



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**2008-2018 TEN YEARS FROM BUCHAREST:
“GEORGIA WILL BECOME A MEMBER OF NATO”**

ALEX PETRIASHVILI

100

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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About ten years ago, on April 2-4, 2008, a NATO summit – one of the most dramatic ones in the history of the Alliance – was held in the capital of Romania, Bucharest, with the results turning out to be fateful. The decision which was made on the dawn of April 4th that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO was followed by a severe development of events for Georgia, and along with it, the democratic community came face-to-face with its biggest challenge since the end of the Cold War. The historic NATO summit was preceded by intensive negotiations – for months and weeks before the summit and for two full days during the summit itself. Ten years have passed since then, but nevertheless, the agreement of the heads of NATO member states is still important and widely discussed today. Before touching upon the decision and its importance, it is important to remember some key developments in international relations in 2007-2008.

In his historical Munich address in 2007, Vladimir Putin openly stated that the unipolar world was unacceptable, talked about the idea of a new security architecture and said that he was ready to take action in response. His speech made it clear that Russia would no longer tolerate the prevailing world order at the time and would definitely have its say on the international arena¹. This address, unfortunately, did not prompt appropriate reaction, neither in Munich itself nor later. For the leader of Russia, the lack of severe reaction from the West was nothing other than a sign of weakness. This was followed by a cyber-attack against a NATO member state – Estonia, for the first attack since the end of Cold War. This attack was also not met with a proper response. On the contrary, instead of employing severe response measures, the West offered Russia more integration and various formats of cooperation². On the other hand, in parallel with including Russia in the global systems and deepening cooperation with it, the West made a decision to recognize the independence of Kosovo. Notably, this was preceded by a warning from Vladimir Putin: on February 14, 2008, during a summarizing conference, Putin stated that if the West recognized the independence of Kosovo “we will not fool around and mirror these steps; however, we have domestic preparation, that we will activate”³. One month later, in March, the President of Russia published a directive on deepening economic and cultural ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The NATO summit in Bucharest was getting closer. The full efforts of the Government of Georgia as well as its Georgian diplomats were focused on

getting the Membership Action Plan (MAP) during the summit. There was unprecedented, open and strong support from the United States and from President George W. Bush himself. He was personally talking to the European leaders on the phone and even managed to convince almost all of them, with the exception of the German Chancellor. In their assessment of this, experts point to the Chancellor's less-than-extraordinary relationship with the Georgian President as one of the reasons for her decision⁴. This was definitely so; however, it was neither a primary, nor a secondary reason. In that period, as in other historical moments, Germany had especially warm and friendly relations with Russia and its President. A very influential German business sector was vitally interested in maintaining these relations and even deepening them. Chancellor Merkel, of course, had to take their opinion into account as well⁵. But what was the main hindrance for this decision? Let us lay out the truth: both the German Chancellor, as well as part of European leaders, were afraid that granting MAP to Georgia would equate to crossing a red line with Russia, to which it would respond with aggressive action, and nobody from the West was ready to confront Russia at that time⁶. Also, a belief was being formed (through the active efforts of Russia, of course) among the circles of skeptical politicians and experts that if it was granted MAP, the Government of Georgia would use the opportunity to try to restore territorial integrity of the country through forceful means. The Government of Georgia at that time did indeed feature some so-called hawks; however, in the case of a MAP, it would be unimaginable for the Government of Georgia to take any surprise steps.

As the unfolding of the events showed, Russia did indeed have aggressive intentions, which it fulfilled by occupying parts of the Georgian territory. However, would he have dared to fulfill these intentions if NATO stood strong and loudly announced that it was inviting Georgia for membership talks? Here the opinion diverges. I personally put myself in a category who thinks that talking and discussing with Putin's Russia is necessary from the position of power, which means that if the Alliance had made its decision without hesitation and swiftly follow it up with actions, Vladimir Putin, even if strengthened by oil-dollars, emboldened by his reprisals against a small Chechen nation, his own citizens and political opponents, would find his place and gradually get used the appearance of a new member of the Alliance on the Russian border.

Let us return to the Bucharest summit where negotiations came to a dead end due to the lack of consensus between the leaders. Usually, the summits are ceremonial culminations of several months of preliminary talks. And indeed, the real work starts much earlier and the summit itself, unless there is some kind of an emergency (for example, Russian aggression against Ukraine and raging war were the main topics at the Wales summit and the main discussion was also about the new act of aggression perpetrated by Russia), is a celebratory adoption of the decisions that have already been made. It is also important to mention that apart from the future of Georgia, the prestige of the United States as a superpower was also at stake in Bucharest. This was the reason why it was necessary to make compromising, yet tangible decisions. After major diplomatic battles, it was written in the declaration of the NATO leaders that Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO. The next sentences said that the next steps to the membership of NATO for Georgia and Ukraine would be MAP; that the Ministers of Foreign Affairs were tasked with preparing the first report regarding the progress of the intensive relations connected with granting MAP, which were about to start and that NATO Ministers would be authorized to make a decision about granting MAP to Ukraine and Georgia⁷.

Was this a historic decision? Yes. After all, we got a clear decision from NATO member states. Skeptical politicians from skeptical states today do not like and make no secret of it in private talks, that they have become hostages of this decision and that they are limited by it in further actions, decisions and so on. For the loyal supporters inside NATO, on the other hand, this is a serious weapon for achieving Georgia's NATO membership. As for Georgia, it must be pointed out objectively, that this was another great victory for Georgian diplomacy.

In the immediate aftermath of the summit, as well as during months and years afterwards, this decision raised a rhetorical question: was this decision really more than MAP? Despite its historical importance, judging from the decisions made during the following summits and also from the statements that are made today, we can clearly say that the answer is no. In all subsequent declarations and communiqués where there are important clauses about Georgia having all the necessary instruments for inevitable membership of NATO, the next sentence always mentions that MAP is a mandatory condition for NATO membership⁸.

Was this an indirect sign for Putin that he could no longer postpone fulfilling his intentions? Unfortunately, yes. There is also an opinion among experts that if no decision at all had been made, the Kremlin might not have even considered occupying Georgian territories. Such an approach is false. Georgia was steadily moving towards NATO membership and was moving away farther and farther from the Russian orbit. My goal is not to put the blame for the 2008 August War on anyone's, except Russia's, shoulders; however, it is commonly agreed today that refusing MAP to Georgia at the Bucharest summit definitely pushed Russia towards military aggression⁹.

Russia won the 5-day war, and occupied over 20% of Georgian territory; however, it failed to win the main battle – popular support for Euro-Atlantic integration within Georgia, despite certain fluctuations in the first few months after the war, has remained close to 70%. Through international assistance, Georgia managed to quickly and successfully go through a rehabilitation period after the war. Moreover, Georgia also joined the Afghanistan peace operation, as a result of which it transformed from a security receiving into a security providing country. Even today, Georgia is the top contributor among non-member states. In terms of democratic development, the peaceful transfer of political power after the 2012 elections and the successful continuation of processes aimed towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration, was historical. All this has been assessed by NATO accordingly, which is reflected in the Wales¹⁰ and Warsaw summit communiqués.

Today Georgia has a dialogue format with NATO, the annual program, a joint training center in Krtsanisi, it is involved in rapid reaction forces, it is a member of the group of outstanding partners and conducts NATO trainings and North Atlantic Council and Military Committee field sessions on its soil. The inclusion of Georgia in new security mechanisms is also being considered actively; more specifically, in terms of the Black Sea. In short, our country does indeed have all instruments for eventual NATO membership.

What processes are unfolding globally? Tensions regarding North Korea, a bloody conflict in Syria and military action in Ukraine still pose serious threats for international stability and everywhere, Vladimir Putin is confronting the efforts of the democratic community. Relations between the US and Russia are at their lowest since the end of Cold War. Russian enterprises, companies, high ranking officials and big businesses are

under sanctions; 13 people from Vladimir Putin's entourage are under investigation for meddling in US Presidential Elections. In Syria, it even came to a military confrontation. According to intelligence data, mercenaries of the so-called private Wagner Company had a green light from those closest to Putin to attack American military units. This was met with a severe and destructive response from the Pentagon. Same goes for NATO and EU, and their member states' relations with Russia, which have significantly worsened due to Russian aggression in Ukraine, the downing of a Dutch civilian passenger plane using Russian rocket systems and multiple cases of the full use of Russian soft power. The US and EU imposed joint sanctions against Russia; NATO military units were placed on land, air and sea in Central European countries; Russia was excluded from G8 format, stripped of its vote in the Council of Europe, the contacts on the highest level are at a minimum and so on.

However, when it comes to the issue of Georgia and its membership of NATO, unfortunately, neither in Europe nor across the ocean is there any noticeable readiness to fulfill the Bucharest summit decision. In its statements, the Alliance focuses on the necessity of continued reforms, gratitude for Georgia's contribution to international missions and reaffirmation of loyalty to NATO's open door policy¹¹. In open conversations, loyal friends of our country, both acting as well as former high ranking officials, experts of leading research facilities and influential so-called Think Tanks still call on our strategic patience¹².

The Brussels summit is approaching. Statements are already being made that the reforms undertaken by Georgia and its contribution to international security will definitely be appropriately reflected in NATO decisions. It is clear that the chance of getting MAP is, as before, not very high, but what is being done and what must be done in the remaining time before the summit or after it to maximally increase this chance, be it for the next, NATO 70-year anniversary summit?

Before the NATO Wales summit, an inter-agency group was created in the Government of Georgia that stated respective positions as to what was the maximum we could receive from that summit. There were visits made on various levels to NATO member state capitals; the necessity of granting MAP to Georgia was being discussed on every international forum and so on. There were joint statements made by the civil society and pro-Western political forces.

On every international event or high level visit, the government openly states that NATO membership is Georgia's main priority. In addition, it is also known that in all meetings, the Georgian side poses the issue of accelerated membership of NATO, and all available methods are being employed, however, there still is a sense in the public that something is lacking. The statements of the government that we should not have exaggerated expectations in the public, that Western partners are calling for patience and that they are assessing our contribution to international security and our conducted reforms highly, all create a feeling that the government has come to accept its fate and is trying not to inconvenience the partners with excessive activeness. In my opinion, if there really is such a thought, that through strategic patience, a suitable moment will arrive by itself and one day the Alliance will make a decision without our efforts, then such a thought is fallacious and the government does need to take some active measures. There will always be an argument among the skeptics and pro-Russian circles that Georgia's NATO membership might not only spark a new military escalation in the region, but also a war between NATO and Russia; also, there is the argument that if on the contrary relations between Russia and the West improve, our NATO membership will be postponed even further. Hence, it is the most correct course of action to attempt to facilitate the arrival of such a moment ourselves, as the Baltic States did it.

What can be done in the remaining time until the Brussels summit and what must be done after it, so that we come to the practical implementation of the Bucharest summit decision?

1. The first and foremost is to agree on a position about what Georgia requires from NATO in Brussels – with the a, b, c principle (principle – ask for more to get what you desire – is mostly successful);
2. An internal consolidation must take place within the country, among political forces, as well as through the active involvement of the civil society;
3. A working group needs to be created which will conduct visits to Brussels and member state capitals as fast as possible, voicing the expectations of our country;
4. It is necessary to conduct an active media-campaign to form public opinion in the member states;

5. It is important that a study is started (through the cooperation of the government and research centers) about how to accelerate membership in NATO, creating specific proposals for negotiations; the experience of overcoming obstacles regarding NATO rules and especially the 5th article must be studied;
6. In all likelihood, a compromise will be reached regarding the name of FYROM and hence, Macedonia will be the next country to be invited for NATO membership. NATO has a practice of placing aspirant countries into so-called baskets. It would be advisable to start consultations with partner NATO member states regarding the possibility of making a decision about Georgia, together with Macedonia.
7. Activating the campaign within the country – taking steps to balance Russian soft power and consolidating the society around the objective of NATO membership.

National Consolidation, modernization of the country and full European and Euro-Atlantic integration – only in this way can Georgia develop, unify and become a successful, democratic and strong European state.

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