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OP-ED

Yushchenko ruins NATO chances with his behavior

Harboring Yuliaphobia is hampering the Ukrainian president's ability to govern

A leading Western ambassador in Kyiv told me recently that he and others had repeatedly warned President Victor Yushchenko that he had to choose between removing Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister, thereby ruining the 2004 Orange Revolution coalition, or advancing the nation toward NATO membership. He could not have both.

Maintaining a united pro-democratic coalition and government in place has been the West's demand since the military alliance first began to consider allowing Ukraine to enter a membership action plan, a concrete step towards NATO membership, after Yushchenko visited Washington in April 2005. Only a year later, Ukraine failed the test of political stability and Orange unity in 2006 during NATO's Riga summit. It failed again in April, during the Bucharest NATO summit and a NATO review meeting.

Still, in September, Yushchenko incredibly said: "Everyone needs to understand that everything Ukraine needed to do to obtain a positive answer (on NATO), if we speak openly and honestly, has been done."

That is not true. The main obstacle to Ukraine's successful drive to join NATO is Yushchenko's inability to place national interests above his personal animosity toward Tymoshenko. The president's undermining of political stability will lead to Ukraine having five governments during his term in office, instability that has prevented any government from launching an effective NATO awareness campaign.

Yushchenko also removed the most pro-NATO and most effective military reformer that Ukraine has possessed, former defense minister Anatoliy Hrytsenko, who is untainted by corrupt allegations. While defense minister under three governments, Hrytsenko was never once invited by Yushchenko to his office for a meeting. Hrytsenko was in Yushchenko's office on four occasions during his tenure between 2005-2007, but each time it was at his initiative. As Hrytsenko said in an interview

in June, Yushchenko never understood the depth and types of reforms that were required in the armed forces to integrate them with NATO. This was, Hrytsenko believes, because NATO membership was never a priority for Yushchenko.

Ukraine's pre-term parliamentary elections, now in doubt, were originally called for the same weekend in December that NATO foreign ministers are due to meet to review Ukraine and Georgia's "progress" toward meeting NATO criteria. Obviously, NATO will postpone a decision on Ukraine until next year.

If Yushchenko follows Leonid Kravchuk in serving only one presidential term, then the last chance he has of fulfilling his dream of being the president who takes Ukraine into the preparatory stage of NATO membership will be in 2009, his last year in office. Ukraine, though, could also fail the test of political stability in April 2009, during NATO's 60th anniversary summit when Ukraine and Georgia could again come under consideration for membership action plans.

Yushchenko's preference for pre-term elections over compromise, because of his loathing of Tymoshenko, means that a new parliamentary coalition and government will not be in place until March 2009, a month before the NATO anniversary and too little time to show NATO doubters, like Germany, that Ukraine is politically stable.

Ukraine's chances of advancing toward NATO membership next year, even after an election, might be thwarted by Yushchenko's own actions. In recent years, the West has pushed for Orange unity as a stepping stone to NATO and European Union membership. This, though, is no longer likely. That train has left the station.

Ukraine's chances of moving closer to NATO membership will be derailed, as in 2006, if an anti-crisis coalition is formed with Yanukovich returning as prime minister in 2009. Next year will also be the year of the presidential election campaign. NATO membership is an unpopular topic for candidates to campaign on.

The irony is that the August crisis in Georgia has made NATO membership more popular in Ukraine. In recent polls, 31 percent of Ukrainians now support membership.

Ukraine and Georgia will always be the two most difficult countries to get into NATO, since they are nations that Russia regards as part of its sphere of influence. Both countries have Russian military bases and both have pro-Russian separatist enclaves. Ukrainians are also much less supportive of NATO membership than Georgia, where public sentiment is 70 percent favorable.

To have any chance of making progress toward NATO, Yushchenko will have to place national interests above personal conflicts by restoring the Orange union in order to show NATO and the EU that a pro-Western coalition is in place. Yushchenko must also summon the will to battle corruption and establish the rule of law. Instead, as senior Western officials advising Ukraine have complained, Ukraine has stagnated in both areas since the Orange Revolution.

Yushchenko has often not abided by the law, does not understand the importance of the equality of all citizens before the law and blocks the prosecution of members of the elite for abuse of office. Senior officials continue to be involved in energy corruption in RosUkrEnergo and Vanco.

Instead, the president's ostensible support for Ukraine's NATO membership has been completely undermined by his own inability to contain his deep "Yuliaphobia." After the 2007 parliamentary elections, Yushchenko eventually agreed to support an Orange coalition and Tymoshenko as prime minister, but then proceeded to immediately undermine it. He appointed Party of Regions parliamentary faction leader Raisa Bohatyriova to chair the National Security and Defense Council, which, again, became misused as an alternative government rather than as what it is constitutionally defined to do: coordinate foreign and security policy.

It is supremely ironic that the president's support for Ukraine's NATO membership is undermined by his own actions. Yushchenko has made a choice: namely, that it is more important for him to destroy and remove Tymoshenko from government than it is for Ukraine to join NATO. The president and Ukraine will have to live with the consequences.

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