

GRUZIE NA CESTĚ DO NATO PO RUSKO-GRUZÍNSKÉM OZBROJENÉM KONFLIKTU V ROCE 2008*

GEORGIA ON THE WAY TO NATO AFTER THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN ARMED CONFLICT IN 2008*

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Abstrakt

Gruzie patří k zemím, které dlouho usilují o vstup do NATO. Článek se zabývá historií vztahu mezi NATO a Gruzíí, analyzuje motivy této země pro vstup do NATO a hledá odpověď na otázku, zda její motivace je podobná motivaci zemí ve Střední Evropě, Pobaltí a na Balkáně. Dále tato stať podává přehled vnímání šancí Gruzie na vstup do NATO gruzínskými politickými elitami na pozadí posledního vývoje na mezinárodně-politické scéně, zejména po ozbrojeném konfliktu s Ruskem v létě 2008 a nástupu Obamovy administrativy v Bílém domě.

Abstract

Georgia is one of the countries that have long been seeking NATO membership. The article deals with history of NATO – Georgian relations, analyses the motives of this country for its accession to NATO and finds an answer to the question of whether these motives are similar to the accession motives of Central European, Baltic and Balkan countries. In addition, the article gives account of the way the chances of Georgia for its entry into NATO have been assessed by the Georgian political establishment against the background of the changes on the international political scene that have taken place over the last two years, especially the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in summer 2008 and the coming of Obama's administration into the White House.

Klíčová slova

NATO, rozšíření, Gruzie.

Keywords

NATO, enlargement, Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of communist regimes, break-up of the Soviet Union and the onset of democratic reforms, transition countries began to deal with the problem of strengthening their own international political positions and security. To achieve their objectives in this area, they sought closer cooperation with NATO and expressed their interest in NATO membership. Generally speaking, the NATO enlargement was a very uncertain process at the beginning of the 1990s, even though looking at it in hindsight, from today's perspective of someone who already knows the result, some authors might be tempted to draw the conclusion that the process of the accession of the newly formed democracies to NATO did not have an alternative. Later on, at end of the 1990s,

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the process of NATO enlargement was started, leading to the accession to NATO of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (1999), Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria (2004). The last round of NATO enlargement led to the accession of Albania and Croatia not long ago.

The main proponent of NATO enlargement was the administration of Bill Clinton (who took office in 1993), the most active supporters of the enlargement during the whole period being James Goldgeier, Anthony Lake, Richard Holbrooke and Madeleine Albright, though, at first, the support for the enlargement within the administration was only very low. The initial resistance against the idea of NATO enlargement, fed mainly by arguments of military-strategic and geopolitical nature, was coming from military circles, especially the Defence Department and Chiefs of Staffs. The supporters of the enlargement got the upper hand in the Clinton administration in the summer of 1994.¹ While the Democrats argued in favour of the enlargement by appealing to the necessity to support reforms in transition countries and enlarge the area of stability, the Republicans tended to accentuate the desire of the transition countries to gain security guarantees against Russia.² In other words, the stance of the USA towards NATO enlargement was not homogeneous, and various groups both within the political establishment and among analysts put forward different arguments for the enlargement.

Even though the launching of the NATO enlargement process can be considered a practical consequence of the liberal-idealist approach of Bill Clinton and his administration to international relations³, we should realize that the countries seeking NATO membership were acting on a different logic. Their main motive for the entry into NATO was, it seems, obtaining security guarantees against external aggression, which is particularly true of the three Baltic countries, and, to a lesser extent, also of Central European countries.⁴ The candidate countries sought security guarantees against Russia. The price they had to pay for obtaining these guarantees was fulfilling new tasks within NATO (peace support operations), meeting the Alliance criteria defined in terms of the achieved level of democracy, and achieving Alliance military standards.⁵ It was impossible not to notice the anti-Russian elements, stemming from the recent historical experience, in the policies of the candidate countries. A paradoxical situation occurred: the new countries were entering an organization which, at the same time, was changing its orientation, enlarging its action radius, and beginning to perceive Russia not as an enemy, but as a partner for cooperation.

Georgia is one of the countries that have long been seeking NATO membership. The primary aim of this article is to analyse the motives of this country for its accession to NATO, and to find an answer to the question of whether these motives are similar to the accession motives of Central European, Baltic and Balkan countries. The secondary aim of the article is to give account of the way the chances of Georgia for its entry into NATO have been assessed by the Georgian political establishment against the background of the changes on the international political scene that have taken place over the last two years, especially the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in summer 2008 and the coming into the White House of Obama's administration.

GEORGIA ON THE WAY TO NATO

Georgia became an independent state in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the former Soviet Union it inherited two secessionist conflicts – one in South Ossetia, and the other one in Abkhazia. Georgia lost both conflicts and had to accommodate 250,000 Georgian refugees, which brought the country to the brink of an internal collapse. After an internal armed conflict between Zviad Gamsachurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze troops, Georgia was finally stabilized by Eduard Shevardnadze, who negotiated a peace monitoring mission with Russia involving the deployment of 2,500 Russian soldiers in both regions. In 1993 Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), hoping that its membership in the CIS would give it a better position to deal with the secessionism of its breakaway provinces. Nevertheless, these hopes turned out to

be false, which was one of the reasons why in 1999 Georgia decided to leave the Russia-dominated Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security.⁶ Finally, Georgia terminated its membership in CIS in conjunction with the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in August 2008.

Gradually, an opposition to Shevardnadze government formed led by Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania. After the elections in November 2003, results of which had been manipulated by the government, the opposition organized mass protests. Against the background of those protests, Saakashvili won the 2004 presidential election, took over power in Georgia and proclaimed his aim of building democracy and integrating Georgia into Western political, economic and security structures. That change of Georgian political regime was backed by American non-governmental organizations, and it was also welcomed by the US administration of George W. Bush⁷, since the strategic interest of the USA in the regions of south Caucasus, and therefore also the interest of NATO, had increased after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001.⁸

Since then, Georgia has been keeping its pro-Western orientation and trying to get integrated into the Euro-Atlantic structures. In its security strategy vision, the Georgian government states that Georgia seeks to widen and strengthen its links with nations with which it shares democratic values, respect for human rights, market economy and freedom of thought. Its aim is the integration into all main institutions of European and transatlantic structures. The Georgian foreign and security policy declares that its most important aims are independence, security and freedom of Georgia, national unity, prosperity and peace.⁹ Its main priority remains obtaining NATO membership. As Alberto Priego notes, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia has chosen, in quite unambiguous terms, its own integration into NATO.¹⁰

Before the armed conflict with Russia in August 2008, the deployment of the armed forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Georgia had not been considered a direct threat to its state sovereignty. The mutual relations had been arranged according to the declaration of Ministers of Foreign Affairs from May 2005, which stated the obligation of Russia to withdraw its armed forces from the Georgian territory by the end of 2008.¹¹ After the summer armed conflict, though, the timing for the complete withdrawal of the Russian forces from the Georgian territory was postponed indefinitely.

The forging of closer ties between Georgia and NATO did not start only after the Rose Revolution, but much earlier, in 1991. Georgia has been actively involved in the program of Partnership for Peace (PfP) since 1994 and it is a founding member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). As early as 2002, at the Prague Summit, while Shevardnadze was still president, Georgia officially declared its interest in NATO membership. In 2004 Georgia proposed its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) enabling more NATO involvement in its domestic reforms.¹² An important milestone along the path delineated by Georgian foreign and security policy was achieved at the meeting of foreign ministers on September 21st 2006, when the Alliance decided that a new phase of cooperation with Georgia, Intensive Dialogue, should open.¹³

The process of forging closer ties between Georgia and NATO, though, set Georgia on a colliding course with Russia. In the spring of 2006, Russia imposed economic sanctions on Georgia. Later on the same year, in September, Georgia accused four Russians of espionage for Moscow. Russia responded by recalling its ambassador. Russia also started military provocations against Georgian military installations and likely attacked the Georgian radar. The conflict was finally settled at the end of 2006 and during 2007.¹⁴ Nevertheless, at the beginning of 2008 Russia issued a warning for Georgia not to seek NATO membership or Russian-Georgian relations could be destabilized again.

In the autumn of 2007 Saakashvili violently suppressed demonstrations organized against him by the opposition in Georgia. This led to some criticism of his government from the West, but that criticism subsided after Saakashvili won the election at the beginning 2008.¹⁵ This election could be considered just in comparison, for example, with the electoral standards common in Russia, even though elections suffered from a lot of imperfections and opposition criticised its fairness.

Also Office for Democratic Institution and Human Right voiced many objections and wrote: "... 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 were evaluated less positively. Many PECs had problems completing the result 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 the DEC level was slow and often chaotic."¹⁶

The available sources show that there cannot be any doubt about the determination of Georgia to join NATO. The bloodless Rose Revolution was a result of the desire of Georgian people for self-determination and an expression of their deep dissatisfaction with the decline Georgia experienced in the 1990s. Georgian people saw an alternative to this in the West and its symbols – the European Union and NATO. After the Rose Revolution, the pro-Western tendency in Georgian public opinion grew still stronger. The referendum held in 2008 in parallel with the presidential election showed that 77% Georgians fully supported the idea of their country's NATO membership.¹⁷ This indicates that, at least before the armed conflict with Russia, there was a high degree of consensus on the issue of NATO membership in Georgian society.

After the outbreak of the summer Russian-Georgian armed conflict on August 8th, NATO did its best to deescalate the conflict. It warned about the potentially dangerous developments in the region and expressed its support for EU and OSCE mediation.¹⁸ It also denounced the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia.¹⁹ Last but not least, it suspended its political cooperation with Russia. On the other hand, the NATO statement that "the conflict between Georgia and Russia has compromised regional stability and security. We deeply deplore the use of force in the conflict between Georgia and Russia. We reiterate that there is no military solution to the unresolved conflicts. We remind all parties that peaceful conflict resolution is a key principle of the Partnership for Peace Framework Document"²⁰ must be understood as critique expressed both towards Russia and Georgia.

Nevertheless, NATO abstained from any direct engagement in peace negotiations, since that course of action, given the hard anti-NATO stance of Putin's Russia at that time and its opposition to NATO's involvement in the Caucasus, would probably have been counterproductive.²¹ The USA, too, limited its action to the use of diplomatic means in the autumn of 2008, which included so called "naval diplomacy" in the form of three warships with humanitarian assistance sent to Georgia, and refrained from sending its own troops there.²² In January 2009, NATO expressed its concern over the news that Russia intended to build its own military bases in separatist Abkhazia.²³ The separatist government of both breakaway regions signed agreements with the Russian Federation on the placement of Russian military bases on their territories. By the terms of the agreements the military bases were to stay 99 years in South Ossetia and 49 years Abkhazia. The USA, NATO and EU expressed their concern about the agreements and stated clearly their uncompromising stance as to the necessity to preserve the territorial integrity of Georgia, and asked Russia to withdraw its military forces from the territory of Georgia.²⁴

Even though we do not have access to the sources we would need to confirm our hypothesis, it seems that if it had not been for the resolute diplomatic stance of the West opposing the Russian military invasion beyond the controversial regions (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), and if Russia had not been afraid of the possible consequences in terms of the deterioration of its relations with the West, it would have invaded the whole of Georgia and deposed Saakashvili by military force in the similar way as Soviet Union in 1956 (Hungary), 1968 (Czechoslovakia) and 1979 (Afghanistan).

MOTIVES OF GEORGIA FOR ITS ACCESSION TO NATO

Obviously, Russia has been playing an important role in Georgia over the last 300 years. Russia would often pose a military threat to the territorial integrity and independence of Georgia in the past, and that situation has not changed in the last two decades. Pursuing a pro-Russian policy is not a way to eliminate that threat, provided, of course, Georgians do not want to sacrifice their independence. A good case in point is the example of Armenia. Belarus, too, is a country whose actual independence of Russia could only be taken with a grain of salt. So, what is the motivation of the Georgian political elites for the accession of their country to NATO?

Georgian president Saakashvili said in connection with the opening of the Intensive Dialogue: “Our aim is clear – to have firm guaranties of our security, our development and European future. I think that NATO is absolutely the crucial factor of our security, and the Georgian people understand this fact very well.”²⁵ Obtaining security guaranties as the main motive for the accession of Georgia to NATO has been stated also in other public speeches of Saakashvili.²⁶ Naturally, not even the Russian-Georgian has changed anything on that attitude. Quite the opposite, the above-described motivation of Georgia has probably only been even further strengthened by it. This is attested for example in Saakashvili’s saying in September 2008 that “the Russian invasion was aimed at frightening NATO off”, and his appeal to NATO not to show “signs of weakness”, which it would certainly do by giving in to the Russian pressure and opposing the Georgian entry into NATO.²⁷

Saakashvili’s attitude toward NATO influenced the Georgian National Military Strategy which was signed in 2005. This document has put stress on NATO integration. The NATO integration is understood as the best way how to gain deterrence capabilities. In this document, NATO is perceived mainly as collective defence organisation.²⁸

According to Levan Nikoleishvili, who was appointed First Deputy Minister in 2006, the membership of Georgia in NATO will not only strengthen Georgian national security, but it will also help further democratic development of that country.²⁹

The motives of Georgia for entering the NATO are also clearly visible in the Memorandum of Parliamentary Factions and Political Parties of Georgia accepted in March 2007. In the Memorandum, the political parties and factions state that NATO membership is the best guarantee of unity, territorial integrity and democratic development of Georgia. The document further expresses a resolute rejection of any possibility of Georgia’s neutrality as an alternative to its NATO membership. On the contrary, it is stated unambiguously in the Memorandum that all the political parties and parliamentary factions are unanimous in their agreement with and support for the full integration of Georgia into NATO at the earliest possible term.³⁰

Temur Yakobashvili says that in the process of the ongoing transformation Georgia is facing many security threats. It is also obvious that Georgia is unable to deal with them by its own forces. At the same time, Yakobashvili further believes, there is a chance for Georgia to become a member of a progressive, economically and militarily strong alliance inside of which Georgia’s sovereignty will not be threatened. The policy of accession to that organization, according to him, is not directed against Russia, and represents steps necessary for the survival and independent development of Georgia.³¹

Kakha Katsitadze, a military expert who fully supports the integration of Georgia into NATO, believes that by attaining that objective Georgia will gain more than it will lose. Katsitadze tries to give an answer to the question of the motives for attaining NATO membership. Among the most important reasons he names the need to join a “privileged club” and implement all the necessary reforms, which could ensure a stable development of the country. At same time, Katsitadze warns that the Georgian government should stick to its pro-Western orientation without pursuing an overtly anti-Russian policy and adds that after Saakashvili leaves, as the case might be, political debates about the integration of Georgia into NATO will take a more constructive form without the anti-Russian hysteria.³²

Giorgi Khucishvili, an expert on conflicts, says that the benefits of Georgia's accession to NATO will far outweigh the risks associated with it. He further believes that similarly as in the case of Eastern European countries, the accession to NATO will create conditions for future incorporation of Georgia into the European Union.³³

Thus, given the geopolitical situation of Georgia, Georgian strategic documents and public statements of Georgian political elites and analysts, it is obvious that the main motive of that country for its accession to NATO is obtaining security guarantees and taking into account the geopolitical situation. Russia is the only country in the region which can be perceived as a vital threat to Georgia.³⁴ The best path for Georgia to follow is, according to the Georgian establishment, a full integration into Western structures in which NATO is the key player (even though it is not the only one). The accession to NATO is perceived as a guarantee of security and symbol of belonging to the West. That is also why Georgia is currently acting on logic that is not dissimilar to that of the Baltic states and countries of Central Europe.

Even though most political parties in Georgia and the majority of its population support their country's NATO membership, some Georgians are opposed to it. Irina Sarishvili, a presidential candidate in the January 2008 election, is one of these exceptions – she categorically rejects the idea of Georgian NATO membership. She argues that if Georgia becomes a NATO member and if then a war breaks out between Iran and the USA, NATO troops will be deployed on the territory of Georgia, and thus, Georgia will be drawn into a conflict, which will only cause harm to the country. After the Russian-Georgian conflict, she says, there is obviously only one viable alternative for Georgia - neutrality.³⁵

Among the opponents of Georgia's accession to NATO is also Shalva Natelashvili, the founder and chairman of the Georgian Labour Party. According to one of his argument against the accession of Georgia to NATO, the country should develop as an independent state refraining from membership in any military block or it will become a battleground for big powers, which could jeopardise its sovereignty.³⁶

RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN ARMED CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POSSIBILITY TO OBTAIN NATO MEMBERSHIP

In September 2008 North Atlantic Council met at the level of its Permanent Representatives with Georgian political representation in Georgia and declared its support for Georgian democratic reforms and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.³⁷ In the follow-up of that decision, NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) was formed to serve as a tool for strengthening and further development of mutual relations.³⁸ J. de H. Scheffer said, "No other country will have a veto over that process, nor will we allow our strong ties to Georgia to be broken by outside military intervention, and pressures. Georgia has a rightful place in this Europe." These words must have been music to the ears of Georgians, all the more so because they were heard against the background of the Russian triumphalism after the summer armed conflict and the Russian requirements that the question of Georgian NATO membership should be decided not in Brussels or Tbilisi, but in Moscow. But Georgia should pay attention to the fact that at the same time, J. de H. Scheffer emphasised: "While the final decision will always rest with the NATO Allies, there is much that Georgia can and should do to influence that decision." He also stressed that "Georgia has made remarkable progress in democratic, judicial, economic and defence reform" and in addition he said "Even if I must be frank and say that there is more that Georgia must still do to meet NATO's democratic standards fully."³⁹

The aims of the Commission were stated as follows: 1. to deepen political dialogue and cooperation between NATO and Georgia; 2. to monitor the process started at the Bucharest Summit; 3. to coordinate the Alliance assistance to Georgia to help it recover after the events of August 2008; and 4. to strengthen its political and economic reforms in the context of its Euro-

Atlantic integration.⁴⁰ Naturally, the question remains of how to interpret the setting up of this commission. The setting-up of the Commission was perceived in Georgia as an approval of its aspirations to NATO membership and an expression of support for that country in its conflict with Russia. On the whole, the creation of the Commission is interpreted in Georgia as having the aim of accelerating the process of the integration of Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic structures.⁴¹ Nevertheless, there is another, equally plausible interpretation. According to that interpretation, the aim of NGS is to give NATO enough time so that it could attain consensus about the issue of Georgian membership, or, if it turns out to be expedient, it could also be used as a tool for postponing Georgian membership indefinitely while, at the same time, offering Georgia a special forum for cooperation with NATO.

When estimating Georgian chances for entering NATO we should take into consideration that at the beginning of December 2008 a session of NAC took place in Brussels that, in spite of the support for Georgia coming from Bush administration, did not put Georgia into MAP. The NATO communiqué only stated that Georgia and Ukraine were making progress, nevertheless, it also pointed out that both countries needed to improve their readiness for the membership.⁴² The main opponents of the membership were France and Germany. What that decision means is basically an indefinite postponement of the accession of Georgia to NATO. The Georgians still emphasize that Scheffer has said: “MAP has not ceased to exist. There was no decision taken on MAP by the foreign ministers, but you cannot say MAP has evaporated. MAP is still there.”⁴³ Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that NATO is not able to achieve consensus on this issue, which is a precondition for the enlargement. The slowdown of the process of the integration of Georgia into NATO is also suggested by the results of an informal meeting of defence ministers of NATO members in Cracow in February 2009. The level of readiness of Georgia for its accession to NATO has been criticized by Germany and the Secretary-General has said that the accession of Georgia to NATO is not a matter of near future.⁴⁴

At the beginning of 2009, while Bush administration was still in office, the United States responded to the incapacity of NATO to reach consensus on the question of the accession of Georgia to NATO by signing an agreement on strategic partnership with Georgia (in January 2009).⁴⁵ This step is interpreted in Georgia as a support from the USA for their efforts to forge closer political, economic and security ties with NATO countries and to integrate into European and transatlantic political, economic and security institutions.⁴⁶ Even though that interpretation is probably correct, it is also possible to argue that, if NATO was able to reach consensus on the question of Georgian NATO membership, and therefore, if that membership was a foregone conclusion, there would be no need for that sort of special American support.

On the whole, the development of the Georgian accession cause after the Russian-Georgian is now interpreted in Georgia along the lines that despite the rejection of its entry into MAP, the stance of NATO to Georgia has remained basically unchanged. “Georgia has achieved progress,” says Saakashvili “and Georgia – through MAP or without it – will finally enter NATO.”⁴⁷ According to the former Georgian minister of foreign affairs Grigol Vashadze, in spite of the summer with Russia, Georgia has made great progress in meeting its commitments within NATO programmes, and is supported by all the twenty-six NATO member states.⁴⁸ Zurab Davitashvili⁴⁹, a political scientist, believes that Georgia has even more chances to attain its NATO membership today than before the Russian-Georgian conflict. The occupation of part of Georgian territory is not an obstacle on its way to NATO. The evidence for that, argues Davitashvili, can be seen in the fact that the support of the Alliance for the process of the integration of Georgia into NATO did not change after the September events, which fact has repeatedly been signalled in numerous statements of various NATO representatives.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the fact that the new Obama administration is showing less initiative in supporting the accession of Georgia to NATO than the Bush administration has been noticed even in Georgia.⁵¹ Shalva Pichkhadze, director of the “Georgia for NATO” NGO, is sceptical about the possibility of Georgia entering MAP in near future, and says that the country is by far not ready for

such a step yet. Furthermore, the transition of Georgia to MAP will depend not only on its readiness for that step, but also on the agreement of all the member states.⁵² Pichkadze says that an effective implementation of democratic reforms will be of primary importance. The reforms in the military, he believes, are not as important as compliance with NATO standards of democracy. Nevertheless, in this area, as he admits, Georgia has still a long way to go.⁵³

We can conclude that, despite the Russian-Georgian armed conflict, the Georgian establishment still by and large believes that Georgia has a chance to attain the NATO membership in the near future. The results of the summit in Bucharest were not taken seriously enough in Georgia – there were signals contained in it about the lack of consensus in NATO on the issue of Georgian NATO membership, which seem to have passed unnoticed in Georgia. Furthermore, the coming into office of the new administration in Washington can hardly be considered an improvement in the prospect of Georgian NATO membership. There are many opponents of the accession of Georgia to NATO in the USA. Obama administration will probably be more willing to listen to their arguments than the previous administration. Last but not least, Georgian politicians and analysts tend to overlook the negative impact of the summer armed conflict with Russia both on the acceptability for Western European countries (France and Germany in particular) of Georgian NATO membership, and on the factual ability of the country to meet the requirements of the Study on NATO Enlargement.

CONCLUSION

Behind the desire of Georgia to achieve NATO membership, there is a similar strategic rationale as behind the corresponding policies of Central European and Baltic states. Its principal aim is to obtain security guarantees vis-à-vis Russia. It is a remarkable fact that all the countries that had historically been on the receiving end of Russian and Soviet expansionist foreign policies turned to NATO and sought security against Russia within that organization. All the countries seeking NATO membership also understand that to justify their claim to it, they have to emphasise also such ideological factors as shared values and belonging to the West. While the arguments directed at the domestic audience in Georgia speak of the NATO membership as of something that will provide security guarantees, the arguments directed outside put emphasis on the democratising effect of NATO enlargement, shared values and on Georgia's belonging to the West.

Similarly as in Central European and Baltic states, the vision of NATO membership is a powerful force for transformation in Georgia. Even though the Georgian democracy is still rather imperfect because government and opposition very often use methods with are not in accordance with democratic political procedures in consolidated democracy and (despite the progress made in the last few years) there is still a lot of corruption in comparison with the West, Georgia is at least trying to improve its democracy. In addition, it has implemented a reform of its armed forces and increased its defence budget. The reform focused especially on the gaining capabilities to carry out expeditionary operations and Georgia obtained US assistance to do it.⁵⁴ This, paradoxically, had a negative impact on its defence capability during the armed conflict with Russia, because when the conflict broke out, the elite core of the Georgian army, having been placed in Iraq, was not available to defend Georgia.⁵⁵

On the other hand, it is not clear why Georgia decided to use military force in trying to resolve the longstanding conflict with its secessionist regions. Before the war, Georgia had repeatedly declared its desire to resolve the conflict through peaceful means, and it must have been fully aware that, given the reserved stance of some NATO members to the idea of its NATO membership, resorting to the use of force was bound to put its NATO membership in jeopardy by providing its opponents further arguments. Even though the reserved stance of some European countries (Germany and France in particular) to Georgian NATO membership cannot be put down

to the Russian-Georgian armed conflict because it had already been there before the summer 2008, the conflict further deepened, and in retrospect justified, that stance.

Despite the Russian-Georgian armed conflict in the summer of 2008, Georgia is still striving to attain its membership in the NATO. The recent changes in the White House, though, have also brought changes in the priorities of the US foreign policy, and this might have unfavourable consequences for the Georgian aspirations. The importance Obama attaches to the improvement in relations with Russia is not compatible with further continuation of the previous US policy of support for the accession of Georgia to NATO because Russia is vehemently opposed to it. Nevertheless, at least in its official declarations, the USA still goes on expressing its support for the Georgian aspirations to NATO membership.⁵⁶ Even though the political establishment in Georgia is aware of the changes that have taken place in the White House, it does not attach much importance to them (or, at least, it behaves as though it did not) and still believes that Georgia can attain its NATO membership in the near future.

On the basis of the available sources, we can conclude that, in its optimistic assessment of the chances of Georgia's accession to NATO, the Georgian establishment does not give enough consideration to the new dynamics of the Obama administration's foreign policy. It also underestimates the importance of the fact that some European countries that are key players on the European political scene are opposed to the membership. Georgian politicians and analysts tend to overestimate the strategic importance of Georgia for the West. It is only logical that, if the Obama administration has set it as its priority to make progress in stabilizing Afghanistan and stop the Iranian nuclear programme, its strategic interests in the Caucasus will have to give way to its interest in engaging Russia in the attempts to resolve both these problems. This brings the US policy closer to the policy that France and Germany have been pursuing for a long time now – the policy of impeding the efforts of Georgia to get an early NATO membership.⁵⁷ If that policy continues for too long, there is a real danger that the Georgian enthusiasm for its accession to NATO will dissolve in disappointment and the support of the Georgian society for the accession will grow weak.

Despite of the fact that, according to the last meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg/Kehl the NATO open door policy will continue, there can be no doubt that all opponents of the Georgian accession to NATO are in a better position now that they can use a relatively powerful argument, namely that Georgia has failed to meet the requirements for candidate countries contained in the Study on NATO Enlargement. The fact of the unresolved territorial conflicts with the secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia alone rules out Georgia's membership in NATO, provided, of course, the Study on NATO Enlargement is taken seriously. By the way, the necessity of resolving these potentially explosive conflicts had already been pointed out to Georgia by NATO representatives before the armed conflict with Russia.⁵⁸

Tbilisi definitely is not the only player on whose good will the resolution of both conflicts depends. Any solution to the issue will have to involve Russia. But since we know that Russia has long been opposed to the accession of Georgia to NATO, interpreting it as another step in bringing the West closer to its own borders so that it could ultimately be encircled by its alleged enemies, it will probably just stand by with arms folded and let the secessionist conflicts grow chronic. The existence of these unresolved latent conflicts serves as a good argument for the NATO countries with important energy interests in Russia, namely Germany and France, to reject the membership of Georgia in NATO. Thus, the Russian policy will create opportunity for impeding Georgian integration into NATO by the NATO countries that are more willing to take into consideration Russian interests before summer 2008.

We should also pay attention to the other key player in the region, Turkey. The Russian invasion in Georgia created a new geopolitical situation which must be taken into consideration in Ankara. Turkey's strategic goal seems to become a key energy transit hub for Caspian gas and oil. Therefore, Georgia is important for this country. But at the same time, the scenario of West – Russian confrontation is a nightmare for Turkey, because if it happens, Turkey will have to choose

between the West and Russia. One should take into account that Turkey is dependent on Russia's energy resources and therefore economic cooperation with Moscow is crucial for Ankara. Nevertheless, political establishment in Turkey believes that Ankara has to react to the new situation which is typical of Russian desire to increase its influence in the South Caucasus region. Therefore, Turkey has tried to accommodate Russia in the regional security architecture in order to avoid confrontation. Turkey will probably want to be a mediator between the West and Russia. That's why one can assume that possibility of future Georgian NATO membership will be influenced by Turkish strategic interest, and Georgian NATO membership is possible providing this step will not open door for Turkey – Russia confrontation.⁵⁹

Last but not least, when analysing the question of the future Georgian NATO membership, we should consider the fact that for many politicians and analysts in NATO countries it is not acceptable that a country should become a NATO member that is ready to respond by the use of military force to secessionist provocations in a region (South Ossetia). The secession is desired by the majority of the population⁶⁰ and it is a very powerful argument. NATO still remembers the lesson learnt from the bloody history of the Balkans after the end of the Cold War. The Russian-Georgian armed conflict itself would likely not have such a negative impact on the Georgian accession prospects if it were not liable to be interpreted in the world as an armed conflict that was started by Georgia.

NOTES

¹ ASMUS, Ronald D., *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, pp. 20-29.; DUGNAN, Peter, *NATO: Its Past, Present and Future*, p. 57.; GOLDGEIER, James M., *The U.S. Decision to Enlarge. How, When, Why, and What Next*, pp. 18-21.; HENDRICKSON, Ryan C., *NATO's Open Door Policy and the Next Round of Enlargement*, pp. 54-56.

² GOLDGEIER, James M., *The U.S. Decision to Enlarge. How, When, Why, and What Next*, p. 20.

³ For more on that see ASMUS, Ronald D., *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*.

⁴ PIECIUKIEWICZ, Tadeusz, *Security in Central and Eastern Europe: A View From Warsaw*, pp. 122-135.

⁵ HUBEL, Helmut, *The Baltic Sea Subregion after Dual Enlargement*, pp. 286-287.

⁶ PRIEGO, Alberto, *NATO cooperation towards South Caucasus*, p. 3.

⁷ More BONNER, Arthur, *Georgian Losses and Russia's Gain*, pp. 83-84.

⁸ PRIEGO, Alberto, *NATO cooperation towards South Caucasus*, p. 3.

⁹ Georgia and The World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future [online].

¹⁰ PRIEGO, Alberto, *NATO cooperation towards South Caucasus*, p. 31.

¹¹ Sakartvelodan rusetis samxedro bazebis gakvana grdzeldeba [online].

¹² NICHOL, Jim, *Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications*, pp. 1-2.

¹³ NATO offers Intensified Dialogue to Georgia [online].

¹⁴ BONNER, Arthur, *Georgian Losses and Russia's Gain*, pp. 85-86.

¹⁵ NICHOL, Jim, *Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications*, pp. 2-4.

¹⁶ Georgia Extraordinary Presidential Elections 5 January 2008. OSCR/ODIR Election Observation Mission. Final Report [online].

¹⁷ NICHOL, Jim, *Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications*, p. 5.

¹⁸ North Atlantic Council discusses situation in Georgia [online].

¹⁹ Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia [online].

²⁰ Statement. Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Foreign Ministers held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels on 19 August 2008, [online].

²¹ See MADEJ, Marek, *NATO after the Georgian Conflict: A New Course or Business as Usual?* [online].

²² More BONNER, Arthur, *Georgian Losses and Russia's Gain*, pp. 86-87.

²³ Údajný záměr Ruska vybudovat základny v Abcházii znepokojuje NATO. (The alleged intention of Russia to build bases in Abkhazia worries NATO) [online].

- ²⁴ Samkhret osetshi rusuli samkhedro baženi 99 clit gantavsdeba [online].
- ²⁵ PAPIAHVILI, Vasil, BEGLARISHVILI, Zaza, *Sakartvelo intensiuri dialogis (ID) etapze gadavida , meotxe gamocema* [online].
- ²⁶ PRANGISHVILI, Nino, *Shalva Pichkhadze: "NATO-shi gacevrianebis samokmedo gegmebze gadasvla adrea"* [online].
- ²⁷ "Nu gamoavlent sisustis nishnebs" mimartavs saakashvili NATOs [online].
- ²⁸ National Military Strategy of Georgia [online].
- ²⁹ JIBLADZE, Kakha, *Russia's Oppositions to Georgia Quest for NATO Membership*, p. 46.
- ³⁰ Sakartvelos saparlamento prakciebisa da politikuri partiebisi memorandumumi [online].
- ³¹ IAKOBASHVILI, Temur, *Ratom NATO?* [online].
- ³² Vis unda NATO-shi shesvla Sakartveloshi? [online].
- ³³ QEVANISHVILI, Eka, *NATO – didi riski tu didi usaprtkhoeba?* [online].
- ³⁴ Cf. JIBLADZE, Kakha, *Russia's Oppositions to Georgia Quest for NATO Membership*, p. 46 and PRIEGO, Alberto, *NATO cooperation towards South Caucasus*, p. 4.
- ³⁵ QEVANISHVILI, Eka, *NATO – didi riski tu didi usaprtkhoeba?* [online].
- ³⁶ Vis unda NATO-shi shesvla Sakartveloshi? [online].
- ³⁷ North Atlantic Council in Georgia [online].
- ³⁸ NATO-Georgia Commission meets at Defence Ministers level in Budapest [online].
- ³⁹ NATO Stands by Georgia But Unclear About Time of Integration [online].
- ⁴⁰ NATO charcho-khelshekrulebis teksts aqveknobs [online].
- ⁴¹ Chrdiloatlantiki sabchis viziti sakartveloshi [online].
- ⁴² Final communiqué Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Foreign Ministers held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels [online].
- ⁴³ NATO sakartvelostan urtiertobebis gaadylierebs, tumba MAP kvlav sachiroa [online].
- ⁴⁴ Dveře do NATO jsou podle Scheffera pro Ukrajinu i Gruzii otevřené [online].
- ⁴⁵ Gruzie a USA podepsaly dohodu o strategickém partnerství [online].
- ⁴⁶ Amerikis sheertebuli shtatebis - Sakartvelos qartia strategiuli partniorobis shesakheb [online].
- ⁴⁷ Saakashvili: Sakartvelo usaprtkhoebis skhvadaskhva variantebs ganikhilavs [online].
- ⁴⁸ Sakartveloshi NATOs specialuri misia ikhsneba, 24 saati, qartuli presis mimokhilva [online].
- ⁴⁹ Zurab Davitashvili is a former deputy. At present he is working as an Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, State University of Tbilisi.
- ⁵⁰ BZHALAVA, Dali, *Schefferma MAP-is migebis garantia ver mogvca* [online].
- ⁵¹ Biden says up to Georgia whether to join NATO [online].
- ⁵² PRANGISHVILI, Nino, *Shalva Pichkhadze: "NATOs shi gacevrianebis samokmedo gegmaze gadasvla adrea"* [online].
- ⁵³ GORDIENKO, Anatoli, *Sakartvelos sashemodgomi gamocdis chabareba uchirs* [online].
- ⁵⁴ More CHICKY, John E., *The Russian-Georgian : Political and Military Implications for U.S. Policy*, pp. 8–10.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. NICHOL, Jim, *Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications*, pp. 3-4.
- ⁵⁶ Clinton Discusses Georgia with Lithuanian Counterpart [online].
- ⁵⁷ Před summitem NATO spor kvůli vstupu Makedonie, Gruzie i Ukrajiny [online].
- ⁵⁸ PRIEGO, Alberto, *NATO cooperation towards South Caucasus*, p. 5.
- ⁵⁹ TORBAKOV, Igor, *The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations* [online].
- ⁶⁰ BONNER, Arthur, *Georgian Losses and Russia's Gain*, p. 81.

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