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NATO Values Soldiers More Than Democracy

By Paul Rimple

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On Thursday, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen met with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Batumi and delivered his anticipated message. He thanked Georgia for its contribution to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and commended its efforts to battle corruption and the progress in democratic and economic reforms. But Rasmussen stressed again that more work was needed "to show determination to undertake further reforms."

Saakashvili's response may not have been calculated, but the point was clear. "I was hoping you would at least have brought me a NATO jacket," he said.

Since the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, when France and Germany shot down Georgia's opportunity to join the Membership Action Plan, NATO has been dangling the issue of "more democratic reform" like a carrot on a string. It's not about "if" Georgia is a member, they still say, it's about "when."

When Albania was invited into NATO in 2008, it was ranked 85 on Transparency International's corruption index, with 180 being the worst. Georgia was 80. The next year, Albania's parliamentary elections were wrought with fraud, while its democratic reform progress had not advanced in five years. The European Union called for rigorous implementation of anti-corruption measures in its 2008 progress report.

This might explain why Georgia hasn't been concerned with improving the rule of law, deepening judiciary and electoral reform and fostering media freedom. Georgia knows EU-Russian relations are a greater priority than Georgian membership. All the authorities have to do is not backslide. Today, Georgia is ranked 68 on the corruption index, while Albania is 87.

It's not easy to strengthen principles like equality before the law, so Saakashvili has pledged to contribute additional troops to the 950 already serving in Afghanistan. This will make Georgia the largest non-NATO contributor to the International Security Assistance Force. Most Georgians serve in the Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold, where so far 10 Georgian soldiers have been killed.

If NATO is sincere about Georgia's democratic reform process, it should set concrete marks for the government to meet. Saying, "We are looking forward to seeing the necessary reforms introduced," is not the same as, "You have to ensure there is a free electoral system before we can sign anything."

But with Albania as a benchmark for democratic reform, NATO might as well just say, "You guys are fine. You're just going to be on hold for an indefinite time."

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