

Guest Editorial: Georgia's message to the North Atlantic Treaty community

By Levan Tsutskiridze

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Georgia, a small albeit strategically located post-Soviet state, has long sought NATO membership. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, a successful process of state building has been put in motion. Unfortunately, the events of November 2007, when the government put down mass protests using riot police and tear gas have raised many doubts as to whether Georgia was indeed bound to liberal democracy.

Mikheil Saakashvili called snap presidential elections to test the endurance of Georgia's democratic credentials. Now, with the first ever truly competitive elections over, and with the West appraising the elections as generally meeting international standards, Georgia renews its call for membership in NATO.

NATO was established after World War II when its member states were reeling from the politico-economic and moral injuries caused by Nazism. The first members of the Alliance were states enduring the consequences of World War II, the Cold War and a myriad of "small scale" conflicts. They were not only eager to defend their democracies but were re-emerging from the great political, economic and—most importantly—moral catastrophe of the twentieth century.

Most of them were in extremely unstable political shape, with their uncertain future dependent on the outcome of a rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States, assuming the dominant role amongst the democracies, tasked NATO to protect the restoration of Europe. Under the US nuclear umbrella, the Bretton Woods system played a key role in strengthening economies and achieving stability.

There are many examples of how safety from foreign aggression and domination leads to economic development and strong democracies. NATO member Italy suffered the threat of Communist terrorism until 1988. The Greeks fought a civil war as a result of their confrontation with Communists prior to joining the Alliance. Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and it had neither civilian control over the military nor entrenched liberal-democratic institutions. NATO was instrumental in protecting and strengthening stability in each of these and other states as well as in binding them to liberal values. Hence, the history of NATO is a path from military security towards the social, political and economic development,

not vice-versa. Italy, Greece, Turkey and many other European states are cases to bear in mind.

It would be misleading to compare Georgia to these now-established European states or to equate the post-WWII political environment with today's political context. The impact of Georgia on international affairs and in a given security architecture is, unfortunately to Georgians, very insignificant. However, the Georgia of today is a more democratic state than Turkey at the time of its accession to NATO; it is more stable than Italy after WWII or Greece before joining the North Atlantic community; the challenges Georgia face today are nothing compared to those of the European states at the time NATO was being built. Most importantly, the quest Georgia has is very much the same the Europeans had toward the United States: not to be left alone and unprotected against a powerful and aggressive neighbor. It was USSR for Europeans then, it is Russia for Georgians now.

International security is not strengthened in a stand-by mode. It is achieved through active engagement of partners and friends. Georgia already had a degree of such engagement through various partnership programs, and it passed this stage. Regardless of the fact that Georgia had, and will still have, many mistakes, and face many challenges, it will not be very much unlike Italy, Greece or Turkey and it still deserves to be granted a Membership Action Plan in the nearest future. By doing so, Europe and the United States will, on the one hand, again reaffirm their commitment to the founding principles of the North Atlantic alliance; on the other hand, they will not give a green light to Russia to further hamper the migration of nations towards organizations protecting and strengthening liberal-democratic statehood. Europe and the United States founded NATO on the ruins of World War II. Today, Georgia expects its very founding principles to be upheld by the very same Europeans who themselves passed down the same road. The difference is this is now happening not in the context of defeated Fascism and the threat of Communism, but in the context of post-Soviet totalitarian convulsions.

Building democracy and statehood simultaneously is arduous and risky. Many states choose to do one at a time. Punishing Georgia for risking doing both and encouraging Russia to exploit natural vulnerabilities that arise along this road will be unfair at least. It will also put in motion a very negative stream of international politics for the West. Instability in Georgia will have a direct impact on the streets of Europe. Feeling insecure from abrupt foreign manipulation, Georgia might again lapse into conflicts that still simmer in its backyard and are directly fueled by Russia. Georgia runs a strategically important oil pipeline, has an interesting economic potential and can serve as an important communication and trade hub between Europe and Asia. It also enjoys

interesting geo-strategic location in politico-military terms.

In this light, the aspirations of Georgia and the interests of the West are meeting and fitting to each other. History has, for the good of us all, preserved many examples of the consequences that come about when one state is punished unfairly and the aggressor is appeased. We need only read these stories properly. Engaging Georgia now will cost the West less; it will cause a far lesser level of political controversy compared to NATO's past and that of the liberal-democratic West. The outcomes, however, will be greater: Georgia will undoubtedly be bound to the path of democracy; one more "area of instability" will find its way towards safety and prosperity; and the success of democracy and statehood in Georgia will benefit the causes of democracy and stability in the Caucasus and Europe.

The question of whether Georgia shall soon join NATO is not a matter to be left to realpolitik alone. It is a matter of moral choice for the West. It is a choice to hold onto the very values and principles that saved much of Europe from falling into the grips of Stalin's Communism.

Levan Tsutskiridze is a Rector of the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) in Tbilisi, Georgia and a specialist in international affairs and strategic studies. GIPA is a graduate educational and research institution educating future public service officials, journalists, lawyers and diplomats