US military exercises during 2005 and 2006.

Finally, the Party of Regions signed a co-operation agreement with President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party in 2005. The party's negative stance towards NATO membership means Moscow has a significant political base in [Ukraine](#) from which to maintain pressure.

FORECAST

[Ukraine](#) is not assured MAP status during the April NATO summit in Bucharest. Nevertheless, even without this the current administration has set [Ukraine](#) on a foreign policy course heavily focused upon the West, and further progress in this direction can be expected. However, this is also likely to exacerbate domestic pressures and tensions with [Russia](#). This poses the risk that [Ukraine](#) could revert to infighting and political paralysis, thwarting any pro-Western policy.