

# GEORGIA'S PATH WESTWARD

William Courtney, Daniel Fried, and Kenneth Yalowitz



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Georgian soldiers attend the opening ceremony of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center at the Krtsanisi military facility, August 27, 2015. *Cover photo credit: NATO.*

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# FOREWORD

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The West faces a strategic choice. In the face of Russian ambition to carve out a sphere of influence over its neighbors, will the West maintain the prospect of a Europe whole, free, and at peace for all who aspire to join its institutions and can meet its standards? Or will it acquiesce in the creation of a post-Soviet “gray zone” of permanent instability, consigning countries therein to buffer-state status, vulnerable to Russia’s will and with limited prospects for a good future?

Georgia, like Ukraine, is a promising democracy that is moving toward a Euro-Atlantic future but still has much work to do to deepen its reforms. The West should demonstrate that, if and as the countries in the “gray zone” meet the standards the West and they themselves have set, the path to joining the European Union (EU) and NATO remains open. All the countries of this region ought to have the right freely to choose their own course.

Membership in the EU and NATO is achievable, but only if the West and Georgia take action. Georgia needs to create a more resilient democracy and a more prosperous society by taking further steps to overcome political and economic weaknesses inherited from the former Soviet system, such as one-party dominance, weak institutions, and the outsized importance of individual leaders who attain their influence based on charisma, populism, or wealth.

Europe and America need to match Georgia’s reforms by steadily deepening institutional and bilateral cooperation. The aim should be to enhance Georgia’s capacity for membership in NATO and the EU and to make clear that this is part of a process of deepening Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration.

In the face of ongoing Russian aggression, the West must also make clear that Russia would pay an even higher cost if it were to renew hostilities with Georgia. This will help Georgia improve its security, which is vital to its continued efforts to strengthen its democracy and economy, increase resilience in the face of Russian pressure, and make itself ready for membership in NATO and the EU when this becomes possible.

We would like to thank the National Democratic Institute for their inputs to this paper, in particular Ken Wollack and Laura Jewett. We would also like to thank this paper’s authors. William Courtney and Kenneth Yalowitz are former US ambassadors to Georgia who have a nuanced understanding of the country’s ambitions, assets, and vulnerabilities and a broad appreciation of American policy in the Caucasus and Eurasia. Daniel Fried, a former assistant secretary of state for Europe and distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council, adds a strong strategic vision and experience working with Georgia from Washington.

**Ambassador John Herbst**  
*Director, Eurasia Center*  
Atlantic Council

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Georgia has made steady progress toward its goal of full European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Now it should deepen reforms and expand practical cooperation with NATO and the European Union (EU) and, bilaterally, with member states. This will help Georgia become more democratic, improve its economy, increase resilience in the face of Russian pressure, and make itself ready for potential membership in these Euro-Atlantic institutions.

In the 1990s, Georgia—beset by separatist conflicts, corruption, extreme poverty, and threats from Russia—was at risk of becoming a failed state. It has overcome many of these challenges and now stands as a striking example of a reforming and Western-oriented country transcending the limitations of decades of Soviet rule.

Georgia's location near Russia, Iran, and Turkey; its growing role as a Silk Road entrepôt connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia; and its place on the export route for Caspian oil and gas underscore its importance to the Euro-Atlantic community and beyond. Georgia's substantial force contribution to the NATO mission in Afghanistan demonstrates its dedication to the purposes of the Alliance. It represents a key test of whether democratic and free-market reforms, and a future as an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic community, is still possible for countries in the former Soviet space.

Despite Russia's military occupation of one-fifth of Georgian territory since their war in 2008, and its propaganda and disinformation aimed at sowing national disunion and undermining the state, Georgia has maintained its resolve to pursue a Western course. It has free and fair elections, a dynamic civil society, a generally free press, and space for political debate. It seeks improved ties with Russia in areas such as trade and tourism even as it refuses to recognize the Kremlin-engineered "independence" of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Georgia should do more on its own to achieve its European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Overcoming political and economic vestiges of the former Soviet system—one-party dominance; weak institutions; outsized importance of individual leaders who attain their influence based on charisma, populism,

or wealth—requires sustained effort. Georgian governments have enjoyed popular backing for reforms and should utilize this further to improve the political process, governance, and economic and social conditions. Support for NATO and EU membership remains steadfast. Increased participation of women in political and economic life would benefit Georgia's democracy and social cohesion.

Georgia wants timetables for NATO and EU membership, but these are unlikely to emerge in the near term. The country can bolster its case for membership by advancing practical engagement with Euro-Atlantic institutions. This will be crucial to maintain popular support for reforms, increase the capacity to deter and defend against external aggression, and build international support for Georgia.

As it does the heavy lifting, Georgia should expect international friends to provide essential help. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West has backed Georgia's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. Western military training and equipment, and Georgian combat experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, bolster the country's defense capacity. Visa-free travel and other benefits from the EU-Georgia Association Agreement offer a wider window into Europe and encourage Georgians to persist on a westward course. There is potential to deepen this engagement. For its part, the West has a responsibility to keep Georgia's EU and NATO membership prospects alive and advancing, with concrete steps commensurate with Georgia's progress.

Enlargement of the family of free, democratic nations in wider Europe is being tested, especially in Georgia and Ukraine. The stakes are high. The United States recently agreed to supply sophisticated lethal weaponry to Georgia; with its NATO allies, it should redouble efforts to help the country build modern territorial defenses. As Georgia does its part to align with European standards, the EU should be generous in using its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) to offer Georgia more export opportunities and other practical steps toward integration with Europe. The West should urge Moscow to pursue peaceful ties with Georgia and accept its freedom to choose its path.

Georgia and its friends should be patient but persistent in the pursuit of shared goals.

## THE POST-COLD WAR CONTEXT IN EUROPE

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West encouraged the newly independent countries of Europe and Central Asia to develop into democracies and market economies rooted in the rule of law and the principle of private property. The Central European and Baltic states led the way. As they made progress, the West brought them into NATO and the EU. With Russia turning away from post-Cold War security structures and committing military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, it has become clear that NATO membership has enhanced security throughout Central Europe and the Baltics.

For Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus countries, reforms at home and cooperation with NATO and the EU have been more fitful. Since the late 1990s, Russian resistance to their Euro-Atlantic direction has become more intense, and in some cases violent. These countries belong to NATO's Partnership for Peace program, which promotes military cooperation. They have EU partnership and cooperation agreements, which foster democratic and economic development.

Notwithstanding Russian pressure, some states have strengthened ties with the Euro-Atlantic community. The NATO-Ukraine Commission supports security consultations and a wide range of practical cooperation programs under the 2016 Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine. Georgia has a NATO-Georgia Commission and is one of five nations (along with Australia, Finland, Jordan, and Sweden) to be granted Enhanced Opportunities Partner status by the Alliance. At its Wales Summit in 2014, NATO established a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) that supports programs to strengthen Georgia's defense capability and interoperability. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have EU association agreements, which include DCFTAs. Russia has pressured Armenia not to sign an association agreement, but an EU-Armenian Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement was concluded last year.

These arrangements foster deeper ties, but none is a formal stepping stone to EU and NATO membership. Notwithstanding their progress, many of the states that emerged from the Soviet Union are in danger of falling into a gray zone of permanent insecurity, vulnerable to Russian domination, with adverse consequences at

home. This is particularly true for Georgia and Ukraine, the states most determined to deepen integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. What's at stake, most vividly in these two countries, is whether the community of free, prospering democracies will continue to grow in the post-Soviet space.

## GEORGIA'S PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

In the 1990s, Georgia—beset by separatist conflicts, weak national institutions, corruption, extreme poverty, and threats from Russia—was at risk of becoming a failed state. In the intervening quarter-century, it has overcome many these challenges to emerge as a striking example of a reforming post-Soviet state dedicated to moving westward.

## Russia's revanchist actions toward Georgia and Ukraine challenge the West's interests and values, and have triggered a reaction.

Georgia enjoys strong support from the West because of its wider interests in Eurasia. Georgia's location between Russia, Turkey, and Iran gives it geostrategic importance. Georgia connects China and Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East via a critical corridor in the New Silk Road network. It provides an important route for the export of Caspian oil and gas to regional and global markets. Beyond this, the West sees Georgia's democratic evolution as an example for other post-Soviet states and societies.

Russia's revanchist actions toward Georgia and Ukraine challenge the West's interests and values, and have triggered a reaction. The United States and other NATO countries are bolstering their capacity to counter further Russian aggression affecting the Alliance, through tools like NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland; its Tailored Forward Presence in Bulgaria and Romania; and the US Defense Department's European Deterrence Initiative. Nonetheless, Russian pressure on Georgia and Ukraine remains intense.

Civil society in Georgia is vibrant, the press and media are generally free, and there is space for political discourse and independent organizations.



Leaders from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan board the first freight trains on the new Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway corridor on October 30, 2017. *Photo credit: Georgian Government.*

Democratic elections are ingrained, and transitions of power are peaceful. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that last October's local elections "were held under a legal framework largely in line with international standards and conducive to the conduct of democratic elections, and fundamental rights and freedoms were respected." At the same time, NDI observed that "the period following the first round of elections, particularly the handling of complaints, reinforced the need for further improvements in the legal framework as well as for a broader dialogue to address lack of trust in the election process."<sup>1</sup>

Two matters are of special concern.

First, Georgia's political history is marked by pendulum swings from one dominant political group to another. As seen elsewhere in the former Soviet sphere, when

one party gains a firm grip on the levers of power it poses risks to media freedoms, judicial integrity, and the rule of law. Constitutional majorities can be exploited to weaken these institutions. One-party rule reduces the need to negotiate and compromise, the basis of democratic governance.

Recent NDI polling shows that Georgians think they are not well represented or consulted in governance and politics, and they are not enthusiastic about their government's performance.<sup>2</sup> A proximate cause is the apparent haste and lack of transparency surrounding recent constitutional changes and local-government reforms. Political processes and governance should be more open and accountable, and leaders ought to recognize that building consensus strengthens democratic rule.

1 "Post-Election Statement of the National Democratic Institute on Georgia's 2017 Local Government Elections," National Democratic Institute, accessed December 4, 2017, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20final%20election%20statement%202017\\_English.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20final%20election%20statement%202017_English.pdf).

2 Laura Thornton and Koba Turmanidze, "Public Attitudes in Georgia," National Democratic Institute, accessed April 17, 2018, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_December%202017\\_ISSUES\\_ENG\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_December%202017_ISSUES_ENG_vf.pdf).

Second, domineering leadership figures, including those operating informally and outside democratic accountability, can overshadow and weaken institutions. This has been evident in Georgia since its first presidency, of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and through those of Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili. Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire businessman and former prime minister, funds the current party in power, Georgian Dream, and appears to influence key government decisions. The sway of “messiahs,” whether in office or from offstage, should be curtailed. A modern, democratic state governs through strong institutions, not strongmen.

Increased participation of women in political and economic life would benefit Georgia's democracy and social cohesion, and better align it with European standards. Women make up only 15 percent of parliament and hold two of fourteen cabinet posts. This problem persists at the regional and local level.

Challenges notwithstanding, Georgia is making reforms in multiple areas. It is fighting corruption and easing the regulatory burden on business. The country's rank on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index improved from 85th in 2002<sup>3</sup> to 46th in 2017.<sup>4</sup> On the World Bank's ease-of-doing-business index for 2018, Georgia ranks ninth from the top,<sup>5</sup> versus 100th twelve years ago.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past decade, Georgia's economy has grown briskly, by an average of 5 percent per year; if reforms are sustained, over the medium term, growth is projected to increase by 4.5 percent per year on average.<sup>7</sup> But the per-capita gross domestic product (GNP)—\$3,866 in 2016—is below those of Bulgaria (\$7,469), the poorest EU member, and Albania (\$4,126), the poorest NATO member.<sup>8</sup>

Further reforms, especially regarding the rule of law and land tenure, are essential for Georgia to improve governance, the economy, and living standards. Barriers impede foreign and domestic investment. Better processes are required to resolve business

disputes. Incomplete land titling and lack of an efficient land market hinder agriculture, which has great potential. Judicial reform must go deeper.

As the experience of Poland and the Baltic states showed, successful reforms bring domestic benefits and serve as a foundation for qualifying for EU and NATO membership. Much of the Soviet legacy in Georgia has been overcome, but more reforms are required to bring the country's dynamics into closer balance with its aspirations, and with Western expectations. Sovereignty, prosperity, and security begin at home.

**As the experience of Poland and the Baltic states showed, successful reforms bring domestic benefits and serve as a foundation for qualifying for EU and NATO membership.**

## ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA

Georgia is burdened by Russia's military occupation of its separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which make up one-fifth of the country's territory. When Georgia became independent, wars broke out in both regions, involving Abkhazian and South Ossetian fighters, Georgian government forces and warlords, and Russian forces and their Chechen allies. Many Abkhazians and Georgians hold mutually hostile feelings dating from those ugly conflicts; ditto South Ossetians and Georgians. In the intervening quarter-century, Georgia has blocked trade and transport with

3 Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2002,” accessed April 17, 2018, [https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi\\_2002/0](https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/cpi_2002/0).

4 Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2017,” last updated February 21, 2018, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017#table](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017#table).

5 The World Bank Group, “Doing Business 2018,” accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.doingbusiness.org/-/media/WBG/DoingBusiness/Documents/Annual-Reports/English/DB2018-Full-Report.pdf>.

6 The World Bank and the International Finance Corporation, “Doing Business in 2006,” accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.doingbusiness.org/-/media/WBG/DoingBusiness/Documents/Annual-Reports/English/DB06-FullReport.pdf>.

7 The World Bank, “The World Bank in Georgia,” accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview>.

8 The World Bank, “GDP Per Capita, PPP (Current International \$),” accessed April 17, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.



A Georgian villager stands behind barbed wire installed by Russian troops on the Russia-South Ossetia contact line in October 2013. *Photo credit: Voice of America.*

the occupied areas, including a railway line through Abkhazia that connects Russia, Georgia, and Armenia.

Isolation from Georgia has caused Abkhazia and South Ossetia to reorient their economies toward Russia, which granted them “independence” following the 2008 war. Nearly every country refuses to recognize this status.<sup>9</sup> The situation appears frozen for the short term. Despite the legacy of conflict with Georgia, some Abkhazians do not want to be swallowed by Moscow and resent the international isolation, poor living standards, and rampant crime and corruption that come with Russian control. To a lesser extent, this may be true in South Ossetia, although its leadership, dependent on Moscow, supports joining North Ossetia in Russia proper; Leonid Tibilov, then the de facto leader of South Ossetia, said so expressly in 2014.<sup>10</sup>

Georgia broke diplomatic relations with Russia in 2008 over its intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but has wisely disavowed the use of force to recover

control over the breakaway territories. United Nations-led talks in Geneva on the two regions are stalemated, but separate bilateral talks have led to improved trade and travel relations. Russian tourism in Georgia has grown sharply.

Russia has militarized South Ossetia and Abkhazia and, in the former, pursues a salami tactic of moving South Ossetian border fences further into Georgia. This has separated families, broken up farms, and increased potential threats to the main road and rail connections across the country. Georgia seeks Western support to stop what it calls “creeping annexation.” One approach may be to erect earthen or other physical barriers to the movement of fences further into Georgian territory, though some fear that this could risk appearing to accept a permanent administrative border.

Over the long term, the best strategy for Tbilisi to recover its occupied territories may be to improve the quality of life in Georgia and develop expanded ties

9 Besides Russia, only Nauru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela recognize the breakaway Georgian territories' independence.

10 Giorgi Lomsadze, “South Ossetia to Russia: Annex Me, Please,” Eurasianet, June 3, 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/node/68432https://eurasianet.org/node/68432>.

with people living in those regions. Georgia should find ways to enhance informal dialogue on the causes and consequences of separatism and the potential for new areas of cooperation, such as development of trade and investment ties, academic exchanges, and people-to-people contacts. A model could be the health-care services Georgia now provides for some seriously ill Abkhazians. An offer, coordinated with the EU, of Georgian passports, which provide visa-free travel to and throughout the Schengen Area, might attract those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia willing to travel abroad from Georgia.

Giving people in the separatist regions a stake in economic and people-to-people ties with Georgia may bring long-term benefits. Fortunately, the government of Georgia is already making proposals along these lines. As a later step in a reconciliation process, Georgia could consider reopening the railway from Russia and Abkhazia through the rest of Georgia to Armenia.

## GEORGIA AND RUSSIA

Russia is Georgia's main foreign-policy challenge. Then-President Saakashvili erred by succumbing to Moscow's provocations in August 2008, but Russia's war against Georgia violated UN Security Council Resolution 1808, adopted four months earlier, which reiterates "the commitment of all Member States to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally-recognized borders."<sup>11</sup> This was not a one-off intervention. In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine, violating its commitment in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for its renunciation of nuclear weapons.

As a counterweight to its neighbors' EU aspirations, Russia has sought to coerce them to join the relatively protectionist and unbalanced Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have refused to do so. Under pressure from Moscow, Armenia did join the EEU but seeks to offset this somewhat with its Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU.

Russia sees post-Soviet neighbors (possibly excepting the Baltic states) as belonging to its sphere of influence. Just after the 2008 war, then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made this clear, asserting that in some regions Russia has "privileged interests."<sup>12</sup> Despite its tactical success in that war, Russia did not achieve

its strategic objectives: ousting Georgia's democratic government, establishing a de facto protectorate, and achieving Western recognition that Georgia belongs in Moscow's orbit. Russia has not abandoned these goals, as evidenced by its fortified military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In Georgia, as in Ukraine, Moscow has employed a three-pronged strategy: economic pressure; information warfare (propaganda, disinformation, cyber threats, and subterfuge); and military intervention and occupation. Russia uses social media and local agents to exploit divisions and stir fears. It alleges Western efforts to force "ungodly values" on Georgia. Moscow argues that Georgia will never gain EU or NATO membership and posits itself as Tbilisi's only reliable ally.

**Throughout the Euro-Atlantic community, cooperation and transparency that exposes malign techniques and falsehoods is an antidote to Russian information warfare.**

While these tactics have made modest inroads, Georgians well understand Russian motives and have not forgotten the war and its aftermath. Throughout the Euro-Atlantic community, cooperation and transparency that exposes malign techniques and falsehoods is an antidote to Russian information warfare. Attempting to counter it by infringing on media freedom, however, would stir public suspicion of Georgian authorities. Civil society and governments in Georgia and the West should share experiences—and best practices—in resisting information warfare and building social resilience in ways consistent with democratic norms.

11 United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 1808 (2008)," April 15, 2008, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1808\(2008\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1808(2008)).

12 "Medvedev on Russia's Interests," *Economist*, September 1, 2008, [https://www.economist.com/blogs/certainideasofeuropa/2008/09/medvedev\\_on\\_russias\\_interests](https://www.economist.com/blogs/certainideasofeuropa/2008/09/medvedev_on_russias_interests).



US Vice President Mike Pence speaks to a gathering of American and Georgian soldiers during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia on August 1, 2017. *Photo credit: US Army photo by Sgt. Shiloh Capers.*

Georgia should not eschew engagement with Russia; pragmatic cooperation is wise. Diplomatic relations were sundered during the war and remain so, but many trade, tourism, and communication ties have been restored. Georgian wine is again flowing to Russia, where it is popular. In 2017, more than 1 million Russian tourists visited Georgia. Tbilisi benefits from dialogue with Moscow on protecting Georgian workers in Russia. Cooperation in tracking returning foreign fighters from the Middle East might be possible.

## GEORGIA AND NATO

At its April 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO denied Georgia (and Ukraine) a Membership Action Plan (MAP), a program of advice, assistance, and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join. The Alliance promised that the two

countries “will become” members, but no date was set.<sup>13</sup>

Last August in Tbilisi, US Vice President Mike Pence reiterated American support for this goal, saying, “We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”<sup>14</sup> This echoed statements of strong support for Georgia from then-Vice President Joe Biden during a 2009 visit: “We, the United States, stand by you on your journey to a secure, free, democratic, and once again united Georgia.”<sup>15</sup>

Although NATO has reaffirmed the Bucharest commitment at every summit since 2008, it is unlikely to reach consensus soon to commence a MAP. Intensified practical cooperation, however, will

<sup>13</sup> “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 3, 2008, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>14</sup> “Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants (August 1),” US Embassy in Georgia, August 1, 2017, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/remarks-vp-noble-partner-participants/>.

<sup>15</sup> Margarita Antidze and Matt Robinson, “Biden: US Backs Georgia, Russia Must Pull Back,” Reuters, July 23, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-biden/biden-u-s-backs-georgia-russia-must-pull-back-idUSTRE56M1YV20090723>.

enhance Georgia's readiness to join the Alliance when this becomes possible.

Although the cycle of advancing freedom in Europe's east has slowed, Georgia remains committed to its European and Euro-Atlantic choice. NDI polling shows that 77 percent of Georgians favor the government's stated goal of joining the EU, and 66 percent back joining NATO.<sup>16</sup>

The decision to admit new members is political, but NATO also has tangible criteria. Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that the Alliance "may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty, and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty."<sup>17</sup> Members can contribute to security in multiple ways, including through economic strength, democratic freedoms, bolstering NATO missions, and demonstrating fealty to the purposes of the Alliance.

On multiple bases, Georgia has a strong case. It makes the highest per-capita troop contribution of any country to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. If Georgia were in NATO, it would rank among the top five members in absolute number of troops in Afghanistan<sup>18</sup> and in defense spending as a percentage of GDP.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Georgia ranks higher than five or more current NATO members in global indices of military power,<sup>20</sup> perceptions of corruption,<sup>21</sup> and economic competitiveness,<sup>22</sup> and it does even better in ease of doing business.<sup>23</sup>

At various points in the 1990s, NATO membership seemed problematic for Poland and the Baltic states, but bold reforms and practical security cooperation improved their prospects and caused the West to raise its strategic sights. This formula also makes sense for Georgia, even if the road is longer.

In preparation for the July 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, and after it, Georgia should develop its case for membership, rooted in a narrative that emphasizes common values, responsible behavior, reforms, and a broad public consensus in favor of joining European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Tbilisi should refute unsound arguments proffered by skeptics, including the canard that Georgia precipitated the 2008 war—months before the conflict, there were ample signs that Moscow planned to undertake it.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Georgia's adoption of a long-term, constructive policy toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia can help.

## NDI polling shows that 77 percent of Georgians favor the government's stated goal of joining the EU, and 66 percent back joining NATO.

For some, Russian control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are deal-breakers for NATO membership. But the existence of East Germany, and the presence of massive Soviet armies on its territory, did not prevent West Germany from entering the Alliance in 1955, a precedent Georgia can cite when it is otherwise prepared to join. For the period of occupation, Article 5 would not apply to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Defensibility is another issue. Georgia's geography renders defense more challenging in some respects than for the Baltic states. Making the Article 5 commitment credible would require a combination of forward Allied presence (on the Baltic model);

16 Laura Thornton and David Sichinava, "Public Attitudes in Georgia," National Democratic Institute, accessed April 17, 2018, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_june%202017\\_ISSUES\\_ENG\\_VF.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_june%202017_ISSUES_ENG_VF.pdf).

17 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Enlargement," last updated March 9, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49212.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm).

18 "Afghanistan War: Trump's Allies and Troop Numbers," BBC News, August 22, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-41014263>.

19 The World Bank, "Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," accessed April 17, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>.

20 "2018 Military Strength Ranking," *Global Firepower*, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.asp>.

21 Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016," accessed April 23, 2018, [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2016](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016).

22 Klaus Schwab, "The Global Competitiveness Report 2016-2017," World Economic Forum, accessed April 17, 2018, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2016-2017/05FullReport/TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2016-2017\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GCR2016-2017/05FullReport/TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2016-2017_FINAL.pdf).

23 "Doing Business 2018."

24 Kenneth Yalowitz and William Courtney, "Georgia and Russia Can Avoid War—If the West Helps," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 2008, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2008/0627/p09s02-coop.html>; Ronald Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010).

substantial strengthening of Georgia's territorial defense capacity; the support of neighboring Turkey; and a credible NATO reinforcement plan, backed by capacity.

With the support of its friends, Georgia will need to develop an effective case for NATO membership—one that takes into account these obstacles, any steps to mitigate or overcome them, and Georgia's many strengths. Georgia should associate its own case with the transatlantic strategy of advancing the frontiers of freedom in the post-Cold War world. This strategy has succeeded despite obstacles that at the time appeared even greater than the ones Georgia now faces. In building support for its case, Georgian diplomacy should focus on France, Germany, Turkey, and the United Kingdom while including, but not relying exclusively on, old friends such as the United States, Poland, and the Baltic states.

### **Georgia should associate its own case with the transatlantic strategy of advancing the frontiers of freedom in the post-Cold War world.**

At every NATO Summit, Georgia should seek reaffirmation of the Alliance's Bucharest commitment to its membership. Tbilisi should not, however, put all its capital into making achievement of a MAP the measure of success at the 2018 summit. Rather, Georgia should seek a commitment to additional forms of practical cooperation with NATO—for example, a separate summit statement that reaffirms Bucharest, calls for Georgia to speed reforms, and commits the Alliance to do more with Georgia, including helping it bolster territorial defenses. NATO and Georgia should agree on a “hedgehog” strategy of deterring aggression by making Georgia a harder, more resilient target.

### **SECURITY COOPERATION**

Georgia's security cooperation with NATO and its members is notable and has the potential for significant growth. Georgia can build on current programs, including:

- the 2014 SNGP;
- the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center;
- the NATO-Georgia Professional Development Program (which focuses on strengthening civilian control of the military);
- NATO's Defense Capacity Building Initiative (a platform for demand-driven advisory support);
- NATO's Defense Education Enhancement Program;
- and Georgia's hosting of Noble Partner 2017, a US-led multinational exercise, Georgia's largest ever with the United States.

In general, NATO-Georgian and US-Georgian security cooperation should continue to evolve from an expeditionary focus in Afghanistan and elsewhere toward improving Georgia's territorial defense capacity. Next major steps could include:

- Georgia's continued participation in Resolute Support, the NATO mission in Afghanistan;
- participation in NATO's Tailored Forward Presence activity in the Black Sea region;
- Georgia's possible participation in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics and Poland;
- a Georgian-NATO airspace-management initiative, supporting Georgian capabilities and linking them with NATO (partly modeled on a similar initiative launched with Poland in the mid-1990s);
- and a rotating air-policing mission, based in Georgia, in the spirit of NATO's Baltic air-policing mission.

Along with the Georgia Defense Readiness Program, a US-funded training effort set to begin in the spring of 2018, next steps in bilateral security cooperation could include training and equipment related to the new Javelin anti-armor program<sup>25</sup> and assistance with

25 Giorgi Menabde, “United States Considers Supplying Anti-Tank Weapons to Georgia,” Jamestown Foundation, November 28, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/united-states-considers-supplying-anti-tank-weapons-georgia/>.

air defense. Both would bolster Georgia's deterrent capacity. The European Deterrence Initiative (for which the Trump administration is seeking \$6.5 billion in funding for fiscal year 2019) may provide resources for other training and equipment initiatives for Georgia.<sup>26</sup> Maintaining or increasing Georgia's defense spending, currently 2.2 percent of GDP, will facilitate NATO cooperation.

An effective national security decision-making process is essential to help Georgia deal with its complex security environment, develop and manage security policy and programs, and guide cooperative security activities. Given the upcoming abolition of its National Security Council<sup>27</sup> in accordance with changes in the constitution, Georgia should create another mechanism for these purposes.

## GEORGIA AND THE EU

In a similar fashion, Georgia should take full advantage of practical opportunities to deepen ties with the EU, while recognizing that accession is a long-term prospect.

With Turkey unlikely to join the EU anytime soon, the accession landscape for Georgia is discouraging. The EU is coping with the possible emergence of a two-tier system within its ranks, with the first, "inner" tier pursuing closer political integration and an "ever closer union." Until the EU can overcome, or learn to live with, its internal divisions, further enlargement is unlikely. An exception may be some Balkan states already in accession negotiations, such as Montenegro and Serbia, but even for them the finish line may recede.

EU membership requires that a candidate country "has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union," per the admission criteria adopted by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993.<sup>28</sup>

Candidates must be able to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union. While Georgia's accession is not on the EU agenda,<sup>29</sup> meeting these obligations is within the country's reach if it undertakes even bolder reforms.

**Until the EU can overcome, or learn to live with, its internal divisions, further enlargement is unlikely.**

The Copenhagen criteria are only the first step toward membership, and they are now widely regarded as too lax. Accession requires adoption of the thirty-five chapters of the EU's *acquis* (laws and regulations). When the 2004–2007 enlargements took place, there was less emphasis on capacity to implement. The accession experience of Bulgaria and Romania has led to an EU consensus that future enlargements should depend not only on changes in legislation to account for the *acquis* but also demonstrated administrative capacity. Tensions between Brussels and Poland and Hungary with respect to democratic backsliding and threats to the rule of law have further slowed the enlargement process.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities. The EU is Georgia's largest trading partner, and Georgia benefits from more than 100 million a year in EU technical and financial aid.<sup>30</sup> The EU's 2016 Global Strategy praises Georgia's state and societal resilience,<sup>31</sup> and the EU sees Georgia in "the frontrunner role" in its Eastern Partnership.<sup>32</sup>

26 Jed Judson, "Funding to Deter Russia Reaches \$6.5B in FY19 Defense Budget Request," *Defense News*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2018/02/12/funding-to-deter-russia-reaches-65b-in-fy19-defense-budget-request/>.

27 "Key Points of Newly Adopted Constitution," Civil Georgia, September 27, 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30474>.

28 "Copenhagen European Council—21-22 June 1993," European Parliament, accessed April 17, 2018, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/ec/cop\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/ec/cop_en.htm).

29 Point 10 of the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit of November 24, 2017, states, "Summit participants acknowledge the European aspirations and European choice of the partners concerned, as stated in the Association Agreements."

30 "EU-Georgia Relations, Factsheet," European External Action Service, November 10, 2017, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/23634/EU-Georgia%20relations,%20factsheet](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/23634/EU-Georgia%20relations,%20factsheet).

31 "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe," European External Action Service, accessed April 17, 2018, [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

32 European Council/Council of the European Union, "EU Relations with Georgia," accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>.

Georgia has taken important steps forward with the EU, such as signing the Association Agreement in 2014 and winning visa-free access last year—an achievement popular with Georgians. The agreement, including the DCFTA, opens a process to integrate Georgia's economy with the EU's, including by alignment of some laws and regulations. Georgia benefits significantly from EU assistance programs, e.g. the External Investment Plan, a program to leverage multilateral funds in support of local entrepreneurship.

### **In sum, Georgia should deepen ties with the EU and keep strengthening its case for membership.**

Despite its positive assessment of Georgia, the EU maintains that the Association Agreement is “not an accession process”; the reforms set out in the agreement “do not have the same breadth and depth” as required for the membership track.<sup>33</sup> The alignment of many Georgian regulations with the EU *acquis* would be required were Georgia on that track. If the DCFTA coverage could be extended to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia would gain additional levers in its outreach to the separatist territories.

Despite the impediments to near-term accession, the EU is unlikely to say “never” to Georgia. The EU appears committed to bringing it into the European family and economic orbit. Potentially relevant to Georgia are the EU-United Kingdom Brexit negotiations, which may provide another pattern for “special relationships” with nonmembers.

In sum, Georgia should deepen ties with the EU and keep strengthening its case for membership. Georgia should focus on its own reforms, expand practical cooperation with the EU and its member states, and make full use of the Association Agreement and its DCFTA.

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<sup>33</sup> European Commission, “Myths about the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA),” accessed January 15, 2018, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2014/march/tradoc\\_152284.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2014/march/tradoc_152284.pdf).

# CONCLUSION

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By advancing reform at home, intensifying practical cooperation with the EU and NATO and their member states, and seeking to deal pragmatically with Russia where possible, Georgia will improve its prospects for full European and Euro-Atlantic integration. As it does so, the West has a solemn obligation to help Georgia protect its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. When Georgia is ready, EU and NATO membership will make substantial contributions to the country's prosperity, democracy, and security, and to that of the wider European and Euro-Atlantic community.

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Ambassador William Courtney is an adjunct senior fellow at the RAND Corporation and executive director of the RAND Business Leaders Forum. In 2014 he retired from the Computer Sciences Corporation (now CSRA) as a senior principal for federal policy strategy. From 1972 through 1999, he was a foreign service officer in the US Department of State. He co-chaired the US delegation to the review conference that prepared for the 1999 Summit in Istanbul of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Ambassador Courtney advised on the reorganization of US foreign affairs agencies, mandated by the Foreign Affairs Reform Act of 1999. Earlier he served as special assistant to the president and senior director of the National Security Council staff for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia; ambassador to Georgia, Kazakhstan, and the US-Soviet Bilateral Consultative Commission to implement the Threshold Test Ban Treaty; and deputy US negotiator in the US-Soviet Defense and Space Talks in Geneva. He served abroad in Brasilia, Moscow, Geneva, Almaty, and Tbilisi. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, where during 1977 and 1978 he was an international affairs fellow. He is a member of the board of trustees of the Eurasia Foundation, and is a member and served on the boards of directors of the American Academy of Diplomacy and the World Affairs Council of Washington DC. He graduated from West Virginia University with a BA and Brown University with a PhD in economics.



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