



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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The countries situated on the Black Sea coast - Romania and Bulgaria - officially joined NATO in 2004. Turkey joined much earlier, in 1952. Neither then, in the far-off 50s, nor in the early 21st century, with the acceptance of new members, was there really any particular emphasis on NATO becoming more active in the Black Sea and engaging in maintaining security. More attention was focused on Central Europe in 2004. However, it would not be difficult for both the proponents of cooperation and opponent Russia to see it as a part of the same boat: three Black Sea members of the Alliance and two aspirant countries - Georgia and Ukraine.

The decision by NATO not to grant a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine in Bucharest, Romania, in 2008, was a dramatic mistake, as Russia perceived it as a sign of NATO weakness. This was followed by the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the occupation of more than 20% of the country's territories. During the 5-day war in August, the Russian armed forces bombed Georgian coast guard boats with particular diligence, along with other military infrastructure. Virtually all boats and ships delivered by NATO partners as part of bilateral cooperation and support programs sank as a result of the bombing perpetrated by Russian aviation.

Unfortunately, despite Georgia's warnings, Russia's occupation of its territories in Abkhazia and Samachablo was not strong enough of a signal to alarm the international community, and as such, regrettably, it was followed by further Russian military aggression, this time against Ukraine.

It was precisely in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the initiation of military activities in the eastern part of Ukraine, that the democratic community began to think seriously about the scale of the threat emanating from Russia and the need to ensure the security of democratic nations. Unsurprisingly, at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, one of the main issues was the Russian military aggression in Ukraine. NATO then decided to strengthen the defense of its member states. This decision specifically targeted the Baltic and Black Sea Member States, including Bulgaria and Romania.

An even greater focus was placed on Black Sea security issues and the need to deepen cooperation at the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit. Paragraph 23 of the Declaration adopted at the Summit reads: "In the Black Sea region, the security situation has also deteriorated in recent years. We will continue to address the implications for NATO of developments in the region and take them into account in the Alliance's approaches and policies. We will continue to support, as appropriate, regional efforts by the Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability. We will also strengthen our dialogue and cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine in this regard."¹

The first tripartite summit was held with the participation of NATO Heads of State, Georgia, and Ukraine at the Brussels Summit in July 2018. Further, a joint declaration of the NATO-Georgia Commission was adopted at the level of Heads of States, in which, among other important issues,

¹ *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, 09.07.2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm

was discussed the strengthening of cooperation on the Black Sea in terms of enhancing security. Speaking about the important elements of the declaration, the Georgian Foreign Minister noted that an agreement was reached according to which the Black Sea airspace will be monitored, information exchanged, and cooperation will be established between the NATO and Georgian Naval commands., with NATO ships periodically visiting the Georgian Black Sea territories. The agreement also implies conducting joint exercises, as well as training of the Georgian Naval forces by NATO. All the practical elements related to the issues of cooperation in the Black Sea are aimed at making Georgia more secure, increasing its defense capabilities and sustainability, and making the readiness of its armed forces compatible with that of NATO.²

Attention and interest in cooperation to strengthen security in the Black Sea is growing yearly. On October 5, 2019, the North Atlantic Council visited Georgia once again, on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the adoption of the NATO-Georgia Joint Package. This time, the meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission was held in Batumi, as a result of which a joint statement was adopted, among other important issues, stressing the need to strengthen cooperation in the field of security on the Black Sea. In particular, paragraph 6 of the statement reads, “NATO values Georgia’s engagement in, and contributions to, strategic discussion and mutual awareness on security in the Black Sea region. NATO is further developing dialogue and practical cooperation in this context, including through the SNGP. In line with the April 2019 decision of NATO Foreign Ministers, a number of new steps have already been initiated in this regard. NATO welcomes Georgia’s offers to provide further logistical support to NATO and the Allies. The Allies have increased their support for Georgia, including by training Georgian Coast Guard boarding teams, enhanced interaction between Georgia’s Coast Guard and NATO’s Standing Naval Forces, port visits, exercises, and the sharing of information to enhance situational awareness. The Allies welcome Georgia’s intention to work towards enhancing interoperability with NATO of its newly acquired patrol boats.”³

At the online Foreign Ministerial in April 2020, it was decided that the new measures of further support for Georgia and Ukraine would engage these countries more in the scheduled exercises of NATO and Member States in the Black Sea. As James Appathurai said in an interview with a Georgian radio station in May 2020, “by the decision of NATO, Georgia will be more involved in activities we call ‘hybrid defense.’ This implies protection from the methods and means that Russia uses against other countries, for example, cyber-attacks or misinformation, energy blockade, covert intelligence or military activity. We consider all these methods as part of one package. We are working with Ukraine and Georgia on these issues. We have a program in which we want to involve Georgia. This is an Airspace Security Program that will allow Georgia to better understand what is happening in its airspace. Another component of the new package is the more active participation of Georgia in joint exercises. Finally, NATO members are seriously

² *11-12 July Nato Summit in Brussels*, Georgia and NATO Information Center, 12.07.2018, <http://old.infocenter.gov.ge/eng-georgia-and-nato/>

³ *The North Atlantic Council (NAC) will pay a visit to Georgia*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 02.10.2019, [https://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartveloshi-chrdiloatlantikuri-sabchos-\(NAC\)-viz.aspx?lang=en-US](https://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartveloshi-chrdiloatlantikuri-sabchos-(NAC)-viz.aspx?lang=en-US)

considering the more active involvement of Georgia in military exercises, including in the region.”⁴

The decision was reached at the NATO Ministerial in December 2020 to strengthen the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) adopted at the 2014 Wales Summit. Among other components, the enhanced package includes additional elements of Black Sea security cooperation, namely, increasing the number of visits to ports, joint exercises, and providing Georgia a secure communication system.

The most recent Black Sea security discussion was held on January 22, 2021, during Salome Zurbishvili's meeting with the NATO Secretary General.

Over the past few years, Russia has not been sitting idle either. It has significantly strengthened the Black Sea Fleet. This reinforcement had two purposes: to demonstrate its forces on the Black Sea as a counterweight to NATO, and to create significant military and logistical resources for the operation in Syria.

Russia demonstrates a particularly aggressive attitude towards the strengthening of Ukraine's navy, its conducting joint exercises with NATO partners, and even its moving from port to port. Military ships of the Russian Federal Security Service opened fire on Ukrainian ships returning from Mariupol to the port of Odessa via the Kerch Strait on November 25, 2018. The Russian side detained Ukrainian crews and ships. This was another very vivid example of Russia's disrespect towards international agreements, including existing bilateral and multilateral agreements on maritime traffic.

It is commendable that Ukraine, despite being practically at war with Russia, still manages to strengthen its defense capabilities and produce appropriate weapons and equipment, including naval means. Even more gratifying is the fact that the process of Ukraine's integration into NATO has accelerated even more than in previous years. The Ukrainian factor and its close cooperation with Georgia are very important in terms of NATO membership; however, in this article, we will not discuss the pros and cons of accelerating Georgia's membership either together with Ukraine or individually. Regardless of how the accession process develops, Georgia and Ukraine must collaborate very closely to strengthen Black Sea security.

It is true that Georgia's naval resources are very modest and its participation in all naval exercises will have more political implications, but this does not necessarily mean that it has nothing to offer to NATO in terms of cooperation in the Black Sea, namely:

- All joint documents talk about increasing port visits - at this time, a small fleet of NATO warships (with the participation of 3 to 6 countries), part of the NATO Naval Unit (NATO Standing Maritime Counter Action Force), enters the Black Sea only twice a

⁴ *NATO's Major Steps to make Georgia more Involved in Black Sea Security*, Georgia Today, 01.05.2020, <http://gtarchive.georgiatoday.ge/news/20944/NATO%e2%80%99s-Major-Steps-to-make-Georgia-more-Involved-in-Black-Sea-Security>

year. Their activity in relation to Georgia and Ukraine should be the same as is the case for NATO Member States;

- It is important to conduct joint NATO-Ukraine-Georgia naval exercises – Georgia would definitely be able to take part in short, several-day exercises in the open sea with two "Island" class ships at its disposal;
- Increasing the number of visits and conducting joint exercises in the Black Sea will allow Georgia to add a naval component to the large-scale NATO-Georgia exercises which have been successfully conducted on the country's territory for years;
- It is important that the Georgian and Ukrainian Armed Forces take part in the exercises along with the military units dislocated in NATO Black Sea Member States, for example, the Romania Tailored Forward Presence Brigade stationed in Romania. Since Georgia has been participating in a joint military operation in Afghanistan for years, the membership criterion / restriction on participation in the exercises must be lifted;
- While developing scenarios and planning NATO exercises, it is also important to include Georgian territories in those scenarios. This would naturally significantly facilitate the further involvement of the Georgian Armed Forces in NATO exercises;
- When it comes to Situation Awareness, Maritime and Air Situation Data Exchange, it is important that Georgia receives comprehensive information faster from its NATO partners; for instance, specifically about what is happening or what is planned in its Russian-occupied territories. Indeed, Georgia's own intelligence alone is not enough to create a comprehensive picture; It should be noted that it has some experience in the field of information exchange with Turkey, with which the Air Situation Data Exchange mechanism has been established. It is important to galvanize it;
- The Georgian Coast Guard Headquarters in Poti, and the Joint Maritime Operation Center in Supsa, which is an inter-agency coordination body, should be closely linked to the NATO Maritime Command and the Transportations Center of NATO Member States. Some communication is already in place, but it is necessary to establish stronger and more intensive connections;
- Logistics infrastructure should be established in Georgian ports – for maintenance and fuel supply, placing Georgia on the logistics map for NATO ships;
- Even though a NATO-Ukraine hybrid platform designed to combat disinformation and neutralize other hybrid threats is already operational, and Georgia has been invited to join this platform, it is extremely important for Georgia to have a joint NATO-Georgia center in Batumi or Poti in order to combat hybrid threats in the Black Sea; it may not be a typical excellency center of NATO, but it is possible to set up other infrastructure similar to the Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Krtsanisi, wherein the NATO and Georgian servicemen will work together.

Under the new US administration, the prospects for cooperation with NATO on the Black Sea are growing significantly. Especially considering that President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and other high-ranking officials are paying particular attention to Ukraine, and there are open discussions about the supply of weapons to Ukraine. In this situation, Georgia should intensify its efforts to cooperate with the United States, as much in terms of military and political engagement, as in the implementation of port and transport infrastructure projects.

Although the construction of the deep-water port in Anaklia has been suspended, with sufficient political will, it would be possible to reactivate the work in that direction.

I am deeply convinced that all of the above initiatives can be implemented if Georgia works together with the United States and its European partners to build modern deep-water port infrastructure. I think the possibility of "more NATO in Georgia" will also increase significantly, ultimately leading to the implementation of NATO's 2008 decision - Georgia's accession to NATO.