

COMMENTARY

NATO and Georgia 13 years on: So close, yet so far



GEORGIA (<https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=232>) / COMMENTARY

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In this special series of Commentaries, EPC analysts look to NATO's new strategy for 2030 and outline what must be done to 'make a strong alliance even stronger'.

Georgia has bent over backwards to prove to NATO that it is a steadfast partner and ready to join the Alliance. Yet Russia's de facto third-party veto hinders NATO's open-door policy and Georgia's eventual membership. There should be no Russian doorman deciding who enters the NATO club.

At the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, Georgia and Ukraine were promised seats at the Alliance's table. 13 years on, this has still not materialised, despite Georgia ticking all the boxes on NATO's to-do list. In fact, Tbilisi is better prepared than some of the Alliance's newest members (<https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2019-nato-70-reaffirming-alliances-values-general-report-schmidt-132-cds-19-e-rev-1-fin>) – and yet a Membership Action Plan (MAP) remains elusive.

While some Alliance members fear Russia's reaction, this approach gives Moscow a de facto veto power over a sovereign country's decision and undermines NATO's credibility. At the forthcoming NATO summit, the Alliance must stand behind its values and ensure European security by demonstrating a genuine open-door policy. It should reaffirm Georgia's eventual place in the club and move its membership process forward.

So close...

Georgia is an important and reliable NATO partner. (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm) Today, relations far exceed the MAP framework (<https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/nato-membership-georgia-us-and-european-interest>). They consist of political dialogue under the NATO-Georgia Commission and practical cooperation, giving Tbilisi the necessary tools to meet NATO standards and ~~accept and~~ obtain membership without a MAP. This includes the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), which aims to strengthen Georgia's military capability, including advancing

its territorial defence and boosting security sector reform. In addition, the Annual National Programme sets policy and reform priorities. Georgia is also an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, which provides all the privileges that Alliance members enjoy barring the collective security umbrella. Strengthening Georgia's resilience to Russian coercion has also been a crucial part of NATO's engagement with Georgia.

Tbilisi has worked hard. It has contributed more to international [NATO missions](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm) (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm) than many existing members while also meeting the Alliance's 2% defence spending target. Georgia was the largest non-member contributor per capita to NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. With its defence capabilities and interoperability with NATO members' armies, its military standards meet those of NATO. [Georgian popular support for membership](https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-and-nato-support-five-year-high-georgia-urgent-action-environment-and) (https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-and-nato-support-five-year-high-georgia-urgent-action-environment-and) also remains very high, at 78%.

In addition to upholding NATO standards, [national trends reveal](https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2019-nato-70-reaffirming-alliances-values-general-report-schmidt-132-cds-19-e-rev-1-fin) (https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2019-nato-70-reaffirming-alliances-values-general-report-schmidt-132-cds-19-e-rev-1-fin) that Georgia is "catching up with current NATO members in international ratings that assess the level of media freedom, the rule of law, and the business environment." Transparency International's [Corruption Perception Index](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl) (https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl) ranks Georgia 45th, while members Montenegro and North Macedonia are 67th and 111th respectively.

...and yet so far

Despite Georgia's readiness and fulfilment of NATO's membership criteria, the Alliance remains reluctant to put MAP on the table. This raises concerns in Tbilisi – and other aspirant countries – that NATO's open-door policy is selective.

NATO claims that Russia does not possess a de facto third-party veto, citing the accession of Montenegro and North Macedonia as proof of its open-door policy. Russia did indeed oppose the accession of both states – but they cannot be compared to Georgia. Firstly, neither country borders Russia. Secondly, Russia has no military presence in either. Lastly, the integration of the Western Balkans into NATO and the EU has long been seen as necessary to prevent renewed conflict in the region, and therefore vital for European security.

It's complicated

Georgia's case is more complicated – and not just because it borders Russia. Russia occupies two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region (South Ossetia), which in turn are deeply integrated with Russia. The Kremlin also maintains a large military presence in each occupied territory, which it uses to project its power. Still, as NATO's policy makes clear, the resolution of territorial disputes is a factor to be considered when evaluating a potential member's suitability, not a precondition.

In [NATO history](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm) (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm), members have joined the Alliance with outstanding irredentist claims, omitting the disputed territories from the collective security umbrella provided under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Examples include Spain, Ceuta and Melilla; or pre-reunification Germany. There are also numerous examples of NATO members that do not have all their territory under the protection of Article 5, including the US (Guam, Hawaii), the UK (Falkland Islands) and France (Réunion Island).

Former NATO Secretary-General [Anders Fogh Rasmussen](https://twitter.com/AndersFoghR/status/1171361985906298880?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1171361985906298880%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F1tv.ge%2Fen%2Fnews%2Fanders-fogh-rasmussen-i-suggest-to-break-stalemate-around-georgia-nato-membership%2F) (https://twitter.com/AndersFoghR/status/1171361985906298880?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1171361985906298880%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2F1tv.ge%2Fen%2Fnews%2Fanders-fogh-rasmussen-i-suggest-to-break-stalemate-around-georgia-nato-membership%2F) proposes a similar approach in the case of Tbilisi: "Georgia could discuss joining NATO without Article 5 coverage of illegally occupied territories. It would show Russia that creating frozen conflicts can't forever freeze Georgia's future."

Don't poke the Russian bear

The biggest stumbling block for Georgian accession is Russia. France and Germany are particularly opposed, fearing that it would trigger a hostile response from the Kremlin. In 2008, German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned the Alliance that Russia would interpret any further eastward expansion of NATO as an existential threat. Four months later, Russia invaded Georgia, coming within a few miles of Tbilisi.



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Today, Russia occupies 20% of Georgian territory. [Russian military adventurism](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54) (https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EURussia-relations-Adding-insult-to-injury~3cfb54) elsewhere – its 2014 annexation and occupation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine's [Donbas region](https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Donbas-Ukraines-continuing-predicament~31a114) (https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Donbas-Ukraines-continuing-predicament~31a114), its expanding military footprint in the Black Sea – has heightened anxieties about pursuing further rounds of NATO's eastern enlargement. Despite NATO's claims, by creating artificial conflicts and freezing them, Russia has created a de facto third-party veto right in NATO's decision-making process regarding the open-door policy.

What to do?

All NATO members should understand that the current policy of keeping Georgia in limbo undermines the Alliance's credibility and reinforces the Russian narrative that the West does not want Georgia. Short of a sea change in Russian thinking, Moscow will continue to view NATO as a threat, regardless of who sits in the Kremlin.

This should not mean that NATO backpedals on its commitment to Tbilisi. Georgia is as much a part of the transatlantic community as those states with which it stood shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan and elsewhere. At the forthcoming June summit, the Alliance should reiterate its commitment to Georgia by moving ahead with the accession. There should be no new modus vivendi with Russia: Moscow must not be allowed to veto the accession of Georgia or any other NATO aspirant simply because it claims that they are part of its sphere of influence.

In its pursuit of NATO membership, Tbilisi has done everything the Alliance has asked and more. Concerns over Russia must be balanced with consideration of the wider contribution Georgia makes to transatlantic security. Given Tbilisi's pro-Western policies, commitment to transatlantic security, and steps taken to strengthen its democracy – in a significant geostrategic region where democracy is in short supply –, NATO should double down on its support for Georgia.

At the upcoming NATO summit, heads of state should underline the Alliance's firm recognition of Georgia's progress in the context of the open-door policy, reiterate that the country will become a member and clearly spell out the next steps. When it comes to Georgia's MAP, NATO can either grant it and a membership invitation simultaneously or scrap the MAP entirely and declare at any given moment that Georgia has been admitted to the club.

Georgia still has homework to complete, too. Despite NATO's promise and Georgia's considerable reforms, Tbilisi still needs to go the extra mile. It will have to go far beyond what other NATO candidates had to do to persuade Germany, France and other sceptical NATO members of its value. Namely, Georgia will not only have to press ahead with the reforms asked by NATO. It will also have to fulfil those demanded by the EU, aiming to further strengthen the country's resilience to internal and external threats (i.e. countering political polarisation). Tbilisi should fully implement the provisions foreseen in the April 2021 deal that was mediated by the EU and [ended the recent political crisis](https://epc.eu/en/publications/Georgias-road-ahead-Time-for-the-EU-to-show-some-tough-love~3e7c18) (https://epc.eu/en/publications/Georgias-road-ahead-Time-for-the-EU-to-show-some-tough-love~3e7c18). With Georgia's transatlantic allies monitoring this process closely, the country's political elites should not waste any more time squabbling and knuckle down instead.

The Georgian government should also acknowledge that it is willing to join the Alliance without including Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali Region under the protection of Article 5 as long as they have not been returned to Georgia. With the support of the EU, US and other partners, Georgia should double down on strengthening peacebuilding efforts with Abkhazians and South Ossetians.

The “[NATO 2030](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf)” (https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf) food-for-thought document, which will be on the table during the June summit, states that “NATO should [...] strengthen partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia as vulnerable democracies that seek membership”. NATO must follow through on this recommendation by demonstrating that it has a genuine open-door policy. There should be no Russian doorman deciding who enters the NATO club. By reaffirming Georgia's eventual membership, NATO will send a strong signal to the region that difficult reforms do pay off and simultaneously strengthen its credibility vis-à-vis the Kremlin.



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