

Georgia and NATO: Turning point or Point of No Return?

Gruzie a NATO: Bod obratu nebo bod zlomu?

Martin Botík

Abstract: Is Georgia's integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) security structures leading to assured full membership? Ever since gaining independence in 1990, Georgia has tried to free itself from Russian influence, focusing on becoming a member of NATO. However, the Georgian journey to NATO is complicated by the country's internal political situation and external relations with Russia. Georgian internal conflicts with breakaway territories supported by Russia led to the Russian invasion into Georgian territory in 2008. Russia suppresses Georgian efforts to join NATO, considers the South Caucasus to be a strategic sphere of interest, and intends to exercise its influence there. Nevertheless, the current Georgian government continues to pursue NATO membership. Key determinants for any invitation to new members are whether their admission to NATO will strengthen the alliance, further the basic objective of NATO enlargement, and increase security and stability across Europe.

Abstrakt: Vede integrace Gruzie do bezpečnostních struktur Severoatlantické smlouvy (NATO) k zajištění plného členství? Gruzie se od zisku nezávislosti v roce 1990 pokouší vymanit z vlivu Ruské federace a stát se členskou zemí NATO. Gruzínská cesta do Severoatlantické aliance je však komplikována vnitropolitickými problémy a zahraničněpolitickými vztahy s Ruskem. Spory mezi vládou a separatistickými regiony podporovanými Ruskou federací vedly v roce 2008 k ruské invazi do Gruzie. Rusko považuje oblast jižního Kavkazu za strategickou oblast svých zájmů, a proto potlačuje gruzínské snahy o vstup do NATO a snaží se v zemi uplatňovat svůj vliv. Současná gruzínská vláda přesto pokračuje ve své politice zaměřené na budoucí členství v NATO. Klíčovými faktory pro přijetí jakékoli nové země do NATO je však posuzováno s ohledem na posílení Aliance a zvýšení bezpečnosti a stability v Evropě jako základním cílem politiky rozšiřování NATO.

Key Words: Abkhazia; Action Plan; Candidate; Caucasus; Membership; Russia.

Klíčová slova: Abcházie; akční plán; kandidát; Kavkaz; členství; Rusko; Gruzie.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since gaining independence in April 9 1991, Georgia has tried to free itself from Russian influence, focusing instead on becoming a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Georgian journey to NATO, however, is not simple; it has been undermined by an internal political situation as well as complicated relations with Russia. In fact, Georgian internal conflicts with breakaway territories supported by Russia led to the Russian invasion into Georgian territory in 2008. As a result, Georgia is not currently able to ensure the integrity of its territory.

In order to be considered as a possible candidate for NATO membership, Georgia must meet at a minimum the following five requirements: “New members must uphold democracy, including tolerating diversity; must be making progress toward a market economy; their military forces must be under firm civilian control; they must be good neighbors and respect sovereignty outside their borders and they must be working toward compatibility with NATO forces.”¹ The key determinant for any invitation to new members is whether their admission to NATO “will strengthen the alliance and further the basic objective of NATO’s expansion, to increase security and stability across Europe,”² including a mutual defense agreement under Article 5, Washington Treaty.³

The political attitudes of the current NATO members also play an important role in the process of approval of new members into NATO, which must be unanimous for accession of a candidate country. The objective of this paper is to evaluate the prospects for Georgia’s admission into NATO in the light of Georgia’s efforts, internal politics, multiple geopolitical interests and the decision that was made at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

1 GEOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Georgia is located in Transcaucasia or the South Caucasus region, and links the Caucasus with Central Asia. It has a population of approximately 4.5 million people. Ethnic Georgians account for over 80% of the population. Minorities include Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, Ossetian, Abkhaz and a few other ethnicities.⁴ The country has borders with Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Georgia’s official territory includes the autonomous republic of Ajaria, as well as the so called autonomous republic of Abkhazia and

¹ Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs, “Minimum Requirements for NATO Membership,” June 30, 1997, http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/regions/eur/fs_members.html (accessed February 23, 2015).

² Ibid.

³ For more details see: http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf.

⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia Home Page, <http://www.geostat.ge> (accessed December 1, 2014).

the autonomous region of South Ossetia. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are breakaway territories but they are not internationally recognized as independent, with only a few exceptions (Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Tuvalu).⁵

Georgia is a member of the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation** (BSEC); it also participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Georgia joined the Council of Europe (COE) in 1999 and, the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000. Georgia intensified its activities within the GUAM regional grouping (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldavia) in 2005. It is also a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialized international agency of the UN.⁶

1.1 Georgia before the Breakup of the Soviet Union

Georgia was settled in prehistoric times. In antiquity, the territory was inhabited by various tribes which constantly resisted attempts at colonization by the Greeks, Persians, Romans and Arabs due to the country's strategic location on the Silk Road and its border on the Black Sea. For centuries, local inhabitants fought for their nation and defended their independence while trying to resist any attempts to centralize power. The relationship of present-day Georgians to their country can be traced back to that time. In the Middle Ages, around the year 1000 CE, the fragmented principalities laid the foundation for the Georgian Kingdom; however, up to modern times, it had to deal with numerous crises arising from its location between two rival powers: the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia.

Georgia was annexed by the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. However, the Russification at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries took such intense forms that it often led to armed unrest, thus fueling Georgian nationalism. After the 1917 October Revolution, Georgia experienced independence from the Soviet Union through the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, which lasted from 1918 - 1921. However, the Red Army invaded the country in February 1921, and the Bolsheviks Sovietized the state. The armed resistance was unsuccessful and Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

⁵ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Abkhazia Home Page*, <http://mfaapsny.org/apsny/historyofabkhazia.php> (accessed December 1, 2014).

⁶ "Gruzie, zahraničně-politická orientace [Georgia, external politics]," http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/encyklopedie_statu/asie/gruzie/politika/zahranicne_politicka_orientace.html (accessed December 1, 2014).

1.2 Internal Political Developments in Georgia, 1991 - Present

In 1991, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia held a referendum and 90 percent of the voters preferred independence. Georgia declared the restoration of the state within the 1918-1921 borders. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a dissident in the Soviet era and representative of Georgian opposition to Soviet power, became the country's first post-Soviet elected president. Gamsakhurdia decided to restore Georgia's independence in political, economic and cultural terms. However, the country was in a state of chaos augmented by friction between ethnic minorities and ethnic Georgian nationalists. Unable to control the conflict, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by an armed *coup d'état* in December 1991.⁷

The State Council subsequently invited Gamsakhurdia's political rival, Eduard Shevardnadze, a Georgian native and Foreign Minister in Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet government from 1985-1990, to chair the Council. Shevardnadze had played a key role in the détente that marked the end of the Cold War followed by normalization of relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. He facilitated the reunification of Germany, and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe that subsequently led to the Warsaw Pact dissolution in 1991. Thus Shevardnadze enjoyed good relations with both the West and Russia, and Georgians had great hopes for his success.

Shevardnadze faced a difficult situation, marked by an economy on the brink of collapse, unrest in South Ossetia, and the ethnic conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. The latter conflict lasted two years and was later halted by a ceasefire supported by the Russian Federation, the UN and the OSCE. However, this did not resolve the problem but only maintained the status quo. In response to this situation and hoping for assistance from the Russian Federation, Georgia joined the Russia dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – a step it had intentionally avoided until then.⁸ In addition, a civil war briefly broke out in the west of the country between Shevardnadze's and Gamsakhurdia's supporters in 1993.

The popularity of President Eduard Shevardnadze, (elected in 1995 and re-elected in 2000) declined rapidly as a result of internal and external problems – corruption, crime, poverty, the separatist aspirations of the autonomous republics, and problematic relations with Moscow. After the 2003 parliamentary elections that were officially described as fraudulent by the Chief Justice of the Georgian Supreme Court and international observers, the Rose Revolution broke out in Georgia and Shevardnadze was peacefully deposed that November.⁹

⁷ Lucie Matulová, "Rusko - gruzínské vztahy a válka o Abcházii a Jižní Osetii: 2. Gruzie a národnostní menšiny [Russia – Georgia's relationship and war about Abkhazia and South Ossetia. 2. Georgia and ethnic minorities]," June 19, 2010, http://www.valka.cz/clanek_13664.html (accessed December 1, 2014).

⁸ Tomáš Vaško, "Gruzínsko-abcházský konflikt (1992 – 1993) [Georgian – Abkhazian conflict (1992 – 1993)]," February 2, 2005, <http://www.e-polis.cz/mezinarodni-vztahy/48-gruzinsko-abchazsky-konflikt.html> (accessed December 1, 2014).

⁹ For more details on The Rose Revolution, see Giorgi Kadelaki, *Georgias's Rose Revolution* (United States Institute of Peace: Special Report 167, July 2006).

Following an interim president and election, Mikhail Saakashvili, a U.S. - trained lawyer and parliamentarian, was elected president in 2004 (and re-elected in the 2008 early elections). He was a keen advocate of close relations with the United States and of Georgia's accession to NATO. He immediately distanced his administration from cooperation with Moscow, and sought the elimination of all Russian military presence in Georgia. Saakashvili pledged to pursue the territorial consolidation of the country, and liberalize the national economy. The relationship with Russia became more troubled during his term as president.

As a result of Saakashvili's promise to restore territorial integrity, attempts at regaining South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2004 led to an exchange of gunfire at the South Ossetian border, with strong involvement by Moscow. After the clashes ended in the summer of 2004, an interim agreement was concluded and the situation remained in a stalemate.¹⁰ In the meantime, Saakashvili strengthened his personal relationship with U.S. President Bush, who supported him in negotiations to shut down the last two Russian military bases in Georgian territory.¹¹

Saakashvili greatly expanded presidential and executive powers, reduced the powers of the independent judiciary and obstructed the democratic development of the country in other areas. Georgian society began to protest and mass demonstrations broke out in November 2007. After violently suppressing the protests, restricting freedom of assembly and, imposing nine days of martial law, Saakashvili eventually resigned. New elections were called for January 2008. The elections were conducted without adequate preparation. Saakashvili won in the first round under conditions of minimal competition and a lack of transparency.

In August 2008, trouble again arose in the unstable territory of South Ossetia, which was rocked by separatism. This was briefly settled by a ceasefire but the fighting soon resumed. Saakashvili risked everything, counting on support from the West. The Georgian army entered Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. On August 7 Moscow responded by immediately occupying South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹² Heavy fighting erupted, claiming the lives of hundreds Georgians, South Ossetians, Abkhaz and Russians.

A ceasefire agreement was signed on 16 August 2008. The Russian Federation immediately recognized the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia and called on other countries to follow its example. The response was mostly negative; only Nicaragua, Venezuela and the tiny island nations of Nauru and Tuvalu joined in the recognition of their claim to independence. Georgia left the CIS in 2008 in response to the conflict with Russia in South Ossetia.¹³

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, Georgia, "Avoiding War in South Ossetia," November 26, 2004, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/159_georgia_avoiding_war_in_south_ossetia.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/159_georgia_avoiding_war_in_south_ossetia.pdf) (accessed December 1, 2014).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Spor o Jižní Osetii - stále doutnající konflikt [The dispute over South Ossetia - still smoldering conflict]," August 5, 2010, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/exkluzivne-na-ct24/63177-spor-o-jizni-osetii-stale-doutnajici-konflikt/> (accessed December 1, 2014).

¹³ "Commonwealth of Independent States," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/cis.htm> (accessed December 1, 2014).

The 2012 parliamentary elections led to a change in government. Only the “Georgian Dream” coalition of businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili and the United National Movement of President Saakashvili won seats in the Parliament. Ivanishvili, an oligarch who became prime minister after winning the elections, had close business links with Russia. This raised concerns regarding his willingness to maintain the established pro-western direction rather than favoring Moscow.¹⁴

The next regular presidential election was held in 2013; Saakashvili was replaced by Giorgi Margvelashvili, who was known as Ivanishvili’s man. Margvelashvili assured the people that, while he would like to improve the tense relations with the Kremlin, he does not intend to depart from the strategy of Georgia’s integration into NATO.¹⁵

Simultaneously with Margvelashvili’s inauguration, the constitutional amendments passed in 2009 came into effect. The amendments changed the political system to one where the prime minister as the head of the government gained the executive authority over domestic and foreign policy, while the president remained the head of the state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces but without the right to initiate laws, to introduce the state budget or hold an official post in a political party.

In order to maintain pressure on Georgia, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the president of separatist Abkhazia, Raul Khajimba, signed a bilateral treaty in Sochi in the autumn of 2014, which anticipates, inter alia, the establishment of Abkhaz military units under Russian command. Moscow will contribute financially to the modernization of the Abkhaz army and has committed to increasing the pensions of public servants. In return, Abkhazia promised Putin to harmonize its legislation, as well as its external and defense policies, with Russia. Georgian diplomatic leaders maintain that this is the first step towards annexation of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation. As could be expected, the agreement has been condemned by High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, according to whom it is a violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia.¹⁶ The United States also refused to recognize the agreement. President Giorgi Margvelashvili said in Warsaw at the beginning of December 2014: “‘South Ossetia is to sign a similar agreement,” terming it an “unfortunate and unacceptable development””.¹⁷

¹⁴ Michael Cecire, “For Georgia’s Ivanishvili, Interests Will Guide Russia Policy,” October 8, 2012, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12397/for-georgias-ivanishvili-interests-will-guide-russia-policy> (accessed December 1, 2014).

¹⁵ “Výměna v čele Gruzie: Ivanišvili si vybral za nástupce svého ministra vnitra [Replacing the head of Georgia: Ivanišvili chose Minister of Interior as his successor],” November 3, 2013, <http://zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-61131170-vymena-v-cele-gruzie-ivanisvili-si-vybral-za-nastupce-sveho-ministra-vnitra> (accessed December 1, 2014).

¹⁶ Federica Mogherini, “‘Statement’ by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the signature of a Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, between the Russian Federation and Georgia’s breakaway region of Abkhazia,” November 24, 2014, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2014/141124_01_en.htm (accessed February 22, 2015).

¹⁷ “Georgia accuses Russia of growing designs on rebel region,” December 5, 2014, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/georgia-accuses-russia-of-growing-designs-on-rebel-region/articleshow/45389837.cms> (accessed December 6, 2014).

2 GEORGIA'S PATH TO NATO ACCESSION

Since gaining independence, Georgia's first priority as a small country in a dangerous environment, has been to strengthen its ties to the West and to join NATO. These efforts are based especially on the country's need to free itself from Russian influence, to find strong allies and ensure help in the event of aggression. The country is therefore attempting to pursue a number of economic, political and military reforms and to actively participate in NATO's military operations in the hopes of receiving an invitation to join the organization as soon as possible. Even if only in the form of the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is understood to be a step immediately preceding full membership. However, NATO's expansion into Georgia and to other former Soviet Union republics is totally undesirable for Russia. "Russia viewed the appearance of a powerful military bloc on its borders as a direct threat to its security. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises,"¹⁸ said Russian President Vladimir Putin in a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*.

2.1 Development of Relations between Georgia and NATO, 1992 – 2003

In March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze assumed the chairmanship of the State Council. That April, Georgia became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). This was the first signal that the country intended to take a pro-western course and pursue future membership in the North Atlantic Alliance.¹⁹

Georgia became actively involved in the Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in 1994. A Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was signed, enabling NATO to carry out exercises in Georgian territory. The Agreement was ratified by the Georgian Parliament in 1997. Furthermore, in 1999 Georgia joined the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) and in the same year the country joined the KFOR mission in Kosovo.²⁰ The process was accompanied by a change in the post of the Defense Minister. The new minister David Tevzadze was tasked with reforming the Georgian Army "from the old Soviet model to modern forces, conformable to international standards."²¹

¹⁸ Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Hitting the 'stop' button on NATO expansion," 2009, http://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/friedman_logan_hittingstopbuttononnatoexpansion.pdf (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹⁹ "The North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) (archived)," October 20, 2011, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_69344.htm (accessed December 2, 2014).

²⁰ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia Home Page*, http://www.mfa.gov.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec_id=455&info_id=9682&lang_id=ENG (accessed December 2, 2014).

²¹ Salome Jashi, "Defence Ministry Issues the White Paper," July 5, 2002, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=2218&search=tevzadze> (accessed December 5, 2014).

After the 9/11 attacks, Russia began to urge Georgia to deal with the Chechen militants allegedly hiding in Georgian territory and threatened to intervene unilaterally if Georgia failed to comply. Russia also resorted to aerial bombing of targets in Georgia. Therefore, Shevardnadze turned to Washington for support. As a result, President George W. Bush, favorable to Georgia's western course and fearing that the armed Chechen groups would join up with the Al Qaida terrorist network, approved the Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP) aimed at improving standards in the Georgian military.²² Shevardnadze confirmed Georgia's interest in candidacy for membership in NATO at the Prague NATO Summit in 2002.

Georgia's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) was adopted at the same summit. IPAP defines the form of cooperation between NATO and Partner states. Shevardnadze expressed his belief "... that the engagement in the IPAP will create an incentive for Georgia to accelerate and more boldly pursue political, economic and military reforms."²³

2.2 Development of Relations between Georgia and NATO, 2003 - Present

Once Saakashvili took over the presidency, he forged closer links with western institutions and started to negotiate a MAP. Clear demonstrations of Georgian ambitions concerning membership in NATO include Georgia's participation in ISAF operations in Afghanistan since 2003, where its contribution of 1,560 soldiers in 2012 was the largest of all non-NATO countries.²⁴

During the Bucharest summit of NATO in April 2008 prior to the South Ossetia conflict the accession of Croatia and Albania was approved. Meanwhile, Georgia and Ukraine were not granted MAPs, contrary to what had been expected, particularly in the case of Georgia. In June 2008, Saakashvili met with Russian president Medvedev, who had replaced Putin in May 2008, hoping to establish a better relationship with Russia. However, the meeting did not bring both parties anywhere closer.²⁵ After the presidents' meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said: "We have felt that Saakashvili understands that a course towards NATO is not the key for solving the Abkhazian problem."²⁶ The subsequent Russian invasion into Georgian territory in August 2008 to support Abkhazia and South Ossetia, became a turning point in the NATO – Georgia relationship. An

²² "Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP)," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/gtep.htm> (accessed March 4, 2015).

²³ Eduard Shevardnadze, "Statement by President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the EAPC Summit," November 22, 2002, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s021122h.htm> (accessed December 5, 2014).

²⁴ "Gruzie: Zahraničně-politická orientace [Georgia: The foreign policy orientation]," May 28, 2014, <http://www.businessinfo.cz/cs/clanky/gruzie-zahranicne-politicka-orientace-18994.html> (accessed December 5, 2014).

²⁵ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War, That Shook The World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 160.

²⁶ Temur Kiguradze, "No breakthroughs in first Saakashvili-Medvedev meeting," June 9, 2008, http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/1622_june_9_2008/1622_saak_medv.html (accessed March 4, 2015).

international fact-finding mission, established by the European Union (EU) and headed by Swiss diplomat ambassador Heidi Tagliavini concluded that:

The conflict in Georgia in summer 2008 laid open tendencies by some of the political actors (Georgian, Russian, South Ossetian and Abkhaz) to move away from generally-accepted principles of international law such as the respect of territorial integrity. There were also ambiguities, if not infringements as related to the principle of sovereignty. There has also been a tendency to move away from multilateralism and negotiated results and solutions in favor of unilateral action. There was an increased readiness on the part of political actors to accept the use of force as a means to attain political goals, and lesser thought was given to considerations of conflict prevention.²⁷

As a political response to the Russian invasion, NATO's North Atlantic Council paid a two-day visit to Georgia in September 2008. A Framework Document establishing the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) was signed and the inaugural meeting took place in Tbilisi. The NGC established the framework for cooperation between NATO and Georgia. It serves as a forum for both political consultations and practical cooperation to help Georgia advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.²⁸ In December 2008, Allied foreign ministers agreed to the development of an Annual National Program (ANP) under the auspices of NGC.

Cooperation between NATO and Georgia was further strengthened in the military sphere by establishing the "Military Committee plus Georgia" format in 2010. The NATO Liaison Office opened in Tbilisi in 2010, with the mission of representing NATO in Georgia, facilitating political/military dialogue and practical cooperation under the NGC in support of Georgia's efforts to join NATO, and enhancing civil and military cooperation between NATO and the Government of Georgia.²⁹ Georgia was commended on the progress it had achieved in introducing reforms and on its contribution to NATO's foreign operations.

Nevertheless, concluding a MAP was not on the agenda at the Lisbon summit in 2010, nor at the Chicago summit in 2012. The 2014 NATO's summit in Wales was held under the influence of the Ukrainian crisis and the Crimea's annexation to Russian federation. In advance of the summit President Obama clarified that: "NATO is not going to grant Georgia either membership or even a MAP considered to be a formal path to NATO any time soon."³⁰ However, NATO's policy to the membership candidates endured: "...The

²⁷ The Council of European Union, "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," September, 2009, 36, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_09_09_iiffmgc_report.pdf (accessed December 1, 2014).

²⁸ "NATO's relations with Georgia," April 9, 2009, http://www.nato.int/summit2009/topics_en/11-georgia.html (accessed December 5, 2014).

²⁹ "NATO Liaison Office (NLO) Georgia," May 21, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_81066.htm (accessed December 5, 2014).

³⁰ Vasili Rukhadze, "Georgia Is Reeling after President Obama's NATO Statement," April 11, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42219&cHash=542118051f8072364e3ccac30c6d738 (accessed February 22, 2015).

NATO door will remain open to all European democracies which share the values of the Alliance, and which are willing and able to qualify for membership."³¹

Moscow takes every opportunity to warn NATO that Georgia's admission will cause security problems in Europe. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, (2008) Medvedev expressed the long-standing Russian position: "We are not happy about the situation around Georgia and Ukraine. We consider it extremely troublesome for the existing structure of European security. No state can be pleased about having representatives of a military bloc to which it does not belong coming close to its borders."³² NATO responds by declaring its awareness of Russian concerns while pointing out that all democratic countries can choose to aspire for membership in the NATO. Despite these self-assured declarations by NATO, Russia's approach most certainly influences some NATO members in regarding their support for NATO aspirants and potential approval of their accession.

3 GEORGIA'S INTEGRATION INTO NATO

Many diverse factors are considered during accession negotiations, which influence their result. These include the aspirant's objective contribution to NATO, reliability in meeting the accession criteria and, a key factor – political accord on the candidate in question amongst the other members. This latter aspect plays the most important role and can easily offset even serious deficiencies in other required areas – and obviously also vice versa, as is apparent from the example of admission processes in the case of the Baltic States, when Russia was arguing that Baltic membership in the NATO would cross a "red line."³³

3.1 Importance of Georgia for the Alliance

Georgia's economy was mostly underinvested in the first decade after the breakup of the Soviet Union. This was mainly due to the marginal position of the region which,

³¹ "Snad příště, vzkázala Clintonová zemím usilujícím o pozvánku do NATO [Maybe next time, Clinton had sent word to countries aspiring to NATO invitation]," May 22, 2012, http://www.natoaktual.cz/snad-priste-vzkazala-clintonova-zemim-usilujícím-o-pozvanku-do-nato-1jd-/na_zpravy.aspx?c=A120522_205821_na_zpravy_m02 (accessed December 5, 2014).

³² Mark Tran, "Medvedev warns against NATO admission for Russian neighbors," March 25, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/25/russia.ukraine> (accessed February 22, 2015).

³³ F. Stephen Larrabee, "The Baltic States and NATO Membership, Testimony presented to the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), April 3, 2003, 5, <http://www.prgs.edu/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2005/CT204.pdf> (accessed March 4, 2015).

in economic terms, did not offer an interesting market environment.³⁴ However, its geographic location predetermines Georgia as a transit corridor especially for gas and oil pipelines from Central Asia to the West such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) which bypasses Russian territory. Russia does not hesitate to employ its own transit routes of strategic raw materials for economic or political pressure. The value of Georgia as a transit area in connection with the energy security of NATO is growing in importance, as projects like BTC help reduce European dependence on Russian energy sources. This makes it an object of geopolitical competition.

After the 9/11 attacks and NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, Georgia capitalized on its strategic position, combined with its pro-Western direction, and permitted NATO military aircraft to fly to the Afghan battlefield over Georgian territory. Georgia also derives benefits from the completion of the Baku – Tbilisi – Kars railway planned for this year. The route can serve not only for the transportation of goods from China, but is also the cheapest and shortest route for ISAF staff returning home from Afghanistan: "We hope that the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway could provide an alternative route for ISAF for a reverse transit of forces and cargo, as it is the shortest and cheapest way to return to Europe," said Irakli Koplataze, the Georgian ambassador to Turkey, in an exclusive interview with *Today's Zaman* (2013).³⁵

3.2 Georgia and its Compliance with NATO's Accession Requirements

Under Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, a political consensus of all the existing members of NATO, rather than exact compliance with all the official requirements, is the most important and inevitable criterion for the admission of a new member to NATO.³⁶ Accordingly, NATO should always make decisions on extensions of its membership on a case-by-case basis and should carefully consider all the qualities of the aspirant and its situation.

Reform of the army has probably been Georgia's greatest achievement. This was facilitated by the generous financial, consulting and training activities of mainly the United States but also other NATO members. The transformation of the army enabled relatively early and successful deployment of Georgian armed forces in missions abroad.

The implementation of economic reforms was another aspect that was fulfilled well. It was influenced by the thorough change in the country's image abroad which occurred

³⁴ Lukáš Tichý, "Význam jižního Kavkazu pro energetickou bezpečnost EU a rusko-gruzínský konflikt [The importance of the South Caucasus for the EU's energy security and Russia-Georgia conflict]," (Praha: Mezinárodní politika [Prague: International Policy], 2009/4), May 5, 2009, 12.

³⁵ "Georgian ambassador: Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway shortest route for ISAF's return," September 30, 2013, http://www.todayzaman.com/interviews_georgian-ambassador.baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-shortest-route-for-isafs-return_327759.html (accessed December 5, 2014).

³⁶ "Washington Treaty," April 4, 1949, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf (accessed December 1, 2014).

after the Rose Revolution and, together with internal economic changes, enabled the entry of foreign investors and an increase in the GDP per capita level.

In contrast, evaluation of the establishment of democracy was not quite so favorable. For example, the powers of the Parliament were substantially curtailed to the benefit of the executive and presidential office during Saakashvili's term in office. Furthermore, the extraordinary presidential election in 2008, organized in response to the civil unrest in the preceding year, was not a perfectly transparent process compatible with democratic principles. However, the parliamentary elections in 2012 and the presidential election one year later were ranked as free and fair by the OSCE observers. Saakashvili's willingness to cooperate with a democratic transition (for which he has not been rewarded) is sometimes cited as a positive contributing factor.

The conflicts in the separatist provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are the greatest, and most persistent problem for Georgia and probably the main obstacle to joining NATO because Georgian territorial integrity is not ensured. These conflicts have no realistic prospects for resolution in the short term. Furthermore, Russia has declared political and military support to both breakaway entities. It obviously worsens the overall objective evaluation of Georgia's preparedness for integration.

3.3 Attitude of the Alliance Members at the Bucharest Summit

The Bucharest summit in 2008 was of fundamental importance for Georgia because there it seemed that it was closer than ever to obtaining a MAP. NATO's expansion with new members was, along with the situation in Afghanistan and the missile defense shield in Europe, a priority subject at the summit. The negotiation of MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine, and potential membership for Albania, Macedonia and Croatia were discussed. However, the member states were so divided in the matter of Georgia's and Ukraine's membership that issuance of a MAP was not possible and no consensus was reached. NATO, fearing a break in relations with Russia, refused to grant MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine.³⁷

The NATO member states finally proposed several compromises for further negotiations. The final declaration (following disagreement regarding the wording) was: "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO".³⁸ The resulting compromise, which attempted to satisfy all parties, was rather optimistic, trying to encourage the candidates in their endeavor and to give them time to properly meet the conditions for membership in NATO. However, it failed to specify or suggest even a vague time for accession. For the first time in NATO's history, NATO approved in principle membership

³⁷ Karel Svoboda, "Summit NATO v Bukurešti [NATO Summit in Bucharest]," April 14, 2008, http://www.natoaktual.cz/summit-nato-v-bukuresti-0wo-/na_analyzy.aspx?c=A080411_193350_na_analyzy_m02 (accessed December 8, 2014).

³⁸ "Bucharest Summit Declaration, Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest," April 3, 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm (accessed December 5, 2014).

without the means to obtain it, because a MAP, the path to full membership, was not agreed. Putin who visited the summit on its last day won. He succeeded in driving a wedge between the NATO members.

3.4 Georgia's Opponents in NATO

The United States' endeavor to grant MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest summit faced the strongest opposition from Germany. Apart from insufficient democracy and lack of military preparedness, Germany also criticized Georgia for the unresolved regional conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While Chancellor Angela Merkel explained the obstacles to issuance of MAP mainly by pointing to the poor preparedness of Georgia and Ukraine there was an undertone that her disagreement was equally motivated by the emphatic opposition of Moscow.³⁹

France also disagreed with granting MAP, but its opposition was not as strong and it seems that it was strongly influenced by the German standpoint. Had Georgia's supporters been able to persuade Germany to change its position, it is likely that it would not have been necessary to persuade France.⁴⁰ For a number of years, France had been traditionally skeptical about NATO's expansion. While maintaining this line, President Nicolas Sarkozy was somewhat more open to the new democracies than his predecessors. At the Bucharest summit, however, France fully aligned its stance with that of Germany, which was not a major change in position for Sarkozy. French Prime Minister Francois Fillon had already publicly expressed his country's view before the summit, in the sense that France was against the integration of Georgia and Ukraine into the structures of NATO in the interest of a balance of power in Europe and, simultaneously, a balance of power between Europe and Russia.⁴¹ By directly mentioning Russia, he had clearly indicated where France found the greatest obstacle.

Italy, Spain, the Benelux states, Turkey and Greece were also skeptical regarding Georgia's preparedness for accession and took a negative stance regarding MAP membership.

3.5 Supporters for Granting a MAP to Georgia

Given their historic experience, the countries of Central Europe and the Baltic States were the main advocates of granting MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine. The Czech Republic and Poland were among the leading supporters of enlargement of the Alliance, which they regard as a guarantee of a further broadening of security and stability in Europe.

³⁹ Stephen F. Szabo, *Germany, Russia and the Rise of Geo-Economics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 45.

⁴⁰ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War, That Shook The World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 133.

⁴¹ Oleg Popov, "France won't back Ukraine and NATO bids," April 1, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/01/us-nato-france-ukraine-idUSL0115117020080401> (accessed December 8, 2014).

Hungary and Slovenia were certainly not amongst those opposing the possibility of Georgia and Ukraine concluding MAPs. Nevertheless, the support for these two countries' accession was rather restrained and more limited than for the Czech Republic and Poland. They imagined MAPs would strongly assist these countries in their further development without seeing it as a step which would automatically precede NATO membership.

Simply on the grounds of their shared history with Georgia and Ukraine in the Soviet Union, the Baltic States quite clearly adopted the position of the countries which supported granting MAPs. Nevertheless, they asserted that they see it as an instrument of further reforms and strengthening of democracy in Georgia and Ukraine, rather than an "entrance ticket" to NATO.

CONCLUSION

The compromises negotiated at the Bucharest summit in 2008 did not close the door to NATO for Georgia. It should nonetheless be noted that three other NATO summits have been held since then and Georgia has not come notably closer to membership in NATO. The still insufficient compliance with the political and military criteria certainly plays a role. A fundamental problem persists in the still unresolved problems of the separatist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, in particular, the Russian involvement in them, which successfully blocks Georgian integration.

One line of approach which, however, lacks broader support in NATO, is granting a MAP and later admission of Georgia into the Alliance without the problematic autonomous republics. However, it is highly unlikely, according to political expert Pavel Zolotarjov, given the fact that Georgia has no intention of abandoning its claims to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁴²

The possibility of granting a MAP followed by Georgia's admission to NATO, is currently questionable given the status quo. According to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, an attack against a member state is considered to be an attack against all.⁴³ It clearly indicates that admitting Georgia, including its autonomous republics would, bring the Alliance to the brink of a conflict with the Kremlin. This situation would not be in the interest of any NATO member and is one that major players are especially careful to avoid. This suggests apprehension over the Kremlin's possible response and hence the obvious efficiency of their methods. The question remains of where and how to draw the red line of concessions that must not be crossed, despite a certain degree of risk.

⁴² Sergej Duz, "Pochybné vyhlídky Gruzie v NATO [Georgia's doubtful prospects in NATO]," March 13, 2014, http://czech.ruvr.ru/2014_03_13/Pochybne-vyhličky-Gruzie-v-NATO-5940/ (accessed December 8, 2014).

⁴³ "Washington Treaty," April 4, 1949, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/stock_publications/20120822_nato_treaty_en_light_2009.pdf (accessed December 1, 2014).

The existing view of the situation is strongly affected by the current situation in Ukraine and the Russian annexation of the Crimea, both of which suggest that this critical line is not very far. If Russia keeps up the current line of its foreign policy and continues to sustain the momentum of exercising its sovereign influence, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to find a way for Georgia's accession to NATO within the boundaries drawn by Moscow. "Russia under Putin has repeatedly stated that two former Soviet republics – Ukraine and Georgia, joining NATO would cross a red line."⁴⁴

Russian strategy towards NATO's expansion is successful and divides the NATO members' view on NATO's future expansion. It is based on the concept "attack the enemy's strategy first,"⁴⁵ using diplomatic, information, military and economic means, and exercised through hybrid warfare and invasion into the territory of sovereign states followed by "frozen conflicts." As Janusz Bugajski has stated: "In blocking Georgia's move toward Western Institutions, particularly NATO, as well as those of other neighbors, Moscow is willing to disregard or violate various international agreements and principles, including changing borders by force..."⁴⁶ Conversely, NATO's strategy towards Russia is characterized by: "as soon, therefore, as the required outlay becomes so great that the political object is no longer equal in value, the object must be given up ...,"⁴⁷ whenever Russia attacks the NATO's membership candidate. As a consequence, it is likely that Russia might use a similar strategy towards the Baltic States in order to test the NATO's cohesion and willingness to employ Article 5, Washington Treaty. Although the current situation is untenable and requires change in the NATO's strategy towards Russia, it is unlikely that the NATO will change its strategy in the foreseeable future, as it is unlikely that Russia will change its course under any Russian leadership. Therefore, Georgia's accession into the NATO is implausible in the near term.

⁴⁴ John C. K. Day, "Georgia Promised Eventual NATO Admission," November 24, 2014, <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2014/11/24/georgia-promised-eventual-nato-admission/> (accessed February 24, 2015).

⁴⁵ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated and with an introduction by Samuel B. Griffith with a foreword by B. H. Lidell Hart (Oxford: University Press, 1971), 77.

⁴⁶ Janusz Bugajski, "Georgian Lessons, Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe, A Report of the CSIS New European Democracies Project and the Lavrentis Lavrentiadis Chair in Southeast European Studies," (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010), November, 2010, 4, <http://georgica.tsu.edu.ge/files/05-Security/National%20Security/Bugajski-2010.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2015).

⁴⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by Colonel J.J. Graham 1874 was 1st edition of this translation, 1909 was the London reprinting. New and revised edition with an introduction and notes by Colonel F.N. Maude C.B. (LATE R.E.), (EBook#1946, Produced by Charles Keller and David Widger), February 25, 2006, 25, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-h/1946-h.htm> (accessed March 9, 2015).

Author: *Col Martin BOTÍK, MSS, born in 1968. He graduated from US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (2015). He served in the command and staff functions of the Army of the Czech Republic. He participated in UN, OSCE and NATO military operations in various command and staff positions. At present he works as senior researcher at the Center for Security and Military Strategic Studies - War School Brno.*

How to cite: BOTÍK Martin. Georgia and NATO: Turning point or Point of No Return? *Vojenské rozhledy*. 2019, 28 (4), 078-093. ISSN 1210-3292 (print), 2336-2995 (on-line). Available at: www.vojenskerozhledy.cz