



Georgian readiness for NATO membership after Russian-Georgian armed conflict

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ABSTRACT

The history of the cooperation between Georgia and NATO had started long before the Rose Revolution. Nowadays, Georgia belongs to the countries which want to join NATO. This article gauges the Georgian readiness for its accession to NATO. Study on NATO enlargement provides requirements on future members of NATO, even though it avoids such an explicit formulation. This article concludes that Georgia is not yet ready to join NATO because it has serious deficiencies in the area of democracy building, military readiness, and settling territorial disputes with its neighbours. The only area where the situation is satisfactory is the support of the public for the accession.

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Introduction

Georgia is one of the countries that are trying to join North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Having gained its independence after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, it had a short but complicated history full of tragic events and hardship. Shortly after its coming into being as an independent state, Georgia fell into the state of internal instability and went through the experience of two unsuccessful wars against its secessionists. The country achieved a degree of stability during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been a minister of foreign affairs in the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it was a period of economic stagnation and the penetration of organized crime into the structures of government. Besides, it was also a period in which Georgia lost control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Gradually, an opposition to Shevardnadze's regime formed under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania. After the rigged election in November 2003, the opposition organized mass protests. Against the background of those protests, Saakashvili won the presidential election in 2004 and took control of the country. He declared his aim of building democracy and bringing Georgia into the political, economic and security structures of the West. On the other hand, according to Tomáš Šmíd, foreign policy of the new Georgian government was not very different from the Shevardnadze one (Šmíd, 2006: 119). The most important organization for Georgia is NATO because it is taught that this organization can bring an end, or at least a decrease in the Russian influence in the region. In addition, being a NATO member is in Georgia perceived as a symbol of belonging to the West. This Georgian policy was strongly opposed by Russia and the conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were a significant apple of discord between both countries (Jibladze, 2007: 45–47).

The history of the cooperation between Georgia and NATO had started long before the Rose Revolution. Georgia has been actively participating in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) since 1994 and is a founding member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the successor to the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). It officially declared its interest in NATO membership as early as 2002, at the NATO Summit in Prague, when the Shevardnadze government was still in power. After Rose Revolution, the new government intensified its cooperation with NATO. In 2004 Georgia proposed its Individual

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Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) that created conditions for more engagement of NATO in Georgia's domestic reforms (More [Nichol, 2008](#): 1–2). An important success of Georgia's foreign and security policies was achieved when, at the meeting of NATO foreign ministers in New York on the 21st of September 2006, the decision was taken that the relationship of Georgia with the Alliance should enter a new phase – the phase of the Intensive Dialogue ([NATO, 2006](#)). On the other hand, Georgia has failed to join Membership action plan (MAP), approved in the 1999 Washington summit.

The process of forging closer ties between Georgia and the West (especially NATO) led to a confrontation with Russia. Russia considers the region of the Southern Caucasus an area of its vital interest, and that is why it has long been trying to prevent the penetration of any other power into that area. The Russian-Georgian confrontation gradually escalated. In the spring of 2006 Russia imposed economic sanctions on Georgia. In the September of the same year Georgia publicly accused four Russians of espionage for Moscow. Russia responded by recalling its ambassador. Nevertheless, at the end of 2006 and during 2007, a settlement to the conflict was – or so it seemed – reached ([Bonner, 2008](#): 84–86). Not even the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in the summer 2008 changed Georgia's resolve to accede to NATO ([Civil Georgia, 2008a](#)). On the other hand, this conflict has not very positive consequences both for Georgia and for NATO ([Madej, 2009](#); [Kríž and Shevchuk, 2009](#)).

The issue of NATO enlargement has arisen after the end of the Cold War. NATO enlargement was not predestined and can be perceived as a fruit of Clintons foreign policy ([Asmus, 2002](#)). NATO enlargement must be seen as part of a very complicated process of NATO adaptation to the new security environment ([Kríž, 2006](#)). As a part of this process, NATO started to cooperate with countries in South Caucasus region ([Priego, 2008](#)).

The aim of this study is to gauge the Georgian readiness for NATO membership after the 2008 summer armed conflict with Russia. To do that, we will use as our standard the Study on NATO Enlargement, which represented a significant breakthrough in the Alliance policy and deals with a number of issues connected with further growth of NATO ([NATO, 1995](#)). The reason for choosing that particular document is that the Study on NATO enlargement defines requirements on future members of NATO, even though it avoids such an explicit formulation. Its main requirements could be articulated as follows: 1. stabile democratic political system; 2. support of the population for the country's accession to NATO; 3. military readiness 4. elimination of all unresolved territorial disputes with neighbouring countries and strengthening integration tendencies. The overall emphasis of the Study is on political rather than military criteria, and the political readiness for the accession to NATO has also been given increased attention in all the three rounds that have taken place so far.

Democratic political system in Georgia

After Georgia gained its independence it went through a difficult phase – torn by internal conflict, it began to resemble a collapsed state in many respects. In spite of all that, Georgia managed to lay the foundations of its state power in a relatively short time and become functioning state which tends to refuse status quo existing in the region ([Cornell, 2008](#): 307–308). The political regime that existed in Georgia until 2003 can be characterised as a competitive-authoritarian regime. According to, Taras Kuzio, the most prolific Western writer and commentator on current Ukrainian affairs, “competitive-authoritarian regimes provide space for the opposition, civil society, a limited number of media outlets, democratic opposition, the opposition's ability to participate in state institutions (i.e parliament and local government), and the ability of international organizations to freely operate in the country” ([Kuzio, 2008](#): 99).

That situation did not create conditions favouring Georgia's early accession to NATO because the creation of consolidated democratic regime is the key requirement on candidate countries as defined in the Study on NATO enlargement. The aim of this study is not to provide a thorough discussion of democratic consolidation. One should pay attention to the fact that there are many definitions of democratic consolidation in the literature ([Pridham, 2009](#): 269–271). All of them have the division of power as a common focus. But it is not enough. Nevertheless, using [Huntington's \(1991\)](#) and [Dahl's \(1989\)](#) ideas, it is possible to assess the progress that Georgia has made on its path to democracy using the following key parameters for the purpose of this study: existence of division of power including independent judiciary guaranteeing the right of just trial for all citizens, regular and formalized replacement of those who hold power by existence of free elections existence of free mass media and last but not least democratic control over armed forces.

In Georgian political system the principle of division of power is applied. Nevertheless, executive branch dominates the whole system ([Freedom House, 2008](#)). In [2006 Transparency International Georgia](#) concluded that “while discussing general governance patterns in Georgia personalization of power and authority is evident. Power of institutions tends to be contingent with the personal standing of their heads/executives, and not really having lives of their own. The Georgian parliament is a perfect example. Influential during Shevardnadze's presidency, it now performs mostly the rubber stamp function for the government of Saakashvili. Local governance need not be mentioned here – it has never been given either considerable authority or independence for being counted as a major force in national politics. “Georgian judiciary was reformed so as to increase its independence and efficiency. Even though the reforms have managed to reduce the abuse of law, the judiciary is not yet entirely independent and immune to external political pressures ([Freedom House, 2008](#)).

As regards transition of power, generally speaking, during its newly established existence as an independent state, Georgia has not experienced a single instance of standard (without mass protests) and formalized transition of power from government to opposition. So far, the change of power in Georgia has always been accompanied by more or less extensive protest rallies and destabilisation of the political system ([Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006](#)). The opposition to the Shevardnadze regime was gradually formed under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze. After the rigged election in November 2003 the opposition organized mass protests, what later became known as the Rose Revolution.

Against the background of these protest rallies Saakashvili won the presidential election 2004. He took over the office of president and declared the aim of integrating Georgia into the political, economic and security structures of the West. The change of the political system was supported by American non-governmental organizations and welcomed by the American administration of G.W. Bush (Bonner, 2008: 83–84).

Nevertheless, later on, Saakashvili's government had to face an opposition of its own. While in the past it was Saakashvili, then foreign minister, who turned against his former ally Shevardnadze, using as an argument Shevardnadze's insufficient fight against corruption, now, for a change, it was Irakli Okruashvili, Saakashvili's former ally and former Minister of Defence, who turned against him (Freedom House, 2008). In autumn 2007 Saakashvili resorted to violence to suppress protests against his own regime, to which the West responded with criticism (Nichol, 2008: 2–3). That criticism only abated after Saakashvili won the election with the electoral gain of 53.47% (Centraluri saarchevno komisija, 2008). This election was criticized by Georgian opposition (Burjanadze, 2008).

At present there is again an opposition movement in Georgia that is ready to resort to the method of anti-government demonstrations in its political fight of Saakashvili. One of the heads of opposition movement is Nino Burjanadze who, at the time of the Rose Revolution, was Saakashvili's ally, but left his United National Movement on the eve of the parliamentary elections in spring 2008 (Fuller, 2008). In March 2008 the opposition, united in a coalition of eight political parties, launched a new round of protest rallies requiring that the new presidential election should be held and the conditions for free and fair parliamentary elections should be created (Civil Georgia, 2008b). In January 2009 twelve opposition parties signed a declaration in which they presented three requirements: Saakashvili should step down, early presidential and parliamentary elections should be held, and suitable conditions for these elections should be created (Georgia Times, 2009). In the spring of 2009 the opposition declared that the protests would continue until Saakashvili left office and the above conditions were met (Civil Georgia, 2009). Nevertheless, as recent developments on the political scene have shown, the opposition is no longer united as far as the intentions of various groups composing it are concerned. While one part of the opposition has rejected the idea of gaining any positions in official political structures, the leader of the opposition party "Tavisupleba" Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, for example, has decided to return to the parliament (Rustavi 2, 2009).

We can conclude that, on the whole, the custom of changing political power in ways that would be in conformity with legal and universally accepted rules has not yet become part of Georgian political culture. The discussion of how the present political situation in Georgia where, against the background of the lost war with Russia, an opposition against Saakashvili is being formed (Mikhelidze, 2009; Fuller, 2008) will enable us to judge the depth and firmness (or lack of it, as the case might turn out to be) of the foundations of democracy in Georgia. If the change of power happens in a proper parliamentary way and in agreement with the constitution, it will mean that Georgia is moving along the right path to meeting the requirements of the Study on NATO Enlargement.

No election in Georgia since the country gained its independence has been without irregularities. After all, the accusations of electoral fraud and rigging were what spurred the Rose Revolution. The early elections in Georgia in January 2008 that were forced on the government by the mass protest rallies (50,000–100,000 people) of the previous year can be viewed as the litmus test of the democratic character of Georgian elections. The Office for Democratic Institution and Human Right, which is part of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), said about that election:

...the election was in essence consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections, it also revealed significant challenges which need to be addressed urgently. Although this election represented the first genuinely competitive post-independence presidential election, shortcomings were noted. The campaign was overshadowed by widespread allegations of intimidation and pressure, among others on public-sector employees and opposition activists, some of which were verified by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM. ... Candidate registration was overall inclusive and transparent ... The vote count and tabulation was evaluated less positively. Many PECs had problems completing the results protocols, which were often not posted for public scrutiny. IEOM observers reported cases of tampering with voter lists, results and protocols. The tabulation process at DEC level was slow and often chaotic. (OSCE, 2008a)

Also Transparency International Georgia voiced many objections and published a lot of recommendations (Transparency International Georgia, 2008).

The Georgian opposition parties refused to recognize the result of the presidential election that was won by Saakashvili, calling the election rigged, and refused to cooperate or accept any positions in the government. Their conviction that the election had been rigged was only reinforced by the electoral result in Tbilisi where Mikheil Saakashvili (31.82%) lost to Levan Gachechiladze (39.76%) (nGnl, 2008). Even though Saakashvili won the election as a whole (53.5%), the opposition insisted that the election had been rigged and required that the whole electoral process should be re-examined, especially in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. It concentrated all its efforts on pushing through the demand that the results of the first election should be annulled and a second round of presidential election should be held. The political crisis in Georgia, the opposition claims, can only be resolved if there are free and fair parliamentary elections. According to the opposition, the Georgian electoral system should be reformed so as to become more proportional, the president and other high-ranking politicians should not be allowed to take part in the electoral campaign, and steps should be taken to improve the fairness of the whole electoral process (OSCE, 2008b).

Georgian legislation provides enough room for the work of independent media. Indeed, Freedom House considers the Georgian legislation defining the legal framework for the functioning of the media to be liberal, compatible with the principles

of democracy, and guaranteeing freedom of speech. Nevertheless the media do not always exercise sufficient control over political power, which is detrimental to the quality of democracy in Georgia. Even though the state controlled television and radio broadcasting stations were transformed into public service institutions in 2005, their reporting is generally considered to be biased in favour of the government. Thus, the role of the criticism of the government is fulfilled mostly by privately owned media (Imedi and Kavkasia). Generally speaking, Georgian media tend to suffer from weak editorial independence (Freedom House, 2008).

As regard civil–military relations, according to J. Nichol “to enhance democratic civil–military relations, a civilian defence minister was appointed in 2004 to head a ministry increasingly staffed by civilians. Coordination between security-related ministries has been increased. The government maintains that the defence budget is transparent and is scrutinized by the Committee on Defense and Security in the legislature. The defence ministry states that it consults with an advisory Civil Council, composed of civilian experts, on issues of defence policy, human rights of members of the armed forces, and budget expenditures. Some critics have maintained that legislative oversight remains inadequate.” (Nichol, 2008: 3–4) According to the available data the main principles of democratic control over armed forces are applied even though a lot of things should be improved.

Support of population for the accession of Georgia to NATO

There is no doubt that, as the available sources show, Georgian people want to join NATO. It was that desire, alongside with the dissatisfaction of Georgian people with the development their country went through in the 1990s, what finally led to the bloodless Rose Revolution. The West, symbolized by the institutions of EU and NATO, seemed an attractive alternative to Georgian people - an alternative to the decline their country experienced in the 1990s. That pro-Western sentiment continued to grow even stronger in Georgia after the Rose Revolution. According to the results of the referendum held at the same time as the presidential election in 2008, 77% Georgians wanted their country to join NATO (Nichol, 2008: 5).

The idea of NATO membership is also supported by all the main political parties in Georgia. In March 2007, a memorandum was accepted with the official title “Memorandum of Parliamentary Factions and Political Parties of Georgia.” The memorandum stated that NATO membership was the best guarantee of unity, territorial integrity and democratic development of Georgia, and that neutrality was not conceivable as an acceptable alternative to Georgia’s accession to NATO. It was also declared in the memorandum that all the parliamentary factions and political parties were in unanimous agreement with respect to the idea that Georgia should be integrated into NATO as soon as possible (Saqartvelos parlamenti, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are also some politicians in Georgia who are against their country’s accession to NATO. One of them is Irina Sarishvili, who was a presidential candidate in the January 2008 election. She categorically opposes the idea of Georgian membership in NATO. In her arguments she points out such potential risks connected with NATO membership as the possibility that Georgia could be drawn into a major war if there is a conflict between Iran and USA connected with the deployment of NATO troops on Georgian territory (Qevanishvili, 2008). She believes that after the Russian–Georgian armed conflict, no other option but neutrality is conceivable for Georgia. Georgian opponents of NATO membership also include Shalva Natelashvili, who is the founder and chairman of the Georgian Labour Party. He argues, among other things, that Georgia will become a battleground for big powers and thus jeopardize its own sovereignty unless it develops as an independent state avoiding membership in military blocks (Georgia Times, 2008).

Georgian opposition parties openly declare their support for the accession of Georgia to NATO and the overall process of European integration (Georgia Times, 2007). They have signed a manifesto which says that Georgia will meet its NATO commitments and concentrate on the harmonisation of its legal framework with EU legislation. It is emphasised in the same article that having good neighbourly and mutually advantageous economic and political relations with its neighbours should become a priority for Georgia (Civil Georgia, 2007).

Readiness of Georgian military

Even though the experience with the process of NATO enlargement that has taken place so far seems to suggest that, when assessing the readiness of a country to join NATO, political criteria are given priority to military criteria, it is still true that military readiness is a very important factor influencing the chances of a country to become a NATO member.

After it became an independent country, Georgia had to build its own armed forces, starting from what it had inherited from the Soviet Union. Following the Rose Revolution, Georgian armed forces went through the process of radical transformation aimed at preparing them for NATO membership. To achieve that, a number of planning documents inspired by the US armed forces planning procedures were created, namely the “National Security Concept,” “Threat Assessment Document and National Military Strategy.” The “National Security Concept” defined the main tasks for the Georgian army as achieving compatibility with NATO standards, acquiring the capacity for providing assistance to civil–political authorities in post-crisis rehabilitation and maintaining law and order, and, last but not least, acquiring the capacity for carrying out peace support, military operations and antiterrorist operations (Parliament of Georgia, 2005). These tasks were elaborated in more detail in “National Military Strategy” (MoD, 2005).

According to both documents, before the Russia–Georgian armed conflict, Georgia was oriented to territorial defence, deterrence of potential aggression and international expeditionary operations. The build-up of the Georgian armed forces after the Rose Revolution led to a substantial increase in Georgian defence spending. Nevertheless, editor-in-chief of “Moscow Defence Brief” and military expert, Mikhail Barabanov said that, in 2007, Georgia spent on defence 8% of its GDP (Barabanov,

2008) and J. Nichol came to the conclusion that in 2008 Georgia spent 10% of its GDP on the military (Nichol, 2008: 3). According to the official data, in 2009 Georgian annual defence spending amounted to 4% HDP (MoF, 2009: 78).

After the Rose Revolution, Georgia sought to acquire heavy weapon systems. It imported tanks, armoured combat vehicles, large-calibre artillery systems and combat aircraft from Ukraine, large-calibre artillery systems from Israel, and missiles and missile launchers from Poland and Bulgaria (United Nations, 2007). The total size of the Georgian armed forces increased to 32,000 soldiers, thus becoming twice as large as the size recommended by the USA, whose advice was to concentrate on acquiring the capacities for expeditionary peace support operations and antiterrorist operations (Nichol, 2008: 3). Towards the end of 2005 and at the beginning of 2006, Georgia launched an extensive programme of the build-up of its army reserves, the target number of reservists being set at 100,000 (Fuller and Giragosian, 2007). In parallel with that, Georgia participated in expeditionary operations abroad. The largest Georgian contingent was placed in Iraq. The contingent (2000 soldiers) has been in Iraq since 2007 (MoD, 2009a).

Even before the Russian-Georgian armed conflict broke out, the size and structure of the army Georgia was maintaining, made one suspect that given the requirements of the character of the armed forces in connection with the preparation for the potential accession to NATO, the actual motive for the size and structure might be the desire of Georgia to subdue militarily its secessionist regions (Fuller and Giragosian, 2007; Barabanov, 2008).

Nevertheless, one could also argue that having an army of that structure was in agreement with the aim declared in Georgian official planning documents, namely acquiring the capacity to protect the territory of Georgia against the threat of external attack.

Not even Georgia's intensive armament efforts were enough to change the unfavourable ratio between the strength of its own and Russia's military, especially since the Western assistance to Georgia was primarily concentrated on enhancing its capability to participate in peace and antiterrorist expeditionary missions with special emphasis on the operation Iraqi Freedom. As a result, on the eve of the war, the Georgian army consisted of two parts: (1) a small but well trained and paid core adapted to carrying out peace support operations; and (2) the insufficiently trained overwhelming majority of the Georgian armed forces, recruited through conscription and characterised by low fighting morale.

To assess the performance of the Georgian army in the Russian-Georgian armed conflict is not an easy task. For one thing, both sides have been waging an information war, which makes it quite difficult to separate facts from intentionally spread misinformation. It is even difficult to ascertain the one fact we would certainly need to know to assess the performance of the Georgian army, namely whether, in that war, Georgia was dealing with an unplanned and improvised operation of the Russian army, or whether, as the case might have been, the Russian military operation had been long planned and carefully prepared by Russia as an attack the pretext for which was obtained by deliberate provocation. Russian government and some Russian analysts claim that it was a quickly improvised operation (Barabanov, 2008; Isachenkov, 2008). Nevertheless, there are many facts and circumstances pertaining to the war that seem to support the opposite claim: the speed with which the Russian response came, opening of the second front in Abkhazia, Russian espionage activities in the region, military provocations carried out on the eve of the war shooting down Georgian unmanned aircraft, attack on a radar station of Georgian aircraft defence, and, last but not least, the Russian military exercises in the region, such as the exercise in the Caucasus (Chicky, 2009: 5; Cornell, 2008: 309–312). According to former Mr Putin's independent-minded economic adviser, Andrei Illarionov, who currently works as a senior fellow in the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC, "the war was a spectacular provocation that had been long prepared and successfully executed by the Russian siloviki – those in government with connections to the military and security organs – that almost entirely repeats in another theatre at another time the incursion of Basayev into Dagestan and the beginning of the second Chechnya war in 1999" (Illarionov, 2008). Be it as it may, Russia made profit from this conflict but on the other hand, Russia had to pay for this attack a political, economic and military price (Blank, 2008) and war also revealed a lot of deficiencies in Russian military (Horemuz, 2009: 69–70).

If these assertions are true, that is if what the Georgian army tried to resist was a carefully prepared Russian military operation for which the pretext had been supplied by the Georgians themselves, acting on a wrong strategic assessment of the situation and of Russian intentions. They had attempted to resolve the secession issue through the use of military force. No wonder the Georgian army failed to stop that attack – it lost to an army that outnumbered it heavily, was vastly superior to it in terms of heavy military weapons, and controlled the airspace over the battlefield. According to Tor Bukkvoll, on one hand, Russian victory was predestined by its overwhelming numerical superiority but on the other hand, Russian forces fought better than one expected (Bukkvoll, 2009). Mikhail Barabanov gives positive assessment at the tactical level, to the quality of training and endurance of Georgian rank and file soldiers. As regards the performance of the Georgian army at higher levels of command, he considers it less satisfactory (Barabanov, 2008). The strategic planning of the whole operation by the Georgian side was subjected to crushing criticism by the director at the Armenian Center for National and International Studies (ACNIS), Richard Giragosian. He believes that Georgia overestimated its own military capability, underestimated the capability of the Russians to respond with military force, and, finally, underestimated the strategic significance of Roki Tunnel (Giragosian, 2008). With respect to the question of the military readiness of Georgia to join NATO, it should be noted that the deficiencies revealed by the war at higher levels of command are more serious and less easy to remedy than the deficiencies at the tactical level because education and military training at the top military level needed much more time than at the basic levels.

No doubt, the capability of the Georgian army to defend its own territory has been reduced by the war. Immediately after the armed conflict, Georgian casualties were estimated at 500 dead and 1500 wounded. Besides, Russian army got hold of 150 pieces of Georgian heavy weapons and a large number of small size weapons (Barabanov, 2008). According to the Georgian MoD's report, the total casualties incurred by the Georgian army during the conflict were 161 killed and 9 missing in action (MoD, 2008). The Georgian government reports that 326 Georgians, including 155 civilians, died because of the conflict (Civil Georgia, 2008c). Given the relatively small size of the Georgian army, it cannot but be affected by the losses. Even more serious

was the fact that, because of the deployment of large Russian contingents on Georgian territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the strategic situation of Georgia has deteriorated significantly. Russia keeps 7600 troops stationed in those parts of Georgia where secessionists have declared their independence (Mikhelidze, 2009: 6). Apart from acting as a deterrent against any future attempt of Georgia to use force in dealing with the secessionists, it poses a permanent threat to Georgia by shortening the warning times for potential Russian attacks. Furthermore, the armed conflict also reduced the capacity of Georgia to participate in expeditionary operations.

The most serious negative consequence of the conflict at the military level is probably the impact it had on the morale of the Georgian troops. In his analysis of the whole course of the war, Mikhail Barbanov points out that the morale of the Georgian troops collapsed shortly after they had been pushed out of South Ossetia, which he believes should be understood in the light of the characteristic emotions of the Caucasian people who tend to easily succumb to panic (Barabanov, 2008). It is very difficult to assess the influence of this factor on the Georgian military in near future.

The Russian-Georgian conflict highlighted the importance of one of the main aims of Georgian defence policy – strengthening the capability of the Georgian army to defend the homeland against direct aggression. Since the September events, the transformation efforts of Georgia have been concentrated on the improvement of combat capability and achieving as much interoperability with NATO as possible. In the years to come, the priority will be given to the development of anti-aircraft and anti-tank capabilities, and to active engagement in various NATO educational and training programmes (MoD, 2009a). Voices are now heard even among Western analysts, saying that the Georgian army should develop differently compared to the main direction of its development prior to the summer 2008 war with Russia. Territorial defence must be given more priority than it has been given so far. While in the past the military assistance provided to Georgia by the West focused primarily on strengthening forces that could be used in expeditionary operations outside the territory of Georgia, now priority should be given to territorial defence. As US military expert John E. Chicky says,

this assistance does not necessarily have to replace tank for tank or artillery piece for artillery piece, but instead could include providing sophisticated air defence, anti-armor and counter-artillery capabilities along with associated command, control, communications, computer and intelligence systems. The purpose of providing these systems and associated training is to redirect the focus of the armed forces on territorial defence in order to give Georgia the ability to respond adequately in terms of troops and treasure if Russia were to attack again.“ (Chicky, 2009: 8–9)

This approach is based on the recognition that Georgia is facing different threats than Central European or Western countries. The probability that its territory will be attacked is much higher than in other parts of Europe.

Looking at the Georgian MoD budget, one cannot help seeing that the increase in personnel expenditures is given preference over the purchase of new military technology. While personnel expenditures take 58.5% of the MoD budget, the acquisition of new military equipment only takes 8.3% (MoD, 2009b). The problem is how to interpret this fact. There are basically four different explanations: 1. The Georgians have come to the conclusion that the weakest point of their armed forces is the quality of their personnel, and they are now trying to remedy it. 2. Saakashvili is trying to ensure the loyalty of Georgian armed forces. 3. The Georgian losses of combat equipment in the war were not as serious as the Russian side alleges. 4. The Russian claims about the heavy losses of military equipment on the Georgian side are true but the losses are being compensated through Western military assistance and therefore the funds thus saved can be invested into military personnel.

Be it as it may, if Georgia wants to meet the requirements of the Study on NATO Enlargement, the reform of its military will have to continue.

Elimination of unresolved territorial disputes and good relations with neighbours

Since the birth of an independent Georgia the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have posed problems for the territorial integrity of the new state. The most serious of these is probably the fact that the majority of people living in the two regions do not want to be part of Georgia. (Bonner, 2008: 81-82) That such a situation arose because of the exodus of many ethnic Georgians during the 1990s is an irrelevant fact from the point of view of Georgian desire to join NATO. If we compare the current situation of Georgia with other countries that aspired to NATO membership in the past, we cannot help drawing the conclusion that none of those countries were in a similar situation and thus, as far as this particular point is concerned, we cannot consider Georgia ready for NATO membership.

We should keep in mind that the resolution of both conflicts does not depend only on decisions taken in Tbilisi. Any future solution to them will have to include Russia – a power that is resolutely opposed to the idea of Georgia's accession to NATO, interpreting it as yet another attempt of the West to move closer to Russia's border so as to complete its final encirclement. To prevent that happening Russia will probably abstain from doing anything that might lead to the resolution of the conflict. She would, probably, just wait for them to turn chronic.

After all, in the past Russia did many things (through fuelling the conflict in Georgia) to complicate the security situation in the Caucasus so that Russian military presence in the region could be justified. It supported the secessionist movements in both Georgian regions, granted Russian citizenship to many people as part of its long term policy aimed at creating a justification for a future military intervention under the pretext of protecting its own citizens, imposed unjustified sanctions on Georgian goods that, later on (after the scandal caused by the arrest of Russian spies) was turned into a full embargo, and finally, before the war broke out, it carried out military provocations of which the most serious one was the attack on a Georgian radar in the summer of 2007 (More in Cornell, 2008: 309–310).

Thus, the history of the Russian engagement in the conflict seems to support the assumption that Russia is not interested in seeing Georgia re-establish its sovereignty over the secessionist provinces, which is a policy whose chances of success are much enhanced in the current situation where Russian intransigence can effectively block Georgia's entry into NATO. Both provinces have declared independence and they have been recognised as independent states by a decree of president Medvedjev (Bonner, 2008: 88). While South Ossetia wants to be united with North Ossetia and become part of Russia, Abkhazia wants to become an independent country within the CIS. The differing attitudes of all sides to the conflict do not leave much room for a compromise solution, as can be clearly seen from the ongoing negotiations in Geneva (Mikhelidze, 2009: 6). During the fourth round of talks (in February 2009) an agreement called "Proposals for Joint Mechanism for Averting and Reacting to Incidents" was signed. The stumbling block of the future rounds of talks might become the insistence of the Russian side that Georgia should sign an agreement with the secessionist republics committing all the parties to the abstention from the use military force in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. But Georgia is not ready to sign any such agreement with South Ossetia or Abkhazia since it does not recognize these regions as subjects of international law and is only willing to sign the agreement with Russia (RFEL, 2008).

Conclusion

If we use the requirements of the Study on NATO Enlargement to assess the readiness of Georgia for its accession to the Alliance, we cannot but conclude that Georgia is not ready to join NATO because it has serious deficiencies in the area of democracy building, military readiness, and settling territorial disputes with its neighbours. The only area where the situation is satisfactory is the support of the public for the accession.

To become a fully consolidated democracy, Georgia will have to redistribute the powers of the executive and strengthen the mechanisms of control over it, put in place measures preventing the government from bullying the opposition, ensure that the former state television and radio stations become public entities with real independence, continue the reform of its judiciary and fight corruption. But the most important – and, at the same time, the most difficult – task for Georgia is to create a political culture that will make it possible that governments can be smoothly replaced by their opposition on the basis of free and fair elections whose results are accepted by both the winning and losing sides. Even though the Rose Revolution brought about significant changes, the Freedom House still classifies the Georgian regime as transitional government or hybrid system (Freedom House, 2008). In other words, despite the fact that Georgia has considerably advanced in building democracy since the Rose Revolution, it cannot yet be considered a consolidated democracy.

While there is still a long way for Georgia to go along the path to consolidated democracy, it is also clear that the idea of its accession to NATO enjoys wide popular support among Georgian people. In Georgia, there is a wide consensus about the necessity of joining NATO that reaches across the whole political spectrum and includes both the government and the opposition. Thus, as far as this particular point is concerned, what is required of Georgia in the Study on NATO Enlargement is certainly met.

The available sources suggest that the Georgian army as a whole is not yet ready to join NATO because it has first to recover from the losses it suffered in the armed conflict. The Russian-Georgian armed conflict will probably strengthen the tendency of Georgia to adapt its army to territorial defence rather than to expeditionary operations, which is a different direction of the army development from the one recommended within NATO.

While making progress in the above listed areas is first and foremost up to Georgia itself, dealing with the issue of the unresolved territorial disputes Georgia has with its neighbours depends on the international community, where one of the key players is Russia – a powerful opponent of Georgia's accession to NATO. It seems that the only way for Georgia to resolve the territorial disputes with its neighbours, without giving Russia a chance to thwart that solution, is to reconcile itself to the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If this is the price it should pay for its accession to NATO, then doing so would be the biggest sacrifice a candidate country has ever made.

An early accession of Georgia to NATO is thus an unlikely event, not just because some NATO countries have long been opposed to it or because the USA under Obama leadership has changed the priorities of its foreign policies, but also because of the insufficient readiness of Georgia itself for NATO membership – an obstacle that is not so easy to remove. Even though Georgia can justifiably claim to have made considerable progress in democratic reforms since the Rose Revolution, all that is still not enough in the light of the requirements of the Study on NATO Enlargement.

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List of abbreviations

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| ACNIS | The Armenian Center for National and International Studies |
| CIS | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| EAPC | Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council |

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| IPAP | Individual Partnership Action Plan |
| MA | Membership action plan |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| OSCE | The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe |

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