

# Can Georgia Get Back on the NATO Track?

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Georgia, the most fervent pursuer of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization among remaining candidates, seeks to receive a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the April 2008 summit in Bucharest. Despite the name, a MAP is not a promise of future NATO membership but a mechanism designed to help “aspiring countries” become more attractive candidates. The United States and most of NATO’s newer members support a MAP for Georgia, as well as for the other 2008 aspirant, Ukraine. However, several other NATO members, with Germany in the lead, are wary of giving Georgia (or Ukraine) a MAP.

The main source of their opposition is a reluctance to strain already tense relations with Russia, exacerbated most recently by U.S. and European recognitions of Kosovar independence. While MAP is not a guarantee of NATO membership, Russia, which is opposed to NATO expansion, construes it as such and has suggested that MAP expansion would negatively impact its relations with the West. Moreover, with outgoing Russian President Vladimir Putin on the summit guest list, no requirement that a MAP be granted at a summit, and, for Georgia, a critical test of democracy coming up afterward, Bucharest may not be the best place for MAP enlargement. The real debate is whether Georgia and Ukraine should soon be granted MAPs at all, possibly later in 2008.

If potential blowback on Russian-Western relations is the prevailing source of NATO members’ reluctance to extend MAP, then Georgia and Ukraine will have trouble making their case even beyond Bucharest. Still, Georgia, at least, could do more to shift the debate on NATO enlargement away from its alleged deficiencies and onto

its strengths, thereby affecting the broader strategic calculus of NATO and its members.

Specifically, Georgia can resolve concerns about its stability and that of Georgian-Russian relations. NATO, despite its origins, rejects the notion that its purpose after the Cold War includes defending members against a Russian threat. By contrast, Georgia's foreign policy inclination is to emphasize the multiple security threats that Russia poses to it. Instead, Georgia should demonstrate that Russia poses little threat to either its stability or its political development. In so doing, it can satisfy NATO concerns about avoiding entanglement in a future Russian-Georgian conflict while increasing its intrinsic appeal as a prospective member, given that NATO sees itself as an alliance of stable democracies.

While this is most obviously relevant to the way Georgia approaches its territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is most immediately relevant in its domestic politics. Georgia is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections in May 2008, in the wake of a political crisis the government says was brought about by Russian meddling. The most effective step Georgia can take to strengthen its request for a MAP is to hold free and fair elections that institutionalize multiparty democracy. This is a move that will be beneficial on its own merits, but it will also help establish the strength of the Georgian state despite Russian interference. Such an assurance is critical for getting reluctant NATO members to begin considering the extension of the alliance's collective security provisions to Georgia.

## **Georgian Insecurity and NATO**

Aside from concerns about the impact of MAP expansion on Russian-Western relations, there are two reasons specific to Georgia that have made NATO members equivocate on granting it a MAP. First, Georgia's territorial conflicts have made many members hesitant about bringing Georgia closer to the alliance, due to the expectation that aspiring candidates will resolve such conflicts before being eligible for membership. Second, a Georgian government crackdown on political protest in the fall of 2007 underscored doubts regarding the quality of Georgian democracy and, hence, its appeal as a prospective NATO member.

In seeking to deflate the significance of these obstacles to a MAP, Georgia has paradoxically deepened their impact by invoking the Russian threat. Georgia has long insisted that its territorial conflicts are not internal conflicts but conflicts with Russia and, hence, that resolving these conflicts is not a matter of negotiating compromise solutions with minorities but of undermining Russian revanchism. In fact, Georgia tends to present Russia as the force behind virtually all challenges to internal and regime stability, thereby even justifying seemingly anti-democratic actions. While invoking such a threat may make Georgia's situation more comprehensible, it is not an effective way to overcome existing objections to a MAP.

Preoccupation with a Russian threat does not disqualify Georgia's candidacy for a MAP or NATO membership. Earlier waves of entrants also sought membership in

NATO not only for its transformative and integrationist possibilities but for the more conventional purpose of providing security guarantees against Russia. Past candidates, however, relied on NATO's collective security provisions at most to diminish a hypothetical Russian threat. In Georgia's case, the threat already exists, or at least Georgia says it does. This makes Georgia's call for NATO integration unique: less about hedging against Russian aggression than about actively rolling it back, a task of considerably less appeal to the post-Cold War alliance.

## **Territorial Insecurity and MAP**

Georgia's territorial conflicts do not pose an insurmountable obstacle for Georgia to receive a MAP, which neither requires a resolution to conflicts nor guarantees alliance membership. By contrast, Georgia's territorial conflicts are, and will remain, an impediment to NATO membership so long as the alliance expects new candidates to resolve such conflicts before becoming members. While NATO's official line is that no outside state (like Russia) has a veto on membership, realistically the lack of resolution means that Georgia's NATO membership continues to be only a future possibility.

It is not so much the unresolved conflicts that pose an obstacle to a Georgian MAP but their security context. Because of Georgia's exceedingly poor relations with Russia, a patron of both disputed territories, the threat of armed conflict tied to developments over Abkhazia or South Ossetia looms. Whether or not a MAP would assure Georgia that it could take military steps to resolve conflict, or prompt Russia to take preventative measures that could also lead to armed conflict, NATO members may fear that granting Georgia a MAP, even without the collective security that membership provides, could entangle the alliance in a future Russian-Georgian conflict.

The recognition granted by the United States and most European states to Kosovar independence increases concerns about potential conflict, if only marginally. Recognition means that Russia has even less incentive to pursue resolutions that respect Georgia's territorial integrity. For now, Russia has refrained from demonstrating a "Kosovo precedent" by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nonetheless, Russia has dropped any pretense that it is obligated to maintain neutrality or to help restore Georgian territorial integrity. It also retains the threat of recognition as a punitive measure if Georgia were to receive a MAP and certainly if it were to approach even closer to NATO membership. Such a threat could make Georgia willing, out of desperation, to take actions that have a greater risk of sparking armed conflict or make Russia more willing to use force to defend the disputed territories' *de facto* independence.

The situation, however, need not be as precarious as it sounds. A MAP could be coupled explicitly with Georgian commitments to forswear force as a means to retake territory and Western reassurances that a Russian recognition of independence would be rejected. Moreover, Georgia could be assured that Russian recognition, or even an acceleration of informal methods of support (military deployments, investment and trade, cadre rotation, and so forth), would not prejudice international views on conflict

resolution. In this respect, it may help to point out that Turkish recognition and support of Northern Cyprus' independence have not been the main factors impeding Cyprus' reunification.

## **Domestic Insecurity and MAP**

While the linkage between Georgia's insecurity and its unresolved conflicts is generally recognized, that linkage extends more broadly to spheres less commonly associated with state insecurity.

Whether motivated by a belief that conflict with Russia over Georgia's Western orientation is inevitable, a desire to get external sympathy for Georgia's position, or because of domestic political considerations, Georgia has maintained that Russia poses a grave threat to its security that goes beyond the occupation of breakaway territories all the way to subversive efforts to overthrow the state. Government actions have implied that this perceived threat is serious enough to endanger Georgian democracy. As a result, the Georgian government has ended up reinforcing the notion that Georgia is a fragile country under siege. This might attract sympathy, but it is not likely to attract NATO's embrace.

In recent years, Georgia has repeatedly and dramatically "exposed" the Russian threat to Georgian security. For one, Georgia accuses Russia of periodically launching missile strikes against it. In 2002, Georgia suffered three missile strikes (denied by Russia) as it was driving Chechen militants back across the Russian border. In 2007, two more missile strikes on Georgian territory occurred, the first in a part of Abkhazia taken by Georgian forces months earlier (but always *de facto* Georgian-controlled) and the second on the edge of a Georgian-controlled part of South Ossetia, apparently targeting a mobile radar station Georgia installed the year before. The location of this last strike, which failed or was intentionally a dud, was not much more than an hour's drive from Tbilisi, Georgia's capital.

In addition to covert missile strikes, Georgia claims that Russia engages in other forms of subversion against it. Ex-president Eduard Shevardnadze survived two assassination attempts in the 1990s. In the first, Georgian Minister of State Security Igor Giorgadze stood accused and to avoid imprisonment fled to Russia where he was protected from extradition and provided a media platform. After Georgia's Rose Revolution, Giorgadze prominently re-entered Georgian politics as the founder in exile of the Justice Party, which teamed up with other marginal political groupings in an anti-government, anti-Western, pro-Russian alliance. In September 2006, members of the Justice Party and its alliance were arrested on charges of plotting a violent coup, cooperating with foreign security services, illegal receipt of funds, and possession of illegal weapons. Soon afterward, Georgia hauled into court and threatened with imprisonment a handful of Russian military officers accused of espionage. This provoked a furious response from Russia entailing the deportation of several hundred migrant workers and the closure of land, air, and sea borders as well as postal communication.

One year later, with the embargo still in force, the Georgian government declared that the second act of this Russian strategy of destabilization was underway. Just a few days after Russian peacekeepers were caught on camera detaining and beating Georgian policemen that had restricted their access to Georgian-controlled territory, an opposition movement composed of ten different parties launched street protests demanding early parliamentary elections (as originally scheduled before the government pushed them back to coincide with a presidential election), changes to the electoral law, the release of “political prisoners,” and eventually President Mikheil Saakashvili’s resignation. Whether most of its members were aware of it or not, the government insisted, this opposition movement, the “National Council of the Unified Public Movement,” was a pawn of the Kremlin which was cannily seeking to overthrow Saakashvili using techniques similar to those that brought him to power.

While Russian state involvement may not have been immediately apparent, Saakashvili insisted that the Kremlin had teamed up with Badri Patarkatsishvili, a Georgian oligarch who made his fortune as a close associate of Boris Berezovsky, became an influential economic force in Georgia, and was the owner of Imedi, a popular Georgian television channel and the government’s leading media critic. Though Patarkatsishvili had long avoided open involvement in politics, he announced his entry in the weeks before the protests, threw his weight behind the National Council, and declared he would finance protest rallies himself. Patarkatsishvili also argued in support of a radical decentralization of power in Georgia leaving only “defense and the economy” to the central government and a foreign policy based on “balancing,” noting that the process of pursuing NATO and eventually EU membership “should not occur at the expense” of Russian interests. Such calls encouraged Saakashvili to accuse Patarkatsishvili not only of financing street protests, but of acting “in coordination” with Russia, which was continuing to seek Georgia’s destabilization.

Four days later, police forcibly cleared a central square of protestors planning to install a tent city in front of parliament, only to see a crowd of thousands break police lines to retake Tbilisi’s main avenue. To clear the streets, the government dispatched riot police (who prepped for the operation by shouting anti-Patarkatsishvili slogans) that twice dispersed the crowds with water cannons, noise machines, tear gas, rubber bullets, and occasionally truncheons.

These developments evidently increased Patarkatsishvili’s urgency to seek regime change. Immediately after police dispersed the protests, Patarkatsishvili swore he would spend “every last cent” to get rid of Saakashvili. Authorities ordered a state of emergency, shut down Imedi, and directly accused Patarkatsishvili of seeking to overthrow the government. They also accused other opposition leaders of working with Russia, releasing tapes of what were at least friendly conversations with Russian diplomatic personnel. More indicting were taped conversations between Patarkatsishvili and associates with the head of the Georgian Interior Ministry’s Special Operations Department, who had pretended to defect to Patarkatsishvili’s camp. A plan was articulated for the staging of a post-election coup: mass protests after the January

presidential election, the use of fake evidence to help prove electoral fraud, and, for \$100 million, support of the special forces and arrest of Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili. Further, the tapes alluded to a Russian link: Patarkatsishvili's associate explained that Patarkatsishvili had distanced himself from Boris Berezovsky at Putin's request, and also from other potential annoyances to the Kremlin by selling his Russian newspaper *Kommersant* and shares in Yukos.

Thus compromised, Patarkatsishvili lost the confidence of his staff at Imedi, which was allowed to reopen but decided to temporarily cease broadcasting, and the opposition also distanced itself from him. No charges were brought against Patarkatsishvili before he ran for president in the snap election Saakashvili called to end the political crisis. Afterwards, however, he was charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government; any ambitions he had for regime change were stalled. He died of a heart attack in London just over one month later, with no evidence to date of foul play.

## **Promoting Security the Democratic Way**

This unusual domestic turmoil has not been the only factor deterring a decision to give Georgia a MAP, but it certainly has provided ready-made justification for those already opposed as well as any fence-sitters. The Georgian government's decision to clear city squares of protestors and its subsequent explanation that it had to do so or risk Russian-engineered regime change simultaneously raised questions about the state of Georgia's democracy and the extent of the Russian threat against it. As a result, a NATO MAP appeared distant.

To some degree, Georgia has limited the negative repercussions of the November events on its MAP prospects. The presidential election was deemed flawed but generally reflective of popular will and, even more importantly, a sign that Georgia was at least secure enough to resolve its crisis through democratic means.

However, Georgian democracy still remains largely untested. The presidential election repaired some of the damage from the government crackdown, but it has not established that Georgia is on the road to multiparty democracy nor that its leadership believes the country is insulated from Russian subversion and, hence, a less risky partner for NATO. The way forward lies with the May 2008 parliamentary elections, through which the parties and movements at the forefront of the November protests are seeking a stake in Georgia's power structures. Holding free and fair elections that result in substantive opposition representation would establish Georgia as at least a politically desirable candidate for membership and demonstrate that the government is not so concerned that Russia will subvert the Georgian state through its domestic politics.

Even if Georgia establishes its democratic credentials, giving it a MAP still involves risks both for NATO members in their relationship with Russia, and for Georgia, which could be the target of even greater Russian pressure. Despite Georgia's domestic turmoil, however, we should recall that in a plebiscite held simultaneously with the snap presidential election, over three-quarters of the population expressed support for

NATO membership, a position that almost no opposition forces contest. This consensus on foreign policy orientation has already gotten NATO to take Georgia's ambitions more seriously than it otherwise would have. Such a consensus will have an even greater impact in an indisputably democratic multiparty Georgia. For all their misgivings, opponents to a Georgian MAP will be hard-pressed to explain why the "open door" alliance let in worthy candidates like Latvia and Bulgaria, still considers membership for ambivalent Croatia and pro-American Albania, but continues to keep out devoted, democratic, but troublesome Georgia.

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