



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**35**

## **GEORGIA: BUFFER OR NATO ALLY?**

*TORNIKE TURMANIDZE*



**EXPERT OPINION**

**2015**



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The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 and its continuing military intervention in Ukraine have once again revitalized discussions about the future of the post-Soviet states located between Russia and the West (the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union). Can these countries survive as sovereign entities and independent units of the international system? Are they free in choosing their paths of development and foreign policies? Can they actually join the alliances or regional associations they want? What roles will they play in European and/or Eurasian regional security in the near future? These questions obviously require a thorough elaboration and are not easy to answer. However, to this end I believe it can be useful to present some thoughts on the case of Georgia based on the lessons learned from the recent developments in Ukraine and, thus, contribute to a better understanding of the problems and challenges that the post-Cold War European security architecture faces today.

Below, I will briefly discuss the current geopolitical situation in the European part of the post-Soviet space, the implications of Russia's attempts to change Ukraine's borders by force for the EU's eastern neighbors (Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and elaborate on the current international standing of Georgia and its prospects for becoming a NATO member.

### ***Geopolitical Situation in Europe to the East of NATO and the EU***

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact at the end of the Cold War created a power vacuum composed of relatively weak states between Russia (the successor state of the Soviet Union) and the West (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization led by the United States and the European Union which formed under its current name soon thereafter). As history shows, whenever such power vacuums – potential buffer zones – emerge between two or more poles of power in the international system, this may lead to one of the following two outcomes: 1) either one of the great powers or alliances unilaterally expands into the middle area or the latter is partitioned into spheres of influence by them or 2) the area between two or more poles of power is recognized by them as a buffer zone and the countries in this region assume neutral or non-aligned status by or, more often, against their own will; i.e., they are “neutralized.” Although, Europe during the Cold War included elements of both of these outcomes (after World War II many Western European countries joined NATO, most Eastern European countries – the Warsaw Pact while neutral states such as Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Finland and the non-aligned Yugoslavia

served as buffers between the two blocs), a greater volume of earlier and later historical evidence proves that in such situations great powers usually opt for the first rather than the second outcome; that is, they favor expanding their borders or spheres of influence over maintaining buffer zones between them. Neutral buffer states appear in these areas only in the case of a tight regional balance of power – when great powers and alliances fail to settle on either dividing the geopolitical vacuum between them or surrendering it to one another. Yet, arrangements regarding buffer states are more or less short-lived as their neutrality, or even sovereignty, is compromised as soon as regional or global balances of power shift and one or more of the great powers or alliances decides to change the status quo and expand its own sphere of influence.<sup>1</sup>

What happened in Eastern Europe and, partly, in the post-Soviet space after the end of the Cold War perfectly illustrates this pattern of great power behavior. On the one hand, the US sphere of influence, NATO and the EU have expanded to the east since the mid-1990s: former members of the Warsaw Pact such as Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, former republics of Yugoslavia such as Slovenia and Croatia, former Soviet republics such as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, all became members of the North Atlantic Alliance and the majority of them of the European Union as well; the Cold War-era neutral countries such as Austria, Sweden, Finland have not joined NATO but entered the EU. On the other hand, Russia has been trying to bring back the former Soviet republics under its sphere of influence by enrolling them in such regional associations as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and, most recently, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) which, since 2015, replaced the Eurasian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Community. From the Eastern Partnership countries located between Russia and the EU and NATO (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan), Moscow has thus far succeeded in bringing only Belarus and Armenia into the EEU (as well as Kazakhstan and soon likely Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia). Ever since 1991 Russia has also been using an array of economic, political and military instruments to regain control on the former Soviet republics and prevent them from moving towards the West, most noticeably by maintaining military bases or “peacekeeping forces” on their territories, manipulating with ethnic diversity, fostering separatism and ethnic conflicts in these countries

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1 For more discussion on buffer states, see: Tornike Turmanidze, *Buffer States* (Tbilisi: BTKK - Policy Research Group, Second Edition, 2011) (In Georgian) and Tornike Turmanidze, *Buffer States: Power Policies, Foreign Policies and Concepts* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009).

and, finally, conducting open military interventions (in Georgia in August 2008 and in Ukraine since February 2014), occupying parts of their territory (e.g., Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk regions) and even annexing them (Crimea).

Unfortunately, we often hear an inaccurate and misguided argument that the eastward enlargement of NATO and the EU was a unilateral expansion of the West into the power vacuum created in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space after the end of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Russia has also been engaged in the westward expansion of not only its sphere of influence but, literally, of its own borders – as recently exemplified by the case of its annexation of Crimea. Moreover, the basic difference between these two expansions, which politicians and scholars who bring up this argument prefer to neglect, is that the former countries of the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc which joined NATO and the EU, did so by their own will and the free choice of their societies while the other post-Soviet countries that joined the Russia-led regional organizations, such as the CIS, CSTO and EEU, were very much likely subjected to pressure and blackmail from Moscow<sup>3</sup> (although their governments might not publicly admit this). Furthermore, in the case of some of these countries, which have not so far entered either of the aforementioned alliances or associations; namely, Georgia and Ukraine, Russia resorted to all-out war, military occupation and even annexation of their sovereign territory with the purpose of eventually thwarting their accession to the EU and NATO and dragging them back into its own orbit.

Thus, despite the fact that Russia and the West, under different circumstances, absorbed a large portion of the post-Cold War geopolitical vacuum in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, by the year 2015 a potential buffer area between them still exists, encompassing Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. A buffer status seems to be acceptable to Moldova and Azerbaijan. Moldova, fearing Moscow and its ability to “unfreeze” the conflict in Transdniestria, has declared permanent neutrality since 1994; however, Chisinau has evolving relations with the EU and signed the Association Agreement with Brussels in 2014 which has irritated the Russian government nonetheless and it seems less likely that Moscow will agree to Moldova’s integration in the EU. Azerbaijan, having a somewhat periph-

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2 For example, see: John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2014, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141769/john-j-mearsheimer/why-the-ukraine-crisis-is-the-west-s-fault](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141769/john-j-mearsheimer/why-the-ukraine-crisis-is-the-west-s-fault)

3 This is certainly true for Georgia which Russia pushed into the CIS in 1993 after the war in Abkhazia.

eral location in the space between Russia and NATO/EU, and supposedly also due to Russia being able to weigh in on its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, has thus far avoided making a clear choice between Russia and the West; respectively, between NATO/EU and CSTO/EEU. However, Moldova and Azerbaijan, together with Ukraine and Georgia, are in a geopolitical limbo largely due to the unsettled relations of the latter two with Russia. At present, Georgia and Ukraine have clearly expressed their wish to be closer to and, in due course, become integral parts of the West: in 2014 both Georgia and Ukraine signed Association Agreements with the EU, in 2008 they were promised eventual membership in NATO at the Alliance's Bucharest Summit, in 2011 Georgia was named a "NATO aspirant" country and just recently the new Ukrainian government decided to renew the country's NATO bid.<sup>4</sup> Russia, however, is holding them back by infringing on their sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders through maintaining effective control of their breakaway, occupied or annexed regions: Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Crimea, also parts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions presently ravaged by war.

What will happen with these countries? Will they evolve into buffers, NATO allies or Russia's satellites? This complex matter has several possible solutions, some of which, unfortunately, may not be a fulfillment of the current foreign policy goals of these countries.

### ***Interests of Russia and the West in the Region***

Russia is a revisionist power. It is clearly not content with the existing status quo in the post-Soviet space and desires to change it. Especially since Vladimir Putin became Russia's president, who called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest "geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> Moscow has been trying to bring back the 12 post-Soviet republics under its control at any cost (except, probably, the Baltic states, which fortunately escaped from Russia into NATO and the EU in 2004). It is apparent that Russia's main foreign policy goal with regard to the post-Soviet space is to restore the Soviet Union (or Russian Empire, for that matter) in a different modern form.

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4 "Ukrainian President Signs Law Allowing NATO Membership Bid," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18.01.2015, [www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-poroshenko-signs-law-allowing-nato-bid/26767916.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-poroshenko-signs-law-allowing-nato-bid/26767916.html) (18.01.2015)

5 Vladimir Putin's Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25.04.2005, [www.archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031\\_type70029type82912\\_87086.shtml](http://www.archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml)

It is interesting that Russia views both NATO and the EU as threats to its sphere of “privileged interests”<sup>6</sup> and those in the West who may argue that the Kremlin is only alarmed because of the enlargement of NATO and not of the EU are wrong. The example of Ukraine proves this. The Kremlin aggressively and successfully pressured the former government of Ukraine not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, thus triggering Euro-maidan, which resulted in the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Applying for NATO membership was not on the agenda of either the Yanukovich government, which had bowed down to the demands of the Kremlin and declared Ukraine as a non-bloc state in 2010, or the interim government which assumed authority after Euromaidan. Nevertheless, Russia started a military intervention in Ukraine in February 2014, seizing Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine in order to halt Ukraine’s approximation with the West and the EU, in particular.

The August 2008 Russia-Georgia War and the subsequent military occupation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia by Russia,<sup>7</sup> its annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine prove that Russia is capable of and will continue using military force abroad for its purpose of regaining control on the former republics of the USSR. Whenever the governments of these countries refuse to yield to Moscow’s pressure on the subject of their relations with the US, NATO and/or the EU, Russia will destabilize them, occupy their lands, maybe even annex them, occasionally referring to the case of Kosovo as a justification of its aggressive actions and, thereby, hit two foreign policy targets at the same time: 1) physically expand its own borders or “defense perimeter” and 2) make the victim states unattractive to the West, block their NATO or EU accession; that is, “neutralize” them in order to further turn them into its own satellites. In other words, at this point Russia is trying to agree with the West on the buffer status for Georgia and Ukraine (as well as for Moldova and Azerbaijan). But this is only Russia’s temporary interest. Its final goal is to pull these countries back into its sphere of influence.

The West, unlike Russia, respects the free choice of the abovementioned Eastern Partnership countries to pursue foreign policies of integration into NATO and the EU but, at the same time, seems to have lost its enthusiasm

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6 Dmitry Medvedev, serving as President of Russia, publicly used this phrase in August 2008, [www.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1294](http://www.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1294), [www.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/2092](http://www.news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/2092) (18.01.2015)

7 Chronology of Russian Aggression against Georgia in 2008, Government of Georgia, [www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=556](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=556) (18.01.2015)



for further eastward expansion fearing more military escalation by Russia. Above all, the West wants to see these countries as sovereign, stable, democratizing and developing, some of them – providing they meet the relevant criteria – even as members of NATO and the EU, at the same time hoping they might enjoy normal relations with Moscow and, thus, tries to find common ground with Russia on this issue.

As we see, the interests of the two major actors in the region are different and at odds with each other. The recurrent attempts by the leadership of the United States, NATO and the EU to transform their relations with the Russian government from geopolitical rivalry to cooperation have failed due to the fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin sees the world exclusively in terms of power politics. For example, soon after the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War, the West returned to business-as-usual relations with Moscow, epitomized by the US “Reset” policy initiated by the administration of President Barack Obama. This, however, failed to tame Russia’s violent behavior in its neighborhood. Today, there is a risk that this mistake will be repeated and the sanctions currently imposed by the West on Russia because of its military intervention in Ukraine might be lifted. At least, discussions on this topic have begun within the EU.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, some Realists in the West often argue in favor of accommodating Russia’s “geopolitical needs” and declare that all Russia wants is a neutral buffer zone to its west, a new “cordon sanitaire” which would guard it from NATO and the EU and that these demands should be fulfilled at the cost of the free will of nations such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. This point of view is wrong because Russia’s actual geopolitical interest is to maintain satellites around its borders, not buffers. Denying these countries a chance to join NATO and the EU means pushing them back into the Russian orbit.

### ***Georgia’s Geopolitical Role and Prospects***

Georgia has been stuck in a geopolitical limbo or transition period for a long time because, on the one hand, Russia is trying to turn Georgia into its satellite (or quasi-buffer<sup>9</sup>) and drag it into the CIS, CSTO and EEU or is considering a temporary alternative of accepting Georgia’s neutral, buffer status, but not withdrawing its forces from the occupied regions of Georgia in order to wait for a future opportunity to convert the country into its

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8 “Mogherini Suggests Détente with Russia,” *EurActiv*, 14.01.2015, [www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/mogherini-suggests-detente-russia-311288](http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/mogherini-suggests-detente-russia-311288) (18.01.2015)

9 Allied, non-neutral state with a buffer location.

satellite. On the other hand, Georgia does not want to be a satellite (or quasi-buffer) of Russia, nor a buffer between Russia and the West; Georgia's publicly declared top foreign policy priority is to become a NATO ally (or quasi-buffer), as well as to join the EU. However, the military occupation of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia by Russia following the 2008 August Russia-Georgia War is a serious obstacle to Georgia's NATO aspirations as well as to its position of a genuine buffer.

As I have argued earlier,<sup>10</sup> hypothetically there may be five future geopolitical scenarios for Georgia. As a small/weak, potentially buffer state situated between the two rival poles of power – Russia and the West – Georgia may, theoretically, play five different geopolitical roles in the region:

1. *Buffer between Russia and the West* – if Russia ends its military occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, or Russian occupying forces are replaced by an international peacekeeping contingent, while Georgia becomes a neutral state and stops its progress towards NATO and the EU. A neutral Georgia in the EU, but not in NATO, is another hypothetical variation of this scenario. In this case, Georgia would become a buffer state between Russia and NATO, in particular, but it is less likely that Russia would accept such a deal judging by its recent actions in Ukraine.
2. *NATO ally (or quasi-buffer)* – if Russia ends its military occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, or Russian troops deployed there are replaced by international peacekeepers, while Georgia becomes a member of the North Atlantic Alliance (and possibly also of the EU).
3. *Russia's satellite (or quasi-buffer)* – if Georgia agrees to and/or recognizes as legal the presence of Russian military bases and troops in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, cancels its bid to join NATO and the EU, declares neutrality and/or further becomes a member of the CIS, CSTO and EEU.
4. *Shatterbelt* – if the Russian occupying army neither withdraws from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, nor is it replaced by an international peacekeeping mission, while Georgia joins NATO and/or the EU, which would de jure imply Georgia's integration into these organizations with its internationally recognized territory, but would

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<sup>10</sup> Tornike Turmanidze, *Buffer States* (Tbilisi: BTKK - Policy Research Group, Second Edition, 2011) (In Georgian), pp. 39-40 and Tornike Turmanidze, *Buffer States: Power Policies, Foreign Policies and Concepts* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009), pp. 19-20.

de facto be equal to the splitting of Georgia along the lines of Russian military occupation into spheres of influence by Russia and the West.

5. *Bridge between Russia and the West* – if the great power rivalry between Russia and the United States/NATO/EU changes to true cooperation and friendship, Russia stops its occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Georgia regains its territorial integrity, perceives no threats from Russia anymore and develops economic, political and military ties with both Russia and the West, possibly joins either NATO or the EU or both, as well as maybe some other regional associations. This is an ideal scenario in which power politics are transformed into regional cooperation, similar to the one that unfolded in Western Europe after World War II (when Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg – buffer states in the past – left this problem behind as the long-lasting historical disputes between France, Germany and the United Kingdom came to an end).

The fifth scenario (bridge between Russia and the West), which may be a continuation of the first (buffer), the second (NATO ally) and perhaps even the fourth (shatterbelt) scenario, is, of course, the best one for Georgia. However, it seems Utopian at this point since Moscow's imperialist approach to the post-Soviet space is less likely to change in the near future. Obviously, Russia prefers the third (satellite) scenario for Georgia but, as a means to achieve this goal, also temporarily considers the first (buffer) scenario, though under slightly different conditions: Russia wants to turn Georgia into a buffer state *without* withdrawing its armed forces and military bases from the occupied regions of Georgia. But a country cannot be considered neutral or non-aligned when its territory is occupied by a foreign power unless it recognizes these regions as independent states or parts of another country which, I believe, no Georgian government would do. Thus, the first (buffer) and the third (satellite) scenarios are equally dangerous for Georgia given Russia's expansionist ambitions.

Although, Georgia may be seeking to accomplish the second (NATO ally) scenario, sadly enough its current international standing is closer to the fourth (shatterbelt) scenario, which is certainly not good in general but, given the current circumstances, is not the worst for Georgia (as well as for Ukraine and Moldova). I would even dare to say that this scenario should be acceptable to Georgia at the moment since it provides NATO/EU security guarantees for Georgia's statehood and sovereignty on the government controlled territory as well as increases Tbilisi's future chances of peacefully reintegrating the occupied regions and people residing there.

Thus, Georgia is neither a buffer state nor a NATO ally today. Though it strives towards the latter alternative, the great power rivalry between Russia and the West, their disagreement over the fate of the post-Soviet space wedged between them, prevents Georgia from achieving its foreign policy goal. However, still much will depend on the robustness of Georgia's endeavor to join the West.

### ***Conclusion: Policy Recommendations and Lessons Learned***

What the Georgian government (Georgian Dream-led coalition government that came to power in October 2012) should learn from the recent Ukrainian experience is that succumbing to Russia's demands and agreeing to a neutral or non-bloc status, trying to balance between Russia and the West with the hope of being left in peace by Russia, makes absolutely no sense. Ukraine, under former President Viktor Yanukovich, did exactly that since 2010 and even extended the lease of the Sevastopol port in Crimea to the Russian Black Sea fleet<sup>11</sup> but Vladimir Putin apparently demanded more and more from the Ukrainian government, including its refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. In the end, Ukraine's non-bloc status did not prevent Russia from starting a military invasion against it.

Therefore, the only possible safeguard for Georgia – as well as for Ukraine and Moldova – is to stay on a clear path of integration with the West, bound for eventual membership in both NATO and the EU. Such a policy increases the likelihood that these countries will get political, economic and even military support from the West in the case of additional Russian military encroachments on their territory. Though, as there are no clear guarantees that either Georgia or any other neighbor of Russia will receive such assistance and no clear timelines are set for their accession to NATO, all other policy alternatives offer less chances to these countries of successfully defending their sovereignty from Russia.

Russian military occupation and/or annexation of Georgian and Ukrainian territories, as well as the deployment of Russian "peacekeepers" in Moldova, should not rule out the possibility of these countries joining NATO and/or the EU – of course, providing that they continue processes of state-building, economic development and democratization on the territories controlled by their governments. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova can agree

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11 "Ukrainian Parliament Ratifies Agreement Extending Russian Black Sea Fleet's Presence in Crimea," *Kyiv Post*, 27.04.2010, [www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/ukrainian-parliament-ratifies-agreement-extending--65103.html](http://www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/ukrainian-parliament-ratifies-agreement-extending--65103.html) (18.01.2015)

with NATO and the EU on different provisions which could make their integration in these organizations compatible with maintaining peace in the region. For example, Georgia and Ukraine could negotiate that in the case of their accession to NATO, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty – which states that “an armed attack against one or more [members of the alliance] in Europe or North America shall be considered [as] an attack against them all,”<sup>12</sup> – would not bear on the issue of earlier military occupation or annexation of their territories by Russia and would only provide for collective defense against new attacks. In this spirit, on November 23, 2010, the then Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, in his address to the European Parliament, made a unilateral non-use of force pledge with regard to the 20% of Georgia’s territory occupied by Russia, retaining only the right of self-defense of the 80% of the country’s territory under control of the Georgian government.<sup>13</sup> If Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko makes a similar pledge regarding Crimea, this would only aid Ukraine’s NATO aspirations.

The post-Cold war world order was once again shaken by Russia in March 2014 with its annexation of Crimea. This step was definitely far more brazen than Russia’s recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in August 2008. If the United States, NATO and the EU do not curb Russia’s current aggressive behavior against its neighbors and make it pay a very high price for its deeds, Russia’s next step might be to test the same strategy against smaller NATO members such as the Baltic States.

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12 *The North Atlantic Treaty*, NATO, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm) (18.01.2015)

13 “Georgia Makes ‘Unilateral Pledge’ of Non-Use of Force,” *Civil Georgia*, 23.11.2010, [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22880) (18.01.2015)