

## NATO-Georgia Relations WILL 2014 BRING ANYTHING NEW?

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The foreign policy orientation of Georgia's new government has been the subject of considerable speculation. During the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's 83rd Rose-Roth Seminar, held in Tbilisi, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili reiterated that his government looks forward to receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the 2014 NATO summit. Although he cautioned the Georgian public that his statement should not lead to exaggerated expectations, some skeptics have still questioned his confidence and criticized his statement as unrealistic.

Ivanishvili's government has to an extent reduced Georgia's level of confrontation with Russia without sacrificing the country's overall path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Georgia is also the largest non-NATO troop contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and has indicated its willingness to participate in the post-2014 mission. However, none of this is earning Tbilisi that many points with some major European members of NATO, which seem content with the alliance's existing composition. Georgia's Western partners agree that Russia should not be allowed to control Georgia's foreign policy choices, but its aspirations for membership and NATO's promises toward Tbilisi are likely to stay unfulfilled for the foreseeable future, barring any earthshaking change in global politics, while the country's strategic dilemmas will remain.

### **Stalemate Continues Despite Consensus on Pro-Western Foreign Policy**

NATO integration is one of Georgia's top foreign policy priorities, deemed less a question of choice than a strategic necessity. At the NATO Bucharest summit in April 2008, the Allied Heads of State and Government agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO. This decision was reconfirmed at successive NATO summits, including at the 2012 Chicago summit.

But while Georgia is committed to active political dialogue and practical engagement with NATO, using such integration mechanisms as the NATO-Georgia Commission and the Annual National Program, Georgia's NATO membership bid

remains indefinitely frozen. Although there is a slim chance that Georgia could get a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the 2014 summit, there is plenty of hesitation among NATO members to commit to Georgia's security as a full-fledged NATO ally. Although many Georgians believe that the Alliance might be willing to do something unprecedented for "an aspirant country," it is unlikely that Tbilisi will be able to overcome the misgivings of continental European powers with extensive commercial and energy ties to Russia (like France, Italy, and Germany) who blocked a MAP at the Bucharest summit. Even the position of the United States, previously the strongest voice for Georgian membership in NATO, has altered considerably during the Obama administration, which was focused more (at least in its first term) on the U.S. "reset" with Russia. As a result, while the door to Georgian membership in NATO has been kept open rhetorically, in practice the membership of the country has been put on hold.

Contrary to expectations, Georgia's change in government has not overly influenced its foreign policies, and its strategic orientation toward NATO remains. Although there is no indication that Georgia will become a member in the near future, most Georgians continue to support NATO membership, which they perceive not only as a guarantee of security but a symbol of their belonging to the West. According to a June 2013 survey commissioned by the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI), support for Georgia's EU and NATO integration remains strong at 79 percent and 73 percent, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, most Georgians also realize that with the Russian military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian security is diminished if not shattered. Relations between the two estranged neighbors may be slowly improving, but there is no clear public mandate in either country to push for restoration of diplomatic ties. And while the Ivanishvili government hopes to find a *modus vivendi* with Russia, Georgia will continue to face strong opposition from Russia in its pursuit of NATO membership, regardless of who rules in Tbilisi. On the fifth anniversary of the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev confirmed once again on Georgian television that NATO membership would strain Georgia's ties with Moscow. He also reminded Tbilisi that Russia is a nuclear power—something to keep in mind while weighing the costs and benefits of joining NATO.

As Georgian diplomacy reconsiders how to deal with its powerful northern neighbor, which still tends to view the former Soviet states as virtual vassals, it is not clear how the country can meet the enlargement criteria set by NATO, at least as they are now written:

"States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance."

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Navarro, "Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of a June 2013 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC," available at: <http://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-Georgia-Survey-June-2013-ENG.pdf>.

What should Georgia's strategy be under these circumstances? While no clear long-term strategy and comprehensive idea has yet been defined, the Georgian political class understands that the formulation of such a strategy may involve addressing some politically awkward questions that can contradict or even endanger the national interest.

### **Dynamics of Internal Politics: Territorial Integrity vs. Western Integration**

Russia pushes Georgia to make a false choice between territorial integrity, which is closely linked with Georgia joining the Eurasian Union and returning to Russia's sphere of influence, and continuing with NATO integration (but without its breakaway regions). In doing so, it conveys a message to other post-Soviet states about what might happen if one opposes the Kremlin's will and chooses its own foreign policy orientation.

Under these circumstances, some Western friends of Georgia suggest that Georgians should think "outside the box" in regards to territorial integrity and even "think the unthinkable." According to their advice, if Tbilisi switches its priorities away from recovering the occupied territories and toward anchoring itself in Western institutions, then Georgia's integration with NATO would become a real option. According to this calculation, it will be much easier for NATO to offer Tbilisi a MAP if it does not also have to help secure Georgia's territorial integrity.

However, it is very unlikely that such a course will be adopted any time soon. Many in Georgia believe that even if it were politically possible to accept the so-called "reality on the ground," this would in no way guarantee that Russia would quietly agree to such a concession if it meant Georgia's entry into NATO. Even if Georgia were to somehow give up the territories, Russia still might not drop its objections to Georgian membership, and so NATO itself would be unlikely to accept it as a member. At the end of the day, the Georgian public has not forgotten that Russia's war aims were not about controlling the breakaway regions but punishing Georgia due to its move toward NATO integration and exercising Russia's hard power in its self-declared "near abroad."

Such "appeasement" of Moscow would not be good for the international community either, as it would set a precedent for the forcible change of borders by Russia in the post-Soviet space. It also directly contradicts the principle of inviolability of borders, which constitutes the cornerstone for contemporary European security recognized by the Helsinki Final Act. Human rights also matter. Ethnic cleansing supported by a great power cannot be seen as a legitimate tool of self-determination of any people, including Georgia's separatist regions.

Finally, while few Georgians would disagree that NATO membership is desirable, it is not entirely assured that Western integration would prevail over the issue of territorial integrity if a referendum on the issue were to be proposed.

Understanding this reality, the Kremlin tries to exploit any weaknesses in Tbilisi to gain influence over Georgian politics, which it definitively lost after the 2008 war. As Georgia is not a member of any security organization and its NATO prospects remain uncertain, Moscow also attempts to lure Georgia back to its security realm by hinting that some face-saving solutions might be found with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the auspices of the Moscow-promoted Eurasian Union. But engaging

Moscow too closely and accommodating it too willingly opens the door to constant meddling in Georgia's internal affairs and limits its independence as well as its foreign policy choices.

As Tbilisi is not going to sacrifice its sovereignty and territorial integrity, there has been some discussion about whether or not Georgia could receive NATO membership without extension of security guarantees over its breakaway regions. This would follow the model of West Germany, which was admitted to NATO in 1949 despite its own "frozen conflict" with Moscow—one that was not solved for decades. Supporters of the idea claim that it would not oblige the Alliance to defend parts of Georgia that have not been directly governed by Tbilisi for twenty years. Interestingly, if this plan works out, some Georgian analysts think that Germany could join the United States as a patron of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. However, it's not clear that Germany is prepared to take such a role in upholding Georgia's NATO bid.

While this idea might sound unrealistic, and could be difficult to sell to all NATO members, Tbilisi might nonetheless hope to persuade Washington and its NATO allies that Georgia's situation is unique and, in light of the threat Russia poses to Georgia, that Tbilisi should be exempted from normal procedure. Decisions in NATO are taken by consensus, and it is debatable how many members would be prepared to antagonize Russia by bending the rules in Georgia's case. Still, from the Georgian point of view, the argument is a rational one and worthy of discussion.

### **Conclusion**

Although Georgia's NATO membership prospects seem remote, the cause is not entirely hopeless. Georgia's progress on the membership track to date is noteworthy, especially when one considers the point from which it began. Yet concerted efforts are required in order to put the relationship back on track. Given NATO members' skepticism of Georgian membership, the perpetual promises to incorporate Georgia into Western structures are starting to ring hollow. Some Georgians now say that the price the country is paying to move up on the Alliance's membership waiting list (i.e., the loss of its soldiers in Afghanistan) is too high. This is an indirect result of the policies of the previous government, which created false expectations that were impossible to meet in the short run. Criticizing previous government rhetoric, the new government is also prone to feeding the public unrealistic expectations, claiming that the process of Georgia's gradual integration into NATO is moving forward even faster. If not checked, this tendency can also cause public disillusionment.

Georgia has passed an important test of democracy and accomplished a peaceful transfer of power through parliamentary elections. In this way, the country has made a major step toward integration into NATO. If further reforms and a strengthening of democratic institutions follow, this will bring it even closer to the Alliance. But this also requires NATO to take concrete steps to further Georgia's integration with the Alliance and to avoid policies that combine polite assurances in public with private indifference or aversion. The failure to give Georgia some sort of upgrade in its status in the near future may result in a serious blow for those domestic forces that support Georgia's

Euro-Atlantic integration. This can decrease the enthusiasm of the population toward the country's integration with the West, which may lead to the erosion and eventual crumbling of the nationwide consensus on the issue.

Although Georgians realize that their country's contribution to the ISAF mission is not a means of buying entry into NATO, they do expect that NATO will make reciprocal steps to demonstrate that an integration process is occurring. Whether or not Georgia receives a MAP in 2014, Tbilisi can at least expect that the next NATO summit will acknowledge Georgia's substantial progress, appreciate the current political processes in the country, and encourage practical steps forward toward Georgia's full and irreversible integration into NATO.

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