

# THE NEXT STAGE IN NATO-GEORGIA RELATIONS: FILLING THE DEMOCRACY GAP



British Embassy  
Tbilisi



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
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The 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. It also encourages public participation in civil society-building and developing democratic processes. The organization aims to become a major center for scholarship and policy innovation for the country of Georgia and the wider Black sea region. To that end, GIP is working to distinguish itself through relevant, incisive research; extensive public outreach; and a bold spirit of innovation in policy discourse and political conversation.

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# Table of Contents

**4** Executive Summary

---

**5** Introduction

---

**8** An Evolving Partnership: The Four Stages of NATO-Georgia Relations

---

**10** Navigating Uncertainty: How Experts and Public View NATO-Georgia Relations

---

**15** Avoiding the Gridlock: How to Enhance the NATO-Georgia Partnership?

---

**17** Conclusion & recommendations

---

**22** Annex: Participants of the focus group

---

**23** References

---

## Executive Summary

The policy paper examines the current state and future prospects of the NATO-Georgia partnership in the context of evolving geopolitical dynamics, particularly following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The relationship has been marked by mutual restraint and strategic ambiguity since the 2008 NATO summit, with pragmatic partnership confined to practical cooperation areas. This policy paper emphasizes the central role of strengthening Georgia's democracy and societal resilience on its path towards NATO integration. To enhance its partnership with the alliance while waiting for a window of opportunity for more substantive membership prospects, Georgia is well-advised to take the Nordic path: strengthen its democracy, societal resilience and establish functional deterrence by implementing comprehensive security sector reform. The paper concludes that Georgia's path to NATO integration hinges on its ability to present a compelling case for membership through robust democratic governance, transparency of the defense and security sector, as well as societal and civil-military resilience. In doing so, Georgia can compensate for the geopolitical challenges that make future Georgian NATO membership an unattractive prospect for many NATO allies - such as the existence of occupied territories, Russia's geopolitical assertiveness and geographic distance from core NATO members. Developing a robust democracy with an effective military deterrent and resilient society could transform Georgia's image from one of an indefensible, security-consumer state into one of an invaluable member and potential security-provider to the alliance.

**Key words:** NATO, Georgia, Democracy, Resilience, Black Sea Security



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N A T O - G E O R G I A

## Introduction

The February 2022 full-scale Russian war of aggression in Ukraine reverberated far beyond the battlefield, forever altering the security landscape of the Black Sea region. For Georgia, alongside Ukraine and Moldova, the tremors were particularly acute. Long a focal point of Moscow's assertive regional policy, Tbilisi had for decades navigated a precarious path, seeking Western integration while attempting to escape Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence. However, the Ukraine war not only amplified Georgia's vulnerability but also exposed a concerning reality: the war revealed the extent of Georgia's insecurity across foreign, security, and domestic spheres. This was further exacerbated by Georgia's lack of committed allies or firm security guarantees like NATO's Article 5. Moreover, years of domestic political turmoil had distracted Georgia from strategically safeguarding its security and future within Europe and the international order.

Against the backdrop of shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea region and in the aftermath of the Russian war in Ukraine, interactions between NATO and Georgia have entered a crucial phase, demanding a new impulse in their relationship. For a long time, Georgia used to be a major regional partner for NATO. Backed by its status as a regional champion of reforms in the security sector and good governance (World Bank 2012), Tbilisi pushed for NATO accession in close alliance with Ukraine (Asmus 2010). But the intensity of NATO-Georgia partnership has been practically stalled since the 2008 NATO summit, when NATO member states formally recognized Georgia as a candidate but opted to practically put further steps towards accession, such as the granting of a membership action plan (MAP), on hold.

In recent years, despite Georgia's efforts in implementing institutional reforms and codifying European and Euro-Atlantic integration into its Constitution, NATO and Georgia have both exercised restraint, restricting their partnership to practical areas of cooperation. While Georgian public support for NATO membership has remained steadily high (NDI 2023), Georgia's NATO membership bid has encountered similar political hurdles to those facing it in the road to EU accession: a series of seemingly unwise policy choices that have sparked uncertainty among the nation's Western allies regarding its commitment to democracy.

These concerns have been increasingly voiced by NATO officials (Tavberidze 2022). In its relations with Georgia, Brussels has also emphasized that, although the alliance will not yield to pressure from Russia on its open-door policy, prospective members like Georgia must undertake substantial domestic reforms and address territorial disputes to qualify for membership (Tavberidze 2022). Consequently, in the final communique issued by NATO leaders on July 11 2023 at the Vilnius Summit, it was explicitly stated that the alliance reaffirmed the 2008 Bucharest Summit decision, declaring that "Georgia will become a member" (NATO 2023c). However, unlike Ukraine, this process for Georgia includes MAP (Membership Action Plan) as an integral part of the journey.

The move was seen by many (Katamadze 2023) as effectively dismantling what used to be a Tbilisi-Kyiv duo, as the two countries' applications had for years largely been discussed in tandem (Gabritchidze 2023). In addition, experts note that following the events of 2008, Georgia demonstrated a distinct eagerness to align with NATO, actively taking tangible steps towards integration. In contrast, Ukraine's efforts in the direction of NATO post-2014 appeared less transparent compared to Georgia's unequivocal approach. The landscape shifted dramatically in 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading to a significant change in dynamics. Presently, Ukraine has forged closer ties with NATO, whereas Georgia continues its gradual and inertia-driven journey towards NATO integration (Voice of America 2024).

However, this did not necessarily result in a downturn in bilateral relations since both sides agreed on the necessity of a prudent approach and less ambitious engagement in a period in which Russia's geopolitical assertiveness had reached unprecedented levels. Talking about Georgia's membership perspective, a high-level NATO official recently stated: "We know that right now is not the time for a breakthrough in the open-door policy. And I know the Georgian authorities know that, but they still need to be prepared, to fulfill all the reforms that are needed - in electoral reform, judicial reform, security, etc." (Tavberidze 2022). Aside from these external, geopolitical barriers, Georgia's path to NATO also faces a formidable hurdle within its own political landscape. While the country outwardly declares its Euro-Atlantic ambitions, the government's actions sometimes fuel skepticism about the extent to which these declarations are substantive<sup>1</sup>. In recent years the Georgian Dream (GD) government kept a low profile on foreign policy issues important to Russia and has attempted to avoid irritating its bigger neighbor. This has been especially controversial since the start of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine when Tbilisi opted out of imposing its own sanctions on Russia, and avoided going beyond formal diplomatically-worded criticism of Russia's actions (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2022). While Euro-Atlantic integration is still Georgia's ultimate goal, Georgia's ruling elite seemingly believes that moving towards NATO without a firm guarantee of Western assistance in the event of a Russian aggressive reaction would be excessively risky (Bryant 2023). From the government's perspective, being a NATO aspirant country without being awarded actual membership, and the concrete security guarantees that would entail, not only heightens Georgia's vulnerability but also diminishes its deterrence capabilities, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Kucera 2023).

Nevertheless, the current situation puts Georgia's long-term security and prosperity in jeopardy because the country risks being left at the mercy of Russia, outside Euro-Atlantic integration schemes in the Black Sea region. The splitting of Georgia from Ukraine in terms of shared security perceptions and regional institutional arrangements, including in forms of partnership with NATO, may further accelerate this process. Moreover, as Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine approaches its two-year anniversary, and the conflict appears to be evolving into a protracted war of attrition, it has become challenging to discuss security guarantees for Georgia or granting it a long-awaited MAP. In short, the protracted nature of the conflict casts a long shadow over regional security commitments, leaving Georgia effectively stranded in an accession limbo without a clear path forward (Gabritchidze 2022) .

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1. For more details see Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili Keynote speech at the Global Security Forum in Bratislava: Prime Minister of Georgia. 2023. "Keynote Speech Delivered at GLOBSEC 2023 Chat Series." May 30, 2023. [https://garibashvili.ge/en/n/all/gamosvla\\_globaluri\\_usaftrkhoebis\\_forumis\\_farglebshi\\_gamartul\\_tematur\\_diskusiashi](https://garibashvili.ge/en/n/all/gamosvla_globaluri_usaftrkhoebis_forumis_farglebshi_gamartul_tematur_diskusiashi).



While the Georgian government's cautious security and foreign policy might be well warranted in this delicate situation, the country needs to find a proper balance between mitigating immediate security risks and advancing long-term national interests. There is a prevailing sentiment in the expert community in Georgia that bilateral relations at this point are beset by inertia and require a substantial reset. The cooling of ties with the NATO member states that were the most ardent supporters of Georgia's membership (Civil Georgia 2023a) is not in Tbilisi's long-term national interests. Tbilisi needs to find ways, even under the current extraordinary geopolitical circumstances, to re-energize and intensify its partnership with the North Atlantic Alliance.

In this regard, while the new geopolitical confrontation between the West and Russia bears existential threats to Georgia's statehood, it also may have the potential to open up new possibilities in NATO-Georgia relations. Should the war end inconclusively, potentially unraveling the rules-based international order, it could potentially mark a turning point in the West's long-standing ambivalence towards the region. For Georgia, this presents both a risk and an opportunity: to capitalize on any renewed Western engagement by remaining primed for a potential surge in NATO integration momentum. In this regard, Georgia must strategically approach the forthcoming 2024 Washington NATO Summit, as it could significantly alter the security landscape in the Black Sea.

However, before this moment arrives, Georgia needs to use this time to consolidate its democracy, and societal resilience. The EU accession track which is more structured and reform-intensive can benefit Georgia a lot in this regard (Civil Georgia 2023c). Finland and Sweden, while being distinct from Georgia in many regards, provide interesting examples of how EU member countries with robust democratic and socio-economic structures as well as strong societal resilience can join the alliance on a fast-track. While Georgia alone may not be able to overcome the challenges of its occupied territories and Russian pressure, it can still leverage its democratic aspirations to become a strategic anchor of democracy in a region dominated by authoritarianism. By demonstrating its commitment to democratic values and contributing to regional security, Georgia can shift its image from one of being a passive recipient of security assistance to one in which it is seen as a proactive provider of stability within the alliance.

This policy paper delves into these issues. It draws on findings from a focus group of Georgian security experts and policy practitioners. The focus group, organized by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), was attended by experts well-versed in various aspects of NATO-Georgia relations. This analysis is also enriched by desk research, which includes content analysis of primary and secondary sources. Any remaining gaps are addressed through anonymous interviews and background discussions with representatives of public authorities working on NATO-Georgia relations.

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## An Evolving Partnership: The Four Stages of NATO-Georgia Relations

Historically, one can identify four stages in NATO-Georgia relations. The first stage was low-intensity relations in the 1990s and early 2000s. Formal NATO-Georgia relations date back to early 1992 when Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), established by NATO in 1991 for cooperation and dialogue with former members of the Warsaw Pact (NATO 2022). In 1994, Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, designed for practical bilateral cooperation with European partner countries (NATO 2023a). However, throughout the 1990s, not much practical cooperation occurred between NATO and Georgia, as NATO was focused on the accession of Central and Eastern European States and rearranging relations with Russia, while Georgia was dealing with internal conflicts, corruption, and state failure (Lebanidze 2020). In 2002, Georgia's then-president, Eduard Shevardnadze, officially applied for NATO membership (Peuch 2002). However, at that time, Georgia was considered an underdeveloped, partially failed state, and its NATO membership bid could not be taken seriously.

The second stage of NATO-Georgia relations started after the Rose Revolution in 2003, when Georgia both accelerated its reform efforts and intensified its push for NATO integration. In 2004 Georgia was the first country to sign an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) - a newly established NATO initiative to help countries willing to deepen cooperation with NATO (NATO 2017). In the following years, Georgia's NATO membership aspiration and fast-paced reforms were supported by the USA and Eastern European member states, and Tbilisi hoped to receive its Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. However, the bid failed due to the opposition of France, Germany, and a number of other European NATO member states (Spiegel Online 2008). Instead, NATO made a vague promise that Georgia (and Ukraine) would join the alliance one day and offered Georgia several programs and initiatives in the following months and years.

This was also the beginning of the third stage - a phase of inertia - in bilateral relations - when both international dynamics and domestic politics in Georgia made the country's accession more distant. On the international stage, Georgia's NATO accession moved down on the list of priorities for Barack Obama's administration which was primarily focused on resetting relations with Russia and pivoting towards China. Meanwhile, the stagnation of democratic reforms and constant political instability since 2008 made Georgia's NATO bid less attractive for many NATO members. Most importantly, Russia's increasing geopolitical assertiveness in the region further dissuaded Georgia-skeptic countries from backing a rapid path to Tbilisi's NATO membership.

The GD's ascent to power in Georgia in 2012 marked the fourth stage in NATO-Georgia relations - a phase of bilateral pragmatism - which continues to this day. Not much has changed internationally in this period of time. Barack Obama's second-term administration and Donald Trump's administration showed no significant interest in Georgia's NATO membership. However, a major change took place at the domestic level when the then new Georgian government moved to a more pragmatic foreign policy aimed at avoiding irritating Russia and shifted towards advancing relations with NATO in lower-profile ways. However, the relationship between Georgia and NATO did not necessarily worsen. Both parties recognized the need for discreet bilateral relations in the face of escalating geopolitical tensions and heightened security risks. Institutionally, bilateral relations have shown a certain positive dynamic and several initiatives have been launched. Most important among them was the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) which was launched in 2014 to strengthen Georgia's defensive capacity and assist the country in its NATO accession quest (NATO 2023b). However, to the detriment of Tbilisi's hopes, none of these instruments were able to replace the need for a MAP, and Georgia's NATO accession has remained politically off the agenda since 2008 (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dzebisashvili 2020).

Currently, Georgia holds a distinctive position from the perspective of NATO. According to Cecire (2022), it neither fits neatly as a full member nor merely as a partner. Instead, it can be accurately characterized as both deeply intertwined with the Atlantic alliance and simultaneously somewhat detached from it. In certain aspects, Georgia's extensive integration and collaboration with NATO could be aptly referred to as an alliance with NATO, yet Georgia is not a constituent part of the NATO alliance. This dynamic involves close synchronization between NATO and Georgia in most significant activities and perspectives, which constitutes a unique arrangement (Cecire 2022).



## Navigating Uncertainty: How Experts and the Public View NATO-Georgia Relations

To fully grasp the complexities of the evolving NATO-Georgia relationship, it is crucial to consider both the collective pulse of the public and the nuanced insights of the expert community. This part of the policy paper explores the opinions of security experts and former security-practitioners who were interviewed for this paper. Overall, the experts have a deep understanding of the geopolitical sensitivities involved in this topic and share the mood of sober pragmatism in NATO-Georgia relations. The majority of experts agree: NATO and Georgia have developed a robust bilateral partnership characterized by deep cooperation. The alliance has played a crucial role in strengthening Georgia's military and defense capabilities in recent decades, providing expertise and equipment to modernize its armed forces. Georgia has contributed to NATO-led international missions and regularly takes part in military exercises with allied countries. Although there are mutual restraints that hinder bilateral relations from advancing to the next level of cooperation, at the same time, in practical terms they are in a relatively good shape. On the side of NATO, surveyed experts mentioned NATO's strategic ambiguity towards Georgia (Expert 1) which is arguably caused by indecisiveness about Georgia's strategic utility - in other words to what extent is Georgia considered to be part of NATO's strategic perimeter, and hence an alliance priority (Expert 4). The Georgian experts also underlined the reactive nature of NATO's approach to Georgia, reacting mostly to impulses coming from the country (Expert 3, 6). However, overall, all surveyed respondents agreed on the indispensability of the strategic alliance with NATO, including future membership, for Georgia's security, stability and economic and human development.

At the same time, the surveyed experts were much more critical of the current Georgian government which has, according to them, failed to develop a comprehensive defense policy (Expert 4) and lacks strategic vision (Expert 2) on how to reinvigorate relations with NATO. The surveyed experts attributed the low-profile NATO policy of the GD government to the ideological foundation of GD's foreign policy, which is based on the idea that Georgia, as a small and vulnerable state, should not play the role of an irritant between the West and Russia (Expert 5). The experts argue that, for this very reason, the Georgian government has also downplayed the idea of Georgia pushing for NATO membership despite the unresolved issue of its occupied territories [by amending NATO's Article 6] (Expert 2). This idea was first raised by the US expert Luke Coffey (Coffey and Carafano 2021; Coffey 2018) and was later also mentioned by the former NATO Secretary General Rasmussen (Expert 2). However, the GD government did not capitalize on the idea and avoided further discussion of it (Expert 5). Some experts also suggested that the Georgian Government is in a mode of strategic waiting - if Ukraine and the West prevail, it will likely decide to use the opportunity to accelerate Georgia's integration into both NATO and the EU. Otherwise, more decoupling from the West and a reorientation towards other poles of gravity such as China and even Russia, cannot be ruled out (Expert 1).

When asked about paths to the further development of NATO-Georgia relations, the surveyed experts mentioned two sets of factors: domestic reforms in the areas of democracy and good governance, and geopolitical structural factors which Georgia may try to mitigate but does not control. To the latter category, belongs for instance geographic distance to the core NATO area and the absence of key patron states within NATO. Georgia does not have a major strategic partner in close geographic vicinity who would push for Georgia's cause within NATO. Turkey, while supporting Georgia's NATO accession, may not live up to this role. This differentiates Georgia from the Nordic countries of Finland and Sweden who were supported by Denmark and Norway and had informal assurances from some NATO member states before their formal applications to join NATO (Expert 1). Therefore, Georgia needs to utilize active diplomacy to establish strategic long-term partnerships at bilateral level with as many NATO countries as possible and to acquire advocate states within NATO as allies (Expert 1).

On the other hand, these structural challenges also provide opportunities if Georgia manages to present its somewhat remote geographic location as not only a part of the strategically important Black Sea area - but also as a transport and energy corridor linking Europe to Central Asia (Expert 5). For this reason, Georgia needs to push more stridently for the development of the "Middle Corridor," (World Bank 2023) which serves as an energy and trade route to Central and East Asia (Expert 5).

The major structural impediment to Georgia's NATO accession is, of course, the Russia-Ukraine War and the security risks emanating from Russia. Georgia's future with NATO will depend to a large extent on how the war ends and what arrangements Ukraine can achieve regarding its status within NATO (Expert 6). Therefore, some experts suggested that Georgia should closely align or "bandwagon" with Ukraine to accelerate the NATO accession process alongside that of Kyiv (as suggested by Expert 5). Ukraine is likely to join NATO in the future in one way or another, and Georgia should not miss this momentum (according to Expert 5).

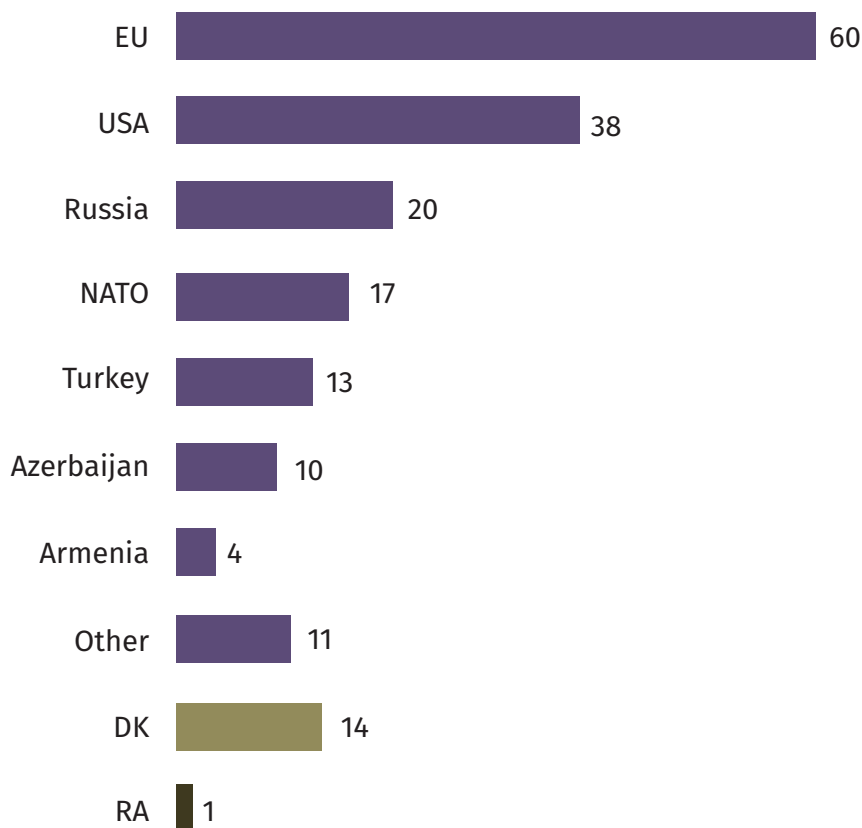
However, while highlighting the importance of geopolitical issues, the main policy advice from the experts to key stakeholders in Georgia was to focus on domestic reforms and strengthen democracy and good governance in Georgia to make the country a more attractive candidate for the North-Atlantic alliance. We will discuss this in detail in the next section.

Public opinion in Georgia is, in a similar way, soberly pragmatic about the importance and future of NATO-Georgia relations. While societal backing for Georgia's accession to NATO remains solid, we can also observe some cracks in NATO's credibility among Georgians, especially when compared to other Western entities, like the EU and the USA. Societal backing for Georgia's accession to NATO remains solid. Over the past decade, public support for NATO membership has consistently held steady at a high level, ranging from 62 to 77 percent (NDI 2023, 92). However, this represents only part of a broader picture. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that, in terms of cooperation preferences, NATO somewhat lags behind the EU and the USA.

NATO’s weakened soft power in Georgia appears to be a logical societal reaction to a long-running process of strategic ambiguity between NATO and Georgia. Figure 1 illustrates this widening gap between public support for the EU and the USA on the one hand, and NATO, on the other. Three times more respondents identified the EU as Georgia’s most desirable political partner than NATO (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Preferences of Georgian Population towards External Actors**

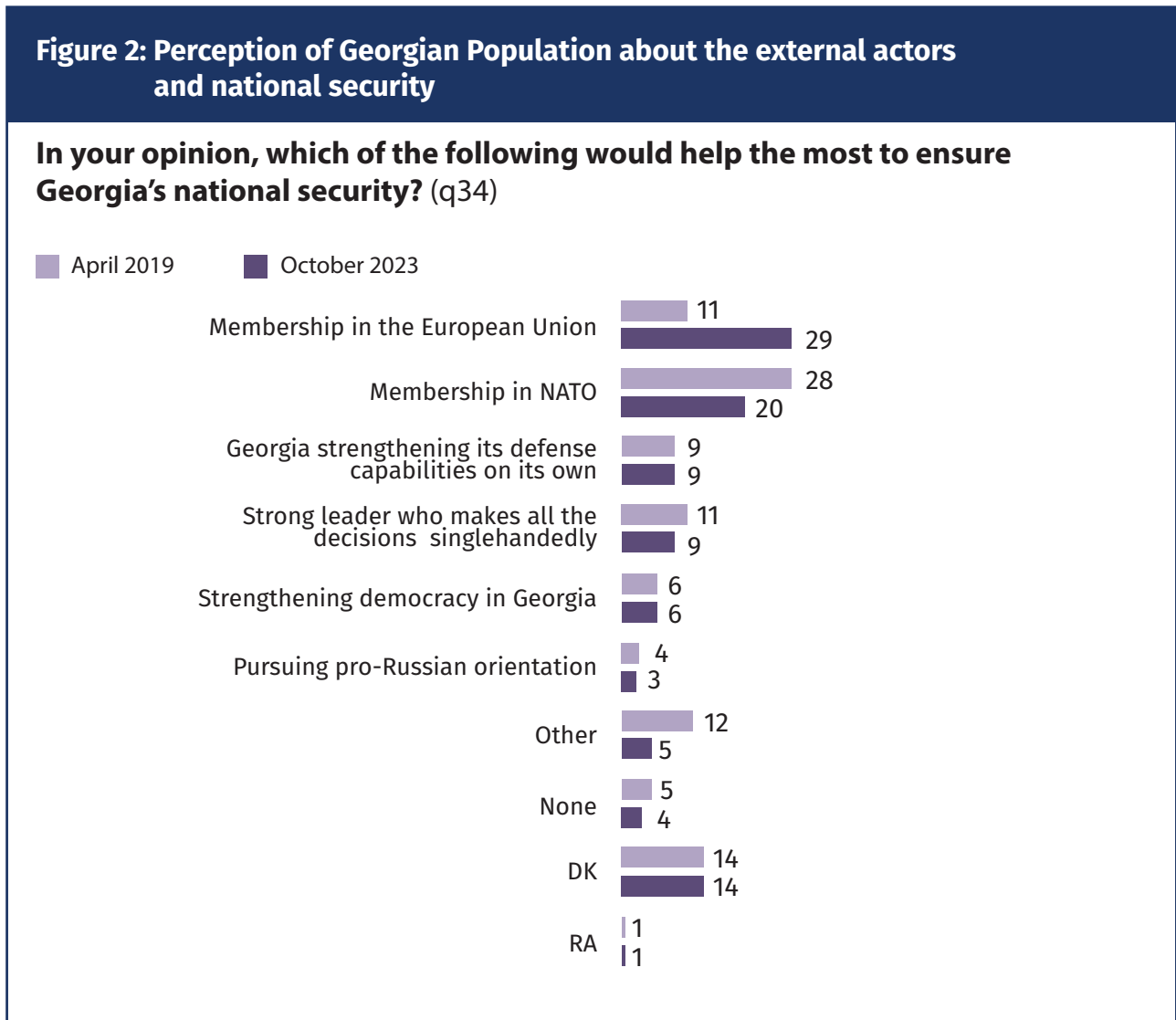
**Which countries and union should Georgia have the closest political cooperation with? Up to three answers. Open question (q35)**



Source: NDI. 2023. “NDI POLL: Georgian Citizens Remain Committed to EU Membership; Nation United in Its Dreams and Shared Challenges.” December 11, 2023.

<https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgian-citizens-remain-committed-eu-membership-nation-united-its-dreams-and>. P. 83.

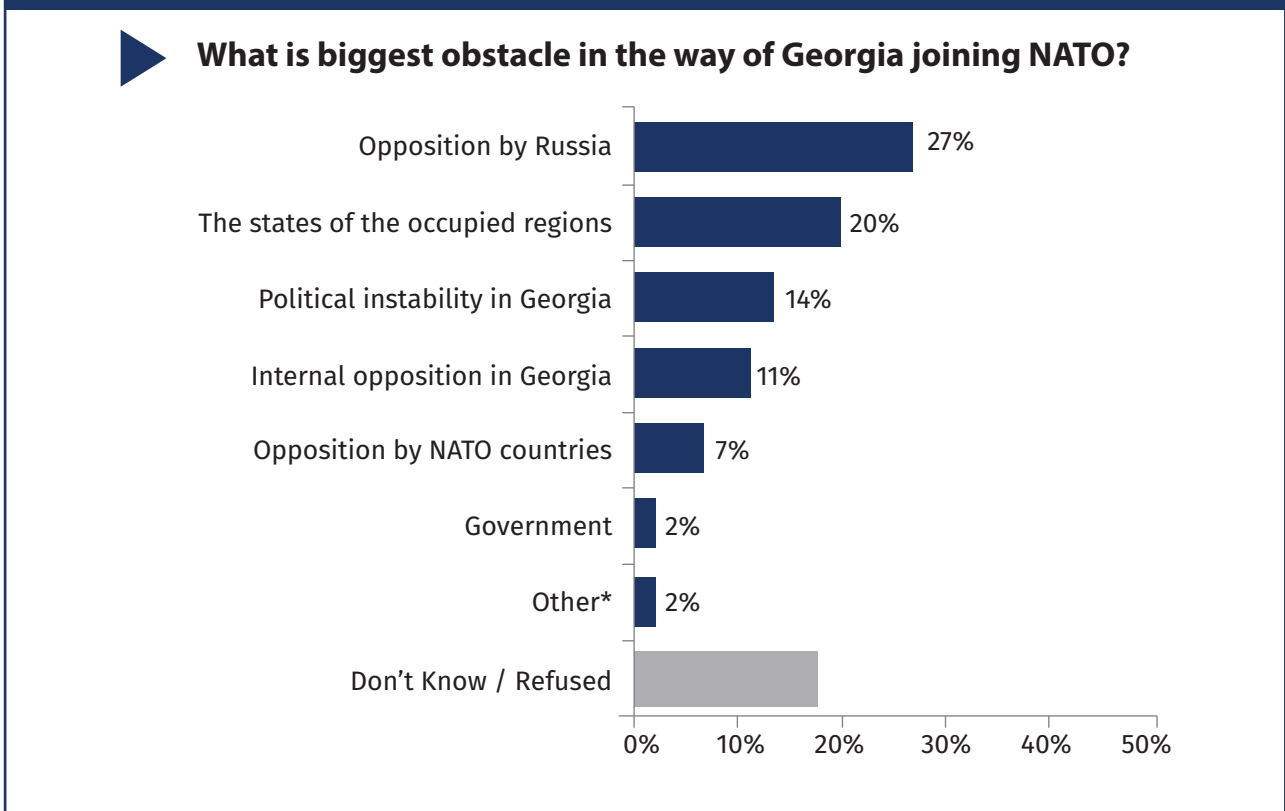
The European Union outperforms NATO even in the latter’s core area: security - NATO’s key specialization (Figure 2). As Figure 2 shows, 2023 marked the first time that the EU was rated higher than NATO as Georgia’s national security provider.



Source: NDI. 2023. “NDI POLL: Georgian Citizens Remain Committed to EU Membership; Nation United in Its Dreams and Shared Challenges.” December 11, 2023. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgian-citizens-remain-committed-eu-membership-nation-united-its-dreams-and>. P. 82.

NATO's relative decline in public support could also be explained by the public perception of NATO as having a cautious policy towards Russia over the last decades. As Figure 3 demonstrates, 47% of the population believes that Georgia cannot join NATO due to factors related to Russia, and another 7% believe it Georgia's membership is being prevented as a result of opposition from NATO countries (IRI 2023, 61). NATO's waning appeal may also be influenced by domestic political processes in Georgia. These include the GD government's policy of downplaying the likelihood of Georgia's NATO accession and its moderate acceptance of voices aligned with pro-Russian or populist sentiments involved in criticizing NATO's role in the region. Surveyed experts also criticized the GD government for securitizing the NATO accession issue by insinuating that membership would result in Georgia entering the Russia-Ukraine War or some other sort of military escalation with Russia (Expert 5, Expert 7). Despite all this, the fact that public support for NATO membership has remained above 60 percent for years is a remarkable achievement and demonstrates the continuous resilience of NATO's soft power among Georgians. Furthermore, this persistence of support suggests an underlying belief in the strategic importance of NATO, despite external and internal challenges.

**Figure 3: Perception in Georgian population about why Georgia's cannot join NATO**



Source: IRI. 2023. "Georgian Survey of Public Opinion | September - October 2023." International Republican Institute. November 15, 2023.

<https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/P.61>.



## Avoiding the Gridlock: How to Enhance the NATO-Georgia Partnership?

Above, we discussed the key challenges in NATO-Georgia relations, attributable to the current geopolitical ambiguity and attitude of mutual restraint. Reviving the NATO-Georgia partnership and progressing it to its next stage depends on addressing both geopolitical and domestic political issues - which currently act as stumbling blocks to Georgia's NATO accession. Russia's grip on Georgian territory and its unyielding aggression in Ukraine effectively act as a veto on Georgia's immediate NATO membership. While NATO acknowledges Georgia's aspirations, it remains contingent on resolving outstanding security concerns. Realistically speaking, neither NATO nor Georgia is in control of geopolitical dynamics in the region and security risks emanating from them. That's why a short-term strategy of mutual restraint on both sides is well-warranted.

This does not mean, however, that the current stage of NATO-Georgia relations should turn into a period of passivity and lost opportunities. For Georgia, one possible roadmap to NATO membership through achieving internal development and resilience is demonstrated by the Nordic states. These include a robust record of democratic and good governance reforms as well as achieving strong deterrence through civil-military and societal resilience. Most importantly, these factors do not depend on the external environment but are linked to domestic dynamics in Georgia, and to the political will of the Georgian government and society.

Currently, one of the stumbling blocks on the path to NATO integration is the stagnation of the democratic reform agenda in Georgia. While NATO is primarily a defense alliance, it does pay attention to how democratic and well-governed its future members are (Civil Georgia 2023b; 2023c). The quality of democratic institutions also has a huge influence on Western perceptions of compatibility with the liberal-democratic values and practices of the Western world. A Georgia with a stronger democratic record could partially compensate for the challenges that potentially disqualify Georgia from NATO membership and are outside Tbilisi's control such as the occupied territories and risks emanating from Russia.

The imperative of strengthening democracy was also the single most important and most frequently mentioned recommendation by the security experts surveyed for this study. The panel of experts, while acknowledging NATO's evolving stance on Georgia's democratization, strongly recommended that the country prioritize internal reforms given the current unpredictable and challenging geopolitical landscape. Some experts even argued that Georgia's strong record of democratic reforms could be more appealing to NATO and its members than Tbilisi's seemingly strategic geographic location or other structural factors (Expert 7).

Good governance and transparency should also become important parts of a comprehensive security sector reform agenda in the country. According to the surveyed experts, to this day, many powerful institutions, such as the defence and interior ministries, remain a closed space - a “black box” for Georgian civil society and the public (Expert 1). Such structures should therefore become more transparent, more accountable and communicate transparently with the population and other key stakeholders about reforms and challenges in Georgia’s security and defense sectors (Expert 1).

The surveyed experts also advocated for more effective coordination between opposition, society and business actors - to raise public awareness about the importance of NATO and put pressure on the government to accelerate Georgia’s NATO integration and necessary reforms (Expert 1). This vision comes close to the Finnish Model of Comprehensive Security which is based on a whole of society approach and close public-private partnerships (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kandelaki 2023; 2022). In an ideal setting, however, such a whole-of-society approach would envisage a leading role for the government in coordinating the country's security and defense policy with other societal actors such as businesses and civil society organizations.

Whole-of-society approaches are also useful in aligning perceptions about major risks and objectives and in building societal consensus over the most important national security issues, which Georgia currently lacks (Expert 8). According to some experts, Georgia’s political class represents an extreme case of national disunity, in which political factions consider their political opponents to be bigger dangers than external threats (Expert 8). This aligns well with the weak states' theoretical model of Omnibalancing (David 1991), in which state actors align with external powers to eliminate internal competitors. To overcome internal weaknesses and democratic stagnation, and to have a chance at a rapid pathway to NATO membership, Georgia needs to follow the path of Finland and Sweden (Expert 19). Here, Georgia must embrace a whole-of-society approach and pursue a comprehensive reform agenda. Showing a strong record of democratic and good governance reform will allow Georgia to position itself as a part of liberal civilization, exemplifying its value-system in a region dominated by illiberal authoritarianism (Expert 9). This will allow Georgia "to punch above its weight" and persuade NATO members of the utility of its membership (Expert 9).

The agenda of the Georgian authorities should also prioritize military reform to prove its civil-military resilience in times of increasing uncertainty. This includes a comprehensive defense and military agenda and achieving certain benchmarks in defense and security policy, such as military expenditures matching 2% of GDP (Expert 4). In times when military power is becoming increasingly important, Georgia should show NATO member states that it is a credible partner and can be a security-provider, and not just a security-consumer within NATO.

These steps do not guarantee anything and the future of the Black Sea region remains unpredictable due to the Russia-Ukraine war and related changing dynamics. Yet, what they can ensure is that once the window of opportunity for further NATO integration opens, Georgia will be ready to grab the opportunity and will not be delayed due to internal struggles.

## Conclusions & recommendations

With the upcoming 2024 NATO Washington Summit on the horizon, the Georgian leadership, in close collaboration with the alliance, must think about how to deepen existing ties and translate Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations into actionable steps. By working strategically with the alliance, Georgia can inject concrete momentum into its Euro-Atlantic journey. While the prospects for an immediate favorable end to the Russia-Ukraine war seem dim today, it is important to consider future security arrangements in the Black Sea region now so policymakers can be prepared when the time comes. When major combat operations in Ukraine end, better assessments of the future of Black Sea regional security may be needed. If Ukraine receives security guarantees, what should Georgia (and Moldova) do to persuade NATO to also extend the same guarantees to them. To achieve this, Tbilisi needs to change perceptions among many NATO allies of Georgia being primarily a security-consumer and not a security provider.

On the one hand, Georgia needs to remain conscious and transparent about recent geopolitical developments in the region, over which Tbilisi has no influence - and which have cemented NATO-Georgia relations into a state of strategic ambiguity. However, Georgia can use this time to boost its societal and democratic resilience and to create a credible deterrent - even if at minimal scale - against security threats. In doing so, Tbilisi can more easily persuade NATO of its utility as a future member of the alliance.

In recent years, NATO has paid special attention to democratic consolidation in Georgia. To unlock further integration, it expects Georgia to demonstrate a robust democratic record - including an independent and effective judiciary, democratic elections and checks and balances. Georgia needs also to show stronger societal resilience and lower levels of political polarization, radicalization, and societal stratification - features that cast Georgia as a weak and vulnerable society.

The holding of fair and transparent parliamentary elections in 2024 may also further facilitate NATO-Georgia relations. This will be another litmus test for Georgia to show its Western partners its commitment to democracy and good governance contrary to recent trends towards democratic backsliding. This will be a good opportunity to finally overcome the traditional "dilemma" faced by Georgian governments between advancing democratization and consolidating guaranteed power in favor of the former. In short, the democratic quality of the elections will have a significant impact on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and its future with the EU and NATO.

Democratic reforms should be accompanied by a strong reform program in the security sector and in other areas of governance. While Georgia can never match the military capabilities of Russia, Tbilisi needs to develop a comprehensive defense and security strategy and create an effective and credible deterrent against the malign influence of illiberal actors (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Kandelaki 2023).

Moreover, Georgia's democratic aspirations hold the key to overcoming its security challenges. By solidifying its democratic credentials and contributing to regional security, Georgia can transform from a passive beneficiary of the alliance assistance to a proactive and essential partner. This shift in perception will be crucial for both Georgia and the alliance in navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the region. In accomplishing these tasks, Georgia may be able to turn the tide within NATO and change the perception of it as a vulnerable and indefensible country, in favor of a view of it as a robust security-provider within the alliance.

Currently Georgia communicates the polar opposite to this vision. It comes across as a disintegrated, polarized and weakened society shaped by continuous political instability and highly vulnerable not only to potential Russian military escalation but also other hybrid threats, such as manipulation, propaganda and disinformation. Below we provide policy suggestions on how to navigate the current status quo and breathe new life into the Georgia-NATO partnership, while keeping the structural constraints of this process in perspective.

# Recommendations:

## To Government of Georgia

**Sustain societal support and combat information manipulation and interference from the Russia:**

Maintain a high degree of societal support for NATO integration. Fight against Russian disinformation to ensure the image of NATO is not negatively impacted in light of the current polarized environment.

Proactively pursue diplomacy to strengthen strategic partnerships with a wide array of NATO member countries, especially the US, UK, and Germany. This is crucial given Georgia's geographical distance and its lack of a significant patron state within the NATO alliance.

**Proactive diplomacy & strategic partnerships:**

**Align with Ukraine's NATO accession trajectory:**

It's essential for Georgia to closely align itself with Ukraine's NATO accession process in order to capitalize on any regional momentum in this regard.

Prioritizing democratic reforms and transparent governance is imperative for Georgia. Strengthening Georgia's democratic credentials will make it more appealing to NATO and its member states.

**Democratic reforms & transparent governance:**

**Involve all societal actors:**

Encouraging effective coordination and collaboration among opposition groups, civil society organizations, and business entities is essential. This can help raise public awareness about NATO's significance and generate pressure for necessary reforms.

Embracing a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach, akin to the Finnish and Swedish models, can facilitate the creation of a national consensus on security matters and help overcome internal divisions.

**Adopt a whole-of-society approach:**

**Implement comprehensive military reform:**

Georgia should streamline its military legislation and strategic documents. Furthermore, it should give precedence to military reforms, invest in defense and security, and work towards meeting benchmarks such as the 2% of GDP military expenditure target. This will enhance Georgia's credibility as a reliable security provider within the NATO alliance.

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# To the Civil Society & Expert Community of Georgia

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## Advocate for NATO integration:

Join forces to actively promote Georgia's NATO integration through coordinated awareness campaigns, public discussions, and informative seminars. Collaborate closely with local communities to enhance their understanding of the advantages of NATO membership.

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Work in tandem to closely oversee the implementation of democratic reforms in Georgia. Hold the government accountable for adhering to democratic principles, as NATO places significant emphasis on the quality of democracy within aspirant member states.

## Monitor democratic reforms:

## Conduct independent assessments:

Collaborate on independent assessments evaluating Georgia's progress in meeting NATO's standards and criteria. Concentrate on key areas like defense, security, and democratic governance. Share these assessments with both the public and policymakers.

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Establish partnerships with international civil society organizations, particularly those specializing in NATO and security issues. Leverage these partnerships to exchange best practices and strategies for advancing Georgia's NATO integration.

## Build partnerships:

## Engage with youth:

Collaboratively engage the younger generation in discussions and activities related to NATO and international security. Recognize the importance of involving youth in building long-term support for NATO membership.

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: Jointly support initiatives aimed at raising public awareness on NATO-related matters. Experts can contribute their knowledge and analysis to educate the public, while CSOs can organize outreach events and campaigns.

## Support public awareness:

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# To NATO and its member states:

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**Promote defense and security sector reform and provide concrete benchmarks:**

NATO should continue to assist Georgia in implementing defense and security sector reforms. This support should focus on improving defense capabilities, transparency, and accountability within the Georgian defense establishment. Expand military training and joint exercises with Georgian forces to enhance interoperability and readiness, reinforcing Georgia's compatibility with NATO standards and structures. Moreover, provide specific measurable deliverables and benchmarks for defense and security sector reform that Georgian authorities can follow.

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**Actively assist Georgia in its democratic reforms and institutional strengthening, as developing a robust democracy is key for closer ties with NATO.**

**Support for democratic reforms:**

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**Public diplomacy and awareness:**

Engage in public diplomacy initiatives to foster a better understanding of NATO's role and benefits among the Georgian population

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**Collaborate with Georgia to develop effective strategies to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda, which undermines NATO's image in the country and the region.**

**Counter-disinformation strategies:**

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**Tailored integration roadmap:**

Develop a clear, tailored roadmap for Georgia's NATO integration, providing specific milestones and objectives to guide the process.

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# Annex: Participants of the Focus Group

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<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Title, Position</b>
Expert 1	Academic, Former MOD Official
Expert 2	Former Diplomat, Think Tank Representative
Expert 3	Security Expert, NGO Representative
Expert 4	Think-Tank Representative, Former MOD Official
Expert 5	Security Expert, Former Diplomat
Expert 6	Academic, University Representative
Expert 7	Security Expert, Former MOD Official
Expert 8	Academic, Former MP
Expert 9	Security Expert, Former MOD Official
Expert 10	Security Expert, University Representative



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