

Bush facing resistance in NATO expansion goals

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WASHINGTON: Ahead of this week's NATO summit, President George W. Bush has told alliance members he wants to expand the organization to include three Balkan countries and put Ukraine and Georgia on track for membership.

Bush probably will get some of what he wants at the meetings Tuesday through Thursday in Bucharest, Romania. But with only nine months left in his term, Bush may find his ability to persuade European leaders diminished, just as it is with Congress. That is a reflection of the president's low public approval ratings and the anticipation of a new administration that will set policy.

European leaders know the new U.S. president could shift course on NATO. For that reason, they may seek to put aside some decisions, including commitments to Ukraine and Georgia, until after Bush leaves office in January.

He also could see his goal of winning NATO membership for Albania, Croatia and Macedonia partially thwarted at the summit.

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Bush also faces stiff resistance on Georgia and Ukraine from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who sees a threat in further NATO expansion into Russia's former sphere of influence.

On Friday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko promised broader cooperation with NATO in Afghanistan were the alliance to shelve invitations to Ukraine and Georgia.

Some NATO allies want to avoid further tension with Russia during the Kremlin leadership transition. Putin, who is expected to attend the Bucharest summit, steps down as president in May.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has signaled opposition despite Bush's support. As a consensus organization, one veto at the summit would block Georgian and Ukrainian hopes, and Germany seems to have the backing of other European countries.

But Bush sees NATO expansion as a way to cement democratic gains in Europe.

Associated Press writer Jennifer Loven contributed to this report.

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