

Geopolitics rule NATO enlargement: the case of Macedonia and Georgia

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Executive summary

Georgia, a small state in the South Caucasus, is the most ardent supporter of Euro-Atlantic integration in the entire post-Soviet region. Georgia's possible membership in NATO looms large not only in terms of politics in the South Caucasus but increasingly in the tense relations between Russia and the West. In July 2018, NATO extended an official invitation to Macedonia, thereby processing its eighth enlargement. Zooming in on Georgia and Macedonia's performance on membership requirements is a one-of-a-kind litmus test of perspectives of Georgia's membership in NATO. The comparative analysis unveils that Georgia has outperformed Macedonia in all key areas of reforms and that NATO still pays more attention to geopolitical aspects of membership, rather compatibility with the Alliance's requirements.

Keywords: Georgia, NATO, Macedonia, small states, South Caucasus, integration

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Introduction

It is already 10 years since NATO officially declared that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance and it is roughly 15 years that Georgia is doing its “homework” to reach that target. In June 2018, Greece and Macedonia reached a deal in a 27-year old dispute over Macedonia’s official name, according to which the country will be called the “Republic of North Macedonia” (Gjukovikj, 2018). A month later, at the NATO Brussels Summit where Georgia hoped to make a step further towards membership, Macedonia was invited to join NATO. This issue has seemingly no relevance for NATO-Georgia relations, but in terms of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, it triggers a couple of questions. Particularly, has Macedonia actually performed on its “homework reforms” better than Georgia? Does geopolitics still take precedence over reforms agenda in NATO’s enlargement policy?

To address these questions, we have divided the paper into three chapters. In the first chapter, we briefly discuss Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration policy and Georgian politicians’ expectations from NATO. Additionally, we analyse the changing trends in the Georgian public opinion on membership in NATO and reasons behind those changes. In the second chapter, we use several indices and statistical data to conduct a comparative analysis on Georgia and Macedonia’s performances in major areas that NATO reviews for possible membership, namely defence, democracy, and economy. To judge the current perspectives of Georgia’s membership in NATO, it was necessary to analyse a recent NATO enlargement. The Macedonian case suits well as both Georgia and Macedonia are small states with roughly equal economies and social-economic development, sharing the same Soviet legacy and, what is most important, having unresolved political disputes with a neighbour. Of course, Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts cannot be compared with the Greek-Macedonian naming dispute as it could hardly go beyond a diplomatic friction, but still, it is important enough to make NATO refrain from processing Macedonia's membership until the dispute was finally set. Drawing from the results of the comparative analysis, the third chapter discusses NATO's current policy towards Georgia and the ways NATO addresses Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Unpacking Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic Saga

At the official level, Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations date back to early 2000s, i.e. Eduard Shevardnadze’s second presidential term. An official document called “Georgia and the World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future” (Government of Georgia, 2000), a prototype of Georgia’s National Security Concept, highlighted that Georgia perceived NATO’s Partnership for Peace program and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, of which it was a participant, as “an essential step toward the realization of its long-term goal of NATO membership”. At the NATO’s Prague Summit in 2002, President Shevardnadze reiterated that accession to the Alliance is among Georgia’s foreign policy goals (NATO, 2002).

In terms of the vision, the Rose Revolution in 2003 did not change much in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic policy. The only difference was the energy that Georgia's quixotic and flamboyant president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and his team put in achieving this goal, namely reforms and extensive engagement in peacekeeping operations. Membership in NATO was considered to be both an end itself and a source of motivation/responsibility for implementing widescale democratic reforms. On top of that, it was believed to indulge Georgia with "an unprecedented degree of military and political security" (Government of Georgia, 2005). Among the first reforms in the government structure was the establishment of the post of State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration (Civil.ge, 2012), which served as a symbol of Georgia's lust for membership in the European Union and NATO.

The impressive results of early reforms, coupled with their generous endorsement abroad, brought Mikheil Saakashvili to the conclusion that NATO will embrace Georgia very quickly. In 2008, President Saakashvili declared that by the end of his presidential term in 2013, Georgia will become a member of NATO (Civil.ge, 2008). In the economic realm the payoff was evident as, for instance, the World Bank recognized Georgia as "world's top reformer" for 2007 (Di Puccio, 2014). In hard security affairs, the mere fact of conducting defense reforms did not automatically translate into accession. By 2013, NATO not only had not invited Georgia to the Alliance but even had not granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP), with the Intensified Dialogue being the only step forward.

From Georgia's point of view, the best acknowledgement of its Euro-Atlantic aspirations was NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration in 2008, according to which NATO will eventually accept Georgia and Ukraine as members of the organization (NATO, 2008). Indeed, it was a landmark event as it was the first time Georgia received such assurances from NATO's highest body, the North Atlantic Council. However, in terms of the evolution of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, it was not actually path-breaking as the wording of the summit declaration was rather obscure. It lacked a clear-cut road map and did not specify under what conditions Georgia would join NATO or at least get a MAP. Additionally, it left space for NATO allies to eschew processing the MAP on the one hand and restate their commitment to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations on the other.

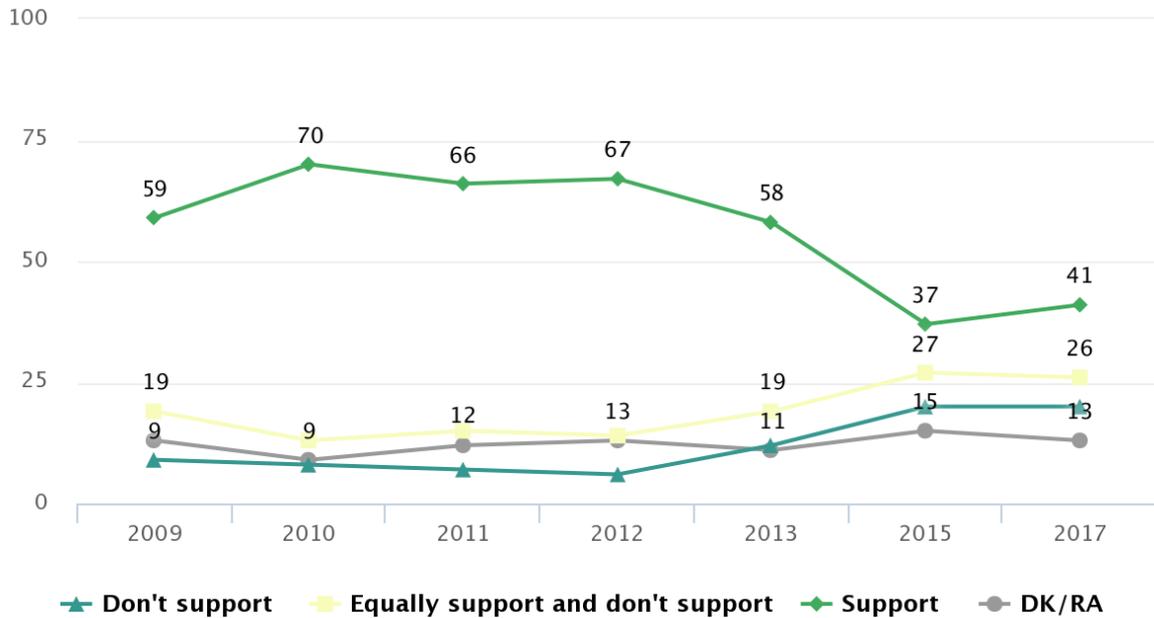
Though NATO did expand its partnership with Georgia, the latter's rush into the Alliance was obviously a cul-de-sac. In all subsequent summit declarations NATO confirmed its "open door" policy towards Georgia, however, the lack of any tangible results gradually sparked disappointment and raising scepticism in Georgia. In 2015, Georgia's Defence Minister Tinatin Khidasheli explicitly voiced her criticism, saying that in Georgia "there is increasing disillusion with Europe and NATO" (InterPressNews, 2015). By and large, Khidasheli turned a blind eye on the Russian factor and posited that NATO overestimated Russia's potential to backfire, should Georgia become a member of NATO (Dempsey, 2016). Apparently, Georgia's Defence Minister tried to persuade the West to securitize Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration as an

indispensable part of NATO's Russian strategy. For instance, she opined that NATO needed Georgia more than the other way around as Georgia's membership will enable NATO to flex its muscles and deprive Russia of the capacity to "guide" the policies of the Alliance (Danilova, 2016). Furthermore, Khidasheli went on saying that in case NATO fails to launch a membership process, Georgia's pro-Western forces may lose the parliamentary elections in 2016 (Menabde, 2016).

NATO-Georgia relations also have some ramifications for Georgia's internal politics. After the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition came to power in 2012, Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), now an opposition party, targeted the government and tried to capitalize on the continuing deadlock in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Occasional statements that NATO allies made on Georgia's vague perspectives fuelled even more criticism against the government. When the US President Barack Obama said in 2014 that there were no immediate plans to accept Georgia and Ukraine as members of NATO, the Georgian government ended up in an awkward situation as it had to express a rather neutral position in an effort to shun criticizing the United States on the one hand and calm the Georgian society on the other. In the end, the UNM lambasted the GD-led government for "inconsistent, uncoordinated, unmotivated and non-ambitious policy and position" (Civil.ge, 2014). Similarly, in August 2018, Grigol Vashadze, Georgia's former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the UNM candidate in the 2018 presidential elections, accused the government of conducting incompetent and inadequate foreign policy, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel dashed Georgians' hopes of receiving a MAP soon (Interfax-Ukraine, 2018).

In time, the lack of progress on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path inter alia had a negative impact on public opinion. The euphoria on possible membership in NATO hit the apex in the 2008 referendum where nearly 80% of the population approved of Georgia's membership in NATO (Georgian Central Election Commission, 2008).

NATOSUPP: Support of Georgia's membership in NATO (%)

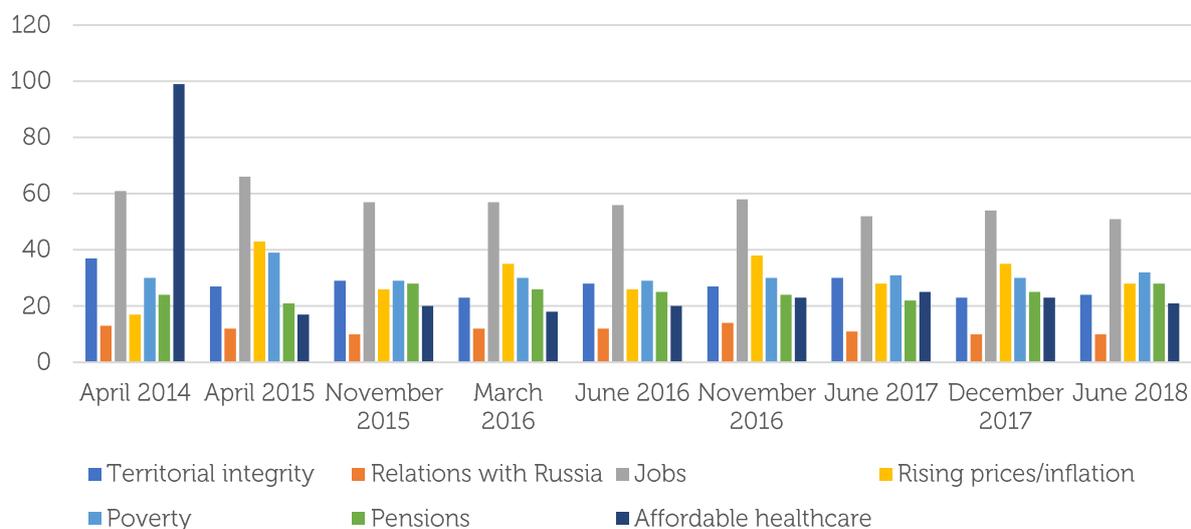


Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

However, as the chart above shows, the popular support for Euro-Atlantic integration shrunk significantly, especially during the rule of the GD-led coalition (2012-2016). At the same time, a public survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) revealed that almost one-fifth of the population favours Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), of which Russia is a founding member (CRRC, 2017).

The stalemate in membership process is not enough to explain the puzzling results of these public opinion surveys. The point is, that though UNM- and GD-led governments fervently aspired for membership in NATO/EU, the Georgian society did not prioritize foreign policy issues equally passionately. Being plagued by daily life concerns actually disenchanted the Georgian population from the foreign policy identity that both the UNM and GD have consistently built for more than 15 years.

Most important national issues in Georgia (% of respondents)



Source: CRRC²

The chart above illustrates this argument best. When asked what the most important national issue was, in 2014-2018 the vast majority of the Georgian population never considered territorial integrity or relations with Russia as the most pressing issue for them. Social-economic challenges, like unemployment, poverty and inflation, have always been at least top two problems that disturbed the Georgian society. To shed more light on this paradox, it is worth mentioning that, according to another CRRC survey (2017), 41 percent of Georgian respondents, who favoured Georgia's accession to the EAEU, believed membership in that organization would improve economic conditions in Georgia. Meanwhile, 33 percent of proponents of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration believed that membership in NATO would help better protect Georgia from external threats, 21 percent thought it would increase Georgia's chances to restore its territorial integrity and only 19 percent opined that it would contribute to dealing with a major issue in Georgia - economic betterment (CRRC, 2017). It means that the Georgian public does not perceive NATO as a panacea for its primary concerns. This is not to say that the Georgian society is going to opt for EAEU instead of NATO, but it points at the discrepancy between perceptions of NATO and major national challenges among the Georgian public on the one hand and political elites on the other.

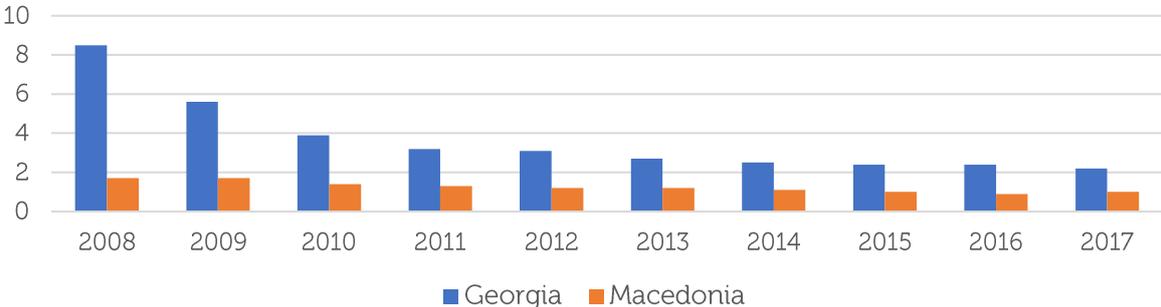
² For detailed information see The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia*. [Online] Available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org> [Accessed on 7 Oct. 2018].

Georgia and Macedonia: Assessing the Progress in Reforms

To paint a more comprehensive picture of Georgia’s membership perspectives in NATO, it is necessary to understand to what extent Georgia has actually progressed on its Euro-Atlantic integration path and whether Georgia lags behind Macedonia, the most recent country that was officially invited to join NATO. The comparative analysis will be conducted based on the guidelines of the MAP which was approved at a North Atlantic Council meeting in 1999.

It goes without saying that as a collective security organization, NATO expects potential members to fulfil certain defence-related obligations. For instance, the MAP guidelines specify that aspirant states should be able to contribute to NATO’s collective security and participate in its missions (NATO, 1999). Unlike Macedonia, Georgia has been among the biggest non-NATO contributors to three major international peace-keeping missions: Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support in Afghanistan. Up to the August war in 2008, Georgia increased its contingent in the MNF-I from 850 soldiers to approximately 2000, thereby becoming the third biggest contributor after the United States and Great Britain (RFE/RL, 2007). Similarly, at its peak, Georgia has sent more than 1500 soldiers to the ISAF mission, while Macedonian contingent has predominantly been less than 200 troops (NATO, n.d.). As of September 2018, Georgia and Macedonia have contributed 870 and 47 soldiers respectively to the ISAF’s successor mission, the Resolute Support (NATO, 2018). On top of that, Georgia is, among non-NATO states, the largest per capita contributor to the ongoing mission in Afghanistan (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2017). It comes as no surprise that Georgian authorities regularly state that Georgia is not only a security consumer but also a provider (Government of Georgia, 2011; Agenda.ge, 2017).

Georgia and Macedonia's Military Expenditures as Percentage of GDP, 2008-2017 (%)



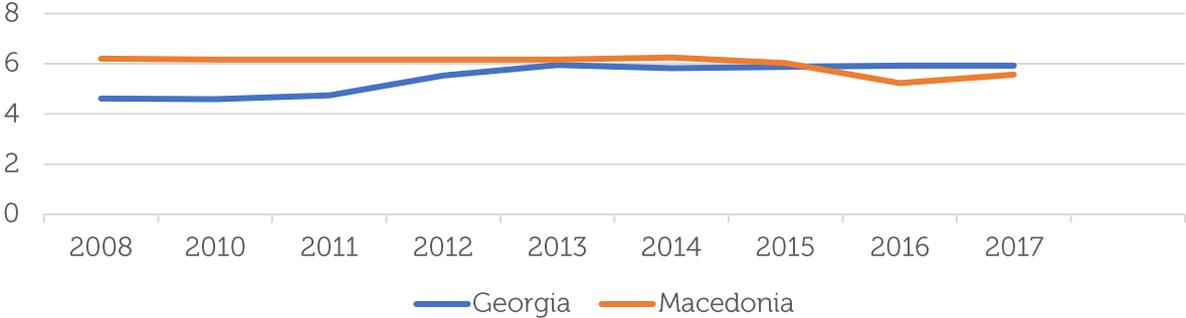
Source: SIPRI

Another defence-related issue, that both aspirants and members of the NATO should always pay attention to, is the ensuring of enough budgetary allocations for defence spending. This serves as a sui generis evidence of a state's resolve to take the collective security seriously. For

NATO members, the acceptable military expenditures-to-GDP ratio is two percent. As the chart above demonstrates, in the run-up of the August War in 2008 that ratio was extremely high in Georgia, however as soon as the GD came to power in 2012, the indicator eventually diminished to 2.2 percent. As to Macedonia, the ratio was close to the NATO standard back in 2008 (1.7 percent) but later it only diminished to sheer one percent.

Though NATO is an alliance, it pays equal attention to aspirants' performance on a myriad of non-military spheres. As specified in the MAP, prospective NATO members should demonstrate their deep commitment to democratic values like individual and economic liberty, rule of law, human rights, social justice and environmental responsibility (NATO, 1999).

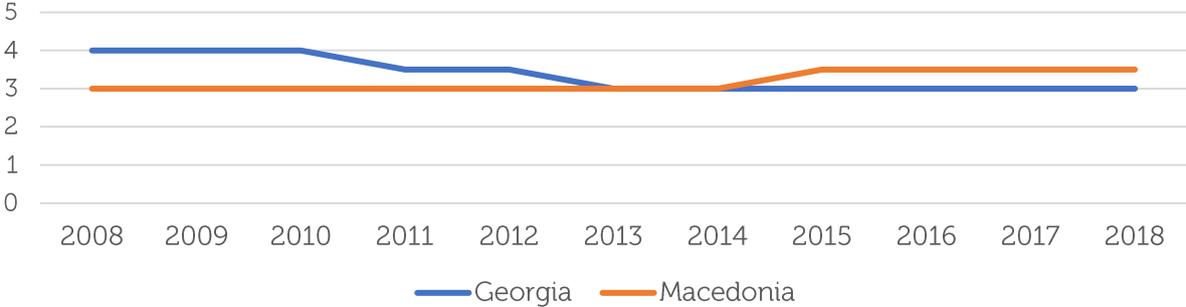
Georgia and Macedonia's Performance according to Democracy Index (on a scale of 0 to 10)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

As the chart above shows, currently, the two countries have roughly equal scores on democracy promotion. It is noteworthy that over a span of the recent 10 years Macedonia's performance has constantly aggravated, while Georgia not only reached the former but scored even more (though with a slight difference).

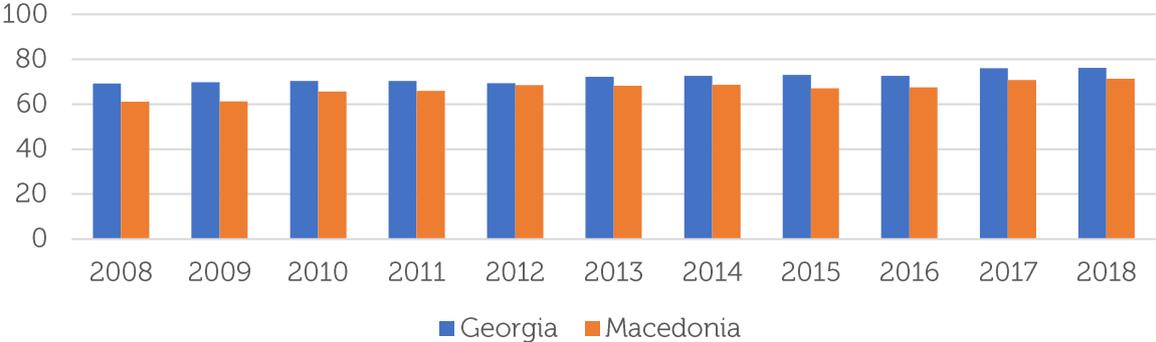
Georgia and Macedonia's Performance according to Freedom in the World Reports (on a scale of 1 to 7)



Source: Freedom House

In its Freedom in the World reports, the Freedom House rates countries based on the aggregate score on political rights and civil liberties. The chart above illustrates the same trend as that indicated by the Economist Intelligence Unit. In 2008, Macedonia was freer than Georgia, while since 2015, the indicators turned upside down. Lastly, Georgia has outperformed Macedonia also in issues pertaining to human well-being. According to Human Development Reports by the UNDP, in 2000, the two states had almost equal scores on human development indicators. However, in 2017, Georgia ranked 70 in the world (with a score of 0.78), while Macedonia ranked 80 (with a score of 0.757) (Human Development Report Office, n.d.; Human Development Report Office, n.d.).

Georgia and Macedonia's Performance according to Index of Economic Freedom, 2008-2018



Source: The Heritage Foundation

Apart from political indicators, Georgia exceeds Macedonia also in economic reforms. The chart above highlights that Macedonia has performed much better in terms of economic freedoms (unlike political ones), however, it still lags behind Georgia. Having incremental success in its economic reforms, from 2003 to 2017, Georgia's GDP grew nearly fourfold (i.e. from \$3.9 billion to \$15.1 billion). Meanwhile, in 2003 Macedonia had a GDP of \$4.9 billion, but in 2017 it ended up worse, with the GDP reaching only \$11.3 billion (World Bank, n.d.).

Understanding NATO's Current Enlargement Policy: Implications for Georgia

Macedonia's poor performance (compared with Georgia) in all spheres discussed brings the key to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic limbo back to geopolitics. The fact that Georgia has disputes over breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and that Russia has a major say here has been the primary driver of NATO's Georgian policy. This has especially loomed large since the August war in 2008 where for the first time Georgia engaged directly with Russian armed forces. Russia's incumbent Prime Minister and former President Dmitri Medvedev clearly denounced Georgia's possible membership in NATO saying that it could provoke a terrible conflict (Government of the Russian Federation, 2018). Moreover, Russia has always

expressed a negative attitude toward NATO exercises in Georgia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

The Russian factor has heavily influenced NATO's Georgian policy in two major ways. First, it split members of the organization into so-called sceptics and non-sceptics. Among the former is Germany which, as already mentioned, is not so enthusiastic about Georgia's membership. Among the latter ones are the United States which not only support Georgia's bid for membership but are the only member of NATO that has put Georgia-related issues on its sanctions policy agenda. Particularly, the US has prohibited financial aid to all countries that have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states or established diplomatic relations with them (US Congress, 2017). Second, the August war forced NATO members to abstain from selling major arms to Georgia, as it feared purchases could trigger another war. Since 2008 perhaps the first major arms purchase agreement was reached only in 2015 when France agreed to deliver air defence systems to Georgia (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2015). Similarly, Georgia and the US concluded a deal on the delivery of "Javelin" anti-tank missiles to Georgia (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2017). However, both deals concern exclusively defensive arms which to some extent reduces the probability of hostilities in the conflict zones.

As a collective security organization, NATO is quite wary of potential sources of interstate confrontation that could engender conflict between an ally and a non-NATO state, dragging the entire alliance into war, or between allies themselves. Though Greece and Turkey, both members of NATO, feud over dominance in the Aegean Sea and continuously implement an extensive military build-up against each other, this case is irrelevant as the two states joined NATO in the Cold War period, i.e. in a completely different geopolitical reality. Macedonia's case aptly fits in the current logic of NATO's enlargement policy as hardly had Macedonia and Greece agreed over the former's official name when NATO extended the official invitation. Interestingly, Macedonia was granted a MAP in 1999, but it took only a month over a 20-year period for NATO to decide on inviting Macedonia to the Alliance. What this means for Georgia is that, despite toughening confrontation between the West and Russia, NATO is not about to change its enlargement policy guidelines and that unresolved conflicts still outweigh the actual progress on MAP requirements.

On the other hand, NATO realizes that it has to elaborate a coherent strategy which would not frustrate Georgia amid non-membership policy. In October 2018, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that "Georgia will not be forced to choose between its territorial integrity and membership of NATO" and that it will become a member of the Alliance (InterPressNews, 2018). In recent years, NATO is trying to have, as Jens Stoltenberg put it, "more NATO in Georgia and more Georgia in NATO" (InterPressNews, 2018) by increasing the toolkit of bilateral cooperation. In 2014, NATO introduced the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, while in 2015-2016 the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre and the Defence Institution Building School were established (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, n.d.).

Also, Georgia prepares its infantry companies to be part of NATO's Response Force and cooperates with NATO on issues pertaining to Black Sea Security issues (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, n.d.; NATO, 2018). The latter is a relatively new, but quite promising area of cooperation as NATO is currently trying to balance Russian military presence in the Black Sea. Being a coastal state, Georgia plays a key role in NATO's Black Sea strategy. According to the Warsaw Summit Communiqué of 2016, NATO will support "regional efforts by the Black Sea littoral states aimed at ensuring security and stability" and strengthen the "dialogue and cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine in this regard" (NATO, 2016).

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Macedonia and Georgia's reform policies unveils that by democratic, economic and human development indicators Georgia outperformed Macedonia and the latter has even backslidened in some areas. In terms of defence, Georgia has demonstrated an utmost commitment to NATO's collective security, at times sending ten times as big contingents as Macedonia does. On top of that, in recent years, Georgia has maintained the NATO standards on military expenditures-to-GDP ratio while Macedonia has constantly decreased its defence budget. All this leaves us with a conclusion that, irrespective of Georgia's achievements, the "Russia first" approach has always come before in NATO's enlargement policy and, as the resolution of Macedonian-Greek dispute shows, will still come before the actual state of meeting MAP requirements.

As long as Russia strictly opposes NATO's penetration into the South Caucasus, the Euro-Atlantic integration will be a fool's errand for Georgia. NATO does not want to pay lip service to Georgia and to escape that, it has developed a new modus operandi which will encourage Georgia to continue its Euro-Atlantic path by expanding the ambit of bilateral cooperation. With clearly no membership plans, in short-to-middle term perspective, NATO will develop this strategy by capitalizing on such prospective areas as Black Sea Security, NATO's Response Force etc.

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