



CRS Report for Congress

Georgia [Republic] and NATO Enlargement: Issues and Implications

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Summary

This report examines the aspirations of Georgia [Republic] to be invited at the upcoming April 2008 NATO Summit to participate in a Membership Action Plan, a key stage of cooperation preparatory to possible Alliance Membership. Issues related to Georgia's reform progress, Georgia-Russia relations, and U.S. policy are examined. This report will not be updated. Related products include CRS Report RL32342, *NATO and the European Union*, by Kristan Archik and Paul Gallis; and CRS Report RS22794, *Georgia's January 2008 Presidential Election*, by Jim Nichol.

Background

Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program in 1994.¹ At the NATO Summit in Prague in November 2002, Georgia declared that it aspired to eventual NATO membership and sought to intensify ties with NATO through an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) to increase the interoperability and capability of its military forces. After Georgia's "rose revolution" of late 2003 brought a new reformist government to power, Georgia placed top priority on integration with Western institutions, including NATO and the European Union (EU). During the presidential election campaign in late 2003, candidate Mikheil Saakashvili ran on a platform that included a pledge to work toward NATO membership. Georgia began sending troops to assist NATO forces in Kosovo in 1999, began hosting multinational PFP military training exercises in 2001, and recently pledged to send troops to assist the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. In late 2004, Georgia concluded an IPAP with NATO, which allowed the Alliance to provide more assistance on domestic reforms, including defense institutional and policy reforms and political reforms. After extensive

¹ In 1994, Georgia's then-President Eduard Shevardnadze stated that he hoped that Russia would cooperate with NATO to enhance international security. *BBC Monitoring Service: Former USSR*, January 19, 1994; *Reuters*, March 23, 1994.

public debate, the Georgian government approved a national security concept in late 2005 that committed the country to carry out the reforms outlined by the IPAP.²

Progress and Challenges

During the first two-year period of the IPAP covering 2005-2006, NATO viewed Georgia generally as adequately satisfying reform priorities and time-lines. Although some Alliance members initially may have been more confident than others that Georgia had made adequate progress, the members came to a consensus in September 2006 to offer Georgia an “Intensified Dialogue” of stepped-up consultations to assist the country in furthering its aspirations for Alliance membership. NATO reportedly has assessed positively Georgia’s progress on expanded IPAP goals covering 2007-2008.³ At a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on February 14, 2008, the head of Georgia’s mission to NATO handed him a note from President Saakashvili formally requesting the Alliance to invite Georgia to participate in a MAP at the upcoming NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008.

Further movement by Georgia toward Alliance membership will be influenced by the country’s drive to democratize, develop a market economy with social welfare guarantees, and create a professional military that contributes to Euro-Atlantic security. Other criteria include the resolution of internal separatist conflicts and international disputes. The latter may include weighing geo-strategic concerns, including good-neighborly relations with Russia.⁴

Democratization and Economic Reform Challenges. In early November 2007, the Georgian government forcibly suppressed demonstrations, closed some media, and declared emergency rule.⁵ Some Alliance members raised concerns about Georgia’s apparently faltering democratization and the suitability of inviting it to participate in a MAP at the upcoming NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008.⁶ Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer criticized the imposition of emergency rule and the closure of media outlets by the government in Georgia as “not in line with Euro-Atlantic values.”⁷ Domestic and international criticism may have helped convince President Saakashvili to admit that his government appeared non-responsive to the concerns of many citizens, and to resign and seek re-election by pledging reforms. Following Saakashvili’s re-election in early 2008, NATO’s press spokesman James Appathurai “welcomed” the international monitors’ assessments that the election reflected the free choice of the voters, and stated that “NATO will continue to deepen its intensified dialogue with Georgia, and support

² Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), October 5, 2005, Doc. No. CEP-20003.

³ *Rustavi Television*, January 31, 2008. See also Ministry of Defense. *Strategic Defense Review: Final Report*, January 24, 2008.

⁴ NATO. *Study on NATO Enlargement*, September 1995.

⁵ For background, see CRS Report RS22794, *Georgia’s January 2008 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications*, by Jim Nichol.

⁶ *Financial Times*, January 25, 2008, p. 6.

⁷ NATO. Press Release. *Statement by the Secretary General on the Situation in Georgia*, November 8, 2007.

further efforts to meet Euro-Atlantic standards.”⁸ Nonetheless, some Alliance members reportedly have urged delaying a decision on a MAP for Georgia, at least until after an assessment of that country’s prospective May 2008 legislative election.

Georgia has made progress in creating a free market economy, resulting in GDP growth of 10% in 2007 (*CIA World Factbook*). However, the economy remains hampered by trade restrictions imposed by Russia. The high level of lingering poverty was a contributing factor in the civil unrest in late 2007. Although the Saakashvili government has made some progress in combating corruption, the World Bank stresses that corruption still seriously retards good governance.⁹ In the presidential election campaign in late 2007, Saakashvili pledged added efforts to combat poverty and corruption.

The Evolution of Defense Reforms. The Georgian military has undertaken major efforts to re-equip its armed forces with Western-made or upgraded conventional weapons, armor, aviation, and electronic equipment, with stated objectives that include increasing the military’s interoperability with NATO forces and contributing to NATO collective security and operations. The Georgian Defense Ministry’s *Strategic Defense Review* states that the country is addressing capability deficiencies in military intelligence, air and maritime defense, joint force interoperability, special forces (including to support ISAF), and combat service support. Illustrative of reform progress, interior ministry troops were absorbed into the armed forces in 2004 and the General Staff command system began to transition to a joint command staff in 2007. The *Strategic Defense Review* has suggested that Georgia eventually might be able to contribute to NATO by developing a niche capability in mountain combat training.¹⁰

Other military reforms have included improved living conditions, pay, and social benefits, and plans to fully replace conscription after 2009 with voluntary enlistment contracts. These improvements have increased the retention rate for officers and specialists who had received NATO and other Western training. In late 2007, Georgian officials announced that the military would add a fifth brigade, boosting the total number of troops from 28,000 to 32,000, and would build a new military base to enhance “integration into NATO and ... the country’s defense capability.” The military budget for 2008 increased to about \$875 million, compared to about \$560 million the previous year, and now amounts to about 10% of GDP. Some in Georgia have criticized the increases in troops and spending as not in accordance with NATO guidelines for capabilities or military budgets.¹¹

To enhance democratic civil-military relations, a civilian defense minister was appointed in 2004 to head a ministry increasingly staffed by civilians. Coordination

⁸ NATO. Press Release. *NATO Spokesman’s Response to the Presidential Elections in Georgia*, January 8, 2008. According to a plebiscite held at the same time as the election, about 77% of Georgia’s citizens who voted answered affirmatively that the country should join NATO.

⁹ The World Bank. *Governance Matters 2007: Country Data Reports*.

¹⁰ *ITAR-TASS*, October 25, 2007; January 20, 2008; *CEDR*, January 18, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950314; *CEDR*, September 12, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950248; *Strategic Defense Review*, p. 83.

¹¹ *CEDR*, September 10, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950289. The *Strategic Defense Review* has called for reducing the armed forces to about 26,000 personnel by 2009 and to about 19,000 by the end of 2015 (pp. 85, 88).

between security-related ministries has been increased. The government maintains that the defense budget is transparent and is scrutinized by the Committee on Defense and Security in the legislature. The defense ministry states that it consults with an advisory Civil Council, composed of civilian experts, on issues of defense policy, human rights of members of the armed forces, and budget expenditures. Some critics have maintained that legislative oversight remains inadequate.

Separatist Conflicts. Georgia faces separatism by the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia concluded fragile ceasefire agreements with both regions by the mid-1990s. The ceasefire in Abkhazia is monitored by UN observers and Russian troops, and in South Ossetia by Russian and Georgian troops. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer appeared to stress in October 2007 that Georgia should settle its separatist conflicts if it aspires to Alliance membership.¹² However, some observers argue that Georgia should not be excluded from the MAP and, ultimately, NATO membership due to separatist conflicts that are in part fueled by Russia. President Saakashvili has declared that Georgia will pursue only peaceful means to regain authority over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian officials envisage that progress toward Alliance membership eventually will encourage the breakaway regions to re-integrate with a stable, peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Georgia. Some Georgians, however, allege that the Alliance will condition membership on Georgia accepting a confederation with or independence for the separatist regions.¹³ In contrast to these views, leaders of the breakaway regions have tended to view NATO as “aggressive” because it is assisting Georgia to build up military forces which they claim will soon attack the regions.¹⁴

Tensions With Russia. While Georgia’s poor relations with Russia are a consideration in NATO’s deliberations over a MAP for Georgia, Alliance membership in principle is open to all European aspirants and cannot be “vetoed” by the recalcitrant objections of nonmembers. Illustrative of Russia’s objections, Dmitriy Rogozin, Russia’s newly appointed envoy to the Russia-NATO Council, warned in January 2008 that eventual possible NATO membership for Georgia would destabilize the Caucasus region and further harm Russia-Georgia relations. President Saakashvili has attempted to reassure Russia that Georgia’s eventual possible membership in NATO will enhance regional security and will not preclude Georgia’s close military and political ties with Russia.

Some observers think that Russia-Georgia tensions may continue for some time unless Russia eases its strong objections to Georgia’s aspirations for NATO membership. Georgia views such objections as threatening its security, which further spurs its efforts to qualify for Alliance membership.¹⁵ These observers also argue that Russia’s threats to

¹² NATO. *Speech by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at Tbilisi State University*, October 4, 2007.

¹³ *CEDR*, December 19, 2006, Doc. No. CEP-21002.

¹⁴ *ITAR-TASS*, June 29, 2007; August 2, 2007; *CEDR*, October 16, 2006, Doc. No. CEP-950118; March 19, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-8001; June 29, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950307; August 3, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950238.

¹⁵ Richard Weitz, *CACI Analyst*, February 6, 2008. Analyst Alberto Priego argues that “Georgia’s most important aim is to obtain NATO membership in the near future to deter Russia (continued...)”

counter Georgia's eventual possible membership in NATO could well destabilize the region if carried out. Some Russian military officials and strategic analysts have claimed that Georgia's NATO membership would *ipso facto* result in the establishment of NATO airbases in Georgia and air flights near Russia's borders, and increase NATO intelligence gathering. They have urged CSTO members to preemptively make changes to their defenses, including beefing up air and border defenses and even naval interdiction capabilities in the Black Sea. Some Russian officials and others have argued that if NATO invites Georgia to participate in a MAP, then Russia should extend diplomatic recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to base Russian troops in those regions.¹⁶

Implications for Georgia

Most Georgians appear to support NATO membership. According to a plebiscite held at the same time as the January 2008 presidential election, 77% of Georgian citizens who voted answered affirmatively that Georgia should join NATO. Among the minority opposing further Georgian moves toward Alliance membership, Irina Sarishvili (who ran as a losing candidate in the January 2008 presidential election) has attempted to gain signatures for a voter referendum on proclaiming Georgia a neutral country. Sarishvili and others argue that Russia will retaliate against Georgian membership in NATO by never permitting Georgia to peacefully regain authority over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They also claim that Iran will target missiles against the NATO bases in Georgia.¹⁷

Some Georgian officials and others have appeared to try to prepare their compatriots for a negative decision by the NATO Summit in April 2008 on Georgia's participation in a MAP. They stress that a NATO decision on a MAP for Georgia is based on political as well as technical military issues, that the civil disorder and government crackdown in late 2007 provided a less than glowing image of Georgia's reform progress, and that partly as a result a political consensus within the Alliance on a MAP for Georgia may be lacking.¹⁸ Some observers caution that Georgia's politicians and citizenry may be seriously discouraged from pursuing difficult reforms if the country is not invited to participate in a MAP in April 2008.¹⁹ Others who discount such a Georgian response argue that the Georgian government frequently in recent years has had to adjust its expectations that Alliance membership was "imminent," as they have faced the real challenges of implementing the reforms necessary for membership.

¹⁵ (...continued)

from interfering in its foreign policy." *Caucasus Review of International Affairs*, Winter 2008.

¹⁶ *Interfax*, January 18, 2008; February 14, 2008; *Interfax-AVN Military News Agency*, January 14, 2008; *CEDR*, January 10, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950047; Army General Anatoliy Kulikov, *ITAR-TASS*, February 20, 2008.

¹⁷ *CEDR*, January 24, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-358004; *BBC Monitoring*, January 2, 2008; *Interfax*, January 15, 2008.

¹⁸ Interview with First Deputy Defense Minister Batu Kutelia, in *CEDR*, December 13, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-950384.

¹⁹ Former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar has argued that "rejecting Georgia's bid now [for a MAP] would discourage not only Tbilisi but other countries trying to embrace democracy." *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2008, p. 13.

U.S. Policy

The Bush Administration has been supportive of Georgia's NATO aspirations. During Saakashvili's July 2006 U.S. visit, President Bush stated that "I believe that NATO would benefit with Georgia being a member of NATO, and I think Georgia would benefit. And there's a way forward through the MAP."²⁰ In February 2008, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza, reaffirmed this stance. However, he also appeared to raise the possibility that NATO may not reach a consensus at the April summit on a MAP for Georgia when he averred that whether Georgia conducts a free and fair legislative election in May 2008 "will be crucial to Georgia's ability to fulfill its NATO aspirations."²¹ U.S. analyst Ron Asmus has urged the Administration and NATO to delay decisions on MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine, perhaps for several years, to give these countries more time to meet the criteria for NATO membership, and to possibly include them in a future round of enlargement.²²

U.S. Congressional Response. Many in Congress have supported Georgia's NATO aspirations. The NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-17; signed into law on April 9, 2007) endorses NATO enlargement and urges NATO to extend a MAP for Georgia. The act also designates Georgia as eligible to receive security assistance under the program established by the NATO Participation Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-447). Following the civil disorder in Georgia in late 2007, the Senate approved S.Res. 391 (Lugar), which stressed Georgia's NATO aspirations and called on the President to urge Georgia to hold a free and fair presidential election. On February 14, 2008, the Senate also approved S.Res. 439 (Lugar) to urge NATO to enter into a MAP with Georgia and Ukraine. In introducing S.Res. 439, Senator Richard Lugar stressed that "it is time again for the United States to take the lead in urging its allies to recognize the important efforts underway in Georgia and Ukraine, and to offer MAP to both countries this spring."²³ Further indicating Congressional support, a group of six Members led by Senator Joseph Lieberman sent a letter on February 19, 2008, to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urging her to support a MAP for Georgia and Ukraine "as one of the top foreign policy priorities of the Administration."²⁴

²⁰ The White House. *President Bush and Georgian President Saakashvili: Remarks to the Press following meeting at the White House*, July 5, 2006.

²¹ Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Testimony: Mr. Matthew Bryza, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia*, February 6, 2008.

²² Asmus urges the Administration to postpone advocacy of NATO membership for Albania and Macedonia (and possibly Croatia). He warns that their admission before they are ready could complicate NATO's operations and make Alliance members less inclined toward soon considering further enlargement efforts that include Georgia. Ronald D Asmus, "A Better Way to Grow NATO," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2008, p. A21; "Eastern Promises: Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2008.

²³ *Congressional Record*, January 31, 2008, pp. S550-S551.

²⁴ *States News Service*, February 20, 2008.