

Putin Scores Diplomatic Victory by Blocking NATO's Expansion Plan

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Putin scores big win in Bucharest

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Russian President Vladimir Putin scored a major diplomatic coup by scuttling the NATO membership bids of Ukraine and Georgia even before he reached the NATO summit.

NATO's plan to expand further into former Soviet turf collapsed Thursday when leaders — anxious to avoid angering Moscow — opted not to put the strategically important nations on track for membership.

Putin had strongly warned the military alliance against moving to bring Ukraine and Georgia aboard. He even threatened that Russia could point its nuclear missiles at Ukraine if it joins NATO and hosts part of a U.S. missile defense system.

In the waning days of his eight years as president, Putin demonstrated his strength — successfully driving a wedge through the NATO alliance.

The United States, Canada and Central and Eastern European nations backed the membership bids of Ukraine and Georgia. But Germany, France and some others resisted it for fear of damaging ties with Russia, a key energy supplier to the continent.

NATO pledged Thursday to embrace Ukraine and Georgia some day, but the failure to grant them a specific route to membership was a major foreign policy success for Putin just over a month before he steps down as president.

Russia has been unable to prevent Western recognition of Kosovo independence or to block U.S. missile defense plans. The collapse of NATO's expansion plan marks the first time since the Soviet collapse when Russia got the upper hand in a dispute with the West.

"Clearly Putin is victorious," said Sergei Karaganov, a Russian political analyst with close ties to the Kremlin. "He has changed the tone of relations between Russia and the West."

Putin's coup comes after the Kremlin closed a series of pipeline deals, dashing Western hopes of easing the EU's dependence on Russian energy.

Last fall, Russia signed an agreement with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan for a pipeline that

will carry Central Asian gas via Russia, draining the main source for the U.S.-backed Nabucco natural gas pipeline. It has also struck deals with Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and Serbia.

Konstantin Kosachev, the head of foreign affairs committee at the lower house of Russian parliament, said NATO's failure to grant membership action plans to Ukraine and Georgia showed Germany, France and some others bear a "responsible attitude."

For the expansion plan to succeed, all 26 bloc members must approve. Even backing from President Bush, who stopped in Ukraine on his way to Bucharest, failed to persuade the reluctant NATO members to drop their objections.

"It was a victory for those who didn't want destabilization in Europe, and it was a defeat for those outside of Europe who were seeking to destabilize it," Karaganov said.

Looking upset, Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko said Thursday that his nation's membership bid was a test for the alliance. He tried to put on a brave face, declaring: "I'm convinced that Ukraine will be in NATO."

Andriy Parubiy, a lawmaker from Yushchenko's faction in parliament, criticized Germany and France, saying: "Their decision was based on economic blackmail by Russia."

Georgia's president, Mikhail Saakashvili, warned that snubbing his U.S.-allied nation would be a "bad sign."

"It would not help our reform process," he said in an interview published in the German daily Handelsblatt. "But either way, we will stick to the Atlantic perspective."

Putin was to dine with NATO leaders and summit guests Thursday evening, and will attend a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council on Friday.

Russia and NATO signed a partnership agreement in 2002 envisaging cooperation in combating terrorism, curbing proliferation of mass destruction weapons and other issues. But Russia's ties with the West worsened amid various disputes, and Putin grew increasingly critical of NATO.

Russia has strongly opposed U.S. plans to deploy missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic. Last year, it suspended its participation in a Cold War-era arms control treaty limiting the deployment of conventional weapons on the continent.

Ukraine and Georgia were part of the Russian Empire for centuries before becoming Soviet republics, and their importance is underlined by key westbound energy pipelines.

Associated Press writers Mike Eckel in Moscow, Maria Danilova in Kiev, Ukraine, and Alison Mutler in Bucharest contributed to this report.

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