

NATO Membership Action Plan: A Chance for Ukraine and Georgia

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I Introduction

NATO members will have to decide at the Bucharest summit at the beginning of April whether to respond positively to requests made by Ukraine and Georgia to receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) or not.

It is in Estonia's and every other NATO member state's interest to extend MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia as soon as possible, preferably in Bucharest. For Estonia and other countries of the so-called Vilnius group, the MAP process offered a valuable framework for pre-accession cooperation with NATO. It facilitated the implementation of various reforms and enabled them to receive NATO assistance in introducing reforms. The progress made by current MAP countries – Albania, Macedonia and Croatia – who are quite close to the successful conclusion of their pre-accession preparations, provides further proof of the effectiveness of the MAP format.

The aim of this paper is to make suggestions and raise issues that would help policymakers to prepare for the upcoming Bucharest summit. This paper outlines the arguments in favour of extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia, asserting that they are ready for it. Two main arguments against such a move are also considered. The authors arrive at the conclusion that both counter-arguments are unviable and that the second one – the opinion of the Kremlin – should not even be taken into account by NATO members.

Researchers of an Estonian think-tank have prepared this paper; the experiences of Estonia and other Baltic states are especially useful for the analysis of this issue. Being on the other side of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, the Baltic states could not be among the founding members of NATO. The Baltic states have gone through the rigorous process of joining NATO. Moreover, the MAP format was initially devised for the provision of pre-accession assistance to the Baltic states and other countries that acceded later.

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II Ukraine and Georgia are ready for membership action plans

The first argument used by member states, who are either against giving MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia at the moment or who are still undecided, is that the two countries are not ready.

Most NATO military and civilian experts maintain that Ukraine and Georgia have fulfilled the necessary criteria for receiving MAPs. Consequently, the

next logical step for NATO would be offering MAPs to them. The problem arises here, because members have differing interpretations of the issue whether the MAP format contains a ‘promise’ for future NATO membership. Some members are not at all convinced that Ukraine and Georgia should ever belong to NATO. Hence, they claim that there is a direct connection between the MAP cooperation framework and future membership.

In fact, the issue is not whether Ukraine and Georgia are ready for MAPs, but whether all NATO members can achieve a political consensus with regard to extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia. On the one hand, even sceptical states do not question the fact that both of them have made significant progress in capitalising on the existing cooperation frameworks. On the other hand, some aspects of the development of state institutions and society in Ukraine and Georgia could be easily used to justify the refusal to establish MAPs for them. No doubt, Ukrainian and Georgian social reforms, and security sector reform in particular, have not been less successful than those of the states who joined the MAP process nine years ago and who will soon accede to the North Atlantic Alliance. This means that the actions of member states are without any doubt politically motivated, when they either support or do not support MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia. If a positive political decision were adopted, all the problems and omissions, for which Ukraine and Georgia are blamed today, would transform into future challenges.

The North Atlantic Treaty stipulates that any European state that supports shared values and upholds the principles of democracy and the rule of law could be invited to accede to the Treaty. As member states who are hesitant about offering MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia consider Russia a European country, even though it stretches to the Sea of Japan, they cannot have any valid arguments against the ‘Europeanness’ of Ukraine and Georgia. If Turkey, situated on the European and Asian subcontinents, is an honourable member of NATO, the non-admission of Georgia cannot be justified in any way, as it has been a part of the European cultural space since ancient times.

Here, the issue of perception plays an important role: do NATO members perceive Ukraine or Georgia as ‘one of us’? Behind the mask of enlargement fatigue, the West hides its negative preconceptions, even racism and xenophobia directed against the two countries. The question is where Ukraine and Georgia are located on the mental world map of NATO members or, figuratively speaking, which foreign ministry bureau deals with them. Do they fall under the scope of the CIS, in which case bureaus for the CIS manage them together with countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, or do they have a special status as subjects of the EU neighbourhood policy who have changed the dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ inside NATO?

A decade ago, ‘old’ NATO members maintained that ‘the Baltic states are different from us’. Toomas Hendrik Ilves, then foreign minister, mocked this attitude at a lecture held at the assembly hall of the University of Tartu: ‘Minsk-Pinsk, Tallinn-Stalin, what’s the difference?’ Unlike Central European countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had to fight actively against the image of being states that ‘belong to the former Soviet Union’. According to some Western politicians, this was the reason that granted Russia the right to have a say in the future of the Baltic states. Unfortunately, there are still some NATO

members who unofficially endorse the same practice in connection with Ukraine and Georgia.

III Russia cannot have the right of veto

This brings us to the second and more compelling counter-argument that influences decision-making processes of some NATO members in connection with MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia. Namely, these countries take into account the disapproval of the Kremlin, as they are convinced that the whole thing would unduly upset Russia. Moscow, on the other hand, is very well aware of the fact that the scepticism of some NATO members stems mainly from Russia's objections to offering MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia. That is why the Kremlin is currently applying maximum pressure on those members. In the case of Georgia, the Kremlin is explicitly referring to the 'frozen conflicts' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

According to some NATO members, MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia would mean importing problems into NATO. First, this kind of rhetoric originates from outside the Alliance. Second, if these problems could be more easily solved by 'importing' them into NATO, they should be imported. The so-called frozen conflicts, the hostage of which Georgia is right now, can be resolved only if it were pointless for Moscow to fuel them (e.g. if Russia realised that the continuation of these conflicts will not stop Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration) or if Russia had to pay too high a political price for them (e.g. if they constantly damaged Russia's reputation in foreign policy or jeopardised the organisation of the Olympic Games in Sochi). If a MAP were offered to Georgia, it would contribute to the solution of those conflicts. It is not the conflicts that are frozen, but process of solving them. A MAP would send Moscow a strong signal that the uncertainties surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia will not reverse the process of Georgia's westward integration.

Russia sees the integration of its neighbours into Euro-Atlantic institutions, and NATO in particular, as a zero-sum game. According to the Kremlin's interpretation, if one of Russia's neighbours attains the standards of the West with respect to democracy, the rule of law and individual liberties, it is a blow for Russia. Such an attitude constitutes a major obstacle to further enlargement of NATO and even to the strengthening of cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia. The question remains: why should an increasingly undemocratic country be allowed to prevent democratic countries from joining an alliance of democratic countries? There is no doubt that the enlargement of NATO and the European Union brought more stability, security and wealth to the acceding countries and Europe as a whole. If this irritates Russia, the West should not empathise with it or reward it for its resentment.

Russia has been opposed to every round of NATO's enlargement. The aggressive rhetoric of the Kremlin targeting Ukraine and Georgia resembles Russia's tirades before the accession of the Central European countries and the Vilnius group, and the Baltic states in particular. Back then, NATO members adopted their final decision without engaging Russia. If the West still retains shared values and honours the principles of democracy and the rule of law stipulated in the North Atlantic Treaty, it must stop listening to Moscow who

sounds like a broken record. The West should not be concerned, if the Kremlin feels threatened, when its democratic neighbours are ‘closing the ring’ around Russia.

As a matter of fact, in addition to the positive developments that would occur in Ukraine and Georgia, their accession to NATO would also profit Moscow. A democratic, stable and security-building West is not the real enemy of Russia. Like all NATO and EU members, Russia should actually worry about asymmetric threats, international organised crime, environmental problems, etc. Ukraine’s and Georgia’s accession to NATO would decrease the security vacuum between Russia and Europe, making it possible to concentrate on real security threats. It would also ‘disarm’ the revanchists who are keen on restoring the Russian (Soviet) empire on its former territory.

IV The positive aspects of the MAP process

NATO members must base their decision on the progress of reforms in Ukraine and Georgia, not on the counter-arguments of third countries that do not belong to the Alliance, namely Russia. MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia would further accelerate reform processes in both countries, which have so far successfully cooperated with NATO. The Alliance has encouraged them to implement reforms. Now, the time has come to define a more specific cooperation format for the promotion of reforms. NATO members have a moral obligation to reach out to countries that seek their help in setting up a democratic government system and enforcing the rule of law.

A MAP constitutes, above all, an excellent instrument for defence planning, an instrument that supports democratic processes, mobilises resources and allows NATO to better regulate the reforms implemented. A MAP does not grant NATO membership to anyone, i.e. it does not oblige NATO members to invite Ukraine and Georgia to join the Alliance. If the two countries do not fulfil accession criteria despite the fact that they received MAPs, they will not be asked to join NATO. Ukraine and Georgia have practically exhausted all possibilities that current cooperation formats offer. By all means, NATO members should not ignore the fact that the two countries have chosen the path of reforms and have done their homework in order to meet the MAP criteria.

Since the initial phase of the NATO enlargement debate, members have focused on expanding the Alliance in such a way that it would contribute to the security of all states, including non-members. NATO must be absolutely convinced that the accession of new countries is in the common strategic interests of all countries and necessary for the security of Europe as a whole. NATO must remain a strong and effective military alliance. Ukraine and Georgia are already participating in NATO’s operations; their contribution per capita is quite impressive. Hence, they are not merely enjoying the benefits of security, but also enhancing it.

Ukraine’s and Georgia’s accession to NATO constitutes yet another litmus test for the West in both political and moral terms, provided that Western countries want to keep Europe peaceful, democratic and united. As we talk about the values we share, it is our duty to reach out to countries that uphold the same

values as we do. We should not say that ‘we are here and we honour our values and principles; you are over there and if you want to live like us, but do not know how, you should manage on your own’. It is not easy to transform a totalitarian society and even the most successful transition countries have made mistakes on their way to democracy. Ukraine and Georgia have suffered some setbacks in their reforms, but it is precisely at those moments when they need the support of the outside world. Democracy is not a one-off chance that you grab or miss. When building democracy, countries must be given every chance to succeed.

V Conclusion

The attitude of the West and the attitude of Russia are the two determining factors for Ukraine and Georgia, the same factors that once influenced three Baltic states. The above mentioned counter-arguments against MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia are actually two sides of the same coin. Those who claim that the two countries are not ready for MAPs mainly use this argument as a suitable cover story for the categorical opposition of Russia. Those who simply object to extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia seem to lack the vision and courage needed to shape the future of Europe and guarantee its security. There is no doubt that Ukraine’s and Georgia’s accession to NATO – a goal for the attainment of which MAPs are fit instruments – would improve the overall stability, welfare and security in Europe. Every decision that postpones the achievement of this goal is shortsighted.

NATO’s previous rounds of enlargement have been successful. The MAP format was first introduced during the last round that involved the Vilnius group. As it turned out, this format was highly effective. Three Balkan countries – Albania, Croatia and Macedonia – who hope to receive invitations to join NATO in Bucharest are about to complete their MAP processes successfully, even though the processes stretched over nine years in two of them. Ukraine and Georgia will definitely enjoy the same success in pursuing their MAP processes. That is why they should be offered MAPs at the first opportunity. Meanwhile, and after joining MAPs as well, Ukraine and Georgia must do everything in their power to become the best and the strongest candidate countries in order to create favourable conditions for their possible accession to the North Atlantic Alliance.

NATO is a merit-based organisation. Extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia would be a logical continuation of their previous achievements. MAPs would offer them desirable objectives. At the same time, the MAP framework would enable them to deepen cooperation with NATO and mobilise all resources. This, in its turn, would allow NATO to influence their development to a greater extent. Hence, MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia would, first and foremost, underpin and guide further implementation of successful reforms. The occasional turbulences in Ukraine’s and Georgia’s domestic and foreign policy are actually caused by the instability of the current security situation. MAPs would ease tensions in Ukraine and Georgia, raise their self-confidence and empower them to concentrate anew on serious homework.

Ukraine's and Georgia's reasons for joining NATO are similar to those of the countries who have acceded earlier. They want the same security and protection. Moreover, transatlantic relations are as important for them as for current members of NATO. Extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia would keep them on the path of democratic reforms and they would not suffer disadvantage due to their history or geographical location. A decade ago three Baltic states felt, as Richard Holbrooke put it, 'beleaguered and surrounded and insecure'; Ukraine and Georgia feel the same way now. As it was in the case of the Baltic states, this feeling is the driving force behind Ukraine's and Georgia's actions. That is why they have already achieved so much. MAPs would make them feel secure: if they do their homework and meet the accession criteria, the door to NATO membership will remain open for them.

VI Key points

- Ukraine and Georgia have demonstrated that they want to share the same values and uphold the same principles as NATO members do.
- Ukraine and Georgia are not merely enjoying the benefits of security, but also contributing to the strengthening of collective security.
- The MAP format is an effective instrument that keeps countries on the path of reforms, thus improving the stability, welfare and security in those countries, in their neighbouring countries and in Europe as a whole.
- Ukraine and Georgia are not yet ready to accede to NATO. Nevertheless, democracy and the rule of law must be given every chance to succeed. Democracy is not a one-off chance that you grab or miss.
- Every European country, who wants to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions and who upholds the same values and principles of democracy and the rule of law as NATO members do, should receive assistance and support from NATO.
- NATO members must proclaim unequivocally that Russia as a third country and non-member does not have a say in decision-making processes of NATO.
- A MAP is not an invitation to join NATO, but it will make Ukraine and Georgia feel secure: if they are devoted to reforms and do their homework, the door to NATO membership will remain open for them.