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Ukraine’s Orange Evolution

MARK KRAMER

Ukraine, despite its widespread corruption and many other lingering problems, has made good progress in the past few years toward establishing a democratic system and a market economy that will eventually pave the way for the country’s membership in the European Union. Even as neighboring Russia has been moving toward an authoritarian and stultifying political system, Ukraine has been achieving impressive, albeit still fragile, advances toward Western-style democracy.

Ukraine now has free, fair, and meaningful elections with ample competition. The outcomes are uncertain until the votes are cast. The mass media provide a crucial independent check on the government by featuring lively discussions of political issues and exposés of official malfeasance. The most prominent politicians and the major political parties no longer see a need to destroy their opponents. They realize that if their own parties are removed from power at some point, they will have a good chance of regaining power at a later stage. All of this stands in remarkable contrast to the authoritarian resurgence in Russia.

THE TURNING POINT

This democratic progress in Ukraine is still precarious, but the gains of the past few years mark a dramatic turnaround. Four years ago, Ukraine seemed hopelessly stuck in a political morass. The president at that time, Leonid Kuchma, had been in office since mid-1994. He had been implicated in a series of corruption scandals and was accused of ordering (or at least condoning) the murder and intimidation of journalists and political opponents. Kuchma had clamped down on the mass media, especially television. He had also brought Ukraine under greater Russian influence, turning over

entire industries to Russian control. Although the Ukrainian constitution bars presidents from serving more than two consecutive terms, Kuchma had persuaded the Constitutional Court to issue a ruling in December 2003 allowing him to run for a third term in the fall 2004 elections.

The court’s decision provoked strong criticism both in the West and at home. Kuchma eventually realized that his extremely low popularity might make it difficult for him to win even a fraudulent election. Thus, he set out to orchestrate the election of one of his cronies, Viktor Yanukovych, who was also supported strongly by the Russian government. The first round of the presidential elections in October 2004 was preceded by a series of “dirty tricks,” including the dioxin poisoning of Yanukovych’s main opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, whose campaign emphasized the need for rapid democratization.

In the lead-up to the final round of voting on November 21, 2004, Yanukovych’s campaign received extensive political and financial backing from Russian authorities. Russian President Vladimir Putin was so anxious to see Yanukovych elected, and so confident about the outcome of what he knew would be a rigged vote tally, that he publicly congratulated Yanukovych on his “victory” well before the ballots had been counted.

But events did not work out the way Putin had hoped. The heavy-handed attempts to rig the election, far from ensuring victory for Yanukovych, became a catalyst for momentous political change. After reports began circulating about systematic electoral fraud and voter intimidation, mass protests erupted in Kiev and other major cities. Yanukovych’s claim of victory and his efforts to organize a new government fueled the demonstrations, and demands for a new election quickly escalated into the peaceful “Orange Revolution.”

In the face of the burgeoning unrest, the supreme court ultimately broke with the official line and ruled that the elections had been fraudulent.

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lent and would be annulled. When a new runoff election was held under close domestic and international scrutiny on December 26, Yushchenko, who had been one of the main champions of the Orange Revolution, easily defeated Yanukovich. Yushchenko was inaugurated as president on January 23, 2005, to great public acclaim.

POLITICAL TURBULENCE

Yushchenko's record in office since then has been mixed, and political turbulence remains the norm. The rule of law is still largely absent, and some tension between ethnic communities persists, especially over the emotional question of whether Russian should be accorded the status of a second official language, alongside Ukrainian. (Ethnic Russians now account for only around 17 percent of Ukraine's total population, but a significant number of ethnic Ukrainians also still use Russian as their primary language.) Yet, despite these problems, the overall trend has been positive. Ukraine since the Orange Revolution has moved steadily away from its Soviet past.

Before the December 2004 runoff election, Yushchenko pledged that if he won the presidency he would appoint a charismatic leader of the Orange Revolution, Yulia Tymoshenko, as prime minister. Tymoshenko took office as prime minister the day after Yushchenko's inauguration, but over the next several months she and Yushchenko clashed over numerous matters, both substantive and political. Frictions also emerged within Tymoshenko's government, and several senior officials (some with close ties to Yushchenko) resigned amid mutual accusations of corruption and other misdeeds. The tensions reached a head in September 2005, when Yushchenko criticized Tymoshenko's performance and dissolved her government, ushering in a period of uncertainty in the lead-up to parliamentary elections in March 2006.

The dissolution of Tymoshenko's government merely underscored what was already obvious—that the previously united Orange coalition had become riven by discord. The bickering caused widespread discontent, giving Yanukovich an opportunity to stage a comeback. His party, the Party of Regions, won the largest share of the vote in the March 2006 parliamentary elections, 32 percent. The bulk of the vote for the Party of

Regions came from the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, where large populations of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians reside, but the party also did better than expected in the western and northern regions, which are inhabited predominantly by ethnic Ukrainians.

Coming in a distant second was the coalition of parties organized for the elections by Tymoshenko—the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc—which earned about 22 percent of the vote. Yushchenko's party, Our Ukraine, won only 14 percent, a clear sign of public restiveness. Because people's hopes had been raised so high in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, the sluggish and uneven pace of change in 2005 and early 2006 was bound to spark this sort of reaction.

For several weeks after the election, the Tymoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine sought to form a coalition with Ukraine's Socialist Party that would keep Yanukovich's Party of Regions out of power. But these efforts collapsed when the Socialists reneged on a tentative agreement and formed a majority coalition with the Party of Regions and the Communist Party.

Meanwhile, as acrimony and mutual allegations of wrongdoing continued to divide the Tymoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine, Yushchenko agreed in early August 2006 to appoint Yanukovich as prime minister. He pledged that Our Ukraine would cooperate with Yanukovich as long as the prime minister did not impede the president's conduct of foreign policy. Neither side was enthusiastic about this makeshift approach, but the lack of viable alternatives enabled Yanukovich to take office on August 4.

The uneasy cooperation between Yushchenko and Yanukovich did not last long. In early October 2006, Our Ukraine announced that it would join the opposition, working against Yanukovich's government. Over the next several months, tensions between Yushchenko and Yanukovich mounted, and in early April 2007 Yushchenko dissolved the parliament and ordered new parliamentary elections. The Party of Regions immediately put up a legal challenge to Yushchenko's action, citing changes that had been made to the Ukrainian constitution shortly after the Orange Revolution. As the court proceedings became delayed by numerous appeals and outside events, Yushchenko and Yanu-

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kovych finally reached agreement to hold new elections on September 30, 2007.

In those elections, the Party of Regions again won the largest share of the vote, with 34 percent. But the Tymoshenko Bloc ran close behind, gaining 31 percent—a dramatic increase over the party's showing in the March 2006 elections. The two Orange parties—the Tymoshenko Bloc and Our Ukraine—together gained a slender majority of seats in the new legislature, with 228 out of 450. In mid-October 2007 the two parties announced that they would seek to form a new government, but another several weeks of bargaining were required before a pact was signed on November 29, promising to restore Tymoshenko to the prime minister's post. Tymoshenko fell short in the initial parliamentary vote on her nomination—a sign of how tenuous the Orange majority in the legislature was. But in a second vote, on December 18, her nomination was approved by a one-vote margin.

“NO TURNING BACK”

Thus, in 2008, the Orange coalition is back in charge of the Ukrainian government. Tymoshenko has pledged to fight corruption vigorously through a series of administrative reforms, and to adopt measures that will solidify democratic institutions. Whether her tiny majority in the parliament will enable her to achieve these goals remains to be seen, of course. Governments in Ukraine since 2004 have not been notable for their longevity, and the Orange coalition could easily break apart again.

Nonetheless, it is now clear that competitive politics and democratic elections have become the norm in Ukraine—a development that has not gone over well in Moscow. Putin and other senior Russian officials have repeatedly referred to the disorderly political scene in Ukraine as “chaos” and “dangerous instability,” contrasting it to what they regard as admirable “stability” and “predictability” in Russia. Their denigration of the legacy of the Orange Revolution has more to do with Putin's domestic priorities than with anything in Ukraine per se. The Russian authorities were deeply unnerved by the Orange Revolution, and they are determined to prevent any such occurrence in Russia. By portraying the situation in Ukraine in an unfavorable light, they hope to convince ordinary Russians that Orange-style protests in Russia would simply make things worse.

Yet, regardless of the view in Moscow, the political reality in Ukraine now seems conducive to

democratic progress. The September 2007 elections showed that all the major parties, especially the Tymoshenko Bloc, have broadened their geographic appeal, largely ending the regional splits that had earlier typified the electorate. (The east-west divide in Ukraine was never as stark as some commentators—especially in Moscow—claimed, and it has now diminished even further.) Ukrainian politics over the past few years has been characterized by democratic give-and-take and peaceful changes of power.

The new milieu in Ukraine was summed up well a few days after the September 2007 elections by a youth leader in Yanukovych's party, Yuriy Miroshnychenko, who said that “we [in the Party of Regions] will just need to accept the outcome. . . . We can work in the opposition, and [Tymoshenko's] return to office will not be a tragedy for us. The most important thing is that Ukraine is moving in the right direction. . . . There is no turning back.”

REFORM PAYS OFF

In the 1990s, Ukraine suffered a precipitous economic decline, stemming in part from disastrous economic conditions inherited from the Soviet regime (hyperinflation, rampant shortages, and severe macroeconomic instability) and in part from egregious corruption and mismanagement under the first two post-Soviet presidents, Leonid Kravchuk and Kuchma. Periodic attempts to embark on economic reforms were stillborn, and corruption became so endemic that Ukraine each year was listed among the world's “most corrupt countries” in rankings compiled by Transparency International.

Not until the end of the 1990s did the situation begin to turn around. Kuchma, observing the consequences of Russia's August 1998 financial crash and having seen his country experience nearly a decade of grave economic decline, appointed at the end of 1999 a reformist government with Yushchenko as prime minister. The new government carried out drastic economic changes, including the elimination of hundreds of unfair subsidies and tax exemptions, the privatization of many large firms, the deregulation of land ownership, and the adoption of a new tax system. These changes helped produce 6 percent growth in 2000 and an average of 7.6 percent annual growth from 2001 through 2007.

The economic reforms continued for nearly a year and a half—until Kuchma's wealthy supporters in the business community, who had lost some of their privileges as a result of the reforms, con-

vinced him in April 2001 to replace Yushchenko's government. By then, however, the radical measures that had been enacted in 2000 and early 2001 were firmly enough in place to provide a basis for solid economic performance, even before the Orange Revolution fundamentally changed the political situation.

Ukraine's economy in recent years has been one of the fastest-growing in Europe. In both 2006 and 2007, annual growth exceeded 7 percent. Since 2000, living standards have risen more swiftly in Ukraine than in Russia, which itself has enjoyed sustained growth. Moreover, in Ukraine, unlike in Russia, economic growth cannot be attributed to increases in world prices for oil and natural gas. Ukraine's reserves of natural gas are modest, and its coal and nuclear power industries are deeply troubled (though the country has profited from higher prices for steel, which it exports to the EU).

After the Orange Revolution, economic reform initially made little headway and indeed was set back

for a while. Tymoshenko during her first term as prime minister embraced a populist economic agenda, advocating higher wage subsidies, price

controls on key goods, and the renationalization of certain large companies, beginning with the giant Kryvorizhstal steel mill. Large private firms, facing the uncertainties surrounding possible renationalization, held off on much-needed investments.

The result was that economic growth dropped to only 2.6 percent in 2005. Meanwhile, inflation surged to 13.5 percent in 2005, up from an average of only 5 percent a year in 2002–2004. The temporary curtailment of Ukraine's exceptionally brisk economic growth was one of the major factors that sparked public discontent with the first post-Orange government.

Since then, however, economic reform has gotten back on track, and rapid economic growth has resumed. Yanukovich's government, for all its atavistic rhetoric, turned out to be pragmatic on economic issues and moved ahead with important reforms needed to qualify Ukraine for entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and for eventual membership in the EU. In November 2006 the Ukrainian parliament approved a major piece of WTO-related legislation with the adoption of a law that allows foreign banks to open branches in Ukraine. In May 2007 the political uncertainty

that followed Yushchenko's contested dissolution of Yanukovich's government did not prevent the parliament from pushing ahead with other laws needed to gain entry into the WTO.

Although Yanukovich himself often seemed ambivalent about the implications of key measures required for WTO membership, legislation moved forward nonetheless. Yanukovich also voiced interest, both while in office and during the 2007 election campaign, in eventually bringing Ukraine into the EU—a sign that the question of whether to seek integration into the EU is no longer controversial in Ukraine. All major politicians now agree that EU membership would be highly desirable; the only differences concern how fast to pursue the changes needed for Ukraine to meet EU criteria.

The momentum behind economic reform has increased since the September 2007 parliamentary elections. Tymoshenko, despite her earlier populism, has now abandoned that stance and has pledged to move ahead with a bold program of economic reforms. Her

appointment of Viktor Pynzenyk, a widely respected economist and well-known advocate of free market policies, as finance

minister offered a clear sign that her current government will not move in the same direction it did in 2005. In November 2007 the government agreed to eliminate all tariffs on information technology products, another step necessary for joining the WTO. In January 2008 it agreed to remove export duties on metals and agricultural goods. Ukraine was formally admitted into the WTO on February 5, 2008.

DEPENDING ON RUSSIA

To be sure, numerous economic problems remain in Ukraine, stemming in large part from a high degree of corruption and the weakness of the rule of law—factors that often cause investors to worry about enforcement of contracts and the security of private property rights. Onerous restrictions on business formation and activity persist, and inflation remains relatively high. These problems, however, are likely to diminish if economic reform continues to advance in connection with the country's bid for membership in the EU. Net inflows of foreign direct investment, which have increased by several hundred percent since the Orange Revolution, have since 2005 helped to offset Ukraine's surging trade deficit.

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The one economic issue that could prove nettlesome for Ukraine in the years ahead is the country's heavy dependence on Russia for energy supplies. The Ukrainian economy is extraordinarily energy-intensive (Ukraine's energy consumption per unit of GDP is more than three times as high as Germany's) and it runs on natural gas and oil from Russia. From 1992 through 2004, Ukraine received subsidized supplies from Russian energy companies that tolerated long delays in payments, giving Ukrainians little incentive to mitigate their consumption. But in the wake of the Orange Revolution, Gazprom (the Russian state-owned natural gas monopoly) and other Russian energy companies have repeatedly threatened to cut off supplies if Ukraine does not agree to pay promptly at higher prices.

A prolonged bilateral dispute over the pricing of natural gas in 2005 went unresolved until Gazprom abruptly halted supplies at the beginning of 2006. The cutoff lasted only a few days, but it was enough to demonstrate Gazprom's ability to wreak havoc not only in Ukraine but in many other European countries that are at least as (or more) dependent on Russia for supplies of natural gas. Moreover, the settlement of the dispute gave Rosukrenergo, a murky company connected with Gazprom, control over all of Ukraine's natural gas imports.

In the long run, Russia's decision to charge higher (and more realistic) prices for natural gas and oil will benefit Ukraine by giving it an incentive to reduce energy consumption. In the short to medium term, however, the potential for major economic disruptions and increased burdens on Ukrainian consumers will remain.

In addition, beyond the immediate significance of Ukraine's fuel dependence on Russia, the high energy revenues that Russia is now earning may enable Russian energy companies to buy additional equity stakes in key sectors of the Ukrainian economy—including banks, oil refineries, and steel plants. Such a trend in fact began in 1999–2001, when entire Ukrainian industries (notably aluminum smelting) were transferred to Russian control in exchange for the cancellation of energy-related debts. Although Tymoshenko has been wary of Russia's efforts to penetrate the Ukrainian economy, financial realities are apt to result in greater Russian ownership.

THE KOSOVO EFFECT

During the first few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Ukraine and Russia were often extremely tense. Kravchuk did

his best to attenuate Russian influence in Ukraine. Issues such as the disposition of nuclear weapons based in Ukrainian territory, the fate of the Black Sea fleet, the political status of Crimea, the flow of oil and natural gas from Russia, and the reallocation of Soviet-era foreign debt caused severe bilateral frictions.

Although ties between Kiev and Moscow gradually improved after Kuchma was elected president in 1994, the relationship was still marked by chronic tensions throughout the 1990s. Russian officials reacted adversely to what they perceived as Ukraine's growing tilt toward the West, including the Ukrainian military's participation in exercises sponsored by NATO. Whenever Ukrainian leaders hinted that they might someday be interested in joining NATO or in receiving overt security guarantees from the United States, the Russian government sought to make clear that any such move would be unacceptable to Moscow.

Public sentiment in Ukraine remained broadly pro-Western until 1999, when NATO's military operations regarding Kosovo and Serbia changed many Ukrainians' perceptions of the Western alliance. Surveys conducted in Ukraine by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in 1999 revealed that the Kosovo war caused the public's view of NATO to shift with surprising speed in a distinctly anti-Western direction. As of mid-1999, a large majority of Ukrainians (nearly 61 percent) voiced a "lack of confidence" and "lack of trust" in NATO, and only about 15 percent expressed "confidence." A few years earlier these percentages had been reversed. Although the public's level of "confidence" and "trust" in NATO rose slightly in 2000 and 2001, it remained far below the level of the early to mid-1990s.

By the same token, Ukrainians' attitudes toward Russia became decidedly more positive than before, in part because the Russian government took a strong stance against NATO's actions in Kosovo. This shift of mood in Ukraine was evident among ethnic Ukrainians as well as among other groups (not least those of Russian descent), and the trend continued in 2000, despite the start of Russia's second war in Chechnya in September 1999. In a KIIS survey conducted across Ukraine in October 2000, 75 percent described their view of Russia as "favorable," 69 percent expressed a "favorable" view of Putin, and 61 percent wanted Ukraine to join a "union" with Russia and Belarus.

The precise nature of this "union" was somewhat ambiguous, but a substantial minority of

respondents—40 percent—voiced support for the full remerger of Russia and Ukraine into a single country. When Ukrainians were asked whether their country should seek closer security relations with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or with the United States and NATO, 52 percent chose Russia and the CIS, whereas only 14 percent chose the United States and NATO. (Another 26 percent said that Ukraine should seek a balance between the two.)

All of these findings, which were confirmed in subsequent polls, signaled a marked shift from survey information compiled in the mid-1990s, when almost no Ukrainians expressed interest in rejoining Russia and when a substantial minority supported Ukrainian membership in (or at least affiliation with) NATO. Even among ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, only a very small minority in earlier years had hoped that Ukraine would merge again with Russia.

The public mood in Ukraine has remained notably against NATO membership in recent years. Polls taken in late 2007 revealed that only 22–26 percent of respondents supported NATO membership, whereas 53–55 percent opposed it. Although opinion by early 2008 seemed to be moving gradually in favor of NATO again, a major turnaround in public sentiment will likely take at least a few years.

TILTING EAST OR WEST?

On the other hand, sentiment toward the United States remained overwhelmingly positive even after the Kosovo war, suggesting that most Ukrainians want closer ties with the West and dissociate this general goal from the specific question of NATO membership. The Pew Global Attitudes Project found in 2000 that more than 70 percent of Ukrainians held a “favorable” view of the United States, despite the steep decline in Ukrainians’ support for joining NATO. The share of respondents expressing a favorable view of the United States rose to 80 percent in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks. As in other European countries, the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003 caused a sharp drop in Ukrainians’ positive sentiment toward the United States. Even so, a clear majority of Ukrainians (54 percent) as of mid-2007 still held favorable views of the United States, far outnumbering the 39 percent who held unfavorable views.

Interestingly, Ukrainians’ perceptions of Russia have also remained extremely favorable since 2000. Of the 47 countries covered by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in mid-2007, perceptions of Russia were far more positive in Ukraine and Bulgaria than anywhere else (aside from Russia itself). In Ukraine, 81 percent of respondents expressed a favorable view of Russia, and only 16 percent said their views were unfavorable. By contrast, 62 percent of respondents in Germany expressed an unfavorable view of Russia, and only 31 percent were favorable.

Although Ukrainians are worried about their country’s reliance on Russia for fuel supplies—63 percent said they are “concerned that [Ukraine] is too dependent on Russia for energy sources”—this anxiety has not translated into a broadly negative view of Russia. Nor have Ukrainians’ favorable perceptions of Russia been eroded by bilateral tensions surrounding the Orange Revolution, Russia’s interference in Ukraine’s 2004 elections, and the January 2006 cutoff of natural gas supplies to Ukraine. The durability of Ukrainians’

positive views of Russia may help explain why so many Ukrainians have been opposed to NATO membership.

Whether public opinion will constrain

the foreign policy of Tymoshenko’s new government is hard to say, however. For the most part, Ukrainian leaders have paid little attention to public sentiment when deciding on policies abroad. Kuchma during his second term as president (1999–2004) generally sought to forge closer ties with both Russia and the West. When Borys Tarasyuk served as foreign minister from April 1998 to late September 2000, he advocated much closer ties with and eventual membership in NATO. But Tarasyuk’s successor, Anatoliy Zlenko, gave highest priority to links with Russia, declaring that “for a certain period of time, our relations with Russia were not normal. Now our relations are being normalized. So, it may seem that we are sharply strengthening the eastern vector of our foreign policy.” Putin, for his part, asserted in 2001 that Ukraine was returning to Russia’s “sphere of influence.”

The tilt toward Russia during Zlenko’s tenure did not prevent Ukraine from signing the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan (a program of expanded cooperation) in November 2002 at the time of NATO’s summit meeting in Prague, but it did mean

All major politicians now agree that EU membership would be highly desirable.

that Ukrainian foreign policy was broadly in line with public opinion. However, in the spring of 2003 Kuchma disregarded public opinion when he offered to send a contingent of 1,650 Ukrainian mechanized infantry soldiers to Iraq to take part in US-led security operations. Although public sentiment in Ukraine was strongly opposed to the Iraq War, the Ukrainian troops arrived in Iraq in August 2003 and remained there until well after the Orange Revolution.

In taking this step, Kuchma was trying to curry US favor and to forestall potential criticism of his plans to stay in office for a third term. The size of the Ukrainian contingent in Iraq was cut roughly in half in the spring of 2004, but Kuchma did not decide until after the Orange Revolution (when the United States led the way in condemning the rigged election) that it was time to pull out the remaining Ukrainian forces. Yushchenko supported the withdrawal from Iraq when he took office, and the last of the Ukrainian forces were pulled out in late 2005.

Yushchenko's role in withdrawing Ukrainian troops from Iraq was in line with public opinion, but he felt no hesitation about bucking public opinion on the question of ties with NATO. Not only did Yushchenko bring back Tarasyuk as foreign minister, but he also made clear that he wanted deeper integration into NATO as well as the EU. The inception of a NATO-Ukraine Intensified Dialogue in April 2005 symbolized this priority. Although movement toward NATO ebbed during Yanukovich's term as prime minister, the return of Tymoshenko has thrust the question of NATO membership back onto the agenda. Before the election, Tymoshenko had made no attempt to hide her suspicions of Russia and its designs on Ukraine. In mid-2007 she published an article in the US journal *Foreign Affairs* warning of Russia's "imperial ambitions," its "desire for hegemony," and its propensity for "unilateral intervention" to gain "domination" in the other "republics that broke away from the Soviet Union, including Ukraine."

Tymoshenko did not broach the question of NATO membership in her article, but in January 2008, a month after taking office, she joined with Yushchenko and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the speaker of the parliament, in sending a joint letter to the Secretary General of NATO on behalf of the Ukrainian government requesting accession to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP). Participation in MAP is normally intended for countries aspir-

ing to eventual membership in the alliance. The letter expressed hope that NATO would recognize Ukraine's "progress . . . on membership and relevant reforms," implying that MAP would be a stepping-stone to full membership. Although the three officials averred that Ukraine's "readiness for new commitments" with NATO was "not directed against third countries," Tymoshenko had made clear in her *Foreign Affairs* article that the West must work with Ukraine in seeking to "contain Russia."

CHANGING MINDS

As Ukraine forges new links with NATO, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko undoubtedly will try to sway public opinion in favor of membership, a task that will not be easy. Although they do not need to act in strict conformity with popular sentiment, the question of allied membership ultimately will require greater public backing, not least because NATO will insist on it. At a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission in December 2007, the allied foreign ministers reaffirmed that "NATO's door remains open to European democracies willing and able to assume the responsibilities of membership," but they also underlined "the importance of informing the Ukrainian people about NATO-Ukraine cooperation."

The NATO governments want to ensure that the question of membership will not become a polarizing factor in Ukrainian society that could impede valuable NATO-Ukrainian cooperation on military reform, civil-military relations, and other key issues. Ukraine's prospective entry into MAP does not guarantee that Ukraine will be invited to join the alliance, but it will give Ukrainian leaders a clear sense of the criteria they will have to meet. It should also help them generate wider domestic backing for closer cooperation with NATO.

Ultimately, the future of Ukrainian democracy and of Ukraine's ties with the West will depend on the success of Ukrainian officials in overcoming internal political and economic challenges. In the short term, some setbacks are bound to happen, but the progress Ukraine has achieved since the Orange Revolution gives ample reason for long-term optimism. Just four years ago, it seemed inconceivable that democracy would be thriving in Ukraine and that Ukrainian membership in the EU and possibly NATO would be drawing near—goals that are now in sight. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has a realistic chance of becoming a full-fledged member of the Western democratic community. ■