

THE ONLY WAY GEORGIA CAN ENSURE ITS LONG-TERM SECURITY IS TO BECOME A NATO MEMBER

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Georgia has continuously been told that it has all the practical tools necessary for NATO membership. Last year, this was reaffirmed by Jens Stoltenberg during his meeting with the Prime Minister of Georgia in Brussels. The NATO Secretary General has again underlined that

NATO NEEDS GEORGIA AND IT IS NOT ONLY A MATTER OF RESPONSIBILITY BUT ALSO A MATTER OF REPUTATION FOR NATO ALLIES TO GIVE MAP TO GEORGIA ON ITS WAY TO NATO MEMBERSHIP.

NATO enlargement has contributed to stability and peace in Europe and that it was up to Georgia and the NATO allies and not up to Russia to decide upon Georgia's membership in the Alliance. However, it is not Jens Stoltenberg who has the final say in getting Georgia into NATO. Final decisions are primarily made in Washington, Berlin, etc.

We indeed live in times of unprecedented security challenges and uncertainties. Liberal democracy has been in decline and ethnic or state nationalism has been on the rise in many parts of the world. There is a fear among NATO's European allies that the transatlantic bond can be weakened and there is also a fear in Georgia that the West will retreat from "Russia's own geopolitical space" which at the very least includes but is not limited to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. We have good reasons to

be worried with recent developments both in the US and in Europe, including their policies towards Russia.

It is still commonly acknowledged that NATO enlargement has expanded peace and stability. However, as some say, today, NATO faces enlargement fatigue, enlargement stall. Last year, former US State Secretary, John Kerry, said: "There have been reasons for a slowdown in Georgia's accession process towards NATO as there are a lot of international challenges, among them related to Ukraine, Syria." As Mr Kerry tried to placate his Georgian colleagues, he reiterated that the US stands by the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit Declaration that Georgia will become a NATO member and "we will stand by this statement in Warsaw." According to Secretary Kerry, Georgia's path towards NATO membership should be "viewed as a continuing process by which confidence is built and timing becomes appropriate for the final steps to be taken."

Let us recall the decisions at the NATO Summits in Bucharest in 2008 and Warsaw in 2016. The Bucharest Summit Declaration states that Georgia will become a member of NATO and that MAP is the next step for Georgia on its direct way to membership. In its 10 April 2008 edition, the Economist wrote: "Without a date for MAP, this promise (that Georgia will become a member of NATO) may mean less than it seems." Unfortunately, this prediction has proven to be correct. Indeed, no Action Plan implied no action in this regard as it was noted by former President of Latvia Mr. Zatlers. The

Warsaw Summit Communiqué pointed out that at the 2008 Bucharest Summit allies agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO with MAP as an integral part of the process.

While allies insist on NATO's open door policy and honestly recognise Georgia's contribution and sacrifices vis-à-vis international security, they consistently refuse to grant MAP to Georgia. The rather creative approach to bypass the customary MAP stage altogether and seek recognition from NATO allies that Georgia can become an Alliance member when members agree on it, failed both in Wales in 2014 and in Warsaw this year. The main reason for not granting MAP to Georgia has always been the idea that this would anger, provoke and antagonise Russia. However, this idea has become increasingly misdirected as it is stuffed by the sophisticated Russian propaganda machine to which we fell victim.

The world has never been perfect (for example, UK citizen, Mr Litvinenko, was poisoned to death in 2006 London on Putin's order); nonetheless, the world before 2008 was perhaps a better place in which to live than it has become since 2008. From then, when Georgia's MAP bid was blocked, Russia invaded Georgia, annexed Crimea and continues to conduct military operations in the east of Ukraine. Russia shot down a civilian airplane that took the lives of 298 innocent people. Montenegrin prosecutors traced Russia in an alleged election day plot to assassinate the country's prime minister Milo Djukanovic. Russia has committed crimes against humanity in Syria, prolonged a war and caused the massive flow of refugees from Syria and, therefore, has largely contributed to the migration crises in Europe. Russia has waged a sophisticated propaganda campaign against the West and is financing nationalistic parties from left to right in Europe. Russia makes dangerous intrusions and its warplanes are buzzing in the air and its warships manoeuvring in waters close to NATO allies. It has undermined existing arms control mechanisms which once were called the cornerstone of European security.

Let us ask a question – do we really think that the world could be even more dangerous if Georgia were given a NATO Membership Action Plan? It should be noted that Putin has never perceived NATO as a threat to Russia's

security per se. President Putin once said: “It is hard for me to visualise NATO as an enemy.” Even when the three Baltic States joined NATO in spring 2004, Mr Putin insisted that relations with the organisation were “developing positively” and he had “no concerns about the expansion of NATO.”

The truth is the following: Russians are seeking to “offset vulnerability at home with aggression abroad.” Putin and the Kremlin will continue destructive policies and, thereby, undermining Western democracies and the democratic rules of governance also in Georgia, not because Georgia gets MAP, but because Western democracies and their political models present an existential threat to the existing rule in Russia. Therefore, Georgia should do its utmost to help political and opinion leaders in Washington, Berlin and Europe to open their eyes to the obvious and take adequate steps.

Let us ask another question – if Georgia is granted MAP, what else could Russia do to the US, Germany, France, etc., (having in mind what Russia has been doing already)? Declare war against the West? It has been already fighting and winning a war in Syria against the fundamental interests of the West.

As the Statement on NATO's Open Door Policy underlined: “Decisions on enlargement are for NATO itself.” Georgia is an important country for the West. Georgia provides shortest transport corridor between Europe and Asia through which gas and oil is exported from Asia to Europe; it is the most stable place and democratic island now in the arc of instability from Ukraine to Yemen. From Georgia, it takes only few hours to fly to any destination in the Middle East. Georgia has been the most successful in the process of state building in the region and support and enormous international investment to this end have been paying back. This importance has been growing over the last years and will continue to grow in the future. NATO needs Georgia and it is not only a matter of responsibility but also a matter of reputation for NATO allies to give MAP to Georgia on its way to NATO membership.

From our side, while demanding MAP as something which we have long deserved, we should be aware and

communicate to our partners in NATO that participation in MAP does not guarantee membership nor prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership. Giving MAP to Georgia is the maximum that NATO can do now. The Membership Action Plan will not provide Georgia with security guarantees as enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

Georgia, which for some years now has already been acting like an ally, should ensure its allies in NATO that both before and after it gets MAP, it will unequivocally exercise its resilience, responsibility and reliability.

While demanding MAP, we should not blackmail the West by saying that unless we get it, NATO support in Georgia will further decrease (perhaps that is something one wants to hear not only in Moscow, but in some other capitals as well.) Instead, we should continue robust reforms, continue to build democratic institutions and strengthen the economy of the country which is the best

way to enable increasing support of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Today, European allies have found themselves in an urgent need to be reassured by the new US President of the ever enduring Euro-Atlantic partnership. To put it differently, European allies are waiting for their MAP as well. It is high time for European NATO allies and Georgia to unite efforts and receive their respective MAPs. However, in the first instance, those psychological barriers in the minds of the decision makers, which have developed in line with the prevailing unwillingness to give MAP to Georgia, should be broken down. NATO allies have to win over scepticism that persists among their ranks and give MAP to Georgia. This time it will serve as one of the instruments among others which will help to increase solidarity and heal some existing divisions among them.