



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

Security Review

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**Georgia and Ukraine:
When and How Will We Join NATO?**

2021

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At various stages of my life, in seminars or lectures with students, and during meetings of various format with public officials, journalists, and with citizens of our country living in rural areas or large cities, one of the most popular questions has always been: When and how will we join NATO?

I understand the authors of this question very well, because I myself have asked the same question to our international partners and friends - how can one accelerate Georgia's accession to NATO?

I remembered all this because Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently in an interview with "Axios on HBO" said: "If I had an opportunity to ask a question to President Biden, I would certainly ask: why is Ukraine still not in NATO?!" (<https://emerging-europe.com/news/why-is-ukraine-still-not-in-nato-elsewhere-in-emerging-europe/>). This is not a rhetorical question – and indeed, why are Ukraine and Georgia not members of NATO to this date, when NATO made the historic decision on this matter 13 years ago at the Bucharest Summit?

Before we try to answer the main questions underlined in the title of our article, it would be better to explain why Georgia and Ukraine should join the North Atlantic Alliance.

Anyone who has been actively following the Euro-Atlantic integration process will agree that much has happened in both countries since the restoration of independence, which determines their aspirations to join NATO. Unfortunately, along with many positive aspects we have in common with Ukraine, we also have a serious problem - our neighbor the Russian Federation, or rather, the relentless struggle of its government to ensure that Ukraine and Georgia can never become part of a free, democratic, developed, and stable space. Vladimir Putin has always openly warned the West that he would undoubtedly take appropriate measures if Georgia and Ukraine were to join NATO. This was the case before and after the Russian military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014. For example, in 2018, after Georgia and Ukraine started openly talking about NATO membership and intensified cooperation in this direction, Vladimir Putin directly stated that Russia would most certainly take retaliatory measures against such "aggressive" moves which posed a direct threat to the Russian Federation (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-putin-idUSKBN1K92KA>). However, how unacceptable the accession of these two countries to NATO is for Russia became apparent most dramatically in 2008 and 2014. The occupation that began in those days in Georgia, the annexation of Ukrainian territories in Crimea, and the military operations in eastern Ukraine continue to this day. The Russian military kill civilians, military personnel, and volunteers fighting for territorial integrity practically on a daily basis in the territories of our countries. They are erecting barbed wire fences, kidnapping civilians, and occupying new territories.

If we look at Russia's aggressive actions in a broader context, we can boldly say that Ukraine and Georgia are fighting not only for their own security and territories, but also represent countries fighting for Russia's containment on NATO's eastern flank.

It is important that despite Russia's aggressive actions, Georgia and Ukraine continue to aspire to NATO membership. If we also look at the pre-war period, it becomes clear that Ukraine and Georgia have been actively working to achieve the goal of NATO membership since the 2000s, except for the period of Viktor Yanukovich's rule (when he first declared that Ukraine has no intention to either join NATO or acquire the MAP, while he managed to pass a decision in the Ukrainian Rada on granting non-alliance status to the country (<http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1028/ukraine-nato-and-russia>)). In 2002, the presidents of both countries officially announced their intention to join the North Atlantic Alliance. Both countries adopted first the format of intensive dialogue with NATO, then the annual national programs and the NATO-Georgia and NATO-Ukraine bilateral commissions. The mechanisms mentioned in the NATO Summit Declarations are considered as essential tools for eventual NATO membership (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm). However, NATO documents also state that the Membership Action Plan - MAP is a mandatory part of the NATO accession process (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm). In 2014, Georgia, along with Sweden, Finland, Australia, and Jordan, was granted enhanced opportunity partner status. Ukraine received this status recently, in June 2020. In addition, Georgia has a substantial NATO-Georgia package for cooperation with NATO- an updated version thereof was recently approved. The NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Education Center (JTEC) has been operating in Georgia since 2015, and a NATO-Ukraine platform has been set up to combat hybrid threats with Ukraine. Of course, the contribution of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO's international security operations is always particularly emphasized in official documents and statements. NATO also praises measures taken by Georgia to ensure military interoperability with the Alliance. Ukraine, in turn, in addition to participating in military operations, actively involved its military capabilities in the implementation of NATO's response to the pandemic through the use of military transport aircraft by the Alliance.

Thus, Georgia and Ukraine, in terms of military interoperability, have been meeting NATO standards for years, and proudly represent experienced and honorable allies on the battlefield.

We have discussed in detail the cooperation with NATO on the Black Sea in a previous security review. So, we will not dwell on the details here, but merely emphasize that Georgia and Ukraine are increasingly involved in NATO military exercises on the Black Sea (as well as other, larger and more intensive joint exercises and trainings), and NATO's growing interest towards the Black Sea region is acquiring clear contours. Growing NATO interest in the Black Sea can be vividly observed (<https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2941>).

Another important aspect that determines the decision of Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO is the steps taken by these two countries to carry out reforms. In the aforementioned documents, you can see how the reform process in Ukraine and Georgia is assessed in NATO. This issue has been repeatedly raised by NATO leaders and senior officials of the member states as one of the necessary preconditions for NATO membership. No-one disputes that the country must be ready in terms of military interoperability as well as democratic development in order to be able to join the military-political alliance. However, you will often see the analysis of some individual experts claiming that both Georgia and Ukraine may already be better prepared in this regard than countries that previously joined NATO (<http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1028/ukraine-nato-and-russia>).

The last but certainly not final argument as to why Georgia and Ukraine should become members of NATO is the strong desire of the citizens of these countries. In this regard, the people of Georgia are exceptional for a number of NATO member states in terms of support for membership. According to surveys, even in the most critical post-war period, support for NATO membership has not fallen below 55%. According to a study published by the US National Democratic Institute in June 2020, 62 to 69% of the population supported NATO membership throughout 2012-2020 (it even reached 80% in various periods) (<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results%20June%202020%20Final%20Version%20GEO.pdf>). As for Ukraine, the support of the population is growing there and currently exceeds 50%.

Popular support in Ukraine for NATO membership since 2002

2014–2019 hide			
Date	Opinion		Poll agency
	For	Against	
March 2014	44%	47%	GfK^[104]
April 2014	36%	48%	Razumkov Centre^[105]
May 2014	37%	42%	Razumkov Centre ^[106]
May 2014	41%	40%	Democratic Initiatives Foundation & Razumkov Centre^[107]
June 2014	41%	40%	Razumkov Centre ^[108]

June 2014	47%	36%	Gorshenin Institute ^[109]
July 2014	44%	34%	RATING ^[110]
October 2014	53%	34%	Gorshenin Institute ^[17]
November 2014	51%	25%	RATING ^[18]
March 2015	43.3%	33.4%	Kyiv International Institute of Sociology ^[111]
June 2015	53%	32%	Pew Research Center ^[112]
July 2015	63.9%	28.5%	Democratic Initiatives Foundation & Razumkov Centre ^[113]
December 2015	75%	11%	Democratic Initiatives Foundation ^[114]
January 2016	47%	31%	RATING ^[19]
March 2016	45%	30%	RATING ^[20]
June 2016	39%	32%	RATING ^[115]
September 2016	39%	31%	Kyiv International Institute of Sociology ^[116]
December 2016	71%	23%	Democratic Initiatives Foundation & Razumkov Centre ^[117]
June 2019	53%	29%	RATING ^[118]

With this in mind, it is safe to say that the time has come for NATO, Georgia, and Ukraine to move from partnership mode to a level of relationship characteristic to the allies. In the historical perspective, 13 years may not be much, and the NATO accession experience of individual countries (Northern Macedonia adopted the Membership Action Plan exactly 20 years before its formal accession to NATO in 2019) also attests to this, but the Alliance must take into account the fact that unlike all others, especially the new members, Georgia and Ukraine are constantly facing threats emanating from Russia. It should be emphasized once again that this threat is not only a problem belonging to the two countries, but is also a very serious challenge for the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole. That is why it is extremely important for the Alliance, especially its

skeptical members, to properly evaluate the decisions made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, or rather - the decisions not taken. It is important for those individual members of NATO who are skeptical of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia to realize that Russia has and will always take advantage of their indecisiveness; it will always blackmail NATO members and will always be ready to pose a direct threat to the sovereignty of Georgia and Ukraine until the issue is resolved through membership.

The best illustration of this was just a few weeks ago the mobilization along the borders of Ukraine of more than 100 thousand Russian servicemen, along with weapons and equipment of all types and categories, although the international community, including the North Atlantic Alliance, strongly supported Ukraine, and warned Russia that it would pay a heavy price in the event of a full-scale military aggression. However, unfortunately, despite calls for NATO membership from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/04/07/ukraine-urges-nato-speed-membership-signal-moscow.html>), Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and Deputy Prime Minister Stefanishyna Olha (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/12/ukraine-nato-membership-path-russia-border-georgia/>), the Alliance has so far limited itself with statements of support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the assessment of close partnership with the country.

The expectations of the Ukrainian leadership have somewhat risen since the Democrat Joseph Biden became US President. Communication between the presidents of the two countries was established; Foreign Secretary Antony Blinken paid a visit to Kiev, and the visit of Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House is also planned. However, there has been no clear signal from Washington as yet about the NATO membership.

At the end of May, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba expressed concern that Ukraine would not be invited to the NATO Summit scheduled for June 14 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-decries-lack-progress-joining-nato-wants-be-summit-2021-05-26/>). According to the Ukrainian leadership, the only way to normalize relations with Russia would be the rapid accession of Ukraine to NATO (I cannot but agree and argue exactly the same about Georgia – A.P.).

To be sure, NATO has other important issues to deal with. First of all, President Joseph Biden's first meeting with the Allies makes this summit important for the Alliance. This meeting has a special bearing after 4 years of strained relations with his predecessor Donald Trump. President Biden and his administration have already made important statements about the steadfastness of allied relations. In addition, the US administration has taken very concrete steps to rejuvenate years of broken relations with individual members of the Alliance, especially with Germany. By all accounts, the decision to ease sanctions related to the Nordstream-2 pipeline was a generous gesture by the US President precisely to restore/improve those connections. Clearly, such a decision would have really pleased the German Chancellor and creates a positive environment

ahead of the NATO Summit. However, the move has caused great resentment in Ukraine, which sees the implementation of “Nordstream-2” as a direct threat to its stability and territorial integrity.

At the same time, the NATO Summit will focus on the document prepared by a high-level group of experts on NATO transformation and adaptation, the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan and the new reality in Afghanistan, climate change, hybrid threats, and, of course, Russia, or more precisely the ways and means of containing it. Thus, the resentment of the Ukrainian side is completely understandable. When discussing Russia's containment, I think it is important to invite the partner countries that face this threat on a daily basis.

I have always said, and I will repeat now, that despite the obstacles, Georgia and Ukraine must continue to prepare tirelessly for the favorable moment that will surely come (and perhaps very soon). This was the case in the early 2000s, when the decision on big expansion was made. Prior to al-Qaeda's terrorist attack on the United States, the Alliance was not ready to invite new members, but the circumstances changed the situation overnight.

Doubtful attitudes within NATO may also change. In this regard, the outcome of the German parliamentary elections scheduled for September is very important. If the German Greens join a coalition government, the chances of a new NATO enlargement could increase significantly.

A few words must be said about the relations between Ukraine and Georgia. In the last few years, the relations between the two have not really corresponded to the level that two countries with a long history of common strategic interests and friendly relations, who also have similar aspirations to join NATO, should have. Recent steps taken to restore ties, along with bilateral visits, are positive developments in this regard. Let us note that, in the recent history of NATO membership, there have been precedents for the simultaneous accession of 10 countries, and also decisions to accept individual members. The issue of which route is better for Ukraine and Georgia - a one-basket approach or an individual membership strategy - has been repeatedly discussed in expert circles. Both in NATO and in those expert circles, preference is given to the joint accession of Georgia and Ukraine. I also think that it would be better for our countries to combine efforts with regard to diplomatic activities (especially in the capitals of those countries with a skeptical attitude), military interoperability, mutual support in the implementation of reforms, and deepening economic cooperation. If these relations actually reach a level suitable for a strategic alliance, one part of the question in our headline (How do we join NATO?) will definitely be answered, and I am sure it will provide real ground for a specific answer to the most pressing question of recent times - when will we join NATO?