

Road to NATO?

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The NATO summit in Prague that has been discussed for so long, was over at the end of last week. Seven countries, as expected, got invitations to start negotiations about joining NATO. The negotiations are to begin no later than the end of March 2003 and wrap up no later than May 2004 when the next NATO summit is scheduled to take place. The new NATO recruits will be Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Three more countries – Croatia, Macedonia and Albania – may be invited to the same negotiations at the next summit. Theoretically, some suggest that the third major wave of NATO enlargement might also include Ukraine.

Nowadays, though, Ukraine's case is a different matter. At the NATO summit, during the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission on November 22, two documents were signed: the Ukraine-NATO Action Plan and the plan of goals for 2003. The documents were probably the most of what could be done, though none of them explicitly states the beginning of a long formal process of Ukraine's accession to NATO. The concluding declaration of the Prague summit stressed that the Alliance remains committed to strong relations between NATO and Ukraine based on the Charter on Special Partnership. The 1997 Charter, nothing else – hopefully, just for now. NATO took notice of Ukraine's determination to pursue its strategic course of Euro-Atlantic integration and urged Ukraine to carry out the necessary reforms, including the need to strengthen export controls. The Action Plan was described as a "significant step forward". As the document stated, the Action Plan determines political, economic, military and other spheres of reforms in which Ukraine should achieve further progress, and in which NATO will continue helping it. Furthermore, it was stated that continuing the process of deepening and improving relations demands Ukraine's commitment to Euro-Atlantic values. This point may be regarded as the most significant one: it is possible that the door to NATO will open for a Ukraine that meets NATO's basic standards. Those involve a democratic political system, a competitive market economy, and respect for human rights, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

At the NATO ministerial meeting in Reykjavik in May 2002 it was decided to invite Ukraine to the Prague summit. At that time the first wave of soft diplomatic isolation of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma was past its peak, but nothing was said about a personal invitation to President Kuchma to Prague either then or at any other point later on. The Ukrainian leaders were watching carefully the dynamics of the NATO-Russia relations and did not hide that its decision about moving towards NATO membership in the future as its goal of joining a pan-European security system had two goals: first, not to allow full isolation of Ukraine from contemporary political processes and, second, "not to lag behind Russia". The Prague summit was seen in Kyiv as a turning point that had to be approached with a certain result and after which one might count on some totally new kind of relations with NATO. Judging from statements of some Ukrainian diplomats, in addition to "re-abilitation" of the notion of "Euro-Atlantic integration" in the Ukrainian political vocabulary (the notion had perished after the resignation of Minister of Foreign Affairs Borys Tarasiuk) the official Kyiv stopped differentiating in its statements between the process of getting closer to NATO and the process of Ukraine's so-called European integration.

The meeting of the North-Atlantic Council at the level of ambassadors of NATO member states to the Alliance shortly before the Prague summit approved a rather poignant for Ukraine decision: to have a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission at the level of ministers of foreign affairs. The decision was approved during a new wave of the "tape scandal", when the analysis of the Melnychenko tapes, performed by the FBI, was reported to have found a genuine fragment of the tape representing Leonid Kuchma's conversation with head of the Ukrspetsexport corporation Valery Malev and Kuchma's approval of the idea to sell Kolchuga air defense systems to Iraq. The announced conclusion caused a wave of strong statements from Washington concerning Leonid Kuchma. On October 20, a group of 13 American and British experts who had come to Ukraine to investigate the situation, could not either confirm or refute the charges of selling the Kolchugas to Iraq. The experts announced that the Ukrainian authorities had not demonstrated full transparency and had not ensured due access to some persons (the names mentioned included, for instance, former head of the Security Service of Ukraine Leonid Derkach and former Honorary Consul of Iraq in Ukraine Yuri Orshansky), nor full access to certain documents, including documents of the Export Control Committee. The decision of the NATO Council was made before the experts' conclusions were made public, which showed dissatisfaction of the US Administration with Kuchma's policies. Different ways were used to send a message to Kuchma: he should not come to Prague or he risked to be received there in a rather cold

way.

Leonid Kuchma pretended he was deeply humiliated. Statements of Ukrainian officials sought to re-focus the emphasis to the “humiliation done to Ukraine”. It took rather long for the Ukrainian establishment to decide about the level of the Ukrainian delegation to Prague. Leonid Kuchma, for instance, said on November 14 that “if the President does not go to the NATO Prague summit, nobody will” (UNIAN, November 15, 2002). There were several statements of NATO, U.S., Polish and other officials that could be summarized as follows: the level of the meeting does not matter, but it is important that if Ukraine really is serious about moving towards joining NATO, it should send a delegation to Prague led by the minister of foreign affairs. According to BBC Ukrainian Service, U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicolas Burns noted that if President Kuchma decided to attend the summit he should not expect a warm welcome from NATO member states. That would be his own decision, Burns said. The diplomat also said he regretted that the NATO-Ukraine relations had come to that point and that they had hoped the summit would manifest significant progress in the NATO-Ukraine relations. According to Burns, they simply could not ignore the “dangerous initiative” on the part of Ukraine to “assist” Iraq by selling it sophisticated military equipment. He added that NATO was “very disappointed” with the accusations that the Ukrainian government and President Kuchma personally had approved the sale of the Kolchugas to Iraq. If that was true, that was a very dangerous step for the Ukrainian government and it contradicted the UN sanctions against Iraq.

On November 16 the urgent meeting of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine decided that the Ukrainian delegation to Prague would be led by President Kuchma who would represent Ukraine at the session of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. At the NATO-Ukraine Commission meeting Ukraine would be represented by Minister of Foreign Affairs Anatoly Zlenko. The “Solomon’s decision” was then explained in a way that “there are no perfect solutions” and that Ukraine could not afford to be isolated from participation in addressing general security issues and, moreover, the invitation could not be taken away from the President. The situation became ridiculous later that day, when the President’s press secretary Olena Hromnytska announced that Brussels had already received an invitation for Kuchma. Later on, after NATO spokesman Ives Broder stated that no invitation for Kuchma had been issued, it was announced in Ukraine that the president’s press secretary meant a package of documents for the summit in which it was mentioned that the Ukrainian delegation would be led by President Kuchma. In NATO that decision was described as “not quite wise”. Meanwhile, representatives of the Alliance stressed that the “wise” decision would be for the Ukrainian authorities to take part in the summit in the format proposed by NATO and allow the adoption of the documents that would facilitate further progress in the relations between the official Kyiv and the Alliance.

Notwithstanding the statements of the Ukrainian MFA that any invitation as such was not supposed to arrive, NATO representatives maintained that the practice of multilateral meetings involves personal invitations to all of those who were welcome to attend the meetings.

For two weeks, the development of relations between Ukraine and NATO, praised as Ukraine’s strategic choice, depended entirely on the mood of the head of the state. Thus, the claims of the Ukrainian leaders about their commitment to the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, the importance of that course for the development of the country and the course towards joining NATO were challenged. Given Minister Zlenko’s phrase that he was “glad” about the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine about the format of Kuchma’s participation in the Prague summit, we may assume that the above opinion is well-founded.

Hence, Leonid Kuchma visited Prague as an unwelcome guest, and his visit did influence the course of events. As members of the Ukrainian delegation said later, the summit was very well organized, and everything was diplomatically correct, without demarches, but not without nuances. For instance, the guests at the conference table at the meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council were seated according to the French alphabet instead of usual English alphabetical order. Thus, Kuchma’s neighbors at the table were not President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, but Secretary General of the Council of the EU Xavier Solana and President of Turkey Akhmet Nedzhet Sezer.

Another nuance was that Canadian Prime Minister Chrétien left the conference room when Kuchma was speaking. Furthermore, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was present at the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission for only a few minutes, and then left claiming that he had to see his president off to the flight to Petersburg. Anatoly Zlenko later said that he had been warned about that before. Another nuance was probably the fact that the name of

Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma was not mentioned in the list of speakers at the NACC session, posted at the official web-site of the summit, though speeches of presidents of Kazakhstan and Moldova were listed there. The organizers of the summit were extremely diplomatic indeed and sought to demonstrate that they had negative feelings about president Kuchma, not about Ukraine as a whole.

As far as the attitudes of representatives of NATO member states and the West to relations with Ukraine are concerned, they may be summarized by a phrase said by the NATO Department of Information J. Shea: NATO made it clear that Ukraine is an important partner and relations with it continue.

Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Yevhen Marchuk said that he believed the decision for both Kuchma and Zlenko to take part in the Prague summit had been “the most optimal”, and that the main result for Ukraine had been that “we did not isolate ourselves”. On the other hand, the Czech Republic did not reject Kuchma’s application for visa. On the contrary, representatives of the Czech government stressed there had been no intention to do so. The only president who was denied a Czech visa was president of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenka.

During the summit there was no diplomatic isolation of Kuchma. Before the summit, Polish President Aleksandr Kwasniewski was reported to have told Kuchma that he was prepared to be the only official who would have a meeting with Kuchma in Prague. In addition to Kwasniewski, Kuchma had meetings with Xavier Solana, Slovak president R. Shuster (who, according to the Czech news agency, said he did not consider Kuchma unwelcome), the Prime Minister of Italy, leaders of Georgia and Lithuania. In NATO, by the way, some explicitly said that the position of the United States and the UK was not shared by all of the NATO member states. But the consensus rule left little space for maneuvering.

The Prague summit for Ukraine was not as significant as the Madrid summit of 1997, when the Special Partnership Charter was signed. Now, we may speak about things that did not happen. The NATO member states did not approve a political declaration that would explicitly state that the Alliance supported Ukraine’s course towards joining NATO. After the Kolchuga scandal that issue was off the agenda. However, there are signs that Washington does not mind getting back to it during the next Ministerial meeting of the NATO ministers of foreign affairs, in about half-year. This, by the way, is indirect evidence that Ukraine’s movement towards membership in NATO is viewed seriously and supported by what was informally described by Ukrainian diplomats as “one and a half members of NATO”, i.e., Warsaw and Washington.

The Action Plan, approved in Prague, according to Deputy Secretary General of NATO Alessandro Nizzo, involves intensive cooperation and consultations between NATO and Ukraine in defense, political and economic spheres. Hence, that is not exactly what Kyiv was hoping to get, and although the document was described as a major step forward, it does not yet mean a breakthrough. The breakthrough may occur only if the plan is implemented in full by Ukraine – and only then it will be possible to discuss prospects for Ukraine to join the MAP - Membership Action Plan. The Action Plan for Ukraine, however, involves all basic parameters of MAP and, obviously, is a necessary intermediate stage that is required for ensuring establishment of adequate structures of governance, introducing an information policy that is necessary for achieving public support, and approving a national program with mechanisms that would make its implementation possible. Leaving aside political and diplomatic vocabulary and eager comments made by members of the Ukrainian delegation, one may say that a new quality of relations is included in that document indeed, but from now on it will depend not on Ukraine’s geopolitical and geostrategic position, as in the case with the Charter, but only on Ukraine’s state policies, i.e., on specific actions. For now, Kuchma’s words said at the NACC session in Prague, “we understand that there is a long way ahead of Ukraine towards its own Prague, but our state is determined to walk it” sound like other pieces of rhetoric prepared for an outside observer.