

NATO on Its Mind: Will Georgia's Aspirations be Fulfilled?

Brendan Cole*

Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, the last decade or so of Georgia's recent history has been a turbulent one. The presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili ushered in sweeping changes, increasing westernization, and a break from the country's Soviet past. After he was democratically ousted by the Georgian Dream coalition in 2012, this Euro-Atlantic realignment continued apace, out of a desire to join the European Union as well as NATO. The economic benefits of EU membership were obvious enough, while joining the Alliance would demonstrate Georgia's ability to hold its own at the world's top military table. On a more practical level, Tbilisi had hoped that membership would offer Georgia security, especially in light of the 2008 war with Russia, which led to declarations of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The breakaway republics remain points of contention in relations between Moscow and Georgia. The Georgian government's rhetoric of optimism has not shifted one bit, and NATO has not disabused Georgia of this outlook, continuing to work with Tbilisi as a partner. However, the alliance remains non-committal regarding the prospects for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the first concrete step to eventual membership. London-based journalist Brendan Cole asks think tanks in the British capital and the US about the likelihood of NATO membership for Georgia - and if not, what are the alternatives?



* Brendan Cole is a London-based journalist and broadcaster whose career spans print, radio, TV and online. In the UK, he has worked at the BBC, Channel 4 News and the Mail Online. He is currently night editor at the International Business Times.

What's in a flag? Well, Quite a Lot if You Are from Georgia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a flag designed by the Georgian painter Iakob Nikoladze was resurrected after more than seven decades. First introduced in 1918, its presence was as fleeting as the Democratic Republic of Georgia it represented, lasting only three years amid the tumult of the Russian civil war before being replaced by the ubiquitous hammer and sickle.

It had a slightly longer life the second time around, after 1991, but not by much. Nikoladze's triple-hued creation had a wine-red background, the colour of its most famous export, symbolizing good times in the past. On the hoist side corner were black and white squares, the black representing Russian rule; the white, hope for peace. The Rose Revolution in 2003 marked the end of Russian rule, it was thought, but hope for peace remained.

Now, the flag with the distinctive cross of St. George festoons buildings throughout the country, accompanied by the European Union flag. The majority of Georgians, and their political leaders, hope that these will soon be joined by the compass rose of the NATO ensign. But how likely is this?

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Soon after the five-day conflict in August 2008, promises made at a NATO summit in Bucharest earlier that year in April took on a significant resonance. In 2008, 86 per cent of Georgians supported NATO membership, although within two years that dropped to 59 per cent, where it has stayed more or less constant.¹

For its part, Georgia has always made its intentions clear and has made significant contributions to the alliance, ever since its troops started serving as peacekeepers with NATO in 1999. With about 1500 soldiers, Georgia was the largest non-NATO troop contributor per capita to the International Security Assis-

¹ Foreign Affairs (2010) *Russia on their mind*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2010-07-01/letter-tbilisi-georgia-between-two-powers>, (Accessed: 01 August 2015).

tance Force (ISAF), which completed its mission in Afghanistan in December 2014. Devotion to the cause did not come cheap, though. Since 2010, 30 Georgian servicemen have died, all in the Helmand campaign, and 435 have been wounded, including 35 amputees.²

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Addressing the Chatham House think tank in London, former Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze emphasized Georgia’s strong partnership with NATO since the early 1990s, and reiterated the benefits of the Partnership for Peace, the alliance’s program with non-member states.

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“It was never a secret that Georgia goes this way. This was our natural choice, supported by the population and something which is historically and culturally very natural for Georgia. Georgia needs European and Euro-Atlantic integration for its own plan and not against a third party. This is important. It is only for us and for our development,” she said.³

However, there is doubt among western experts about how realistic Tbilisi’s aims are. Neil MacFarlane is Professor of International Relations at Oxford University and associate fellow of the Eurasia program at Chatham House. He says that NATO has always had difficulty in defining its relationship with the members of the former Soviet space, and that with the exception of the Baltic republics, it has always been ambiguous whether this implied eventual membership.

“Minister Panjikidze is pursuing a will-o’-the-wisp. There has never been, and there is no, consensus within the alliance on membership for Georgia, or for that matter Ukraine. It is hard to say who is being disingenuous here. Is it NATO, or is it the Georgian government?”

² Civil.ge (2014) *Georgian troops end mission in Helmand*. July 17, Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27498>, (Accessed: 03 August 2015).

³ Speech to Chatham House, 11 June 2014. Available at: http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140611GeorgiaFM.pdf, (Accessed: 30 July 2015).

The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia means that a NATO enlargement that includes Georgia would be risky for the alliance.

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NATO membership would tie Georgia symbolically to the West, but more practically, it would afford Georgia protection under the alliance’s Article 5 mutual defense pact. But there are question marks over precisely what level of protection it would provide.

Professor MacFarlane said: “NATO would gain very little from Georgian membership. Georgia is already contributing at the extreme of their capacities in Afghanistan and in peace keeping without any promise of MAP or membership. Membership would extend the Article 5 quasi-guarantee to a location which was not central to alliance concerns, and where Russia would enjoy substantial and durable theatre superiority. If I am not mistaken, one of the criteria for new members is that they will produce security for the alliance, rather than consuming it. In expanding to Georgia, NATO would get new liabilities and risks, without new capacity.”

In July 2015, NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow held talks with the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, David Usupashvili about their relationship. Along with its contribution to NATO’s Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Tbilisi also committed financial support to help the Afghan National Security Forces. In a statement, NATO said that in addition to Georgia’s contributions to Euro-Atlantic peace and stability, key areas of cooperation under the Annual National Programme include political, military and security-sector reforms. “NATO agrees to support Georgia in these reforms by providing focused and comprehensive advice and activities in several frameworks (both civilian and military) towards its reform goals.”²⁴

²⁴ NATO website, *NATO welcomes Georgia’s reform*. Available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_121864.htm? (Accessed: 08 August 2015).

Bucharest Summit Pledge

But what of that pledge at the Bucharest Summit? Director of the RUSI think tank in London, Michael Clarke, says the agreement made in the Romanian capital by the Allied Heads of State and Government was misinterpreted by all sides, and that the consequences are still being played out.

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“Georgia’s NATO aspirations were always somewhat misplaced, and NATO was very reckless in implying to Georgia and Ukraine in 2006 that NATO membership was a distinct possibility at some point. That was diplomatically foolish because they were a long way away from eligibility, quite apart from their proximity to Russia and the sensitivity of their relationship with Moscow. So it was foolish for NATO to promise that and it was foolish for Georgia to believe it. That was the way it was until the Ukrainian crisis which has forced NATO not to talk directly about Georgian membership but to make good as least some of the stronger relationships that NATO should be seen to have. Georgia is a beneficiary of the Ukrainian crisis.”

It was ahead of the NATO summit in the Welsh city of Newport in 2014 when Georgia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani spoke about Tbilisi’s continued objective of securing a membership action plan for the alliance, describing the move, along with possible EU membership, as part of a priority to join “the family of European nations”. “This trajectory is undertaken with support of all major political parties in the country. Georgia is in a new chapter of relations – ‘irreversible Europeanization’,” he said.⁵

However, in a paper for the Tbilisi-based Centre for Social Sciences, analyst Salome Minesashvili stated that a claim to Euro-

⁵ Speech to Chatham House, *Georgian foreign policy in a new era*. 18 March 2014. Available at: http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140318GeorgianForeignPolicyZalkaliani.pdf. (Accessed: 04 August 15).

pean identity is the driving force behind Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and support among the Georgian people for NATO membership may not be so clear cut. "As the examination of opinion polls show, Georgian society's aspirations for EU/NATO integration are consistent with the officially stated direction, but this support hardly stems from the cultural identity affiliation with the West. The concurrence of Georgian attitudes with some of the basic European values is quite low."⁶

NATO's Mixed Messages

The message that is consistently coming from NATO is that its priorities are the Ukraine crisis and the threat of Russia. This theme is categorical, and Georgia's role within the Alliance remains decidedly ambiguous.

The Alliance's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, Adrian Bradshaw, told a London audience that NATO was going through a period of refocusing and adapting and that it would build NATO force integration units in each of the eastern states to send a strong signal of a NATO presence.

The direction of this strong signal is of course Russia, whom he accuses of destabilizing the region. "Whilst the threat from Russia, together with the risk it brings of a miscalculation, resulting into a slide into strategic conflict, however unlikely we see that as being right now, represents an obvious existential threat to our whole being," he said.⁷ This would suggest that the Ukraine crisis and Russia's role within it is the focus of NATO policy, with enlargement towards the east taking a back seat.

Senior Vice President at Beacon Global Strategies LLC, Julianne Smith, a former advisor to US Vice President, Joseph Biden, told Foreign Affairs magazine that it was questionable whether the alliance should continue to state that its door remains open to those that aspire to join. "Unfortunately, the hopeful rhetoric coming out of NATO and member states does not always match reality. The truth is that members remain deeply divided on the questions of enlargement, with some questioning whether additional

6 Minesashvili, S. (2012) 'Explaining Georgia's Westward Aspiration', *paper for Centre for Social Sciences*. Available at: [http://css.ge/files/documents/Papers/Research_paper_Salome_Minesashvili_\(1\).pdf](http://css.ge/files/documents/Papers/Research_paper_Salome_Minesashvili_(1).pdf), (Accessed: 03 August 2015).

7 Royal United Services Institute, *Briefing at RUSI*, 20 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=videos&ref=V54E7621089708#.VY1RPIIwarR>, (Accessed: 06 August 15).

rounds of enlargement would unnecessarily escalate the already high tensions with Moscow.”⁸

Salome Minesashvili of the Tbilisi-based Centre for Social Sciences says Georgia’s embrace of Europe is based not so much on a feeling of belonging to Europe, but, instead, ‘on anticipated instrumental gains’. “This recalls the proposition that, historically, Georgia saw the West as more of a patron capable of providing either security protection or economic benefits.”⁹

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Could Georgia Shift More Towards its Neighbors?

However, that security could be better served by pursuing alternatives. But as Professor Neil MacFarlane says, the question would be: which alternatives? “Turning towards Turkey might be one. However, there are problems. The first is that Turkey is distracted by a number of much more serious security problems such as Syria and the Kurds. And it is not clear what the trajectory of Turkish domestic politics is, making it difficult for their government to embark on new strategic initiatives. Turks know very well that attempting to secure Georgia against Russia would complicate their relationship with Russia. There are big stakes for Turkey in the bilateral relationship with Russia: energy, trade, investment, tourism, Black Sea security, among others.”

There is no sense that Georgian enthusiasm towards the alliance is abating. In July, NATO troops concluded two weeks of military exercises in Georgia, where more than 200 US Marines took part in a series of drills intended to help allies prepare for crisis-response missions. The exercise, Agile Spirit, was the first NATO exercise held at the Vaziani base outside Tbilisi. William Lahue, head of the NATO liaison office to Georgia, told the US military newspaper Stars and Stripes that: “It helps to keep them hopeful of their path toward NATO.”¹⁰

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Georgia has two major instruments for eventual membership. One is the NATO-Georgia commission, which includes the po-

⁸ A defining moment for the alliance, *Foreign Affairs*, 03 August 2015. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sponsored/defining-moment-alliance>, (Accessed: 08 August 15).

⁹ Minesashvili, *Explaining Georgia’s Westward Aspiration*.

¹⁰ Stars and Stripes, *NATO exercise shows alliance commitment*, 22 July 2015. Available at: <http://www.stripes.com/news/official-nato-exercise-in-georgia-shows-alliance-commitment-1.359162>, (Accessed: 08 August 2015).

litical component; the other is the Partnership Action Plan, which provides the military component. However, the Georgian Ministry of Defence said in June that it wants confirmation of Membership Action Plan at the next NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016. The Director of Research at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, Mamuka Tsereteli, says that obtaining a MAP should not be considered the Holy Grail.

“MAP has a symbolic meaning and that is what we need to get rid of. Let’s put more into the international process and push for NATO to say that Georgia no longer needs it. If NATO says Georgia can join without a MAP, then it removes all the technical obstacles. It is not worth expending political capital on the MAP when it doesn’t really guarantee the security of Georgia.” He said Moscow believes that NATO is not ready to accept Georgia in the alliance and by not giving Georgia a MAP, NATO will confirm Russian expectations. “Why spend political capital on MAP, why not spend it on eventual NATO membership? If they say that Georgia already has the instruments to join, that would be recognition of Georgia’s progress. Most members are still not ready for Georgia joining, but at the same time to make a step forward in the right direction would be helpful,” said Dr Tsereteli.

European and Russian Strategies Pose Barrier for Georgia

Another major factor in Georgia’s NATO aspirations is the uncertainty of European strategies. The US has a clearer stance on enlargement, but some of the western European countries are less certain and want to avoid provoking Russia. In any case, NATO will have to balance its next move with Russia’s position. Even if in reality Georgia’s membership of NATO could strengthen the security of Russia’s southern border and help stabilize the North Caucasus, Russia remains vehemently opposed to any such move. Russia’s permanent representative to NATO, Alexander Grushko, said that any political game concerning NATO expansion into Georgia, as well as Ukraine, would be “catastrophic” and “filled with the most serious, most profound geopolitical consequences for all of Europe.”¹¹ A key question ahead of the next NATO summit in 2016 is just how long both

¹¹ AFP, *Nato eastward expansion would be 'catastrophic' says Russian official*, 28 July 2015. Available at: <http://news.yahoo.com/nato-eastward-expansion-catastrophic-russian-official-175750347.html>, (Accessed: 09 August 15).

sides can maintain that alliance membership is possible. Georgia's leaders must continue expressing hope for membership for domestic consumption, while NATO may not want to be seen to be renegeing on a deal.

A third way could be for Georgia to review its role in the region and see it as part of a multi-polar world, as director of RUSI, Michael Clarke, explains. "Europe is by no means a single entity. The difference between northern and southern Europe is becoming more pronounced and the Caucasus has got to be seen not as someone's back yard but a region in and of itself."

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"Georgia should see itself as a Caucasus nation in which it needs a good relationship with a lot of its neighbors. It needs a lot more internal reform, like Ukraine, which NATO can help with, and it ought to see its security within the Caucasus not as within the periphery of some sort of mythical European unity which is beginning to fade away," he said.

Extending from the airport of Tbilisi is George W. Bush Avenue, named in 2005 after the former American president who visited that year. It could equally be seen as a symbol of Georgia's road to the institutions of the west. That has not happened yet, and the next year could see the most testing times for Georgia and NATO since Tbilisi started its co-operation with the alliance in 1992.

Conclusion

Georgia has a fine balancing act to master. Post-2003, in the flush of the revolution which swept away the old guard, it set out its stall as a country that wanted to move away from the post-Soviet sphere of influence and into a new era of democracy and modernization. As part of that shift, Georgia sees its place within the European Union and NATO, even if critics highlight shortcomings in those institutions. This is because Tbilisi has made a promise to its people regarding NATO membership that it is determined to keep, regardless of the actual prospects of membership. Turning its back on that pledge would be politically toxic for Tbilisi.

Georgia will have to take something positive away from that summit to present to its people. But whatever Tbilisi does get from that meeting will be part of a long-term plan. In the short-term, however, the country may have to focus more on regional allies, and see itself as part of a Caucasian entity rather than one that is tied to Europe and the United States.

As the Georgian electorate demands why alliance membership is still such a long way off, there is the problem of how it will deal with its immediate strategic threats. The conflict in the east of Ukraine has taken all of NATO's attention and will be the focus of next year's summit in Warsaw, meaning that Georgian membership could be bumped further down the agenda. But there will need to be a commitment of some kind from the alliance, which has happily accepted Georgia's troop contribution to its operations. The Membership Action Plan, which is the first step to joining, seems a long way off, meaning that Georgia will have to take something positive away from that summit to present to its people. But whatever Tbilisi does get from that meeting will be part of a long-term plan. In the short-term, however, the country may have to focus more on regional allies, and see itself as part of a Caucasian entity rather than one that is tied to Europe and the United States.