



Dear all—

Last week we spent several days in the Republic of Georgia as co-hosts of the seventh annual Tbilisi International Conference. Our interactions there provide the context for this trip report. The conference theme, “Defeating Putinism,” intentionally focused on the increasingly Putinist governing style of Georgia’s ruling party, the Georgian Dream Party, its tacit alignment with Putin (especially by opposing sanctions on Russia) and the need not only to oppose Vladimir Putin, but the Putinist autocratic, human-rights violating methods other leaders are emulating.

Georgia stands at a fork in the road between a future in the Euro-Atlantic community, or one where it is dominated by Moscow. Either path appears equally likely despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Georgians wish to see their country join the European Union and NATO. They do not wish to remain in a gray zone aligned with Putin or, worse, almost absorbed into the Russian Federation, a la Belarus. There is a short window of opportunity for the Georgian people and the Georgian government to make the right choice.

In July 2022 when Ukraine and Moldova received European Union (EU) candidacy, Georgia was left behind. The EU set twelve conditions for Georgia to continue on the path to membership with a December deadline, when the EU will vote on Georgia’s candidacy. Only months away, Tbilisi appears unlikely to satisfy the EU. Perhaps the biggest hurdle is the requirement for “deoligarchization,” which means curtailing or limiting Georgia’s major oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili from any informal advisory or financial role in politics. The members of the current government owe their positions to Ivanishvili, who has also paid off, co-opted or pressured businesses, media and civil society organizations.

The Georgian people are in danger of landing on the losing side in the struggle against Putin, in the near future, if their government cannot meet EU requirements and pulls Georgia off the path to democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration. And in the longer run, Georgia’s fate is also being determined in Ukraine. If, as most experts predict, Ukraine prevails and maintains its sovereignty, there will still be an opportunity for Georgia to do so as well. But if Ukraine is defeated, Russia will certainly re-assert full control over Georgia and Moldova, and Putin will set out to destroy NATO. .

Given all of the above, we have concluded that there are five action items for United States and allied policymakers in Europe and beyond:

- 1. Engage in open and frank dialogue with the Georgian government and Georgian people.**



The U.S. government needs to reorient the relationship with Georgia to one that is more frank and firm with the government, and open with the Georgian people. U.S. administration officials and members of Congress must publicly repeat the requirements for NATO and EU accession and if the Georgian government chooses not to meet them, this must be communicated directly to the Georgian people.

The Georgian Dream government appears to have aligned with Putin in recent years, while maintaining a rhetorical commitment to Euroatlantic integration. The United States and its allies have worked to coax the Georgian government to reverse course, even while our diplomatic representatives have been personally attacked for doing so. At the same time, we have repeatedly told the Georgian people that the door to NATO and EU membership is open. We owe it to them to be transparent if we are on the verge of concluding that the door is closing due to the choices of the Georgian Dream government.

2. Heed our European allies and prevent global war.

We need to inform our colleagues and the American people about the real danger of history repeating itself, with regards to underestimating Putin's recklessness. We cannot be lulled into thinking that 2008, 2014, 2015, and 2022 won't happen again. We didn't think Russia would invade Georgia in 2008; we did not think Russia would invade Crimea in 2014; we were glib about Russia's intentions in Syria in 2015; and clearly not enough was done to prepare for Vladimir Putin's genocidal invasion of February 2022. Western officials were in denial each time until war was upon us, and returned to business as usual each time prior to 2022.

It's naive to think we have entered a new era just because technology has changed; dictatorial aspirations have not. Vladimir Putin sees Georgia – the rest of the “Near Abroad” -- as a part of historical Russia, whether we like it or not.

To prepare, we must take the best of the old world – a keenly honed fear of repeating historical mistakes – and the best of the new world – an unparalleled American optimism that we can finally learn and change things for once and for all. We must be a rightly worried about a new world war, like our Eastern European colleagues, but at the same time as Americans, we should take bold optimistic action to defeat Russia's aggressive foreign policy, and deter countries like China from following suit.

3. Admit Ukraine into NATO in 2024.

NATO is the best guarantor of Euro-Atlantic security and without the U.S. leading NATO, the peace and prosperity we have enjoyed since World War II is imperiled.



Our European partners are deeply afraid America will disengage from the world. The lack of U.S. support for admitting Ukraine into NATO at Vilnius was a missed opportunity, and a cause for concern among our allies, especially because the U.S. was reportedly the lone holdout, with all other members including France and Germany in favor.

To maintain the strength of our convictions and of our alliance, it is imperative that we admit Ukraine into NATO at the upcoming Washington, D.C., summit in 2024. It will be hard if the war is still ongoing, but if we fail, the political will of the alliance will be questioned, not only by our allies and partners, but especially by Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

4. Galvanize the Global South against Putin's neo-imperialist vision.

In Tbilisi some European politicians pointed out that the West has convinced itself that Putin is diplomatically isolated, but this is only true in the community of democracies. If we fail to convince the Global South that Putin is pursuing a neo-colonial policy, support for his regime will remain unchallenged in a large part of the world.

During the McCain Institute's delegation to Finland this spring, President Sauli Niinistö impressed Drs. Mark Esper and Evelyn Farkas with his diplomatic outreach. He has visited leaders in Africa and Latin America and reminded them of Finland's history of Russian occupation, putting Russia's aggression into a colonial context. This diplomacy and outreach is vital.

It is not enough to economically sanction Russia; we must also do a better job diplomatically isolating Russia. Liberating former Soviet republics (and potentially parts of the Russian Federation) from Russian domination involves confronting Russia's imperial past. This will resonate with countries that have been colonized or otherwise subjugated by external powers. If the United States is not the perfect messenger for this, many of our allies are. The Ukrainians have recognized the diplomatic challenge and responded by, among other things, opening embassies and consulates across Africa

5. Step up U.S. engagement, just like John McCain would.

U.S. policymakers must remain internationally engaged and explain the stakes to their colleagues and the American people -- this is an ongoing fight where we have much to gain or lose. Engaged U.S. policymakers must take their colleagues overseas, just as John McCain regularly did, so they can see and hear from Russia's victims of wars and occupations, past and present. They must also see firsthand the growing Chinese influence in countries such as Georgia, where China is building the largest highway project in the country and has co-opted Georgian ports for Chinese military use.



At the same time, U.S. policymakers should make known to both colleagues and constituents that America is not in this fight alone. Just last week, Japan and Turkey signed an agreement for the reconstruction of Ukraine that combines Turkish construction capabilities with Japanese technological expertise. America's allies and partners are willing, and able to help.

History demonstrates that when the United States disengages the nefarious forces benefit, ultimately negatively affecting American security. We are still the biggest political, economic, and military power on Earth. Make no mistake, while some U.S. leaders and policymakers do not believe we are at war with Putin, his actions and words clearly demonstrate that he believes he is at war with us.