

## NATO-Russia Clash over the Pro-Western Post-Soviet Republics

Tato BEZHITASHVILI<sup>1\*</sup>

Jonathan Gerdes SCOTT<sup>2\*\*</sup>

### Abstract

The future of the ex-Soviet republics represents a central point of contention between NATO and Russia. The article analyzes the situation in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the USSR. It refers to NATO and Russia's strategies towards the eastern European states. The piece explains the motivation behind the pro-Western objectives of ex-Soviet states, particularly the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia. The paper consists of three major parts. These include the aspiration of post-Soviet republics to join NATO (1), the eastward enlargement of Euro-Atlantic structures (2), and the Russian response to NATO eastward enlargement (3). The study is organized around the following question: What has been the nature of the NATO-Russia clash over the pro-Western post-Soviet republics? Its primary method, literature review, examines scholarly articles and books. As for the scientific relevance of the paper, the issue of NATO integration is still unachievable for particular ex-Soviet states. Hence, explaining the roots of confrontation and finding the ways of solution are likely to fill the existing gaps and give an impetus to the pro-Western states to realize their objectives.

**Keywords:** Baltics, Georgia, Integration, NATO, Russia, Ukraine

---

<sup>1</sup> \* Master Student of International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: 21300418@ibsu.edu.ge.

<sup>2</sup> \*\* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. E-mail: jscot@ibsu.edu.ge

---

## Introduction

Since the dissolution of the USSR, the future of the ex-Soviet republics appeared a central point of contention between the West and Russia. It is noteworthy that the issue of pro-Russian countries did not create the quarrel between the NATO alliance and Russia, just because it was up to the states to decide their future, and NATO would respect any choice. Instead, particular emphasis should be put on the pro-Western states. They had a revisionist policy towards Russia and a determined aspiration for joining NATO. Thus, the Euro-Atlantic alliance found itself obliged to incorporate the Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, post-Soviet Russia has always been reluctant to give up its imperialist ambitions over the post-Soviet space.

The study is organized around the following question: What has been the nature of the NATO-Russia clash over the pro-Western post-Soviet republics? Its primary method, literature review, aims at examining scholarly articles and books. In addition, the literature review is conducted to find existing gaps and then fill them through further exploration of the topic. As for the scientific relevance of the paper, the issue of NATO integration is still unachievable for particular ex-Soviet states. Hence, explaining the roots of confrontation and finding the ways of solution are likely to fill the existing gaps and give an impetus to the pro-Western states to realize their objectives.

The paper consists of three major parts. These include the aspiration of post-Soviet republics to join NATO (1), the eastward enlargement of Euro-Atlantic structures (2), and Russian response to NATO eastward enlargement (3).

## The Aspiration of Euro-centric Post-Soviet Republics to Join NATO

The first bulk of studies observes the aspiration of Euro-centric post-Soviet republics to join NATO. Here should be particularly mentioned the Baltic states, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The three countries set a determined course towards the NATO alliance (Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2019, p. 18). They unwaveringly continued doing their homework related to democratic transformation and economic restructuring.

Ex-Soviet states aspired NATO membership for several reasons. The willingness of the ex-Soviet states to gain recognition as a full-fledged part of the West played one of the primary roles. NATO, besides a military organization, was believed to be representative of the most civilized part of the world. The pro-Western countries identified the Western institutions, primarily the EU and NATO, as the promoter of democracy, security, and prosperity. The East, on the contrary, was perceived as both the source of insecurity, poverty, and oppression. The similar identities of the NATO members and certain ex-Soviet states, especially a tolerant, inclusive, pluralist, democracy-oriented society, play an enormous role here.

Attaining the membership within the Euro-Atlantic structures was equivalent to coming out of the Russian sphere of influence. Accordingly, the Baltics society and political spectrum

came together in the effort to break free from the Russian-led politics (Urbelis, 2003, p. 3).

“Great-power competition plays out along the East-West axis in Ukraine, Georgia, and Central Asia” (Shea, 2019, p. 21). Since NATO appears as the most effective security alliance, it is perceived to be the best security guarantor for small states in the eastern flank of Europe. Former Soviet states have been struggling for survival from military and hybrid threats, misinformation, and provocations of Russia. Thus, the survival from “Russian claws” is possible through cooperation with NATO, which famously represents a “security umbrella” for about 1 billion people (NATO, 2019). Article 5 is a cornerstone of the Washington Treaty as it guarantees collective security for all NATO members (Tertrais, 2016, p. 2). Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia declares the integration into the EU and NATO as Georgia’s top foreign policy priorities (Constitution of Georgia, 1995). Similarly, Ukraine has the integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures enshrined into its Constitution.

The rational choice approach is another driver for ex-Soviet states to find NATO essential. Specifically, countries use pragmatic assumptions and find NATO a more beneficial source of development than Russia. Consequently, Georgia’s pro-western policies provide clear guidance for the population, the same way the Baltics and Ukraine do.

Hence, since the breakup of the USSR, all ex-Soviet republics emerged as sovereign actors with the freedom of choosing their future trajectories. Nevertheless, the pro-Western objective appeared more difficult to fulfill than remaining in the Russia-led orbit.

## The Quest for Eastward Enlargement of Euro-Atlantic Structures

NATO’s “open door policy” primarily focuses on the enlargement of its membership through including pro-Western European states. Putting it into a legal framework, Article 10 of Washington Treaty states that “the Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty” (NATO, 2019).

It is no surprise that peace and security ease the struggle for democratic transition and stable development of the country (Asmus, Kugler, & Larrabee, 1993). Hence, the NATO membership helped nations including Greece, Turkey, Spain, and Portugal achieve democratic stability. It also reduced the chances for backsliding towards authoritarianism. Therefore, the best way to encourage progress is to provide security through offering NATO membership.

As the reverse of the operational depth of Russia, the eastward enlargement of NATO could increase the security in the West itself. The integration of Eastern European countries could stop the East-West confrontation and fill the existing security vacuum. “Projection of stability to the east is a prudent investment to secure the peace in Europe,” identified Senator Lugar (1993). Indeed, the inclusion of ex-Soviet states would foster stabilization throughout the continent.

Because NATO is a collective security alliance, its enlargement focuses on small Eastern European states for which guaranteeing the necessary dose of protection appears challenging, especially in the settings of increasing Russian ambitions (Franekova, 2002, pp. 10-11).

NATO enlargement policy in the eastern edge of the continent gradually moves the NATO border closer to the Russian one. Consequently, the membership of the three Baltic republics into the alliance took precedence for other ex-Soviet countries to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Yet, the inclusion of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania into NATO exacerbated the Russo-NATO relations and constrained the room for maneuver for the rest of the former USSR countries. Nevertheless, "NATO is not about to change its enlargement policy guidelines" (Davtyan, 2018, p. 10).

Despite Russia's accusatory rhetoric towards NATO, the latter has never perceived its eastward enlargement as aggressive or anti-Russian. The alliance is purely built upon the free choice of trans-Atlantic states to decide what type of security organization is preferable for their peaceful and stable development. There have been no threat from the side of NATO towards Russia, and any exercise has been announced only within the confines of previous agreements.

### Russian Response to NATO Eastward Enlargement

The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War. However, Moscow perceived the previously-imagined threat from NATO as irreversibly aggressive. According to Kremlin's vision, NATO has an intimidating plan for entering the security area of Russia, particularly the latter's self-declared Near Abroad (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 77-79).

Vladimir Putin has repeatedly been mentioning the "red lines" while criticizing the attempts by NATO to incorporate Georgia and Ukraine and the positioning of its Missile Defense System (MDS) near Russian territory (Kavadze & Kavadze, 2014, pp. 22-25). In case of crossing these "red lines", Russia's reaction is likely to bring disastrous results for Georgia and Ukraine.

Russia impedes NATO's eastward enlargement with two principal methods, divided into two periods, namely the pre-2008 and post-2008. During the first period, Russia attempted to dissolve the unity of NATO from within by splitting it over the issue of Ukraine and Georgia's membership. The second period refers to the relative disintegration in the Georgian-Western partnership. Because of the security concerns, the latter started refraining from arms trade with the former. It was only 2015 when France delivered air-defense systems to Georgia (Davtyan, 2018).

Baltic membership in NATO in 2004 appeared as a turning point for Russia. Since that time, Russia has been taking all the potential measures for blocking NATO's eastward expansion. As Hyde-Price (2011, p. 48) explains, the Russo-

Georgian conflict of 2008 once again demonstrated that Russia is unwilling to give up its regional or global ambitions. Hence, the more Georgia attempts to highlight its distinctiveness from Russia and integrate into the West, the higher the pressure from Moscow towards Tbilisi (German, 2015, p. 613).

According to some scholars, despite Georgia and Ukraine's solid desire and a considerable capability for meeting the NATO requirements, the final say remains in the hands of Russian officials. As MacFarlane (2016, p. 231) explains, the peaceful resolution of Georgia's security issues depends on the nature of NATO's attitudes towards Russia and vice-versa rather than Georgia's foreign policy alignment towards any organization. Nevertheless, it should be underscored that Ukraine and Georgia should maintain their unwavering aspiration towards the Euro-Atlantic integration and do homework perfectly.

### Conclusion

The Euro-Atlantic integration has been a primary foreign policy objective for certain pro-Western ex-Soviet states since the 1990s. Yet, only the Baltics could join the alliance. Despite firm support from the NATO alliance, Russia impedes the entire process. Consequently, the two pro-Western states, Ukraine and Georgia, are still left outside the alliance. The paper paid attention to three major topics. These include the pursuit of pro-Western ex-Soviet states to join NATO (1), the quest of the NATO alliance for the eastward enlargement (2), and the role and response of Russia to NATO's enlargement policies (3).

The article found that the post-Soviet republics aspire the NATO integration because of several reasons. These include the chance for coming out of the Russian sphere of influence, considering the Western institutions as the source of democracy, security, and prosperity, perceiving Article 5 as a cornerstone for guaranteeing collective security, and rational choice approach as a driver for joining NATO. The states of research focus realize that joining the NATO alliance means increased Western aid and multidimensional support. On the contrary, the membership of the Russia-led organizations is considered as regression. Whatever Russia has been doing to its neighbors has never been supportive.

According to NATO's "open door policy," it is up to the post-Soviet republics to build their future with or without the alliance. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that democratic transition is way easy in the conditions of security. Therefore, the membership of the Euro-Atlantic organization prepares the solid ground for democratic transformation. Interestingly, the NATO membership of former Soviet states increases the degree of security in the West itself. By not abandoning but incorporating the small post-Soviet countries, the alliance protects the continent and the trans-Atlantic space from flux.

Russia has an enormous interest in the whole post-Soviet space. Despite maintaining its influence over most of these states, it could not prevent the Baltics from joining NATO. Nevertheless, Russia has been impeding Georgia and Ukraine's NATO integration by sending warning signals and mentioning

“red lines.” Additionally, Russia maximally uses its leverages to ensure supremacy in its self-declared “Near Abroad.”

To summarize, the post-Soviet space has been an area of high interest for both NATO and Russia. If the former has attempted to incorporate the pro-Western states for protecting them from Russia, the latter has never given up its policies towards the ex-Soviet republics. Hence, the process of NATO integration is full of uncertainty and is unlikely to progress in the predictable future. Yet, the ongoing tensions near the Ukrainian border may become a precondition for solving the decades-long issue over Ukraine and Georgia’s NATO integration.

## References

- Asmus, R. D., Kugler, R. L., & Larrabee, F. S. (1993). Building A New NATO. *Foreign Affairs*, 28-40. Retrieved November 20, 2021, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-eastern-europe/1993-09-01/building-new-nato>
- Constitution of Georgia. (1995, August 24). Tbilisi. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/30346/35/en/pdf>
- Davtyan, E. (2018). Geopolitics rule NATO enlargement: the case of Macedonia and Georgia. 1-13. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <http://ysu.am/files/6-1590489402-.pdf>
- Franekova, A. (2002). Uneasy Expansion: NATO and Russia. *Harvard International Review*, 24(3), 10-11. Retrieved November 23, 2021, from [www.jstor.org/stable/42762829](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42762829)
- German, T. (2015). Heading west? Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic path. *International Affairs*, 91(3), 601-614. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/91/3/601/2326859?redirectedFrom=fulltext>
- Hyde-Price, A. (2011). NATO’s Political Transformation and International Order. In J. Ringsmose, & S. Rynning, *NATO’s NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT: A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT* (pp. 45-54). Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/59845/1/656748095.pdf>
- Kavadze, A., & Kavadze, T. (2014). NATO Expansion to the East: Georgia’s Way to NATO Membership, Perspectives and Challenges. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2), 21-27. Retrieved November 13, 2021, from <https://jss.ibsu.edu.ge/jms/index.php/jss/article/view/77>
- Lugar, R. (1993). Admit Poland as a NATO member? The Washington Times. Retrieved November 17, 2021
- MacFarlane, N. (2016). Georgia’s Security Predicament. In G. Nodia, *25 Years of Independent Georgia: Achievements and Unfinished Projects* (pp. 208-236). Tbilisi: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Retrieved November 13, 2021, from <https://library.iliauni.edu.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Georgia-2-5.pdf>
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(5), 77-89. Retrieved November 19, 2021, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>
- NATO. (2019). Press Conference. *By NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg ahead of the Leaders’ Meeting in London on 3 and 4 December*. Retrieved November 7, 2021, from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_171460.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_171460.htm?selectedLocale=en)
- NATO. (2019). The North Atlantic Treaty. Washington D.C. Retrieved November 13, 2021, from [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)
- Nisnevich, Y., & Ryabov, A. (2019). Post-Soviet Authoritarianism. *Sociological Research*, 58(1-2), 1-19. Retrieved November 28, 2021, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/010610154.2019.1688994>
- Shea, J. (2019). NATO in the Era of Global Complexity. In T. Valášek (Ed.), *NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SHARED SECURITY: NATO’S NEXT 70 YEARS* (pp. 19-23). Carnegie Europe. Retrieved December 3, 2021, from [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/NATO\\_int\\_final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/NATO_int_final1.pdf)
- Tertrais, B. (2016). Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: Its Origins, Meaning and Future. 1-8. Retrieved November 20, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10238>
- Urbelis, V. (2003). *Defence Policies of the Baltic States: from the Concept of Neutrality towards NATO membership*. NATO-EAPC Individual Fellowship Report, Vilnius. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/01-03/vaidotas.pdf>