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## GEORGIA AND NATO: A SMALL COUNTRY IN SEARCH OF SECURITY

GIORGI BADRIDZE

# 141

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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*Since regaining its independence in 1991, Georgia has never fully enjoyed the benefits of the end of the Cold War. While most Central and Eastern European countries rejoined Europe (and the Euro-Atlantic structures), Georgia has had to struggle to defend its borders and sovereignty from the old imperial power. Despite a difficult start and many setbacks, the country has implemented reforms and achieved considerable progress on its path toward building a European democracy while developing a strong cooperation with NATO (and the EU). Its main goal of joining the Alliance as a member, however, remains an uncertain prospect. The absolute majority of Georgians strongly supports NATO membership as the country, even more than many member states, continues to contribute to NATO operations over the years. The obstacles to Georgia's membership have, oddly enough, not come only from Russia but from internal contradictions and disunity among NATO member states. This paper discusses the history of Georgia's path toward NATO and presents a rationale for its membership.*

During its history, the world has rarely changed so rapidly and so profoundly as at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. These changes were felt most intensely in Central and Eastern Europe. Within a few years, the Cold War ended, Germany was reunited, democratic velvet revolutions swept away the Communist regimes in the Soviet bloc and the Soviet Union itself – collapsed. My student years coincided with this period. When I became a history student in 1985, my native Georgia was hopelessly stuck under Soviet rule and the Cold war was still in full swing. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine that, by the time I graduated, Georgia would regain its independence and I would join its newly created diplomatic service. Even though the collapse of the Soviet system caught many by surprise, it was clearly the result of its own economic incompetence and flawed ideology. Crucially, like its predecessor – the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union was doomed by its hypertrophied geopolitical ambitions which were not matched by its economic abilities. Georgia's independence had its own logic, too. Contrary to the widespread cliché, Georgia was not some “newly independent state” that was born in 1991 out of the collapse of the USSR. Rather, that was the year when the Georgian people regained the independence of their ancient state\* which had been taken from us twice by our giant northern neighbor. Without understanding its history, including the most recent period, it would be impossible to determine why Georgia strives to join NATO and why it has not succeeded so far.

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\* For the history of Georgia see: Oliver Wardrop, *The Kingdom of Georgia, Notes of Travel in a Land of Women, Wine, and Song* (London, Simpson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1888); W.E.D. Allen, *History of Georgian People - From the Beginning Down to the Russian Conquest in the Nineteenth Century* (London, Keagan Paul, Trench, Truber and Co. Ltd., 1932); Ronald G. Suni, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994); Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires, A History of Georgia* (London, Reaktion Books Ltd., 2012).

## **Not Quite the End of History – Georgia’s Predicament as a Déjà Vu**

Unfortunately, Georgia was not to fully benefit from the opportunities created by the end of the Cold War and the demise of the old bipolar world order. While most Central and Eastern European nations, freed from Soviet domination and the Communist regimes, set upon the path of building new democratic political and economic systems in line with European standards (which soon were enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty and the Copenhagen criteria), Georgia encountered a whole different set of obstacles – both internal and external. Internally, the 70 years of the Soviet rule had its effect on society – civil society was weak and democratic and statehood traditions were largely forgotten. Central and Eastern European nations, whose statehood was not totally wiped out and had preserved a limited autonomy under the Kremlin’s watchful eye, faced the task of rebuilding democracies and reforming their economies. But Georgians had the additional challenge of rebuilding their statehood, lost as a result of the Bolshevik invasion and annexation in 1921. Even the three Baltic nations, annexed by the Soviet Union nearly 20 years later than Georgia, had an advantage as the generation which had experienced its independence was still alive and had preserved some institutional memory.

The near total political and diplomatic inexperience of Georgia’s new political elite, mostly the nationalist leaders who fought against the Communist oppression and declared independence on April 9, 1991, does not fully excuse all of the mistakes that were made in the first months of the first democratically elected government. But as we soon found out, Moscow had not accepted the end of history, at least not for our part of the world and had different ideas about the degree of freedom that should have been afforded to its former fellow republics. Even though Georgia and the Baltic nations had already declared their independence, they were not the ones which really destroyed the Soviet Union. The real death knell for the USSR sounded when Boris Yeltsin, the new Russian leader, simply outmaneuvered Mikhail Gorbachev by creating an alternative union called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) together with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus. By December 1991, all of the former Soviet republics had joined the CIS with the noticeable exception of the three Baltic nations and Georgia. What followed was painfully familiar to many Georgians.

In the early 1920s, as soon as the Bolsheviks consolidated power in Russia and won the civil war, despite their internationalist slogans, the first thing that the new Communist government did was to launch itself into wars with nearly all of the neighbors in order to recover lost imperial possessions. Only eight months after signing the Treaty of Moscow,<sup>1</sup> by which Soviet Russia recognized the independence and the borders of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG) on May 7, 1920, the Red Army invaded Georgia in 1921. Despite the fierce resistance on the part of the Georgian defense forces, the Bolsheviks occupied the country, crushed its democratic institutions, and set up a Communist regime. The annexation was complete when Georgia was declared a part of the newly created Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, a Communist reincarnation of the Russian empire. The conquest of Georgia by Bolshevik Russia was largely ignored by the international community and the totally dysfunctional League of Nations whose impotence in the face of aggression would soon become its trademark and the guarantee that the new European order was doomed.

The destruction of the DRG can also be considered as a loss for the cause of democracy in the inter-war period. In the words of one of the greatest scholars of Georgia of that period, Professor Stephen Jones of Indiana University: “[The Democratic Republic of Georgia] was, at the time, a genuine beacon of hope (a beacon of liberty, too) among social democrats such as Emile Vandervelde, Karl Kautsky and Ramsay MacDonald, all of whom visited the republic and wrote about it as a viable democratic alternative to other authoritarian and more statist models.” He praises the universal suffrage, which Georgia had introduced ahead of most European nations (it is worth mentioning that despite being a majority Orthodox Christian country, Georgia was the first nation in the world to elect a Muslim woman),<sup>2</sup> political pluralism and free and fair elections which resulted in strong democratic institutions. He concludes: “...the First Republic was an outstanding achievement. Civil rights and dissent were recognized and, on the whole, legally protected. Society gained autonomy from the state. It preserved the two cardinal institutional guarantees of democracy – the right to participate and the right of public contestation – which includes freedom of expression, freedom to form and join organizations, the right to vote and the existence of free and fair elections.”<sup>3</sup>

The Second Republic, born in 1991, thankfully, did not end as abruptly as the first but the pattern was recognizable. Like the Bolsheviks, who claimed

to be anti-imperialist but conducted such a foreign policy that the Tzars would have approved of it, Yeltsin, the leader of the supposedly democratic Russia, made keeping the former Soviet republics under its control by the most brutal of means as a priority. He made an ultimatum to the Georgian government to sign the CIS treaty by December 21, 1991 when the first Commonwealth summit was scheduled in Almaty, Kazakhstan.<sup>4</sup> Georgia refused and was immediately punished for its defiance. On December 22, armed militias attacked the government office in Tbilisi, starting what is often referred to as a civil war but it was also a coup fully supported by Russia. By January 6, 1992, the democratically elected government was deposed, and its leader was forced into exile. Ironically, while Georgians were busy fighting on their capital's main avenue, they missed the historic moment of the official dissolution of the Soviet Union which was formally completed by the resignation of its last leader – Mikhail Gorbachev on December 25, 1991.

After the ensued chaos, Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister (1985-1990) and also the long-time Communist leader of the Georgian SSR (1972-1985), returned from Moscow and assumed power. But apparently, the Kremlin was not satisfied and carried on with its subversion against Georgia: while Soviet authorities decided to entice and use the ethnic conflicts in Georgia as a deterrent against its independence ambitions, the new rulers in the Kremlin utilized them in order to prevent Georgia from escaping its orbit. In 1992-1993, a disastrous war followed in Georgia's Black Sea region of Abkhazia where separatists received full military, political and economic support from Moscow and which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of nearly all of the Georgian population which, before 1993, constituted by far the largest ethnic group in the region. Even after the total surrender – the accession to the CIS and even accepting a Russian-nominated cadre as ministers (security, defense, internal affairs), nothing much changed. However, as soon as Shevardnadze started putting his house in order - he curbed the reign of the militias which had ousted his predecessor, introduced a new constitution and started cooperating with international partners on energy projects – he became the target of an assassination attempt. His own Minister of Security, Igor Giorgadze, an ex-KGB officer, nominated by Moscow, was the prime suspect but he fled to Russia where he lives to this day.

Like in the 1920s, the West, consumed by the euphoria of the end of the Cold War (and also tired of it) had very little appetite for intervening

into what was wrongly perceived as yet another ethnic conflict, fueled by “ancient hatreds” or “primitive nationalisms” in *a faraway country of which they knew little*. As a result, the international community (the UN and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe [later renamed the OSCE] subcontracted the conflict resolution efforts to Russia (which itself was a party to the conflict). It was hard not to notice that Russia was not only an interested party but was also actively involved in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia by enticing separatism, arming the rebels, and directly fighting on their sides. But this was either ignored or condoned. In the best case, the West preferred to avoid confronting Russia regarding its aggression against Georgia, hoping that Yeltsin, once he had secured power, would turn Russia into a real partner. After all, he had claimed that under his leadership Russia was going to transform itself into a proper democracy. Indeed, many meaningful political and economic reforms had been initiated that were fully supported by Russia’s enthusiastic European and American partners. So, both the supporters of *Realpolitik* and the idealists chose to disregard Russia’s malign behavior in its “near abroad” and thus ensured that the new European order (based on the self-determination of nations) was never complete: Georgia, once again, found itself on the geopolitical fault-line or even on the frontline of history.

Not everyone was naïve about Yeltsin’s motives and his increasingly authoritarian style. There were warnings from the most authoritative sources that the ill-conceived *Realpolitik* could backfire. In the early 1990s, Henry Kissinger, a well-known proponent of *Realpolitik* himself, voiced such a warning loud and clear: “...Russian reform will be impeded, not helped, by turning a blind eye to the reappearance of historic Russian imperial pretensions.”<sup>5</sup> This warning proved to be prophetic – by the end of 1999, Yeltsin had built a deeply flawed political system which was neither democratic nor effective. He left Russian society deeply disappointed in the very idea of democracy and his ultimate legacy was not just poverty and lawlessness but Vladimir Putin, to whom he personally handed over the power on New Year’s Eve which Putin has not relinquished since (and apparently intends to keep indefinitely).

If Putin’s background as a KGB operative was not enough ground for alarm, his first steps as the new leader should have given the Western observers an idea of what was to come. Together with his KGB comrades, he energetically consolidated (rather grabbed) both political and economic power into what he himself described as a “*power vertical*,”<sup>6</sup> he restored



the Stalin-period Soviet anthem (quite a clue) and, finally, declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”<sup>7</sup> His ideological preferences deserve a special mention.<sup>8</sup> In other words, he directly challenged the outcome of the end of the Cold War and started taking steps to reverse it.

This, in my view, was the beginning of the end of the post-Cold War era, even though the West either did not notice or refused to acknowledge the reality. And again, the warnings were ignored: when Edward Lucas, the then Senior Editor at the *Economist*, published his book, entitled *The New Cold War* in February 2008, many did not take it seriously or angrily labeled him as a warmonger. Even when in August 2008 Russia’s subversion and proxy attacks against Georgia culminated in an open war, many Western leaders chose appeasement. Some of them felt it was more convenient to blame the victim – Georgia – for “poking the bear” or at least tried to spread the blame between both sides. The result was Russia’s further aggression but this time much closer to the European borders – in Ukraine, just as I had warned in my interview with *Aljazeera* in London in August 2008: “Russia is on a collision course with the West and the longer it takes to react, the deeper this collision will occur inside European territory and the more painful it will be.”<sup>9</sup>

Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, which displayed many elements of the so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine”<sup>\*\*</sup> and Russian meddling in the US election and elsewhere changed perceptions and demonstrated that the Kremlin indeed was engaged in a Cold War-style behavior against the US, Europe and their collective security structures. Now, the demise of the post-Cold War era is more-or-less a universally acknowledged fact. Interestingly, the post-Cold War era failed even to secure its own name. I really hope that posterity will not know it as the “inter-war” period like the ill-fated post-WWI era which also failed to create a stable and just world order.

### **Georgia and NATO - From a Humble Beginning to a Close Partnership**

Meanwhile, against this historical backdrop, Georgia made its first modest steps toward cooperation with NATO back in 1992 when it joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (since 1997, known as the Euro-Atlantic

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Technically there is no such a doctrine. It is a term coined by journalist Mark Galeotti based on General Gerasimov’s speech in 2013 but, as it turned out, Russia used it as a practical guideline for its hybrid warfare.

Partnership Council). In 1994, Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program. But it was not until 2002 when Georgia declared its desire to join the organization as a full-fledged member.

In November 2003, the Shevardnadze era ended. At the beginning of his rule, he was forced to reverse Georgia's vector back toward Russia but gradually developed stronger ties with the West and together with Georgia's international partners laid the ground for the country's international geopolitical and geo-economic function as a bridge connecting the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions. However, he failed to curb systemic corruption in the country and after a highly contested election in November 2003 he was forced to resign as a result of the peaceful protests known as the Rose Revolution.

The new Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his Western-educated team of reformers first tried to sort out Georgia's troubled relationship with Russia. During his first official foreign trip, he paid a visit to Putin who even refused to name the terms under which Russia would consider changing its attitude toward Georgia. However, according to Saakashvili, he advised him to keep Shevardnadze's security minister, a fellow former KGB officer. From then on, Georgia reinvigorated its pro-Western drive. In 2004, Georgia became the first country for which NATO established the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). NATO opened IPAPs to countries that had the "political will and ability to deepen their relationship with NATO."<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the Georgian government decided to send its troops to Iraq and joined the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan. By the time they were withdrawn in August 2008 (during the Russian invasion), Georgia had 2,000 combat troops fighting along the international coalition in Iraq. This was the third largest contingent after the US and UK. In the same period, Georgia increased the number of its troops in Kosovo to 160 where they had been deployed since the 1990s. In Afghanistan, Georgia still has deployed 870 combat troops, constituting the largest non-NATO contingent (without caveats).

On May 10, 2005, during his visit to Tbilisi, President George W. Bush once again hailed Georgia as "a beacon of liberty."<sup>11</sup> In an ironic twist of history, however, while Georgia's First Republic (DRG) was highly praised by the leaders of the European Center-Left (Social Democrats), Georgia, with its liberal economic reforms after the Rose Revolution, became the darling of the Center-Right. Tbilisi turned into a Mecca for Western politicians who

wanted to see with their own eyes the effects of reducing bureaucracy, eliminating red tape, police<sup>12</sup> and public service reform<sup>13</sup> and the Laffer Curve in action. However, the sympathy of the Bush administration and some European politicians by itself created some unexpected complications. While there is no way to deny that there were genuine reasons for concern about the rule of law in Georgia, the Bush and the “NeoCon” association was enough for some European leaders to develop mistrust toward Saakashvili and his government.

The same year, NATO sent its first liaison officers to Georgia (the NATO Liaison Office in Tbilisi was established five years later). Georgia’s next step on the path toward NATO came in 2006 when during their meeting in New York the NATO Foreign Ministers launched the so-called Intensified Dialogue which envisaged consultations on political and security matters, conflict resolution, defense, economic and other issues.

However, the most crucial moment came in April 2008 when after the successful implementation of the previous commitments Georgia was expected to be given the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest summit. As mentioned above, Georgia already was one of the top contributors to NATO and US-led international operations with more combat troops in Iraq, Kosovo and Afghanistan than the absolute majority of NATO member states.<sup>14</sup> But Georgia’s MAP (which by itself was not a guarantee of imminent membership but was a necessary step toward it) encountered resistance on the part of a few NATO members led by Germany. Some observers pointed out that Angela Merkel had personal “disgust” toward Saakashvili.<sup>15</sup> Whether it is true or not, this was definitely not the only or even most important factor behind Germany’s opposition. It was made quite clear that Germany believed that a Georgian MAP would be viewed in Russia as a provocation and would give Putin a pretext for countermeasures. In my personal view, as uncomfortable it is to say, German leaders at the time were more concerned with their bilateral relations with Russia than about Georgia’s record or NATO interests. *Die Russland-Versteher* traditionally spoke about “Russia’s grievances” as a result of the perceived “NATO encirclement” – a ridiculous perception given that out of the 60,932 kilometers (!) of Russia’s borders (of which 22,125 km are land borders) only 1,215 km are shared with NATO countries. This kind of school of thought was not new or limited to Germany. Back in the 1940s, former Vice-President (and then Secretary of Agriculture) Henry Wallace justified Stalin’s aggressive behavior after the war by the “capitalist encirclement”

of the Soviet Union. Before WWII, this was called a policy of appeasement. As a result, despite much efforts from the Bush administration, Germany remained adamant and the Bucharest summit did not give Georgia a much deserved MAP. Instead, it promised Georgia (and Ukraine) admission into NATO but without specifying any time line or mechanisms of accession.

Obviously, no one intended this but it was not unexpected that Putin interpreted the disunity of NATO as an opportunity. It turned out that what really provoked Putin into action was its visible weakness and its preference for appeasement. Back in February, he had already issued a threat that Russia was prepared to retaliate in the case if Kosovo were recognized.<sup>16</sup> Putin had planned an attack on Georgia before (as he acknowledged in his 2009 interview, he had instructed the General Staff of the Ministry of Defense to prepare an operation back in 2006).<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Putin had a plan to use force against Georgia which by that time had transformed itself from a failing state into a successful alternative to his political model. The recognition of Kosovo gave him a pretext (despite the vast difference between the two cases – in Kosovo, the West supported the victims of ethnic cleansing; in Georgia, Russia supported the ethnic cleansing) and the Bucharest summit showed that this was an opportune moment as it displayed NATO's disunity. His calculation proved him right: after his aggression in August 2008, there were no meaningful sanctions introduced and in a couple of months the West, consumed with the global financial crisis, returned to business as usual. As mentioned above, this only emboldened Putin who a few years later invaded Ukraine.

The war was a huge setback, but this was not the end of Georgia's NATO aspirations as Putin and his team hoped. In August 2008, a meeting of the NATO Foreign Ministers established the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) which serves as a forum for political consultations and oversees the practical cooperation between Georgia and NATO. Since 2008, Georgia submits an Annual National Program to NATO allies with a wide range of reform objectives to support its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Based on the ANP, NATO provides focused and comprehensive advice towards Georgia's reform goals, both in civilian and military frameworks.<sup>18</sup>

On December 7, 2011, Georgia was officially recognized as a NATO aspirant country. At the NATO summit in Wales in 2014, Georgia was recognized as the "most interoperable partner" and given the status of an Enhanced Opportunity Partner together with Australia, Jordan, Finland and Sweden.

The summit also elaborated the Substantial NATO-Georgia package which aims to strengthen Georgia's defenses and ability to work side-by-side with NATO forces and help Georgia advance in its preparations for membership in the Alliance.<sup>19</sup> One major initiative from the Substantial package is the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC). Inaugurated in Tbilisi in August 2015, the center assists Georgia in reforming, modernizing and strengthening its security and defense sector. It offers multi-national training and exercise opportunities, fostering cooperation between forces from Georgia, NATO and interested partner countries. Through regional training opportunities, the center also contributes to promoting stability in the Black Sea and Caucasus region.<sup>20</sup> The JTEC regularly hosts joint military exercises with the participation of 21 NATO allies and three partner nations.

Now what remains is the political will to move to the next stage. Without sending a clear message to Russia that its provocations will not stop Georgia's progress toward NATO, Moscow will always be tempted to create instability. Georgia-skeptics within NATO, as well as those who caution against further "expansion," should understand that the NATO membership of its neighbors does not threaten Russia's security but only limits Russia's ability to bully and destabilize them. Russia's vehement objections against what it calls the "NATO expansion" – which, in reality, means its former colonies and vassals gaining a security shield, only exposes Russia's intentions. Furthermore, Russia's interests would be best served by a stable, friendly and prosperous neighborhood (the one which the EU is trying to facilitate on its eastern borders through its Eastern Partnership initiative). However, the Kremlin does everything to achieve the opposite and prevent a success story of an alternative political system and justifies this with the chimera of the lost empire and stories of a *besieged fortress Russia* – all of which leads to the necessity of keeping Putin and his team of tough guys in power.

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Georgia does deserve membership in NATO. It is a European nation which, despite many setbacks and mistakes, is progressing on the path of building a European democracy. Through reforms and substantial contribution to NATO missions for many years, the country has proven that it is a determined and faithful partner of the Atlantic Alliance.

NATO would benefit from Georgia's membership. Georgia as a NATO

member would not only enhance the security of the Black Sea region but much improve the stability of the energy and transportation routes connecting the Greater Caspian region with Western markets. After all, for Central Asia, surrounded by Russia and Iran from the west (and China from the east), Georgia is the only alternative gateway connecting it with the Black Sea region.

But Georgia's membership in NATO would not only do justice to the determination and the sacrifices of the Georgian people. It would ensure that the world will not go back to the Cold War realities and the spheres of influence. But should this still happen, would anyone judge Georgians for wanting to be on the right side of history?

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