



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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NATO-GEORGIA RELATIONS: 28 MINUS 1

EUGENE KOGAN

EXPERT OPINION



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Between Georgian Doubts and Expectations, NATO's Encouragement and Russia's Muted "Nyet"

There is no doubt whatsoever that NATO-Georgia relations can not be managed without taking into account the reaction from Russia. Back in November 2012 Janusz Bugajski stated clearly that Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili will not convince the Kremlin that Georgia's NATO membership poses no threat to Russia as no other neighbouring capital nor the Alliance as a whole has succeeded in this effort. Moscow needs NATO as an adversary and no amount of persuasion is likely to alter the official stance.¹ Even if NATO disagrees with the perception of Moscow, it does not change the situation. Moscow sees Georgia's NATO membership as the red lines that should not be allowed to be crossed. Period.

Evidently, as the title of Vasili Rukhadze's article states, the latest Georgian casualties in Afghanistan spark unprecedented public debate and doubts about Georgia's NATO perspectives. For years, the general public narrative was that Georgia's large-scale participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan, and earlier in Iraq, could help Georgia's accession to NATO as members of the North Atlantic Alliance would see and appreciate Georgia's efforts and sacrifices and accept the country into the Alliance. Some now question whether or not such a hope is realistic. Many argue that Georgian sacrifices (in Afghanistan) proved futile in convincing Western countries to accept Georgia into the Alliance; the process is dragging indefinitely. The West is unwilling to aggravate Moscow which sees Georgia's NATO membership as an anathema to its domination in the Caucasus.² In this less than romantic game of ménage à trois, the Russian game of bully and intimidation proved to be crucial and decisive. This issue is discussed below.

Despite the doubts of the Georgian people regarding the acceptance of the country into the Alliance, NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, repeated statements such as Georgia "is on the right path" and Georgia moved "a lot closer to NATO" and "with consistent and determined efforts, you will reach your destination and you will walk through that open door"³ which mitigated the doubts and raised the expectations in Georgia. Furthermore, in early December 2013, Rasmussen said that: "In the five years since we created the NATO-Georgia Commission, Georgia has moved closer to NATO." Rasmussen's recent statement could have an easily have been made in 2005 or 2007 as today. Indeed there is a bit of the Zeno's paradox to Georgia's NATO progress as it continually gets "closer" while seemingly having a way yet before actually arriving Trying to play the spoiler, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, was in Brussels

as well and in a press conference stated that NATO enlargement, not only in the context of Georgia but in general, represents a “continuation of the Soviet-old inertial logic of the Cold War.”

At this point, the protracted Georgia-NATO-Russia discussions are taking on a bit of a theatrical air. Georgian NATO membership *is not impossible* [author’s italics] but it would take a *dramatic change* [author’s italics] in the current geopolitical circumstances for that to happen. While all three parties probably know that, all have an interest in continuing to pretend that the prospect is real. For Georgia, appearing to get closer to the West is important both for domestic political reasons and for its international image. For NATO, an organisation without a clear purpose, that it still has ardent suitors like Georgia make it seem relevant. And for Russia, the building up of a threat – especially a paper tiger like NATO – helps the Kremlin’s efforts to present itself to its population and to the world as a strong geopolitical power. So, do not expect the farce to end any time soon.⁴ Play simply goes on.

As part of the NATO reassurances to Georgia, around 19 September 2013, Irakli Alasania, Minister of Defence, stated that in 2015 Georgian military forces will become part of the NATO Response Force (NRF). Sergey Minasyan, Deputy Director of the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute, explains the NATO decision as compensation to Georgia for not granting it NATO membership. Thus, NATO gives Georgia some significance without accepting it as a full member.⁵ There is a degree of truth in what Minasyan says since both sides - NATO and Georgia - do not lose face and maintain good relations. Nevertheless, the NRF as compensation does not alleviate the doubts of Georgians and the problems along the path towards NATO membership. To add fuel to the fire of Georgian doubts, David Phillips, Director of the Programme on Peace-Building and Rights at Columbia University’s Institute for the Study of Human Rights, was resolute that NATO membership for Georgia is on the distant horizon. Pledges for eventual membership made at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 are an empty promise.⁶ That was the first-ever bluntly stated Western opinion published in *Georgia Today* to which very few in Georgia paid attention.

Despite Phillips’ clear statement, Irakli Alasania, in an interview with *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, stated that: “What is on the agenda now is a solid step forward – whether it is going to be a MAP or something else, we are talking about an instrument that will ensure that Georgia is rewarded because this is a country that is reforming with a maturing political system and performing by providing security. There should be advancement because we are advancing in meeting the criteria. Another reason for NATO to move along

with Georgia is because of the signal it gives to aspirant countries: if you perform, you are invited to join. And the signal to Russia is that no matter what they did in 2008, they will never derail an aspirant nation from being a part of whatever it wants.”⁷ Even though Alasania may consider himself as a realist within the Georgian Dream coalition, his statement “they will never derail” manifests naivety regarding Georgia’s path towards NATO. Such naivety on how Russia is going to react to Georgia’s path towards NATO is deeply embedded in the mind-set of the Georgian government officials.

This naivety can be explained by the fact that almost one year after the parliamentary elections in Georgia, the Kremlin seems to have been caught flat-footed by the realisation that NATO membership is, in fact, a goal desired by a *broad swath of Georgia’s political class* [author’s italics]. As a result, it does not know how to respond to the fact that Ivanishvili wants both good ties with Russia and NATO membership.⁸ However, such was the situation in September 2013. Since then, Russia becomes more assertive and blunt by stating its clear objection to Georgia’s path towards NATO.⁹

Such was the state of affairs in late 2013 when each side of the less than romantic trio played their roles accordingly. Then, on 13 January 2014 came the first-ever blunt remarks of Davit Usupashvili.

A Decisive Turn

In blunt remarks made on 13 January 2014 at the event organised by the Estonian Centre of the Eastern Partnership, Davit Usupashvili, Georgia’s Speaker of the Parliament, suggested that if Georgia is again denied MAP, like it happened at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, it will give a “momentum” to anti-Western political forces in Georgia. Usupashvili said that: “If the [answer] is ‘no’ and the ‘situation has changed now and more important things are [happening] in the wider region and, therefore, that the promise [that Georgia will join NATO] was important then [in 2008], but [not] now because of some new circumstance’ – this is going to ruin and undermine political stability in the country.” He further said that if the NATO summit in September 2014 results in “very little progress,” it would not be enough. “[It] will be very difficult to sell to the people as a big success.”

A readout of the meeting, distributed by the Georgian Parliament’s Press Office, says that: “The [Georgian] Speaker of the Parliament has also discussed the issue of the [2014] NATO summit and noted that Georgia remembers the pledge [made by the NATO leaders] at the Bucharest Summit [in 2008] and although the country is following steadfastly in its commit-

ments, no concrete results are yet visible. He (Usupashvili) said that Georgia has an expectation for a concrete result – that is MAP and a certain threat to EU integration may also emerge if this result is not tabled.”¹⁰ Usupashvili’s blunt remarks have been the first-ever official comments on Georgia’s crawl at snail’s pace quest for NATO’s MAP. It also exposed Usupashvili’s impatience and loss of confidence in the pledge made by NATO.

On the other hand, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili told journalists on 16 January 2014 that he disagreed with Usupashvili’s assessment. At the same time, Garibashvili stressed that Georgia’s foreign policy priorities remain unchanged. He expressed confidence that: “If there is no MAP now, it will be later...This will not pose a threat to and change our European integration.”¹¹ On 10 February 2014 in an interview with the *Rustavi 2 TV*, Alasania said that: “There is a high probability that at the next summit we will have new instruments for closer integration with NATO. Whether it will be called a MAP or something else, or it will be a new instrument... it has yet to be decided.”¹² It is very hard to say on what ground Alasania assumes that Georgia will be given a new instrument. Perhaps this was the wishful thinking of a minister who was promised something unattainable or, perhaps, it is a minister’s conviction that despite all odds Georgia will be given the magic key to NATO membership. There is no sense in speculating about Alasania’s statement.

However, on 26 February 2014 Garibashvili radically changed his mind. He said that NATO should grant MAP to Georgia at the summit in September 2014 as a reward for the progress made by the country. Although some leaders of the Georgian Dream ruling coalition have previously voiced calls for granting MAP to Georgia, this was the first time when Garibashvili, who prepared opening remarks at the Washington-based Atlantic Council, prioritised the issue. Garibashvili said that moving forward with NATO integration was “essential” and the “realistic” way to do it would be to give MAP to Georgia.¹³ Well, it was certainly a sea of change between what Garibashvili said on 16 January 2014. There is no doubt that the events unfolding at the time in Ukraine directly affected Garibashvili’s opinion. Usupashvili’s and Garibashvili’s comments clearly indicated that discussion on NATO’s granting Georgia a MAP has entered into a new phase. Georgian officials began to speak openly about getting MAP as a concrete result. On the other hand, NATO found itself on the defensive while Dennis Sammut and the US State Department mentioned below stated bluntly that Georgia should be granted MAP.

As Liz Fuller writes, NATO will have to weigh the advantages of granting Georgia a MAP against the inevitable negative reaction from Russia. Lavrov

reiterated to the NATO-Russia Council in December 2013 Moscow's opposition to Georgia's accession to NATO. Lavrov argued that NATO enlargement is a holdover of Cold War thinking and "implies not only preserving the dividing lines which we have all committed to remove but also implies moving [these lines] further to the east. No one should take steps that pose a danger to a partner's security."¹⁴ Whether or not Rasmussen's recent reservation namely, that Rasmussen stopped short of promising that Georgia will receive MAP at a NATO summit in September 2014¹⁵ has to do with weighing the advantages of granting Georgia a MAP against the negative reaction from Moscow is hard to say. Although such supposition cannot be dismissed out of hand. During a discussion at the German Marshall Fund's annual Brussels Forum on 21 March 2014, Rasmussen asked Alexander Grushko, Russia's Envoy to NATO: "Will you accept Georgia's right to choose NATO membership if this is the Georgian decision and if NATO accepts? Would you accept that?" Grushko responded that: "No. I was absolutely very clear; we are against it. We believe that this is a huge mistake. This is the position of my country."¹⁶ To put it bluntly, Grushko's response was resolute and unequivocal. It also gave Rasmussen a clear indication of the insurmountable obstacle that NATO has to overcome in order to bring Georgia into NATO.

Whether or not the Georgian foreign policy strategy represents simple naivety on the part of the Georgian Dream government, the fact remains that rapprochement with Russia *excludes* [author's italics] the very notion of Georgia's NATO membership. It is, therefore naive, if not outright dangerous, for the Georgian Government to believe that it will be able to normalise relations with Moscow while keeping Georgia on track to eventually securing NATO membership. The Kremlin has made it clear on numerous occasions that it will not tolerate the North Atlantic Alliance's expansion into the post-Soviet space, including Georgia, and will do everything in Russia's capacity to halt it¹⁷ including a new Russian invasion of Georgia. The author's comment should be taken seriously and not dismissed out of hand.

On the international arena two important statements need to be remembered. Dennis Sammut, Director of the London-based Links Analysis, said that there is now no justification for continuing to procrastinate over Georgia's NATO membership. It will irritate Russia but that may be one of the reasons why it needs to be done. The lingering sense that Russia somehow has a veto on what happens in Georgia has lingered long enough and is now itself a cause for instability and insecurity, let alone being an infringement of the rights of these countries to determine their future. NATO membership for Georgia is a taboo that needs to be broken for the sake of Russia as much as for the sake of Georgia.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, the US

State Department endorsed granting MAP to Georgia on the same day. It is not clear, however, whether or not this represents a substantive policy shift but it is, nevertheless, the first time in recent memory that the US has explicitly come out in favour of MAP. We need to remember that the US is the only *one* [author's italics] member of NATO to do this. And the US was in favour of MAP for Georgia in 2008. Still, NATO works on consensus and other Georgia-sceptic NATO members, primarily in Western Europe, scuttled that plan. There is no indication that those sceptics have changed their mind on MAP for Georgia today. As a result, MAP still seems a remote prospect when NATO gets together in September 2014 in Wales. But this nevertheless seems to be a significant statement from Washington. And it is all the more reason to believe that something substantial will happen with Georgia and NATO in Wales.¹⁹ Apparently, Joshua Kucera tried to sweeten the bitter pill for Georgia and completed his article by writing that something substantial will happen with Georgia and NATO in Wales.

Joining the fray, Alasania wrote in an e-mailed response to a question posed by *Eurasianet.org* that: "Speeding up the process of Georgia's joining NATO should be one of the essential elements of the new policy approach that will better contribute to ensuring [the] stability of the European and Euro-Atlantic area." Sergi Kapanadze, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs under the former Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, contends that Western credibility is at stake: showing a strengthened commitment to Georgia on NATO membership would be one of the best ways to show Russia's paramount leader, Vladimir Putin, that the West is not a paper tiger. The main reasons for NATO's hesitancy persist: Russia still maintains a military presence within the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and regards NATO advancement as an immediate threat. Given the Kremlin's self-evident hostility to the notion of NATO advancement into the former Soviet space, however, Georgia's acceptance into the Atlantic alliance could possibly goad Russia into engaging in brinkmanship, such as has been recently demonstrated in Crimea.²⁰

Georgian independent experts regard Tbilisi's wishes to receive MAP during the next NATO summit as justified but doubt they are realistic. Security expert Teona Akubardia told the *Jamestown Foundation* that: "The primary opponents of giving Georgia the 'road map for accession to the alliance' were not the US, but France and Germany. She did not rule out, however, that against the backdrop of the events in Crimea "even these countries could change their position and support Georgia."²¹ However, James Appathurai, NATO Secretary General Special Representative, said in an interview with the *Georgian Public Broadcaster's (GPB) First Channel* that the issue of granting Georgia's NATO MAP has not been discussed at

NATO's recent high-level meeting. He added that: "The Georgian people should not jump the gun and try to get the action plan for NATO membership ahead of time." [To sweeten the bitter pill] Appathurai said that he believes that "a new step will be put forward on Georgia's accession to NATO in September."²² Even though Appathurai's statement reinforces the statement of Irakli Alsania made on 10 February 2014, it shows that NATO was not yet ready to grant Georgia MAP.

Despite both ups and downs in NATO-Georgia relations, the worst was yet to come.

The Moment of Bitter Truth

President Barack Obama told a news conference after meeting European Union (EU) leaders in Brussels on 26 March 2014 that: "Neither Ukraine nor Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership and there is no prospect of that changing anytime soon."²³ In other words, Obama clarified that NATO was not going to grant Georgia either membership or even a MAP – considered to be a formal path to NATO – any time soon. Although Obama's remarks simply reiterated what most Georgians already understood well, it still sent shockwaves across Georgian society.

The overwhelming majority of Georgian people whom Vasili Rukhadze approached responded that they felt deeply disappointed and betrayed, stating that Georgia's military efforts and sacrifices in Iraq and Afghanistan were ignored or unnoticed by the United States. They all asserted that Obama was simply appeasing Moscow by side-lining small Georgia. His remarks confirmed the fears of many Georgians that the West, weary of conflict with revanchist Russia, will never accept Georgia as a NATO member.

The Georgian leadership, however, tried to downplay the importance of Obama's statement and issued somewhat mixed and incoherent declarations. For instance, Minister of Foreign Affairs Maia Panjikidze, insisted that that the US president did not really say that Georgia was not on a path to NATO membership. In a similar fashion, Speaker of the Parliament, Davit Usupashvili, even blamed journalists for misinterpreting the US head of state, although, Obama very clearly stated that NATO was not going to give Georgia either membership, or a path to membership, in the near future. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili declared that Obama's statement was adequate and reflected reality.²⁴

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said in an interview with *Rustavi 2 TV* on 28 March 2014 that his US counterpart Barack Obama's remarks on NATO were "not something he was glad to hear." [To mitigate his disappointment] Margvelashvili stressed that it was never expected that Geor-

gia would have joined NATO at the summit in Wales in September 2014.

A lawmaker from the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority group, Tina Khidasheli, said on the same day that she expects NATO to give a clear response to Russia's moves in Ukraine at the September summit. She added that: "One of the options to give this response to Russia is to grant MAP to Georgia. Another option might be reiterating that Georgia will join NATO but without making reference to the need of going through a MAP phase."²⁵

To conclude, the bitter truth on NATO-Georgia relations is somewhat less palatable than expected. It is hard to say whether for Georgia it is a sense of déjà vu that it lost and should resign to its bitter destiny or a feeling that at least Georgia tried and failed. On the whole, there is a profound disappointment in Georgia that despite its efforts and sacrifices NATO let Georgia down and/or perhaps even deceived Georgia despite doing its best and utmost to fulfil stringent NATO demands. No doubt, as was stated often above, NATO as a whole was not and is not prepared to defend Georgia against Russia today. The reasons for NATO's stand vary from the unwillingness to aggravate relations with Russia for the sake of Georgia to NATO's military impotence. Although the onus was supposed to be on both sides, in reality, however NATO shirks from its pledge and responsibility, despite repeated promises made by General Secretary Rasmussen to move Georgia closer to NATO and, ultimately, grant Georgia MAP. Obama's statement was the last straw that destroyed illusions harboured by many in NATO as well as in Georgia. As a result, everyone in Georgia today understands that the forthcoming NATO summit in Wales is not going to change the situation. NATO officials do not wish to admit that point but they also have a problem to deny it. On the other hand, Russia as the indirect participant in these relations successfully derailed them by using the blunt and direct strategy of opposing the successful completion of Georgia's getting MAP and then joining NATO. The lesson that can be learned from this traumatic experience for Georgia is that NATO, despite its Open Door Policy and assistance that it provided to Georgia, failed to deliver the goods called MAP and then bringing Georgia into the Alliance. It is easier to blame NATO for all the evils rather than to admit Georgia's unrealistic expectations that the country's leadership was not and is not yet ready to accept.

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