

Boiling Point Across the Atlantic: How Georgia Is Cutting the Branch It Sits On

Previous editions of this journal have thoroughly [documented](#) how the Georgian Dream regime has rapidly consolidated authoritarian control, capturing all levers of power within the country. This state capture has extended across all branches of government, encompassed key economic and financial assets, and ensured near-total dominance over the information space. Crucially, this transformation has not been driven by domestic forces alone; as previously [discussed](#), it has been heavily influenced—and in many ways enabled—by strategies conceived not in Tbilisi but in Moscow. Obviously, Russia's clear objective is to maintain a loyal proxy regime in Georgia for as long as possible.

This reality raises an essential question for NATO and other Western partners: if Georgia holds no

strategic significance, why have allied countries invested billions of taxpayer dollars into its development over the years? And if Georgia does matter, why are these same allies passively allowing Russia to reverse the country's democratic and Euro-Atlantic progress? This contradiction demands serious and urgent reflection.

This article seeks to evaluate the current state of NATO–Georgia relations. Are these ties continuing to unravel? Is anyone taking decisive steps to confront the errors and neglect that brought Georgia to this point? And, most importantly, are NATO–Georgia relations irreparably broken, or is there still a chance to revive the country's Euro-Atlantic path?



SHOTA GVINERIA
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010–14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



NATO at a Crossroads: Challenges in a Fractured Security Environment

To address the critical questions surrounding NATO–Georgia relations, one must first grasp NATO’s current priorities and the internal debates shaping its strategic outlook. The Alliance is operating in the most volatile security landscape since the end of the Cold War. The transatlantic bond, long the cornerstone of NATO’s collective defense, now faces growing pressure from both internal divisions and external challenges.

As EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas [observed](#) at the 2025 Lennart Meri Conference, Europe has entered what she termed an “acceptance phase” with the United States. While American commitment remains—for now—there are increasing indications that Europe must brace

for a future with a less predictable U.S. role and limited time to adapt.

NATO was never designed to confront the kind of internal tensions it now faces.

NATO was never designed to confront the kind of internal tensions it now faces. The Alliance has proven highly effective in deterring external adversaries and managing conventional threats but it struggles to respond to internal discord, whether it is Hungary’s persistent obstructionism or ambiguous U.S. messaging on issues like Greenland. The unity that once served as NATO’s greatest strength now highlights its institutional vulnerabilities in managing crises from within. Compounding this is the fact that NATO’s structure was built for deterrence, prevention, and out-of-area missions, not for sustained warfare or direct territorial defense. This raises pressing concerns about the Alliance’s

preparedness as the security environment continues to deteriorate.

Recent high-level meetings, including the Antalya gathering of foreign ministers, have [underscored](#) a broad consensus on the need to increase defense spending, boost industrial capacity, and place resilience at the heart of NATO's strategy. But the urgency is unmistakable: Europe must not only spend more but spend smarter, ensuring that investments translate into real capabilities when they are needed, not years down the line. These priorities will be central to the agenda of the upcoming NATO summit in the Hague in June 2025.

At the same time, Russia's military, although [far less resourced](#) than the combined forces of Europe, continues to pose an existential threat through its effective use of both conventional and hybrid tactics aimed at undermining the cohesion and stability of the Alliance.

In response, resilience has emerged as the new frontline of transatlantic security. Building it [requires](#) a coordinated effort across governments, the private sector, and civil society. Each must play a role in safeguarding critical infrastructure, combating disinformation, and preparing populations for the realities of modern conflict. The psychological domain remains particularly vulnerable as adversaries exploit cognitive weaknesses and sow division through increasingly sophisticated information operations. Russia's tactics, [honed](#) first in Georgia and now deployed across Europe, demonstrate that the battle for hearts and minds is no less decisive than traditional military confrontation.

NATO's true strength lies not only in deterring conventional threats but also in its ability to learn from past failures and cultivate the resilience needed to face the complexities of hybrid warfare.

Ultimately, NATO's true strength lies not only in deterring conventional threats but also in its ability to learn from past failures and cultivate the resilience needed to face the complexities of hybrid warfare. A challenging but necessary truth is that few within NATO's leadership circles openly acknowledge that Georgia's current democratic backsliding is, in large part, a consequence of the Alliance's [inaction](#). Fewer still are willing to admit that Georgia's deepening slide into Russia's orbit represents not just a national issue but a strategic challenge for NATO itself.

Even more troubling is that current trends in Euro-Atlantic geopolitical discourse [suggest](#) a growing risk that the same mistakes will be repeated with Ukraine. A telling example was the [debate](#) among Allies over whether to invite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Hague summit. This dispute exposed internal fractures and signaled wavering resolve at a moment when unity is essential for the future of Europe. Although Zelenskyy was [ultimately](#) invited, the lingering sense of disunity left a troubling aftertaste.

The [experiences](#) of Ukraine, Finland, and Sweden illustrate that societal resilience—the willingness and capacity of citizens to defend their country both physically and psychologically—is as essential as military hardware. Finland's example shows that recognizing a threat is only the beginning; without clear communication and preparedness, public morale can erode rapidly as it did in Georgia.

What we are [witnessing](#) in Georgia today is a textbook case of what Sergei Rastorguev described as the ultimate aim of information warfare: to make an adversary abandon its defenses voluntarily by instilling fear and helplessness through overwhelming cognitive operations. Taken together, the lessons, both positive and negative, point to one crucial insight: if Ukrainians begin to lose hope, their ability to withstand Russia's relentless assault will be gravely weakened.

Georgia: From Accession Aspirations to Footnote

The trajectory of security in the Black Sea region starkly illustrates the consequences of NATO's broader strategic challenges. A decade ago, the region included three firm Allies and two promising aspirants. Today, Türkiye has become a difficult ally, Romania and Bulgaria face massive hybrid assaults, Ukraine is at war, and Georgia is governed by Kremlin proxies. Once the model aspirant for NATO's open-door policy, Georgia was singled out in the [2014 Secretary General's report](#) for its "European path" and was promised substantial support to prepare for membership.

That optimism has since vanished. [The 2024 report](#) mentions Georgia only in passing, stripped of future perspectives. What was once a symbol of NATO's eastward ambition has been reduced to a footnote—still involved in joint exercises, but politically sidelined. This reflects not only deteriorating NATO-Georgia relations but also the Alliance's broader retreat from enlargement and strategic uncertainty on its eastern flank.

Over the past decade, NATO-Georgia cooperation has continued through the [Substantial NATO-Georgia Package](#) (SNGP), which encompasses 13 initiatives spanning medical support, language training, and defense standardization. Centers like JTEC have facilitated joint exercises and contributed to the modernization of Georgia's military. NATO has also supported governance reforms through the [Building Integrity Program](#). Yet these efforts increasingly run on inertia, undermined by Georgia's political ambivalence and the shifting regional environment.

Political ties, however, have weakened significantly. The last high-level NATO-Georgia Commission [meeting](#) took place in 2019. Since then, Georgia's presence in NATO forums has dwindled and en-

gagement has shifted from strategic partnership to technical cooperation. This decline parallels a broader political shift within Georgia itself. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government has embraced increasingly anti-Western rhetoric and scaled back democratic reforms, [alarming](#) NATO allies and eroding trust.

Statements by former Prime Minister Garibashvili [blaming](#) NATO for the war in Ukraine, along with Georgia's [absence](#) from recent NATO summits, clearly signaled a shift away from Euro-Atlantic integration. His successor, Mr. Kobakhidze, has further deepened this trajectory, overseeing the dismissal of pro-Western civil servants, reducing the size of Georgia's NATO diplomatic mission, and dismantling key institutions supporting Euro-Atlantic cooperation. Most notably, the Information Center on NATO and the EU—a long-standing state-backed agency dedicated to raising public awareness about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations—was formally [shut down](#) in June 2025.

Today, NATO-Georgia relations exist in a paradox: continued technical cooperation amid political disengagement and strategic drift.

Today, NATO-Georgia relations exist in a [paradox](#): continued technical cooperation amid political disengagement and strategic drift. Years of partnership have built solid defense capabilities and interoperability, but these achievements are now overshadowed by declining political will and Georgia's pivot toward a more Russia-accommodating posture. If this continues, Georgia even risks disappearing from NATO's periphery.

While the Georgian Dream regime bears responsibility for halting Georgia's NATO ambitions, the absence of a Membership Action Plan and the geopolitical pressure from Russia have constrained

the Alliance as well. Without renewed reforms and political alignment with NATO values, Georgia's path to membership remains blocked, leaving it exposed in a volatile security environment.

[Exploiting](#) this strategic “grey zone,” Russia has employed hybrid warfare to subdue Georgia and is waging a grinding war of [attrition](#) against Ukraine, aiming for a comparable result. The sobering reality is that Moscow's gamble has largely succeeded. Instead of drawing closer to NATO, both countries have seen their membership [prospects](#) recede, along with the broader vision of a stable and integrated Black Sea region. Each time a senior American official declares that NATO membership for Ukraine is off the table, the Kremlin is further emboldened, reassured that its aggressive tactics have been both practical and rewarding.

Georgia's Existential Security Dilemma and the Path Forward

Georgia now faces an existential security dilemma. With limited military capacity, [ranking](#) 94th globally, it remains highly vulnerable without strong defense and security support from NATO and its Allies. While the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package offers vital assistance, it cannot substitute for the protection provided by full NATO membership or sustained Allied backing.

Without close cooperation with NATO and its member states, the survival and effectiveness of Georgia's armed forces are simply impossible. Georgia [lacks](#) the self-sufficient resources—be it modern equipment, advanced training, or technological know-how—to independently sustain a capable and modern military. For years, NATO and its allies have provided the essential support, supplying uniforms, weapons, and, crucially, high-standard training and education that have enabled the Georgian military to reach and maintain international standards. If these ties are severed, there is

no realistic alternative—no other partners are willing or able to fill this gap. The idea that non-NATO states like Iran, Russia, or China could substitute for this support is not only unrealistic but dangerous, as none of these countries has any interest in strengthening Georgia's defense; in fact, their interests are often directly opposed.

Moreover, the very foundation of Georgia's defense readiness is interoperability with NATO. This is not just about having compatible equipment, but about sharing doctrines, participating in joint exercises, and being part of a security culture that prioritizes accountability and professionalism. As recent years have shown, when cooperation with NATO is weakened, Georgia's military quickly loses access to vital resources, cutting-edge training, and the collective expertise that underpins its operational effectiveness. In short, without close and active relations with NATO and the Allies, Georgia's armed forces would not only stagnate—they would face a rapid decline, leaving the country exposed and vulnerable in an increasingly dangerous region.

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, its rejection of ceasefires, and its resistance to peace talks have [reaffirmed](#) a hard truth: democratic states near Russia cannot survive without credible security guarantees. Georgia's internal resources and regional partnerships are no match for Moscow's hybrid tactics, military superiority, and regional influence. Without deeper NATO cooperation, Georgia risks isolation and diminished sovereignty in a volatile security environment.

Democratic states near Russia cannot survive without credible security guarantees.

The pressing question is: what can be done—and by whom? In a country governed by a pro-Russian regime, Georgia's pro-Western society and politi-

cal opposition must step up. A unified opposition could formally request a meeting with the North Atlantic Council at the ambassadorial level to present a clear vision for democratic renewal and outline how NATO can help. Now more than ever, NATO needs a reliable partner, and Georgia needs a credible alternative to its ruling regime.

Civil society must also act decisively. Beyond short-term campaigns, it should lead long-term public diplomacy efforts to counter government propaganda. Engaging forums like NATO Engages and advocating for a Black Sea-focused session at the margins of NATO summits would allow Georgia to share its firsthand [experience](#) with hybrid threats, offering lessons relevant to the entire Alliance.

NATO, for its part, must navigate skillfully across the nuanced border between two dangerous scenarios: normalizing relations with the ruling regime or isolating Georgia from the Euro-Atlantic security arrangements. There is a golden middle to avoid these two scenarios. NATO should take a strong stance against the regime's authoritarian policies and, at the same time, enhance relations with the pro-democracy stakeholders in Georgia. NATO must also welcome engagement from pro-democracy actors and remove bureaucratic barriers that obstruct cooperation.

Western hesitation created a strategic vacuum that Russia eagerly exploited: first in Georgia, then in Crimea, and ultimately in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Did NATO miss a historic opportunity by not offering Georgia and Ukraine a clear path to membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit? Perhaps. What is beyond doubt is that Western hesitation created a strategic vacuum that Russia eagerly exploited: first in Georgia, then in Crimea, and ultimately in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Reflecting on this, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz recently [stated](#) that the war in Ukraine might have been avoided if the country had joined NATO in 2008.

Georgia was once seen as the gateway to Ukraine; today, Ukraine is the keystone of European security, and their fates remain intertwined through the shared security architecture of the Black Sea.

This geopolitical turbulence has laid bare the cost of delay, but it also created a window of opportunity that Georgia cannot afford to miss. Georgia was once seen as the gateway to Ukraine; today, Ukraine is the keystone of European security, and their fates remain intertwined through the shared security architecture of the Black Sea. Integrating both countries into European and Euro-Atlantic structures is no longer just a strategic option — it is a prerequisite for lasting peace and stability in Europe ■