

[Outside View: U.S. backs NATO enlargement](#)



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WASHINGTON, April 10 (UPI) -- On March 6 and 9 both houses of the U.S. Congress approved the "NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007." The act follows in a long line of U.S. legislation adopted since 1994 that strongly backed NATO enlargement. Both [former President Bill Clinton](#) and President George W. Bush supported, and have continued to support, NATO's open-door policy of enlargement. The NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007 supports NATO's last enlargement into the Western Balkans and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The initial enthusiasm of [the Bush administration](#) following the Rose and Orange Revolutions of 2003-2004 that Georgia and Ukraine would be included in the 2008-2010 enlargement process together with the Western Balkans has waned. Only the Western Balkans have a strong chance of being invited to join NATO at its 2008 summit, with membership taking place two years later.

Ukraine and Georgia are different from the Western Balkans in four key areas. First, the Western Balkans have Stabilization and Association Agreements that offer future EU membership. [NATO](#) membership will be therefore a stepping stone to EU membership, a sequencing that has occurred throughout post-communist Europe.

Ukraine and Georgia, like all C.I.S. states, do not have any EU membership offer. Ukraine's reforms are muddled and inconsistent, making it resemble Romania's and Bulgaria's transitions, except that Ukraine has no "carrot" of EU membership to induce continued progress of the kind that eventually led to Romania and Bulgaria joining the EU this year.

Second, the three Western Balkan states have been in Membership Action Plans since 2002. Ukraine and Georgia joined Intensified Dialogue on Membership in 2005 and 2006 respectively, and it remains unclear when, or if, an invitation into MAP will take place.

Ukrainian domestic politics is divided. Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich told NATO in September 2006 that Ukraine is not ready for a MAP. Newly installed Foreign Minister Arsen Yatseniuk told Parliament that it had adopted legislation in 2003 to support NATO membership. President Viktor Yushchenko advised Yatseniuk to strive for Ukraine to join NATO. Georgia and Ukraine are naturally placed in one group by NATO. NATO and the United States might be therefore reluctant to only invite Georgia into a MAP as it would send the wrong signal to Russia on Ukraine.

Third, although NATO has always ruled out Russia having a veto through the NATO-Russia Council, Russia de facto has vetoes over both Georgia and Ukraine. Russia has consistently stated its opposition to NATO enlarging into the C.I.S.

In Ukraine, the veto is omnipresent through the Yanukovich government, which has its base of support in two anti-NATO regions, the Donbas and the Crimea. Another veto is the widespread fear in Eastern Ukraine that NATO membership will

dramatically worsen Ukraine's relations with Russia and thereby threaten inter-regional tension inside the country.

Ukrainian support for NATO membership has plummeted from one-third in the 1990s to one-fifth since 2002. It is doubtful that an educational campaign to improve public opinion on NATO can increase this low support for membership to satisfy NATO doubters in "Old Europe."

Georgia has attempted to ensure U.S. support for its NATO membership by increasing its troop commitment to Iraq (Ukraine withdrew its troops in late 2005). Georgia is also offering to host a U.S. defense shield base. Georgia has widespread public support on a par with Poland and Romania for NATO membership.

Georgia's membership could be derailed by two frozen conflicts. Interviewed by Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Russia is responsible for the "tens of thousands of Russian citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia."

Improved relations with Russia would be a sine qua non for a resolution of these frozen conflicts. The arrest of alleged Russian-backed coup plotters in September 2006, suspiciously only a month before local Georgian [elections](#), only served to worsen Georgian-Russian relations and raise complaints from international human-rights organizations about the treatment of Maia Topuria and 11 others accused of plotting the coup. Topiura is the niece of exiled Justice Party leader Igor Giorgadze. All the plotters have been held in pre-trial detention for seven months, a practice common for two-thirds of Georgia's prisoners that has been criticized by the U.S. State Department and Human Rights Watch.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer supports Georgia's right to seek membership in NATO, but he is not optimistic about its prospects. Pifer said, "I don't see how President Mikheil Saakashvili can back down on South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and there's no resolution of either in the offing. Many NATO European capitals (and perhaps a number of people in Washington) will be reluctant to bring Georgia in to the Alliance if it means importing those two potential flashpoints, as they hold some -- not much perhaps, but certainly a non-zero -- probability of military conflict with Russia."

Fourth, as post-Soviet states, Georgia and Ukraine are experiencing more traumatic transitions that make the "carrot" of EU membership even more necessary. Ukraine has seen the return of the ancien regime in 2006, little breakthrough in the rule of law and a frontal attack on democratic gains from the orange revolution.

Georgia's democratic progress is also mixed. As a result of a high threshold of 7 percent (similar to Russia but not Ukraine which has only 3 percent) and a weak parliament there is a lack of a strong opposition. Ukraine has moved to a parliamentary system common throughout the successful democracies of Central-Eastern Europe. Georgia has moved to a super-presidential system more commonly found among autocracies in the C.I.S.

The just-released U.S. State Department's 2006 country report on human rights in Georgia pointed to persistent pressure on the judiciary "by the executive and powerful outside interests." The "judicial authorities continued to act as a 'rubber stamp' for prosecutors' decisions and ... the executive branch had exerted undue influence."

Since 1994 the United States has been an ardent supporter of NATO enlargement through an open-door policy, a policy glaringly different than that of the closed shop EU. A third round of enlargement will undoubtedly go ahead in 2008-2010 that will bring in three Western Balkan states. A fourth round to the C.I.S. is threatened by developments in, and around, Georgia and Ukraine that could derail the process.

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