

# NATO Growth Spurt Unlikely by 2002

## But Allied Officials See Advantages of United Bid by 9 Countries

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**VILNIUS, Lithuania** — The accord among nine East and Central European nations to work together toward NATO membership in 2002 may prove to be the road map for these countries but it is unlikely to be the alliance's timetable.

Nine nations, designated by the alliance as eligible for membership, sent their foreign ministers to Vilnius last week to pledge common cause to join the alliance — Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The united bid, modeled on the approach that worked for the initial trio of countries admitted last year — Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic — seems unlikely to have any immediate impact because the United States and its allies will be intent on working out their relations with the new leader of Russia, Vladimir Putin, according to U.S. and European officials at the Vilnius meeting.

The timing of the Vilnius meeting, the officials said, was partly influenced by the candidate countries' eagerness to bring the issue to the fore ahead of the U.S. political party conventions this summer.

But most Western policymakers seem inclined to postpone any debate on NATO enlargement for at least a year. Officials said that enlargement of the alliance was unlikely to figure prominently on the White House agenda for the summit meeting with Mr. Putin next month. In those talks, President Bill Clinton will probably concentrate on trying to ease Russian objections to planned U.S. missile defenses.

In practice, no serious political debate on enlargement seems likely for at least two years, too late for admission of new members in 2002.

Conceptually, however, the group approach has political appeal, U.S. sources said, because Congress and European legislatures are reluctant to expend their energies on what seemed to be a repetitive process of small steps and would prefer a major diplomatic initiative.

The striking aspect of the group approach was its simplicity, according to policymakers at the Vilnius meeting. It could be a way of "cutting the Gordian knot of European security," according to Eduard Kukan, the foreign minister of Slovakia.

Basically, a single expansion involving the nine countries would solve all the competing claims of candidates and security organizations, roughly aligning the membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union for the future.

For example, it could ease the tensions around the three Baltic states —

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — whose moves arouse special objections in Moscow because they were incorporated into the old Soviet Union and border Russia on its strategic northwestern corner.

A group intake might be the least offensive formula, officials said, if it appeared to Moscow to be the last NATO enlargement.

Even on this issue, several European participants said, it seemed too soon to formulate realistic goals and make choices.

"Worrying about NATO and the Baltics may ease as it becomes clear that these three countries are going to enter the European Union, probably by 2005," a European official said.

The new emphasis on defense in the European Union means that membership will bring security dimensions now, and no longer just economic opportunities.

Already, a Lithuanian policymaker said, Russian officials have started reacting "with some suspicion for the first time" to the Baltic countries' progress toward joining the EU.

None of these participants in the Vilnius meeting would agree to be quoted on these candid views that could irritate Moscow just as Mr. Putin starts charting his foreign policy course.

Similarly, the thematic focus for NATO expansion has shifted from the need for defensive depth against Moscow to an emphasis on spreading shared

values such as democracy and multi ethnic coexistence.

In formulating this approach for NATO, the idea of a group intake has attractions, a U.S. official said, explaining that a package could include some weaker candidates — such as Albania, Bulgaria and Romania — that would have a better chance of acceptance if they accompanied obvious choices such as Slovenia.

Many Western governments would support an early gesture to these less qualified countries. As the NATO secretary-general, George Robertson, said in Vilnius, their stance over Kosovo involved economic sacrifices and political risks that made their performance "perhaps the most encouraging" aspect of the crisis.

Unless the nine countries come up for membership together, officials said, the alliance would end up having to proceed to yet another round, raising the possibility that NATO would then have to turn to some neutral countries — such as Austria and Sweden — to make a politically attractive package.

That would be "a formula for trouble," an alliance official said, explaining that NATO did not want to solicit membership from countries that traditionally have been reluctant to join and appear quite likely to remain lukewarm or divided about the alliance.

A group enlargement would produce a tidy map of Europe, uniting the Continent from the Balkans to the Baltics, connecting allied countries from Denmark to Turkey and bringing NATO right to Russia's borders, according to Bruce Jackson of the U.S. Committee on NATO, a bipartisan group advocating enlargement that helped organize the Vilnius conference.

But European participants warned that the tidy lineup would raise troubling concerns. They cited Ukraine as an obvious omission from NATO solidarity on Russia's western border.

"It would be a signal to the leaders in Ukraine that the West has decided to leave them to a Russian sphere, perhaps even Russian domination," a European policymaker said.