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## OPPOSITION USES UKRAINE-NATO ISSUE WHEN POLITICALLY EXPEDIENT

By Taras Kuzio

For over a month, the Ukrainian parliament has been in a forced recess as the opposition blocked the legislature to protest a joint letter to NATO signed by President Viktor Yushchenko, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, and Parliamentary Speaker Arseny Yatsenyuk. The January 15 letter asked NATO to consider offering Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at its April summit in Bucharest.

Under the 2006 constitution, Yushchenko can dissolve parliament if it does not function for 30 working days. However, he exercised that power in April 2007 and doing so again in less than a year would be an unpopular move with unknown consequences.

Of parliament's three largest factions, only the Tymoshenko bloc (BYuT) would likely gain from pre-term elections. Based on current polls, the Party of Regions and the president's Our Ukraine-People's Self Defense (NUNS) bloc would poll even less than they did last year. In the September 2007 elections, BYuT increased its support by 8% over the 2006 election, finishing only 3% behind Regions. BYuT would likely become the largest parliamentary faction after a 2008 vote, because of a combination of declining support for Regions and NUNS and the rising popularity of the Tymoshenko government following the re-payment of lost Soviet savings to Ukrainian citizens.

In addition, NUNS's relationship with the president is increasingly tenuous. Presidential chief of staff Viktor Baloha resigned from NUNS on February 15, after its nine disparate parties failed to unite as a pro-presidential party of power (see EDM, February 20).

Given these factors, odds are that political leaders will find a way to compromise and avoid early elections. Yushchenko and Baloha would not want to head into the 2009 presidential elections with an even larger BYuT parliamentary faction, which already is double the size of NUNS.

Yatsenyuk has proposed a compromise to unblock parliament; specifically, asking all factions to refrain from using this tactic in the future. Yatsenyuk has also called upon all factions to recognize the legality of legislation on NATO that was adopted under former president Leonid Kuchma and that Regions and other pro-Kuchma centrist forces endorsed.

The Ukrainian media has recently published Kuchma-era official documents that outline Ukraine's goal of NATO membership. In 2002–2004 Kuchma and then-prime minister Viktor Yanukovych, head of Regions, initiated and fully supported Ukraine's drive to NATO membership. In November 2002 NATO initiated annual NATO–Ukraine “Action Plans,” and the 2002–2004 Yanukovych government fulfilled the first two.

Former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer, now a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Jamestown that the Ukrainian leadership and NATO understood that there was little difference between “Action Plans” and “Membership Action Plans.” Both require Ukraine to undertake a wide range of military, political, and economic reforms. According to Minister of Foreign Affairs Volodymyr Ohryzko, Kyiv is now seeking a MAP because Ukraine's cooperation with NATO has outgrown the five Action Plans.

In 2004 the Yanukovych government signed on to a strategy for Ukraine's drive to NATO drawn up by the president's think tank, the National Institute for Strategic Studies. The plan has four stages:

2002–2003: prepare the legislative basis for Ukraine’s NATO membership;

2004: Ukraine enters into a MAP;

2007: NATO invites Ukraine to join the alliance;

2008: Ukraine joins NATO.

This month Prime Minister Tymoshenko publicly apologized for not succeeding in reaching the Yanukovych government’s 2008 NATO membership goal.

Importantly, the four-stage strategy never included a referendum on NATO membership. This demand emerged during the latter stages of the bitter 2004 president election, together with elevating Russian to a state language. Both issues were introduced by Russian political advisers working for the Yanukovych campaign.

Regions has raised the demand for a referendum on NATO whenever it has been in the opposition – in 2005–2006 and again since the 2007 elections. This duplicitous strategy of being radically opposed to NATO only when in opposition could be seen further in documents adopted by Yanukovych governments on July 17, 2003, and October 5, 2006, that gave Ukraine’s wholehearted support to NATO military operations in peacetime, during crises, and in military conflicts.

Yushchenko and Yatsenyuk see no need for a referendum ahead of a MAP, and the president has described the call for a referendum as “political adventurism.” While acknowledging the need for an eventual referendum, Yushchenko has promised this would be many years away, only when Ukraine was on the verge of joining NATO, as occurred with other NATO candidates.

Regions seeks to hold a referendum in April. In a February 12 statement, Yanukovich said, "We are against any steps that would take our state to the North Atlantic Alliance without the agreement of the Ukrainian people."

NATO is publicly receptive to Ukrainian membership, but some large Western European members, such as Germany, oppose a Ukrainian MAP. Such opposition within NATO can only be overcome if the Ukrainian leadership is united on the question of seeking a MAP. Herein lies the crux of the problem.

Following the Orange Revolution NATO was more receptive toward Ukraine joining, and a MAP for Kyiv was a serious prospect at the November 2006 Riga summit. However, this step depended on Ukraine creating an orange coalition after the 2006 elections, a strategy that failed because of Yushchenko's unwillingness to see Tymoshenko return as prime minister.

However, Tymoshenko did just that after the 2007 elections. But her approach to NATO membership, as seen during her January 28–29 visit to Brussels and her cancellation of a presentation to the February 8–10 Munich security conference, is more lukewarm than that of Yushchenko and NUNS.

([president.gov.ua](http://president.gov.ua), [securityconference.de](http://securityconference.de), [partyofregions.org.ua](http://partyofregions.org.ua), [Pravda.com.ua](http://Pravda.com.ua), January 15–February 18, *Zerkalo nedeli*, February 2–8, *International Herald Tribune*, January 24)

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