

# READINGS

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## Georgia's Path towards NATO Membership: Expectations for the Warsaw Summit

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Georgia raises the issue of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), during the Warsaw summit, to be held in July, 2016. The combination of several factors, including the current realities on the international stage, the importance of NATO's strategic adaptation to the challenges to transatlantic security and strengthening of NATO's capacity to defend its member states; a need for further reforms in political, economic and defence fields in Georgia; as well as a potential reaction of Moscow and consequently lack of consensus among NATO members on what message to send to Georgia over its long-delayed membership promise threatens to positive developments of the declared and long-awaited aim of the country, which is NATO membership.

### Georgia's NATO Ambitions

Since the dialogue and cooperation was first established in the early 1990s the relationship between NATO and Georgia has deepened significantly and today, Georgia is an NATO aspirant country.

The cornerstone of Georgia's foreign and security policy is Euro-Atlantic integration. Georgia aspires to eventually become a full-fledged member of both EU and NATO communities. In order to achieve this and to be a secured, democratic, and stable country, Georgia actively cooperates with NATO, is vigorously involved in the reform process, contributes to NATO-led operations and cooperates with the Allies and other partner countries in many areas<sup>1</sup> through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).<sup>2</sup>

NATO membership is seen by Georgia as a security guarantee, what itself is necessary condition to further advance the level of democracy and economic prosperity. In addition, public support is

<sup>1</sup> "Deepening Relations with Georgia", NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Backgrounder, 2013. Online access: [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_publications/2013530\\_backgrounder\\_nato\\_georgia-eng.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/2013530_backgrounder_nato_georgia-eng.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Relations with Georgia", NATO, December 8, 2015. Online access: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_38988.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm)

constantly high for accession. According to November 2015 survey, conducted by the National Democratic Institute, 69 percent of Georgians support NATO membership, naming security and economic benefits, as reasons for their support.<sup>3</sup>

After ten years spent in the Intensified Dialogue, a precursor to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), the issue at hand is whether or not Georgia will receive the MAP in the upcoming Warsaw Summit. Although at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO leaders failed to find consensus on granting MAP status to Georgia, a promise of an eventual membership was given and further reaffirmed during following NATO summits. Eight years after, Georgian government is firmly demanding acknowledgment of Georgia's progress in political and military reforms. Georgian Minister of Defence Tina Khidasheli issued several statements confirming that at this moment the main aim of the government is the NATO membership not MAP, a technical instrument itself, and that from the Warsaw Summit Georgia expects receiving more instruments, helpful and necessary for the preparation of the country to be ready to enter NATO once "the window opens."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the Allies underline the important role of Georgia as one of the closest partner for NATO and strongly support the country in the implementation process of all necessary reforms. But they reaffirmed that Georgia should go through the MAP phase, before it will join the Alliance. In his recent statement, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg once again made it clear that MAP is a political status, granted by Allies based on the consensus decision, therefore before Georgia will join the Alliance it is necessary the consensus to be reached regarding this issue (MAP).

NATO already reassured Georgia with the Foreign Ministers' Joint statement issued in December 2015 that "Georgia's relationship with the Alliance contains all the practical tools to prepare for eventual membership."<sup>5</sup> But, the political decisions as well as further NATO expansion mainly depends on strategic issues in the frames of current security environment as well as on the assessment of the readiness of the aspirant state by the members.<sup>6</sup> Therefore it is not easy to argue that Georgia will receive the MAP at the Warsaw Summit. Russia's resistance towards NATO's expansion to the former Soviet Union states and the need for further reforms in Georgia play the significant role. However, the decision of December 2015 about the Montenegro's invitation to join the Alliance reaffirms NATO's commitment to the open door policy and sends a message to Moscow that it does not have a veto on the Alliance's eastward expansion. This development also gives a hope and optimism to Georgia.

<sup>3</sup> "Public attitudes in Georgia", National Democratic Institute, Survey, November 2015. Online access: [https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_Winter%20poll\\_2015\\_Public%20presentation\\_ENG\\_version%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Winter%20poll_2015_Public%20presentation_ENG_version%20FINAL_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "I have never asked for MAP, I ask for NATO membership – Defense Minister", Interpressnews.ge, February 2, 2016. Online access: <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/75897-i-have-never-asked-for-map-i-ask-for-nato-membership-defense-minister.html?ar=A>

<sup>5</sup> "Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers on Open Door Policy", NATO, December 2, 2015. Online access: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_125591.htm?selectedLocale=en#\\_ftnref1](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_125591.htm?selectedLocale=en#_ftnref1)

<sup>6</sup> Sikharulidze David, "Road to Warsaw", Atlantic Council of Georgia, 2015. Online access; <http://georgianreview.ge/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/sikharulidze-article-eng1.pdf>

## NATO-Georgia Cooperation after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War

Since September 2008 in the wake of post Russo-Georgian August war and tensioned crisis situation, NATO-Georgia cooperation extensively intensified and the significant progress in the reform process is noticeable. Since then, joint NATO-Georgia commission (NGC) is functioning, serving as a forum for political consultations and practical cooperation and supervises the process to help Georgia advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations<sup>7</sup>. Since December 2008, under the auspices of NGC Georgia develops an Annual National Programme (ANP), the document which reflects Georgia's short- to medium-term strategy with all the substantial reforms and issues that assist in bringing Georgia closer to NATO standards.<sup>8</sup> It covers various key areas of cooperation ranging from military and security-sector reforms to political and economic development. Georgia perceives the ANP as an integration instrument. In parallel with the establishment of the NGC, the Military Committee with Georgia was created as a format for meetings focused on military cooperation; also a NATO Liaison Office was established in Georgia in 2010 to support reform efforts and programme of cooperation with NATO.<sup>9</sup>

At the 2014 Wales Summit, Georgia was identified as a country, 'eligible for enhanced cooperation and dialogue opportunities with the Alliance' and<sup>10</sup> currently is implementing the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), a new mechanism of cooperation with the aim to help Georgia strengthen its ability to defend itself; develop its forces and defence ministry.<sup>11</sup> The SNGP comprises measures at the strategic, tactical and operational levels across 13 areas starting from strategic and operational planning, including air and cyber defence and intelligence-sharing.<sup>12</sup> The largest project under the Package—a Joint Training and Evaluation Center—was inaugurated in August 2015. In parallel, the NATO core team for Defence Capacity Building has been set up and is embedded at the Georgian Ministry of Defence. In 2015, furthermore, Agile Spirit, a large-scale NATO-Georgia military exercise, was carried out.

Beyond support for reforms, an important area of cooperation is Georgia's participation in the NATO-led operations. Currently, Georgia is the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (870 troops by December 2015<sup>13</sup>). At the same time, Georgia is providing a company size unit to NATO's Rapid Response Force for 2015-2017.<sup>14</sup> Through its

<sup>7</sup> "Relations with Georgia", NATO, December 8, 2015. Online access:

[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_38988.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm)

<sup>8</sup> "Integration Mechanisms", Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European & Euro-Atlantic Integration. Online access: <http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/en/nato/relations/integration>

<sup>9</sup> "Relations with Georgia", NATO, December 8, 2015. Online access:

[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_38988.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm)

<sup>10</sup> NATO Factsheet, Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), 2014. Online access:

[http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_12/20151209\\_151209-factsheet-nato-georgia-package.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_12/20151209_151209-factsheet-nato-georgia-package.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> "NATO-Georgia Commission discusses state of partnership, welcomes Georgia's reform progress", NATO, July 22, 2015. Online access: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_121864.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121864.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>12</sup> NATO Factsheet, Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), 2014. Online access:

[http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_12/20151209\\_151209-factsheet-nato-georgia-package.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_12/20151209_151209-factsheet-nato-georgia-package.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Troop numbers and contributions, NATO Afghanistan-Resolution Support. Online access:

<http://www.rs.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>

<sup>14</sup> Kumar Sen Ashish, "Keeping Georgia's NATO Dream Alive", Atlantic Council, January 20, 2016. Online access:

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/keeping-georgia-s-nato-dream-alive>

participation in NATO missions, Georgia has established itself as a security provider and has proved its ability to contribute to common security<sup>15</sup> and only not to be a security consumer country.

Allied Ministers several times remarked that Georgia has made significant progress since the Bucharest Summit and has come closer to NATO by implementing ambitious reforms and making good use of the NGC and the ANP; Assessments of the implementation of priorities under the ANP have been positive throughout years.

Indeed, Georgia made several developments: gained the reputation as a leader in democratic growth and judicial reform in the former Soviet Union, where the media and the courts became more independent; passed the democratic elections test, for instance in 2012 the first peaceful constitutional change of power in Georgia took place (coalition Georgian Dream, headed by Bidzina Ivanishvili came into power); reformed its military, command and control systems; invested in advancing of armament technologies and trained deployable units according to NATO standards.

Nevertheless, despite positive trends in the reform process, Georgia's democracy is still fragile. Allies underline that further implementation of reforms is needed, especially, when it comes to the consolidation of democratic institutions, judicial reforms and the respect for the rule of law.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a recent battle over the ownership and control of Georgian broadcasting company 'Rustavi 2' (usually voicing critical stances towards of the ruling Georgia Dream government) unveiled the existence of several problems in relation to the human rights, media freedom as well as internal political power struggle in the country what needs to be handled.

### **Impediments for Georgia on Its Path to NATO Membership**

Despite all the progress Georgia made so far, several factors hamper the country to achieve its declared goal of NATO membership. NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, James Appathurai stated on February 7, 2016 that currently no agreement is achieved among NATO member states regarding the MAP issue for Georgia. What he expects for the Warsaw Summit is a strengthening of the substantial package of measures and practical mechanisms instead of taking a political decision.<sup>17</sup>

The following factors represent the impediments for Georgia in the current situation:

First, Moscow opposes further NATO expansion to former communist space and continues the East-West struggle for influence over post-Soviet states.<sup>18</sup> Besides, President Vladimir Putin and other high ranked Russian officials continue presenting NATO enlargement in general, as a threat to Russian security and national interests. For instance Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> "Joint statement of the NATO-Georgia Commission at the level of Defence Ministers", NATO, February 5, 2016.

Online access: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_117221.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_117221.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>17</sup> Kardava Ketevan, "What will Georgia receive during the Warsaw Summit, instead of a MAP", 1 TV channel, February 7, 2016. Online access: <http://1tv.ge/ge/videos/view/157575.html>

<sup>18</sup> Emmott Robin and Siebold Sabine, "NATO invites Montenegro to join alliance, defying Russia", Reuters, December 2, 2015. Online access: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-montenegro-idUSKBN0TL0J620151202>

September 2015 that any expansion of NATO is "a mistake, even a provocation", also noted that NATO's so-called open door policy was "an irresponsible policy that undermines the determination to build a system of equal and shared security in Europe."<sup>19</sup> In July, 2015 Alexander Grushko, Russia's permanent representative to NATO, made it clear that "any political game concerning NATO expansion into Georgia and Ukraine is filled with the most serious, most profound geopolitical consequences for all of Europe," and that NATO enlargement into Ukraine and Georgia would have "catastrophic consequences" for Europe<sup>20</sup>.

Wars in Georgian in 2008, shortly after the NATO Bucharest April Summit, and in Ukraine in 2014 confirms this policy, aiming to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from further strengthening ties with the West. Despite following "hard power" tools: occupation and formal recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions as independent nations, increase of a military presence of Russian troops there, reinforcement of its positions by concluding Treaties of Alliances with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region for further integration of their security and economies with Russia, -Moscow also effectively exploits "soft power" tools towards Georgia. Kornely Kakachia, Professor of Political Science from Tbilisi State University, argues the usage of NGOs, political parties, Orthodox Church, media and public diplomacy by Russia to earn a positive image in Georgian society, as well as of economic ties to raise Georgia's dependence on Moscow's market is primary motivated with the aim to split public opinion concerning Georgia's foreign policy and hamper Tbilisi's desire to join Euro-Atlantic community.<sup>21</sup>

Second, NATO allies lack the consensus on the message to be send to Tbilisi over its long-delayed membership promise. Sceptic states, for instance France, Italy and Germany do not believe that NATO presence would add to the security and stability of this part of the region, instead they argue that bringing Georgia into NATO would increase risks, coming from Russia. In particular, there is a danger that the Alliance will be unable to defend Georgia if there is a potential for invasion or conflict situation with Russia.<sup>22</sup> While on the other hand major supporters including the U.S., Central and Eastern European states, as well as Turkey, continue advocating for Georgia to be kept in the process of eventual membership and sending a clear message to Moscow by granting a MAP to Georgia. When it comes to the U.S., despite that it considers Georgia as the Alliance's trustworthy partner and feels "committed to Georgia's eventual membership in NATO"<sup>23</sup> it seems that the administration of Barack Obama does not push as hard for Georgia to be invited to join the MAP, as President George W. Bush did, who was actively lobbying for Georgia and Ukraine to be granted MAP at the Bucharest Summit. In March 2014, President Obama declared that "Neither Ukraine or Georgia are currently on a path to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> "Russian Official: NATO Eastward Expansion Would Be 'Catastrophic'", Agence France-Presse, July 25, 2015. Online access: <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/07/28/russian-official-nato-eastward-expansion-catastrophic/30810549/>

<sup>21</sup> Kakachia Kornely, "The Ukraine Crisis: Repercussions on Georgia", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 67–68, December 23, 2014, p.8.

<sup>22</sup> Emmott Robin and Siebold Sabine, "NATO invites Montenegro to join alliance, defying Russia", Reuters, December 2, 2015. Online access: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-montenegro-idUSKBN0TL0J620151202>

<sup>23</sup> Goodenough Patrick, "Hagel Again Assures Georgia of Eventual NATO Membership", CNN NEWS, September 8, 2014. Online access: <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/hagel-again-assures-georgia-eventual-nato-membership>

NATO membership”, instead it seems that he puts a higher priority on preserving the unity of the Alliance.

One more factor complicating the situation is that since 2008 Russian-Georgian war one fifth of Georgia’s territory remains occupied by Russia. Despite the fact, that the Allies support Georgia’s territorial integrity and call on Russia to reverse its recognition of the Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, several NATO countries argue that Georgia will import instability into NATO as the country doesn’t have full control over its territory. Russian side openly says that “should Georgia achieve its goal of joining the NATO, Russia would likely respond by strengthening its garrisons and possibly expanding bases in the breakaway regions”.<sup>24</sup> According to Evgeny Buzhinsky, former Russian ministry of defence’s liaison with NATO during the 2008 Russo-Georgia war, “If Georgia joined NATO tomorrow, in two days they would attack Abkhazia. We would respond, as we are obliged to by our agreements with Abkhazia. Then NATO would have to decide what to do”.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it seems that NATO lacks a clear policy and a united position towards Georgia what is encouraged mostly by Russia. The fact that many European nations are highly dependent on Russian energy and that NATO states seek Moscow's help to fight against terrorism in Syria also plays a role.

There are some more arguments which were voiced and need to be taken into account. For instance, former US Ambassador to Georgia, William Courtney argues, that in the near future it seems impossible for Georgia to become a NATO member because of two following reasons: first, Georgia still has a pure economic performance; its per capita income is twice less than Bulgaria’s, a poorest NATO member. Second, the process of integration of the newly accessed NATO states is not completed yet. For example, the Alliance first has to secure defendability of the Baltic States. In the near future NATO will pay more attention to the security of its own member states.<sup>26</sup> Especially, the recent developments in Ukraine, namely Russia’s annexation of Crimea showcased and contributed to the fear and concern among the NATO member states’ leaders about a possible invasion of Russia in one of the Baltic counties.

## Concluding Remarks and Possible Solutions

Euro-Atlantic integration is the cornerstone of Georgia’s foreign policy and the country aspires to become a fully-fledged NATO member in the future. Despite the fact that Georgia achieved noticeable progress in the implementation of the reform process, anchored in the cooperation programmers with NATO. Several factors still hamper the country to receive long-awaited membership proposal from the Alliance, among them the Russia’s opposition towards NATO’s eastward expansion plays a significant

<sup>24</sup> Oliphant Roland, “Russia 'would boost military presence' in response to Georgia NATO membership”, The Telegraph, August 28, 2015. Online access: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/11831356/Russia-would-boost-military-presence-in-response-to-Georgia-Nato-membership.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Kalandadze Anna, “Georgia may become under the same threat, as Russia did in Crimea”, January 18, 2016. Online access: <http://www.amerikiskhma.com/content/william-courtney-interview/3150249.html>

role. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 reaffirmed once again that Russia perceives the post-Soviet space as its sphere of influence and the extension of Western institutions as a threat.

Moreover, current realities on the international stage, including ongoing developments in Syria raise the importance of NATO's strategic adaptation to the challenges to transatlantic security and strengthening of NATO's capacity to defend its member states. This, in combination with other factors, including the lack of consensus among Allies on what message to send to Georgia over its long-delayed membership promise threatens to positive developments of the declared and long-awaited aim of the country, which is NATO membership.

At this moment, it seems that Georgia also lacks a cohesive policy and proactive stance for voicing its aims in relation to NATO (on the Euro-Atlantic level) as well as a united vision about the preferable ways how to achieve them. Georgia needs more efforts to convince Allies that further enlargement, particularly to Georgia, is going to contribute to Alliance security and to strengthen the argument of those states that support Georgia's rapid NATO integration. To achieve this, coordinated work of Georgian authorities and state institutions is significant. The main attention should be paid to continuation of successful implementation of already started reforms, especially in relation to the consolidation of democratic institutions, as well as strengthening of defence and security sectors in the country. The experience of the Baltic States represents an example how a Russian resistance can be overcome and how undecided NATO members can find a consensus regarding NATO's further expansion.

Georgia should follow the reform process, while NATO should not framework itself only with the positive general statements but also to take some concrete political decisions regarding Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.