



# GAME OF (OPEN) DOORS: NATO-Georgian Relations and Challenges for Sustainable Partnership

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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

# POLICY PAPER #18

SEPTEMBER 2020

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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## HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

**Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze, Shalva Dzebisashvili, "Game of (open) Doors: NATO-Georgian Relations and Challenges for Sustainable Partnership", Policy Paper No.18, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2020.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Since the 2008 Russia-Georgia War NATO-Georgia relations have been in limbo. While NATO has never formally closed its doors on Georgia, the alliance has become more skeptical of enlargement and warier of Russian interests. While Georgia's practical NATO integration has continued to deepen, it still remains below the threshold of membership. This policy paper maps the main interests, mismatches, perceptions and misperceptions in the relations between NATO and Georgia. It is argued that while Georgia's territorial disputes are often seen as the proximate impediments to NATO membership, the real reasons are Western European skepticism towards Georgia and an accommodating approach towards Russia. The paper also explores the potential alternatives to NATO membership for Georgia. While Georgia and enlargement-sceptic members of NATO will not be able to solve their differences anytime soon, alternatives to NATO membership seem even more distant or less desirable. Evidence from the post-Soviet area demonstrates that non-alignment and neutrality are suboptimal options whereas a bilateral military partnership with the U.S. would be the most desirable, but less attainable option in the short term.

**Key words:** NATO, Georgia, National security, Russia

## INTRODUCTION

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NATO's approach towards Georgia since the 2008 Russia-Georgia War has been following two key principles: deepening relations with Georgia, while preventing it from joining the Alliance so as to not provoke Russia. The two somewhat contradictory dimensions of NATO's approach explain well the dilemma many NATO member states are facing. On one hand, NATO is officially insisting on its "open door" policy despite the obvious resistance from a camp of skeptical members. On the other hand, it is pursuing a more practical path of interoperability, knowing full well that the only viable option left is a Membership Action Plan (MAP), which the alliance is not ready to propose, due to the "Russian factor". Additionally, many NATO members do not see Georgia as a net contributor to NATO's security and consider Tbilisi's NATO membership as a step leading to an unwanted escalatory spiral with Russia.

For Georgia, NATO's ambivalence has significant repercussions, both internally and externally. While NATO membership may not result in the short-term resolution of Georgia's conflicts, which are exacerbated by Russia, Tbilisi believes it would boost the country's overall security and resilience. Finally, NATO membership has symbolic meaning for Georgia as well, as it would strengthen its quest towards "returning to the European family."

Even as NATO keeps Georgia at an arm's length in terms of formal membership, Georgia's practical approximation to NATO structures and standards has continued at an accelerated pace making Georgia increasingly appear as a de facto NATO member without the Article 5 assurances. Since 2004, Georgia has actively participated in NATO-led operations and is among its top troop contributors, regularly receiving praise for troop interoperability and combat readiness. In 2015, NATO and Georgia signed the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), which initiated comprehensive assistance programs in 13 areas of defense and security-related sectors (including the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center-JTEC). In 2016, Georgia also received recognition as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner country, providing, "all of the privileges that alliance members receive except for the collective security umbrella" (Paul and Andguladze 2018). Finally, NATO members also started to supply Georgia with defensive weapons and technologies<sup>1</sup> – an issue which was politically taboo for some period after the 2008 war with Russia.

Nevertheless, the stalemate between Georgia's desire for formal membership and the NATO Secretary General's "offer" of "strategic patience" (NATO 2017) leads to the logical question of how to manage expectations in Georgia. This is especially important since NATO indecisiveness whether to offer Georgia MAP anytime soon strengthens alternative NATO-sceptic discourses in Georgia, enforced further by Russian propaganda efforts. While the idea

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<sup>1</sup> Military equipment acquired by Georgia from the NATO member countries includes U.S.-made Javelin Missiles (Georgia Today 2020) and French-made short range anti-aircraft missile systems as well as ground-based surveillance radars (Civil Georgia 2018).

of NATO membership enjoys strong support among both the political class and with the population<sup>2</sup>, it is interesting to explore the alternatives to NATO integration and their potential utility in the areas NATO has failed so far – that is, resolving territorial disputes and boosting country’s security by alleviating the external threats. To answer this question, the remainder of this policy paper will proceed in three parts. First, we discuss the main interests and reservations NATO and Georgia harbor in relation to Georgia’s NATO membership. Next, we discuss major contradictions that emerge from conflicting factors such as Georgia’s territorial disputes and Russia’s negative stance on Georgia’s NATO membership. Finally, we analyze three key alternatives to Georgia’s NATO membership: neutrality, the bilateral partnership with the U.S. and the option of major EU involvement. Ultimately, we will conclude the article with some key findings and recommendations.

## NATO AND GEORGIA: CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS OR HIDING THE GAP?

What is at stake for Georgia?	What is at stake for the NATO?
<p><b>Sense of security and hopes for future reunification</b></p> <p>Georgia sees membership of NATO as a way to boost its security in the face of ongoing Russian military aggression and occupation. At the same time, Georgia’s political class, as well as the general population understands that Georgia’s NATO accession may not result in the immediate resolution of territorial disputes given that the occupied zones may be even exempted from NATO’s security umbrella. However, Georgians still believe that the chances for resolving the disputes will increase if Georgia joins the North-Atlantic Alliance.</p> <p><b>...and beyond</b></p> <p>For Georgia, NATO membership would strengthen country’s defense resilience, including its capacity to fight cyber-attacks, terrorism, espionage and other forms of so-called hybrid warfare. NATO membership is a long- term project which would</p>	<p><b>Peace and stability</b></p> <p>NATO’s main objectives are ensuring peace, stability and security of its members states while projecting stability in their immediate neighborhood. At the same time, the past twenty-five years have shown that NATO’s neighboring countries, unable or unwilling to join the alliance, are stuck in a kind of buffer zone between NATO/EU and Russia. They cannot act as contributors to the Alliance’s security and are especially prone to bad governance, political instability and violent conflicts. Consequently, instead of a peaceful neighborhood, NATO is facing a "belt" of instability and growing Russian influence. Hence it is in the interest of NATO to strengthen Georgia's ties to the West in order to increase its resilience against the malign Russian influence which promotes instability, governance failure and violent conflicts.</p>

<sup>2</sup> According to the latest public opinion survey, support for NATO membership stands at 69% (Civil Georgia 2020b).

ensure Georgian sovereignty and national security for decades.

#### **NATO as a way of “Returning to Europe”**

NATO membership also has a significant philosophical meaning for Georgia. It symbolizes Georgia’s return to the European family – an idea on which Georgian statehood and national identity has been constructed since the declaration of independence in 1991. As the EU membership seems even more distant due to the enlargement fatigue within the EU, close institutional relations with NATO are becoming more instrumental in validating Georgia's self-identification as part of the West.

#### **Consolidating the reform process**

Although NATO membership remains a top priority for the Georgian political class and the general populace, the growing dissatisfaction with the lasting membership (and MAP) denial cannot simply be dismissed. For many in Georgia, denying MAP at this point appears as a rejection of Georgia by its Western partners. Hence Georgia’s political elites have failed to establish proper communication with its citizens and calm down overoptimistic expectations on NATO membership. Nevertheless, the indefinite postponement of Georgia’s MAP has already become a powerful instrument in the hands of illiberal and ultra-conservative forces, who want to derail the fragile process of democratization and bring the country into Russia’s orbit.

#### **NATO - a legitimizing factor for internal consumption**

Although NATO membership has not lost its urgency and actuality in the agenda of the various Georgian governments, a deeper look into the results of security and defense sector reforms renders a quite unsatisfying and mixed picture.

#### **Trump factor and reconfiguration of the Georgian issue**

As long as the Trump administration remains fixated on the 2% defense funding problem within NATO, and transatlantic harmony continues to experience frequent unnecessary shocks, like Turkey’s hawkish behavior toward the EU, the top political challenge for the Alliance remains the preservation of unity among its members. This obviously, pushes the "Georgian problem" further down NATO’s priorities list leaving the final decision on Georgia’s membership to a more "favorable future".

#### **Loyal outpost in a strategic region**

There is no consensus among the scholars of NATO as to whether Georgia will contribute to NATO’s security or become a problematic consumer of security in case of membership. Nonetheless, from a geostrategic perspective, the Black Sea country adds value to the Alliance. It is located in a strategic region connecting Russia with Iran and the Middle East, and the EU to the Central Asia (potentially even bypassing Turkey via the Black Sea). At the same time, Georgia is the part of a strategic energy corridor which transports energy resources to Europe bypassing Russia and has room to increase its supply potential.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Doing dirty work**

Georgia does what many NATO members do not – sending a significant number of troops to NATO’s out-of-area missions such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. For some time, Georgia was the highest non-NATO contributor of troops surpassing even the majority of NATO members in both Iraq and Afghanistan (Coffey 2018b). And unlike

<sup>3</sup> Georgia already hosts several gas and oil pipelines however their share in overall energy consumption of the NATO countries (with exception of Turkey) is rather modest. However, Georgia has potential to become an even more important energy and transport hub in the future. The EU recently acknowledged Georgia’s transit potential and allocated 3 billion Euros for transport infrastructure projects for the Black Sea country (European Commission 2019).

Despite the long history of reform efforts since the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, significant problems continue to plague the Georgian defense sector, starting from the basic shortcomings in democratic control, politicization and transparency down to the chronic underfunding and inability to achieve long-term resource and strategic planning (Dzebisashvili 2014; Darchiashvili 2008). From that perspective, it seems that to a large extent the integrational effort has, and continues to, serve as tool of political manipulation and source of domestic political legitimization.

many NATO members, Georgian forces operated without national caveats preventing offensive operations, making them especially valuable in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations. This is a valuable contribution especially since engagement in NATO's military missions has become increasingly unpopular in many European NATO member countries.

#### **Normalization of relations with Russia**

Georgia's NATO membership is intimately linked to NATO's long-term objective of normalizing relations with its former archenemy – the Russian Federation. Similar to the skeptical views during the Alliance's first enlargement wave, the last decade experienced a heated debate in the West whether the inclusion of post-Soviet states in the Alliance alienates Russia and serves as red line for the Kremlin (Mearsheimer 2014; Walt 2015a, 2015b; Wolff 2015). Irrespective of opposing views within the Alliance and the unwillingness to grant Russia veto power, a general consensus had been formed that that a new enlargement should not result in an uncontrolled spiral of confrontation with Russia.

#### **Support for political reforms in Georgia**

Promotion of democracy and the rule of law was not a primary function of NATO, yet over time it has adopted a strong normative script and included political criteria in its enlargement conditionality. Accordingly, candidate countries need to conform to the basic principles of "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law" in order to be eligible for NATO membership (NATO 1995). From this point, NATO's objective in Georgia became strengthening Georgia's democratic development, institutions and societal resilience.



*Peacekeeping troops from the 1st Infantry Brigade of the Georgian Defence Forces before their departure for Kabul.  
Photo via Ministry of Defence of Georgia*

## MAIN MISMATCHES BETWEEN NATO AND GEORGIA

### *Territorial disputes*

There are two main mismatches between the interests of Georgia and NATO members which has resulted in indefinite postponement of Georgia's membership: Georgia's territorial disputes and Russia's geo-political posture. The two factors are closely interconnected, but distinct from each other. First, many NATO members maintain that a country with territorial conflicts is not eligible for NATO membership, and this claim is directly derived from the membership criteria established in 1999, which clearly states:

- *"...to settle their international disputes by peaceful means."*
- *"to settle ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes including irredentist claims or internal jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles and to pursue good neighbourly relations" (NATO 1999).*

In fact long before the MAP document was introduced, the enlargement study made it clear that *"...Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance"* (NATO 1995).

Ever since Georgia's NATO membership became relevant, Tbilisi has been repeatedly reminded by European politicians that the disputes over Abkhazia and so-called South

Ossetia posed a serious impediment for Georgia's NATO membership (Eurasianet 2018). In turn, many in Georgia consider this position as hypocritical. Former Georgian Defense Ministry Official draws a parallel between Georgia and Germany saying that occupation of Georgian territories should not be an obstacle, because "when Germany became a NATO member, one-third of its territory was occupied by the Soviet Union" (Eurasianet 2018).<sup>4</sup> Between these two opposing views, there are ideas of midrange solutions that may mitigate the dilemma of Georgia's territorial disputes and NATO membership such as a membership option for Georgia without a security guarantees for its breakaway regions. This would follow the model of West Germany, which was admitted to NATO in 1955 despite its own "frozen conflict" with Moscow – and 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-seven years. Interestingly, some Georgian analysts even voiced hopes that Germany could join the United States as a co-patron of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. However, judging the current geopolitical situation it is not clear whether Germany is prepared to or even considers taking 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. Additionally, any membership scenario whatsoever would become unrealistic if the unoccupied core of Georgia's territory is not "secured" by strong defense guarantees. Decisions in NATO are taken by consensus, and it is debatable how many members would be prepared to antagonize Russia by modifying the rules in Georgia's case. Still, from the Georgian point of view, the argument is a rational one and worth discussing. In fact, the model of accepting Georgia to NATO without extending security guarantees to its occupied territories has found some support in Western circles. For instance, a recent Heritage Foundation report advocated this view (Coffey 2018b). According to Luke Coffey, the author of the report:

*"NATO could amend Article 6 of the 1949 treaty (which defines which territories fall under the Article 5 protection) to temporarily exclude only the Russian-occupied region from NATO's Article 5 protection. So all of Georgia would join NATO, but only the regions of Georgia not under Russian occupation – about 80 percent of the country – will get the alliance's security guarantee" (Coffey 2018a).*

This would allow Georgia to join the Alliance more quickly and "would deny Moscow's de facto veto on countries under partial Russian occupation which want to join the Alliance" (Coffey 2018b, 14). Still, it is unclear whether this model of accepting Georgia into NATO

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<sup>4</sup> Often, similar opinion is aired by the Western scholars and experts. For instance, Lieutenant General (Retired) Ben Hodges provides a similar argument: "There are concerns that 20% of the country is still occupied by Russian troops, but there is a precedent for NATO membership; Germany was divided in East and West, where you had hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops occupying East Germany. Yet, West Germany was brought into the Alliance, and this is something that could be worked out [also for Georgia]" (Civil Georgia 2019).

would gain broad support from all NATO members, and until it does, Georgia's territorial disputes remain a deal breaker towards NATO membership.



*Russian-led "borderization" activities in Georgia. Photo: Nino Dalakishvili*

### *Russian red line - a veto right?*

Russia's presumed veto power over Georgia's NATO membership stretches far beyond Georgia's territorial conflicts as Russia opposes Georgia's NATO membership under any circumstances. At the end of the day, the territorial conflicts are the powerful tool for the Kremlin. It effectively utilizes to stop Georgia's accession to the Alliance, but also to slow down the Westernization process and manipulate the internal political situation in country in its favor. Therefore, whereas solving the conflicts ex-ante would certainly make Georgia's NATO bid more credible, it is far from obvious that all NATO members would support Georgia's NATO bid given the Russian objections would still be there. Germany and France as the main opponents to Georgian membership argued at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit that granting a MAP would "provoke Russia unnecessarily" (The Wall Street Journal 2008) and their position has not changed much since then. The former NATO Secretary General, Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, shared a similar position at a meeting in Bucharest. According to him, NATO should not even have given Georgia and Ukraine a membership promise because it "drove Putin into a corner" (Georgia Today 2018). Instead "the West should have respected the red lines of Russia" and "NATO should not have committed to the membership of Ukraine and Georgia", according to Scheffer (Georgia Today 2018). For its part, Russia has constantly asserted to NATO that the Kremlin considers Georgia's NATO membership as a clear red line (German 2017). For instance, in 2018 then Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev said Georgia's accession to NATO would cause "a terrible conflict" between Russia and NATO, which would be NATO's fault (Reuters 2018). However, one must be clear, not everyone within NATO agrees with accommodating policy towards Russian red lines. Another former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen admitted recently that the Bucharest decision (to not give Georgia and Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP) was

“a wrong signal to Putin” which encouraged Russia to invade Georgia a few months later (IWPR 2018). Still it seems that the so-called soft-liners towards Russia have been in the majority in NATO ever since Georgia’s membership was put on the political agenda.

At the same time, it is not to say that accommodating the Russian red line is an easy endeavor for NATO. At the declaratory level at least, it seems that the NATO does not want to give up on the liberal script of international order that is based on multilateralism and eschews the existence of zones of influence. NATO’s top officials constantly reiterate support to alliance’s open-door policy and deny Russia agency in NATO’s decision-making. As the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg stated during his recent visit in Georgia, NATO would not accept “that Russia or any other power can decide what members can do” (RFE/RL 2019). However, as long as NATO insists that Georgia cannot be accepted because of its territorial disputes and conflict with Russia, it implicitly acknowledges Russia has de facto veto power, undermining NATO credibility in Georgia.

## IMAGINARY ALTERNATIVES TO NATO MEMBERSHIP AND REALITY CHECK

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While Georgia’s commitment to Euro Atlantic integration is unprecedented<sup>5</sup>, the stalemate in the process of NATO (and EU) membership naturally contributes to emergence of alternative discourses voiced by pro-Kremlin political groups related to the country’s foreign policy orientation and alliances. Most prominent among them is a policy of neutrality and non-alignment which has long been advocated by Eurosceptic and NATO-sceptic political figures. Some other voices disillusioned by the protracted process of Georgia’s NATO integration also discuss the option of boosting bilateral relations with the U.S. or the EU to replace or supplement the lack of formal commitment from NATO. Below we try to discuss each of the main alternatives in detail.

### *Non-alignment and neutrality as a non-option for Georgia*

Over the last decade Georgia has been the most pro-Western country in the EU’s eastern neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the discussion on neutrality as an alternative to Georgia’s Euro Atlantic integration has routinely been spotted by pro-Kremlin political groups and some parts of Georgian society which harbor pro-Russian sentiments. The neutrality discourse is not always inspired by Russia, but is often driven by domestic Euroscepticism and/or Russia-friendly actors. It has not garnered any meaningful traction politically and has failed to become part of the dominant discourse in Georgian society. However, as Georgia’s NATO

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<sup>5</sup> There is a broad consensus in Georgia both among the political class and in general public about the country’s pro-Western orientation and particularly about NATO and EU membership (Atlantic 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Support for NATO and EU membership in Georgia has always been the highest among the post-Soviet states (Civil Georgia 2020a; Atlantic 2019).

integration continues to stall, frustrated public becomes more susceptible to the pro-Kremlin narrative, and vulnerable to the seeming allure of neutrality.

Supporters of neutrality focus on the few successful cases of small states with neutral status such as Switzerland or Austria. However, there have been many more cases in world history when neutral states are quickly swallowed by their big neighbors (i.e. Belgium during both World Wars). Georgian neutrality today would rather resemble the Belgian case. Neutrality presupposes the approval of the status by all key players in the region, which is based on a very rational calculation that preservation of neutrality is in interests of all major powers. Alternately, a neutral country should be in possession of some unique capabilities which would contain the aggressor. Georgia lacks any specific advantage which would prevent Russia from further coercive measure; nor is there a consensus among major powers about Georgia's potential neutral status. Finally, Russia's approach to its "Near Abroad" does not make neutrality a viable option for any country viewed by Russia as such. Russia's relations with Moldova and Ukraine – two other EaP countries which have adopted a pro-Western course – provide powerful examples why Georgia should avoid the neutrality trap at any cost.<sup>7</sup>

Since its independence from the USSR, Moldova has tried strenuously to enshrine permanent neutrality as a core principle of its foreign policy. Both the Constitution of Moldova adopted in 1994 and modified several times since then, and the Concept of Foreign Policy of Moldova adopted in 1995 highlight permanent neutrality as a fundamental principle of Moldova's foreign policy (Cebotari 2010, 84; Presidency of the RM 2016, Article 11). Moldova's status of permanent neutrality was initially thought to be a substitute for a military force, "a cheap way of defending the sovereignty and independence" as well as limiting the presence of Russia's military forces (Cebotari 2010, 86). More fundamentally, Moldova hoped that implementation of the neutrality policy would "secure the country's national interests", contribute to the "consolidation of peace and stability on its territory" and resolve the conflict in Transdnistria (Cebotari 2010, 84).

Unlike Georgia, the conflict in Transdnistria has remained relatively peaceful, however, its frozen status highlights the fact that official neutrality is no guarantee to achieve territorial unification. It also clearly shows Russian unwillingness to obey to formal commitments and regard former satellites as beyond their direct rule. In the best-case scenario, which is rather unlikely, Russia would ease its pressure on Georgia (for instance by temporarily abandoning the creeping occupation of Georgian territory). However, Moscow would never reverse its policies on the major issues of the Georgian political agenda, such as territorial unity and

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<sup>7</sup> Some experts would welcome Finlandization of Georgia and the EaP region in general. The proponents of Finlandization argue that Finland maintained its independence throughout the Cold War despite its neutrality, and that Georgia should follow suit. There are however two critical differences between the Finnish and Georgian cases. First, Finland is much larger than Georgia and as such more difficult to occupy thus easier for it to maintain its independence. Second, Finland de facto defeated the Soviet Union in the Winter War of 1939-40, and the memory of that defeat remained a powerful deterrent throughout the Cold War. Georgia lacks a similar deterrent.

security. From this perspective neutrality is too high a price to pay to receive only minor concessions from the aggressor.

The unfortunate fate of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed at the OSCE conference by Russia, U.S. and UK in 1994 is another example of Russia's irresponsible approach towards international treaties and commitments. In exchange for joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (which meant giving up the control on its nuclear stockpile and transferring it to Russia) the signatories guaranteed "respect for Ukraine's borders, independence, and sovereignty, and promise[d] to refrain from the threat or use of economic and military force" (Talbot and Tennis 2019). Just 20 years later, however, Russia annexed the Crimea and orchestrated a military confrontation in the Eastern part of Ukraine. The U.S. and the UK supported Ukraine politically and imposed sanctions on Russia, but this did not result in the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity or in a significant improvement of the country's overall security.

The neutrality discourse in Georgia is closely linked with the idea that Georgia's NATO membership would result in the complete loss of two occupied regions. Somewhat strikingly, 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 instead firmly anchors itself in Western institutions, then Georgia's integration with NATO would become a realistic option. Continuing this logic, abandoning the mission of securing the country's territorial integrity will make it much easier for NATO to offer Tbilisi a MAP. However, this view wrongly assumes the logic of accession by casting the factor of territorial integrity as the only issue. Even if it were politically possible to accept the "reality on the ground," this would in no way guarantee that Russia would simply agree to such a concession if it meant Georgia's entry into NATO. Even if Georgia were to somehow give up the territories, Russia might not drop its objections to Georgian membership, and so NATO itself would be unlikely again to accept it as a member. According to many analysts, at the end of the day, Russia's war aims in 2008 were not about controlling the breakaway regions but punishing and preventing Georgia from moving closer to NATO by exercising Russia's hard power in its self-declared "near abroad" (Asmus 2010).

While few Georgians would reject the idea of NATO membership, 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. Well aware of this, the Kremlin tries to exploit any weakness in Tbilisi in this regard 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 has attempted to lure Georgia back into its orbit by hinting at some face-saving solutions which could be implemented regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the auspices of the Moscow-promoted Eurasian Union (Kakachia 2013). This would naturally open the door to constant Russian interference in Georgian internal affairs and would limit Georgia's foreign policy options. Additionally, hybrid measures applied by Moscow to impact the Georgian society should also not be underestimated. A

media monitoring report conducted by the Tbilisi-based Media Development Foundation, which studies anti-Western propaganda, documented a significant increase in the intensity of anti-Western and pro-Russian discourse in Georgian media in the past year exposing it to too much of the population (Kintsurashvili and Gelava 2019).



*EUMM Monitoring Mission, Council of the European Union*

### *Is European military umbrella an option?*

Since the August War in 2008 the EU has become the only international actor with "boots on the ground" in Georgia. Since October 2008, the EU-Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has been set up to monitor "compliance by all sides with the EU brokered Six-Point Agreement of 12 August" and "contribute to the stabilization of the situation on the ground" (EUMM 2020). The EUMM did not significantly improve overall security of Georgia. Neither could it prevent Russia's hybrid approach including creeping occupation and the so-called borderization process (Kakachia 2018). Yet, the EUMM does provide a minimal hedge against a future full-scale military conflict.

However, the EU cannot replace NATO in terms of hard security. This division of labor is clearly manifested in the EU's inability to offer any meaningful solution with regards to Georgia. There is the question of the capabilities of a European military umbrella. Many hoped that UK's departure from the EU would bolster the Collective Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and push the remaining EU member states towards deeper military integration (DGAP 2018). Loud statements from key European politicians have been issued from time to time about the necessity of a European army and greater EU military integration (Politico 2019; BBC 2019). The first steps in this direction have been made with the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF); and by adopting the Military Planning and

Conduct Capability (MPCC) which is an out-of-area command and control structure for the EU. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future the EU will continue to lack the capacity to replace NATO command structures or conduct military operations without significant NATO support.

There is also a question of will, both political and militarily. Even if the dream of a European army becomes true someday, there is no guarantee that it will accommodate Georgia's security, political or ideational interests the way NATO would. For one, the EU, will be less inclined to engage in arm twisting with Russia. Whereas institutionally the EU is a more stable and predictable partner, key EU member states are often constrained by their specific strategic culture that, unlike the U.S., is generally more accommodating if not appeasing towards Russia (Herzinger 2019) and have little interest in Europe's Eastern neighborhood. It is also worth remembering that at the end of the day, it was European NATO members – France and Germany<sup>8</sup> – which blocked Georgia's NATO advancement in Bucharest and have remained major critics of Georgia's NATO membership since then. Therefore, without the U.S. pressure in place, the idea of military support to Georgia and much more, its integration, would find even less enthusiasm among the EU members than it does in NATO. As such any future breakthrough in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration will be initiated by the U.S. at some point in the future if at all.



U.S.-Georgia military exercises at the Vaziani training area, Ministry of Defense of Georgia

### *Taiwan as role model - Can Bilateral treaty with the U.S. strengthen Georgia's security?*

<sup>8</sup> Recently, the former NATO Secretary General confirmed in the op-ed that NATO postponed the decision "at the insistence of Germany and France" (Rasmussen 2019).

A bilateral military treaty with the U.S. seems the most desirable option and yet it is rather unrealistic for Georgia at the time being. While the U.S.-Taiwan security arrangement might seem an ideal example for Georgia, U.S. security interests in Taiwan have been of much greater standing for a much longer time than they are in Georgia. Moreover, Taiwan's location, economy, and security are all essential to American interests, and the assumption that the U.S. is committed to defending Taiwan in case of attack is one of the foundations of security and stability in Asia (Bader and Paal 2008; Tucker 2009). In addition, U.S. foreign policy strategy is generally very cautious when it comes to commitments on bilateral level and it has so far signed bilateral military treaties with only a handful of countries. Further, there are systemic changes at the global level which may have a negative impact on Georgia achieving a bilateral treaty with the U.S. They include U.S.'s pivot to Asia which started under Barack Obama and has intensified under Donald Trump; and the commercialization of the U.S. security and defense policy that makes U.S. protection conditional on financial contributions from its allies. Significant changes have also been occurring in Georgia's immediate neighborhood including the dramatic militarization of Russia's foreign policy, the gradual deterioration of relations between Turkey and the U.S./EU;<sup>9</sup> and periodic escalations with Iran and across the broader Middle East. Whereas Russia's military assertiveness may further deter peace-loving Europeans from inviting Georgia to the Alliance, it can also bolster direct support to Georgia as a reliable outpost in a strategically important region. Similar can be said given the worsening relations between Turkey and NATO.

While a full-blown defense pact between Georgia and the U.S. is still far away, Georgia has achieved some significant progress towards a bilateral track with the U.S. Georgia initiated the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership in 2009 and annual high-ranking meetings are held within the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission (U.S. Department of State 2019). The priority areas covered by the Charter include democracy, defense, security, economic, trade and energy issues; as well as people-to-people and cultural exchanges (U.S. Department of State 2019). While the present U.S. administration has continued to sell Javelins to Georgia and deploy combat units to train Georgian military (none of which would have been possible prior to the Russian war in Ukraine), the Trump Administration lacks the political determination to offer Georgia security commitments on a bilateral level anytime soon. Moreover, President Trump made it clear that he is no longer interested in promoting global democracy and has hinted at the U.S. becoming less engaged with the rest of the world. These factors together with some existing transatlantic tensions (US-EU tensions, Turkey's geopolitical posture, Turkish-Greek tensions etc.) makes Georgia's security even more vulnerable to outside pressure. At present U.S.-Georgia relations, as well as Georgia's NATO membership, is being guided by inertia and lacks clear focus from both Tbilisi and Washington. While Tbilisi lacks a vision of how to enhance or upgrade its bilateral relations, Washington has been prioritizing its resources and pays most of its attention to the overall democratization process in the country, and the ruling party's compliance with the standard norms of transparent and democratic governance. Georgia needs to receive a very strong,

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<sup>9</sup> Recently the bilateral ties between the U.S. and the NATO member Turkey reached a new low when Turkey decided to buy Russian anti-missile defense system S-400 instead despite the U.S. warning. The two countries also remain split on Syria and Iran (DW 2019).

united message from the U.S. regarding its Euro-Atlantic integration as well as clear guidance on how to deal with expectation management at home. Despite the many flaws in its strategy, the West is still the main guarantor of Georgia's democratic consolidation and its unstable security.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Georgia looks to the West, it is apparent that constructing a durable democracy and a productive economy in an unstable security environment is a major challenge. While the country's Western friends expect the Georgian political class to deliver on promises to improve the democratization process, incentives offered by the Euro-Atlantic community are not sufficient, especially as each Western carrot is coupled with a Russian stick. Although Georgia's level of cooperation with NATO is unmatched among the other post-Soviet republics, the stalled process of acquiring a MAP is frustrating for the country's elites and public at large. In this delicate situation, constant and consistent dialogue between Georgia and its Western partners can help ensure that the country remains on the path to democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration. Georgia also needs a political compass or road map from its Western partners on how to move forward with strategic patience, and without damaging its Euro-Atlantic identity.

This paper discussed the main challenges that lay ahead of Georgia's NATO membership and whether there are viable alternatives for Georgia. Overall, we can conclude that whereas the stalemate is here to stay the country has no alternative to NATO membership to ensure its long-term security and enhance its resilience. Perhaps the fact that after ten years of "strategic patience" 78% of the population still supports the country's NATO aspirations shows that Georgia still has no alternative. However, there are some urgent issues which need to be addressed both by Georgia and the NATO partners in order to ensure that Georgia survives this period of NATO skepticism. This must be done without falling into political instability and without any weakening of statehood, and, while not allowing anti-western elements to utilize the ongoing stalemate to sabotage the Western orientation of the country.

Having reviewed the existing alternatives for Georgia, we can make following conclusions:

- Despite the ongoing stalemate toward achieving NATO-membership dubbed the "strategic patience," the Georgian populace has not lost its enthusiasm or faith in Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as the EU and NATO.
- Eurosceptic forces in Georgia are still a minority, but as more time passes without ascension into the EU or NATO, these forces can utilize the deadlock to sabotage the Western orientation of the country and with it the process of political and military reforms.

- By not addressing Georgia's security concerns and fears of renewed Russian military aggression, NATO, as well as its key members individually, directly "support" the narrative that the pro-Kremlin and Eurosceptic forces are pushing within Georgian society, this undermines the overall process of democratic transformation and the adoption of western political standards.

Based on this we present the following recommendations:

### *For the Georgian government*

- The Georgian government should continue knocking at NATO's door and patiently implement all necessary reforms proposed by the NATO partners in terms of membership conditionality. Georgia should be fully prepared for any window of opportunity and it should not be a matter of technical questions whether the country is eligible for the membership once the membership door is opened.
- The Georgian government needs to improve its strategic messaging with its NATO partners. It is important that Georgia is increasingly associated with successful democratic reforms, increased state and societal resilience and improved defense capacity. These achievements will significantly alleviate doubts about Georgia's credibility and present Georgia as an overall security contributor.
- The Georgian government should do everything possible to increase the frequency and number of "NATO-boots on the ground" in Georgia by offering larger variety of joint exercises with NATO troops. Additionally, Georgia can offer to establish permanent NATO-Georgia logistical and training bases, allowing them to receive and host large numbers of NATO and multinational forces.
- The Georgian government should improve its communication strategy with the population to avoid anti-NATO backlash which is being actively cultivated by Eurosceptic political groups. Rather than focusing on short-term outcomes the government (and other pro-Western parties) should focus on the ideational importance and long-term benefits of NATO. It should stress that integration into NATO – even without formal membership – is the long-term project that will secure Georgia's place in the European family, improve its economic development chances and enhance country's resilience amid rising security challenges.
- The Georgian government and other pro-Western political parties and civil society actors should help to debunk myths about neutrality as a viable alternative to Western integration. NATO Integration Centers and an active information policy promoting a positive image of NATO have helped keep attitudes towards the Alliance positive even as the membership process has remained slow.

### *For NATO and its member states*

- NATO should think about alternative, perhaps provisional, security-providing mechanisms below the membership threshold to address Georgia's legitimate security concerns and increase its resilience.
- Together or individually NATO members should start conceptualizing new security arrangements with Georgia, with some key steps and ideas implemented in a bilateral format. Joint logistical and training centers could serve as a practical option.
- NATO must increase its presence on the eastern shore of the Black Sea linking itself with freedom of navigation and security in the Black Sea region.
- NATO has to send clear signals to the Kremlin that it has acknowledged a growing responsibility towards Georgia since the Bucharest summit and will not allow Russia to keep Georgia in a strategic limbo. Simultaneously, the alliance can indicate that strengthening Georgia's defense capabilities by no means would imply any threat to Russia or increase of alliance military infrastructure that could objectively be perceived by Russia as a threat.

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