

FROZEN PARTNERSHIP. GEORGIA-NATO RELATIONS AFTER THE BRUSSELS SUMMIT

The recent NATO summit in Brussels once again confirmed the validity of the declaration of Georgia's imminent membership within the structures of the Alliance that had been submitted in Bucharest in 2008. Nonetheless, it has not been specified when such an event would possibly take place. The further cooperation shall be based on the previously developed integration mechanisms. Despite Georgia's apparent determination, the country has currently no major prospects for NATO membership. In this respect, Western countries lack cohesion in terms of their strategy towards the Russian Federation; moreover, some of member states of the Alliance are clearly afraid of inflaming their relations with Russia. Such long-lasting *frozen partnership* between Georgia and NATO raises the risk of a gradual revision of the state's geopolitical position as well as it may eventually result in increased anti-NATO moods. In addition, it seems that Georgia's membership in the Alliance is desirable mostly due to the relative fragility of the security order in the South Caucasus region.

One of the topics discussed at the recent NATO summit held on July 11-12 in Brussels was the issue of further cooperation between Georgia and the Alliance. Following the meetings carried on within its framework (including the North Atlantic Council session with the participation of presidents of Ukraine and Georgia), the officials adopted a number of provisions in this respect. Nonetheless, the overall result of their talks seems rather symbolic. During the summit, NATO representatives repeatedly assured that Georgia would finally be added to the Alliance; nevertheless, the final declarations did not contain any new arrangements on the cooperation between Georgia and NATO. As a result, any provisions regarding the Georgia-NATO relationship concerned mostly maintaining in force arrangements of the Bucharest summit (2008) as well as continuing cooperation based on the instruments that had been developed in previous years (including the *Substantial* NATO-Georgia Package).

As for the Brussels summit, the Georgian authorities prefer to refrain from any comments that would reflect a sober assessment of the country's inability to obtain any necessary consents to join the Alliance. As a result, both the country's President, Giorgi Margvelashvili, along with the Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani stressed out positive aspects, including the fact of organizing such unprecedented Georgia-NATO Commission at the presidential level. According to Georgian President, the existing cooperation platforms should in fact be considered as a "technical" part of the Membership Action Plan (MAP); however, the state's only challenge on its road to NATO is the need to reach a consensus among other members of the Alliance.

Moreover, the Georgian officials insisted on maintaining in force the declaration of the country's future membership in the Alliance. And yet, Georgia's opposition parties have set out their views that had differed from the above-mentioned opinions. Their representatives criticized the lack of progress in the state's path to the Alliance; moreover, they argued that the recent summit had appeared to be the least successful in history.

Georgian Aspirations

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration has long remained an important point of reference in the state's foreign policy; it dates back to the Revolution of Roses in 2003, which resulted in assuming the power by the later President Mikhail Saakashvili. Even if the cooperation with NATO did not start from scratch (since 1994, Georgia had participated in the Partnership for Peace program while the very first declarations of NATO membership dated the rule of President Eduard Shevardnadze), the process has significantly accelerated from that time. In just a few years, the state's military expenditures had increased by ten-fold (they even reached 9.2 percent of Georgia's GDP) while its national army had been completely reconstructed. Due to such early achievements, in 2007, President Saakashvili publicly declared that his country would get a *Membership Action Plan* (MAP) within next two years and thus would become a new member of the Alliance.

However, Georgia's expectations had to be reviewed in 2008; first, the country was not given the MAP at the Bucharest summit in April (such decision was taken literally at the last moment due to the veto from Germany and France; instead, Georgia was promised a "future membership") and later that year, in August, the country got involved in the war with the Russian Federation. A few-day conflict disrupted the Georgian army (a two-thousand contingent was quickly sent from Iraq back to the country) as well as it negatively affected Georgia's credibility as a potential member of the Alliance. As a result, the Russo-Georgian conflict (also referred to as the Five-Day War) staved off the state's membership within the NATO structures, even despite the fact that the Georgians had intensified army reform as well as they had been provided by the Alliance by new cooperation instruments, namely the aforementioned Georgia-NATO Commission and the so-called Annual National Program (ANP).



Fot. Ministry of Defence of Georgia/Facebook

Since that moment, the relations between Georgia and NATO have been characterized by a relative stability. Throughout this period, the member states of the Alliance failed to reach a consensus on Georgia's accession; as a result, it is emphasized at every summit that any promises made in

Bucharest in 2008 shall remain in force. Nonetheless, the Georgians have not been provided with the MAP; instead, they were offered some other practical cooperation instruments.

At the same time, Georgia did not review its position on its membership in the Alliance. Such state of matters occurred in spite of the fears whether the country would be able to maintain its hitherto pro-Western orientation after the power in the country was assumed by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party. As a consequence, before the latest summit in Brussels, Georgia's decision-makers stressed out that it was necessary to provide their state with a clear prospect of future membership in the Alliance, even if mutual cooperation seems to remain favourable for both sides. Nevertheless, regardless of Georgian *raison d'état*, any other standpoint would not be accepted by Georgia's public opinion. According to the polls conducted by the National Democratic Institute in March this year, 65 percent of the country's inhabitants were in favour of membership in the North Atlantic Alliance.

Euro-Atlantic Valedictorian

Even though Georgia is now unlike to become a NATO member, it does its best efforts to remain the "model" partner of the Alliance; for example, the country series to maximize its commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration process. Georgia's determination is evidenced by its involvement in the NATO military and stabilisation missions. Even before the outbreak of the Five-Day War, Georgia was able to deploy up to 2,300 soldiers to Iraq; as a consequence, the Georgian contingent was the third largest military force (after the American and British ones). Today, although the state has still no prospects for joining the Alliance, it remains one of the countries that are most involved in the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (with 870 Georgian troops).

In addition to the core of the current debate of military expenditures within the Alliance, Georgia traditionally spends more than 2 percent of its GDP on defense (it currently amounts to 2.11 percent). In order to meet NATO requirements, the Georgians have also changed the structure of their own budget; they are currently aiming to reduce personnel costs (such as salaries or social benefits) to less than 50 percent of total armaments expenditure (decline from 67 percent in 2017 to 53 percent in 2018). Thus, Georgia managed to reach the required level of 20 percent of expenditures on purchasing weapons and modernizing the army. It needs to be mentioned that Georgia and NATO hold joint activities with the view to increasing mutual interoperability. In 2015, the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC) was opened in the city of Krtsanisi; in May this year, Georgia and the United States launched a 3-year-long training project called *Georgia Defense Readiness Program* (GDRP) at the Vaziani military air base. In addition, Georgia holds annual joint NATO military drills Noble Partner.



Fot. Ministry of Defence of Georgia/Facebook

Since two and a half years, the already existing programs of NATO-Georgia cooperation are officially referred to by the Alliance as “all practical tools” to prepare the country for its membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. Nonetheless, at the same time, the final declarations of successive NATO summits (including the previous one in Brussels) have also stated that providing Georgia with a MAP remains an “integral part” of the process of the country’s accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Practically speaking, Georgia’s road to the membership in NATO is in fact hindered by the lack of the Alliance’s political decision. In fact, such a situation results in a prolonging state of a “*frozen partnership*”; despite the ever-closer military cooperation, there are no major prospects for opening accession talks.

Such state of matters is caused mainly by the lack of consent within Western countries as they are unable to reach a consensus on their strategy towards the Russian Federation. Some of them (including Germany and France) are not eager enough to expand the Alliance into the post-Soviet area for fear of inflaming their diplomatic relations with Russia. The Russian authorities have traditionally considered the territory of the former USSR as the so-called “*near abroad*”, namely its special zone of influences. Moreover, given the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus (understood in terms of its transit potential and neighborhood of Turkey, Iran and the North Caucasus republics), it is clear that Russia will consider Georgia’s possible accession to NATO as a threat to its vital interests.

At the same time, it may be assumed that such *frozen* partnership between NATO and Georgia constitutes a derivative of the problems of the latter in terms of its territorial integrity. There is no doubt that the existence of separatists parasites in Abkhazia and South Ossetia constitute a blow to the negotiating position of the Georgians (as it depicts Georgia as a state that does not control its own borders and may “involve” NATO into an armed conflict with Russia). Nonetheless, it seems that such state of affairs should not be perceived in terms of a potential veto. For instance, it should be noted that in recent months American expert Luke Coffey wrote that Georgia might enter the Alliance

except for the country's territories that are currently occupied under Article 5 on Collective Defense. So it seems that if the Alliance expressed its genuine political eagerness, both sides would be able to reach a compromise solution that would take into account the existence of multiple separatist parastates.

Potential Risks

The hitherto cooperation between NATO and Georgia has provided the latter with a number of benefits; nonetheless, they do not correspond to the ambitions of the authorities in Tbilisi as well as those of ordinary citizens. Instead, they seek rather to become a full-fledged member of the Alliance. So such prolonged process of Euro-Atlantic integration, additionally fuelled by the lack of any major perspectives on starting accession talks, constitute one of the main themes discussed by Russian and pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia. Such narrative is disseminated by some of the media, representatives of non-governmental organizations and even politicians; it seems that it may have an influence, as evidenced by a gradual change of the geopolitical orientation of the Georgians. According to a study by the National Democratic Institute, Georgia's membership in NATO is supported by 65 percent of respondents against 20 percent who are against; 5 years earlier, the results amounted to 73 percent and 8 percent respectively. The actual drop in support for the Euro-Atlantic integration is possible only insofar as the knowledge about NATO is not widespread; for example, one third of respondents were aware that membership in the Alliance does not necessarily involve the need to adopt a liberal Western system of values. It should also be stressed that Georgian national minorities (including about half a million of Armenians and Azerbaijanis who live in relatively tight communities) remain particularly skeptical about the membership in the Alliance; only 26 percent of them seem to support Georgia's accession to NATO.



Fot. nato.int

Indeed, such long-lasting *freeze* in relations between Georgia and NATO (or even decline in Tbilisi's interest in joining the Alliance) may also mean a missed opportunity as for the future of the South Caucasus region. Despite its apparent stability, the region consists in fact of a complex puzzle of both conflicting interests and historical events that may even lead to the collapse. It is mostly due to the fact that Russia keeps playing the key role in the current balance of power in the Caucasus and, at the same time, it provides the region with a kind of a security guarantee, especially in the context of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, Moscow blocks any Georgian attempts to regain control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the long run, the regional order built in this way seems to be fragile and depends on Russia's internal situation, which should constitute the basic argument for NATO's maximum possible involvement in this territory (according to the promoted principle of "stability through integration"). Such idea already guided the states of the Alliance in the 2000s when Albania and Croatia were accepted as NATO members.