

Georgia's Prospects for NATO Membership in Light of the War in Ukraine

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Since at least 2008, when NATO declared at its April summit that Georgia and Ukraine would one day become members of the Alliance, but failed to offer them Membership Action Plans, the two countries have been linked together in a sort of “NATO-limbo”. While NATO has regularly reiterated its pledge of eventual membership for Kyiv and Tbilisi, it did little to follow through. Ukraine and Georgia have found themselves in NATO's waiting room for over 14 years, as other candidates have joined the Alliance.

Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine has altered NATO's enlargement process. Countries like Finland and Sweden, which had flirted with NATO membership but seemed in no hurry to join, will almost certainly be Alliance members by year's end. Ukraine, the victim of Russia's aggression, has shown admirable military capability and inspiring political leadership. If ever there was a country that nailed its audition for NATO, it is Ukraine. Whether that translates into an offer of membership remains to be seen and depends in many ways on when and how Russia's invasion ends.

It is perhaps counter-intuitive, but Georgia is the country whose NATO chances were hurt most by the war in Ukraine. Although Kyiv and Tbilisi have been regarded as paired in their accession drive since 2008, their trajectories have varied over the years. At times, such as when Ukraine

elected Russia-friendly Viktor Yanukovich president in 2010, Georgia preferred to distance itself from Ukraine in its NATO membership campaign. Now the tables have turned: it is Ukraine that has made progress toward NATO and Georgia that has wavered. Politically, as Ukraine's democratic transition progressed, Georgia teetered on the edge of a slide into authoritarianism. Militarily, Ukraine's stout resistance to Russia's invasion revealed the vast gulf in military capabilities between the two. Simply put, Ukraine has shown it would be an asset to NATO, while Georgia has not.

All is not lost for Georgia's NATO hopes, but to recover its standing in Brussels, Tbilisi needs to make a sincere effort at sustained progress in democratization, and to invest in the types of military capabilities that play to its advantages and minimize its disadvantages. NATO is a political-military alliance, so progress in both is necessary if Georgia is to have any chance at membership.

Political Developments

The dominant Western narrative about Georgia's democratization process is this: since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia has made steady, if sometimes fitful and painful progress toward democracy. This narrative is pervasive in many Western capitals, especially Washington, D.C. It is also wrong. The truth is that Georgia has seen two short bursts of liberalization and democratization – the first from the Rose Revolution until about 2007, the second from the election of the current government in 2012, until about 2017 – followed by prolonged periods of democratic regression. Georgia's [Freedom House democracy scores](#) document this regression. Under the rule of the current Georgian Dream government, Georgia's score peaked at 40/100 in 2016 and 2017 before eroding to 35/100 this year. While not a democratic superstar, Ukraine has fared better in the same period, scoring 39 or 40 in every year. More importantly, Ukraine's scores have held steady as Georgia's have declined.

NATO has noticed Georgia's democratic decline. On a recent visit to Tbilisi, Javier Colomina, NATO's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, [remarked that](#) the Alliance was concerned about Georgia's lack of progress, especially in the areas of judicial reform, electoral system reform, and security sector oversight. Colomina described reform in these areas as "stalled" and concluded, "we are concerned, as an Alliance and the Allies themselves." The U.S. has also been unusually blunt recently in its assessment of Georgia's lack of progress, perhaps reflecting a shifting of the dominant narrative on Georgia's democratization. A 2021 [U.S. embassy statement](#) noted that Washington was "increasingly alarmed about repeated setbacks to Georgia's democratic future."

The Georgian government's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further tarnished its reputation and driven a wedge between Tbilisi and Kyiv. Shortly after the war began, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili [dismissed Western sanctions](#) on Russia as "not effective" and

announced that Georgia would not join them. In response to what he called the Georgian government's "[immoral position](#)" on sanctions and its refusal to allow a charter flight to transport Georgian volunteers to fight in Ukraine, Ukrainian President Zelensky recalled his ambassador from Tbilisi. Georgia's President Salome Zurbishvili then [broke with her government](#), criticizing it publicly for its stance and reminding it that the "dignity of the Georgian people means that we stand with our friends when they fight for freedom, for independence, and for a European future."

In response, the Georgian parliament requested that the Constitutional Court sanction her for those comments and for making what it called "unauthorized" trips to Paris and Brussels, where she also made clear her support for Ukraine and her dissatisfaction with her government's position. Though her support for Ukraine was certainly welcome in Kyiv, the ceremonial nature of the Georgian presidency means Zurbishvili is unable to offer much more than the rhetorical support she has already extended. The spat between Tbilisi and Kyiv, against the backdrop of an unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, reflects well on neither capital but is especially damaging to Georgia's reputation.

Military Developments

In addition to driving a political wedge between Kyiv and Tbilisi, the war has made clear the vast difference in military capabilities between them. On one hand, this is self-evident: Ukraine is about ten times Georgia's size in both area and population. And disqualifying Georgia because of its small size and limited military capability would undermine the entire rationale for a collective security arrangement like NATO, which rests on the assumption that together states can defeat threats they could not defeat individually.

But the difference in military capability between Ukraine and Georgia is about much more than size. Ukraine's success so far in blunting and even reversing Russia's initial attacks is less a function of how much combat power it deployed than of how it has used that power. Ukraine is fighting a decentralized war, with small-unit leaders taking initiative and developing the situation without waiting for orders from their commanders. This style of fighting is widely practiced in NATO militaries but is anathema to many Soviet-legacy military forces, which rely on a strict, hierarchical structure of command and control that punishes initiative.

Ukraine's success against Russia so far is at least in part because it is using what Western militaries call Mission Command. The [U.S. military defines](#) Mission Command as "the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution", which "exploits the human element...", emphasizing trust, force of will, initiative, judgment, and creativity", and "demands that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission". Unfortunately for Georgia, its military is still more aligned with the Soviet model than the Western model of fighting. In Georgia, as in many other

former Soviet countries, most power and authority reside within the top levels of the Ministry of Defense (MOD), leaving little room for the exercise of initiative and independent thinking by lower-level leaders. This organizational culture and the style of fighting it produces could cripple Georgia's ability to resist a Russian invasion.

Recently NATO has made resilience a major focus area, declaring that [member states need](#) "to be resilient to resist and recover from a major shock such as a... hybrid or armed attack." To maximize its resilience in the face of the Russian threat, aside from fighting in a decentralized manner, Georgia needs to prepare to fight asymmetrically, investing in capabilities that will make Russia's overwhelming advantage in conventional capabilities less relevant to the outcome of a war. As the war in Ukraine has made clear, anti-tank, air defense, artillery, and drones are critical to the development of an asymmetric military capability. And an asymmetric military capability is a key to the development of resilience.

In its [Strategic Defense Review 2021-25](#) Georgia's MOD defines focus areas for capability development as "command and control, communications, intelligence, air defence, aviation, anti-armor, artillery, mobility and counter-mobility, and special operations forces." This dilutes the focus on the capability areas needed to build resilience, a luxury Georgia cannot afford, given that its defense budget is a tiny fraction of Russia's. [Russia spends](#) \$61.7 billion on defense, Georgia spends \$327 million, meaning that Georgia must spend every defense dollar in the way that most efficiently counters the existential threat Russia poses.

For NATO, Georgia's allocation of precious defense funding on capabilities unrelated to resilience is a problem. Although tanks, helicopters and fighter aircraft might be impressive in parades and flyovers, they are expensive to operate and do little to build Georgia's resilience to an invasion, since they would easily be overwhelmed by the vastly superior numbers of the Russian armed forces. Instead, Georgia can help build the military component of its resilience by focusing its investment on the capabilities identified earlier. Aside from the military component of resilience, there are civil defense and societal components, where Ukraine has also demonstrated impressive capability, at least in part due to its size and resources. Lacking these, Georgia can increase its resilience by tightly linking the military, civil defense, and societal sectors into a true total defense effort.

Conclusion

Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine is of course most tragic for Ukraine itself. The death and destruction Russia is causing by the indiscriminate application of military force will take years for Ukraine to recover from. But the war has given Ukraine the opportunity to display its military capabilities in a way that no other NATO applicant in recent memory has had. NATO membership depends on multiple factors, not all of which are under the control of the candidate country, but in military capability, Ukraine has proven that it would be an asset to NATO.

The war's effect on Georgia's candidacy has been, by contrast, uniformly negative. First, the comparison with Ukraine has highlighted Georgia's democratic backsliding, and Tbilisi's spat with Kyiv has raised questions about the former's reliability as an ally. To be fair to the Georgian government's position, its participation in Western sanctions would damage its own economy (which remains overly reliant on trade with Russia) and might also provoke Russia to threaten Georgia militarily. And despite the government's reticence to cooperate with Ukraine's government, Georgia has been [a leading donor](#) of humanitarian assistance to the Ukrainian people, and the Georgian public is overwhelmingly supportive of Ukraine. The criticism of Georgia here is less about its policy than how that policy is articulated. The spectacle of Tbilisi picking a rhetorical fight with Kyiv as the latter fights off a Russian invasion does considerable damage to Georgia's reputation.

Next, the war has revealed the huge gap in military capability between Ukraine and Georgia, a critical factor in the ability of each to contribute to NATO military power. This gap is due less to the size difference between the two countries than to how they fight and the capabilities in which they have invested. Put simply, Ukraine would be a military asset to NATO, while Georgia risks becoming a liability. If Georgia prioritizes the development of Mission Command, and invests in the asymmetric capabilities that build resilience, it can significantly improve its military attractiveness to NATO.

All is not lost for Georgia's NATO bid. The country still has much to recommend it: Georgia has a robust civil society, its public support for NATO membership has been strong and consistent, and it has institutional links with NATO militaries developed over years of training and fighting together in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Georgia was one of the largest force contributors. Unfortunately for Tbilisi, the war in Ukraine has shone a bright light on those areas where Georgia's case for NATO membership is weakest. Georgia needs a significant and sustained focus on improving its democratic credentials and its military capabilities if it is to recover its standing in Brussels.