

# Georgian Military Modernisation: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Eugene Kogan

The article focuses on the current modernisation of the Georgian military. Whatever happened before appointment of Levan Izoria, the recently appointed Minister of Defence, is history. Izoria was appointed Minister of Defence on 1 August 2016.

## They Keep Treading on the Same Rake

At a press conference on 7 November 2016, Izoria announced plans to reform the country's armed forces, air force and air defence, but concluded that the construction of a new naval capacity was too costly. The Navy was disbanded in 2009 and merged with the Coast Guard, which is part of the Border Guard Division and reports to the Ministry of the Interior (MIA). It should also be emphasised that Izoria's reform plans were not the first and probably will not be the last ones. His predecessors tried to pursue the same reform and, idiomatically speaking, "they keep treading on the same rake."

During the reign of the Georgian Dream Coalition between 2012 and 2016, two ministers resigned, the third was removed from office and the fourth, the current minister Izoria, retained his previous position as minister. It remains to be seen how long. The frequent change of ministers has hampered efforts to build robust and effective armed forces, as each minister has his or her own vision of the armed forces he or she tried to implement without learning from the mistakes of his or her predecessors. As a result, the reforms have not yielded tangible results and the country's military capabilities give little hope, even though Georgian Dream's officials claim otherwise. It is not yet clear whether the current reform will be more successful than the previous ones.

## The Contours of Reform

During the press conference, Izoria added that the basic training of conscripts will in future be similar to that of professional soldiers, in order to create a larger pool of qualified personnel, which can be used either as contracted servicemen or in the reserves. In the past, army conscripts only exercised logistic and support functions;



Photo: US Army

***A mine-clearing line charge (MICLIC) explodes in a Georgian obstacle during a rehearsal for the combined arms live fire at Vaziani Training Area, Georgia. The live fire was the last training event before the closing of Exercise Noble Partner in August 2017. Noble Partner is a multinational, US Army-led exercise conducting training for the Georgian military designated for the NATO Response Force.***

they were not trained for combat and did not participate in combat. At the same time, Izoria stressed that the army will continue to consist primarily of professional soldiers. Professionals currently account for 90 percent or around 13,000, all of them deployed in Afghanistan as part of combat operations. However, conscripts currently account for only 10 percent or around 2,000. For example, the current army has about 15,000 soldiers without the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff personnel as well as civilian staff of the Ministry of Defence, which according to various open sources consists of 36,000 to 37,000.

Izoria also announced plans to optimise the General Staff, the army, the air force, the air-defence forces, and the military police.

The plans envisages abolishing an unspecified number of departments within the General Staff and emphasises the use of combat helicopters and UAVs as there is no Georgian air fleet. Because of this optimisation, 1,750 civilian personnel from the MoD and 340 military personnel from the Georgian Armed Forces (GAF) were dismissed in December 2016. Who will supply combat helicopters and UAVs to Georgia is currently unknown, as the West is not yet ready for such deliveries. And Israeli companies might not step in as they do not want to provoke Russia's ire. After the August 2008 war, Israeli companies halted the supply of weapon systems to Georgia, while neighbouring Turkey did not provide any arms at all.

Photo: NATO



**General Pavel, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, and Georgian Minister of Defence Izoria provide opening remarks for the Special Military Committee meeting with Georgia.**

In the meantime, the number of infantry brigades was cut from five to four and changes were made as to where they would be based. Georgia needs a small but well-equipped army that is highly mobile, robust, effective and cost-efficient and interoperable with NATO standards. A new West Command of Land Forces of the GAF with its headquarters in Kutaisi was established in November 2016. Simultaneously, an East Command of Land Forces of GAF was also established.

But the lack of a naval capacity leaves Georgia out of NATO maritime operations in the Black Sea. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili stated on 7 November 2016, "We shall be part of Black Sea security together with the North Atlantic family, and Georgia will be included in patrolling and other similar operations." But this statement should not be taken seriously, as it is not the competence of a prime minister to deal with military issues. This would be a task of MoD officials or the minister himself. Moreover, Georgia has no naval capabilities aside from a few Coast Guard ships donated by the US.

In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, the annual NATO-Georgia military exercise Noble Partner which began in 2014 aims to improve the interoperability and performance of the Georgian military. In May 2016 the Georgian Army commanded for the first time a joint Georgia-US-UK air and land forces exercise. However, deterrence with defensive weapons and training of troops for homeland defence remains an unresolved issue for Georgia which has not yet been addressed by its allies. In July 2016 it was reported that the US intends to step up training combat skills of the GAF and help Georgia building a local training

centre for self-defence rather than only deploying troops to Afghanistan. The US does some combined arms training of Georgian troops, but it does so at Hohenfels Training Area in Germany. Izoria said that the proposed training centre will probably be located at Vaziani Air Base, with Georgia investing GEL10M. Izoria added that nine Georgian battalions would start training there on 1 March 2018.

As for the overall cost of the aforementioned endeavour, the MoD budget largely covers personnel wages and to a lesser degree training and acquisition despite standing at 2 per cent of the GDP.

## Defence Budget and Acquisition

In May 2014 a bill proposed to spend 2 per cent of the country's GDP on MoD's annual budget. However, the bill was never adopted; there is no such obligation in Georgia's legislation. Nonetheless, in 2014 the MoD received 2.24 per cent of the GDP (GEL660M). In 2015 and 2016 the MoD received GEL670M. In 2016, 67 per cent of the budget was spent on salaries and social benefits while 33 per cent was spent on military equipment, ammunition and other unspecified needs. This was a big mistake indeed and an improper allocation of funds.

According to NATO standards, salaries and administrative expenses should range somewhere between 50 to 53 per cent, and Georgia tries to live up to these standards. In April 2017, Izoria said that Georgia's spending ratio would change, with a larger percentage of the budget allocated for procurement needs and combat readiness. It remains to be seen whether or not Izoria's intention will be realised. According to a government-revised draft published in December 2016 the MoD is to receive GEL750M (or about US\$312M) in 2017. It is still unclear how this sum will be spent. It is obvious, however, that the revised defence budget does not allow for substantial acquisition of new equipment and advanced weapon systems. It is also uncertain that NATO member states – together or individually – would be ready to offer Georgia arms at a discounted price.



Photo: ??????

**A US Army Soldier assigned to 2nd Cavalry Regiment poses with one of the local children during their stop in Khashuri, Georgia, on 31 July 2017 as they begin Exercise Noble Partner. Noble Partner 17 is a European Rotational Force exercise of Georgia's light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force. The exercise provides participating nations with the opportunity to train in a multinational environment while enhancing interoperability during realistic training events.**



Photo: US Army



**Georgian Army soldiers from the 22nd Light Infantry Battalion listen to their captain during a Georgian Independence Day celebration on 26 May 2006 in Baghdad, Iraq.**

But it is a fact that even nine years after the August 2008 war the West remains reluctant to sell arms to Georgia due to concerns about provoking Russian ire. Thus far, Western reluctance has resulted in serious impairment of the country's air-defence and anti-tank capabilities. As long as the West is unwilling to sell these weapon systems to Georgia, the Georgian military inventory will consist of obsolete Soviet equipment, some Georgian-made equipment and some Western arms like US-donated helicopters. As a result, the Georgian military remains vulnerable vis-à-vis the heavily

armed Russian military stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia which has been increased in strength since the August 2008 war. More than 8,000 Russian soldiers are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – the occupied regions of Georgia. The integration of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian troops under Russian command further increased the numbers and agility of the deployed forces.

Despite Western reluctance to sell arms it was reported in February 2016 that American military assistance to Georgia known as Foreign Military Financing (FMF) would

decrease under a budget proposal from US\$30M in 2016 down to US\$20M in 2017. The 2017 funding is intended "to advance Georgia's development of forces capable of enhancing security, countering Russian aggression, and contributing to coalition operations. This will include support in areas such as upgrades to Georgia's rotary wing air transport capabilities, advisory and defence reform, and modernisation of Georgia's military institutions." Yet, as late as July 2016, it was not entirely clear what type of weapon systems Georgia would be allowed to acquire as a result of the aforementioned funding. American officials were tight-lipped regarding the provision of weapon systems. Even in September 2017 uncertainty about acquisitions persisted. It appears, however, that JAVELIN ATGMs and F-92 STINGER MANPADS are unlikely to be sold to Georgia. Despite a wealth of information in open sources about Georgia's likely acquisition of French air-defence systems nothing has materialised thus far. In April 2017 it was reported that Izoria plans to visit France to negotiate with his French counterpart about purchasing air-defence systems. All of this makes Georgia's military unprepared against potential Russian military attacks.

The final piece of the current reform announces the establishment of reserve forces. Previous ministers of defence have tackled this issue with little success. Another initiative should be taken with a grain of salt.

### Reserve Forces

The Georgian military expert Vakhtang Maisaya said, "Forming robust military reserve forces remains the most important and challenging step in army reform. Currently, the main objective should be to make use of the reserves and work out mobilisation plans that signal the defensive strength of the country. The government has worked out the concept, and it fully corresponds with NATO standards."

Indeed, in March 2016 Georgia's top military commanders discussed the mobilisation and reserve forces draft concept. According to the concept, the main mission of the GAF reserves is to support the armed forces in wartime, during crisis and in peacetime. The draft includes three categories of the reserve system – army, territorial and specialists' reserve.

In May 2017, the aforementioned categories were elaborated. The first category is to be composed of demobilised servicemen or servicemen who completed a five-year military contract and are willing to serve for another five years in a reserve unit.

Photo: US Marine Corps



**Georgian Army soldiers wait for air transportation prior to conducting operation Northern Lion II at Camp Bastion, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, July 2013. Northern Lion II was a Georgian-led operation conducted to deter insurgents, establish a presence, and gather intelligence.**

The second category is to be the territorial reserve established on the basis of the existing Georgian National Guard with its current 1,600 active reservists that is used as reserve for the GAF. In the event of hostilities, its members will be deployed only in their home district and serve for five years.

The third category is to consist of civilian experts whose knowledge and experience can be useful to the army in peacetime or wartime.

The active army reserve is to number 1,500 people, and the territorial reserve will be 10,000 strong. The specialised reserve units will not be limited in size, and will be dynamically formed based on GAF's developing needs. Unlike the current reserve system, the new concept envisions manning a reserve on a voluntary basis only. Women up to 55 years of age will also be allowed to serve. Under this proposed system, members of the reserve who sign a five-year contract will undergo an annual 45-day retraining course; they will receive financial compensation equalling 20 per cent of the salary of a military service member of similar rank and grade. As for the others' refreshing course it remains unknown and, as a result, there are questions around whether or not the proposed idea is feasible.

Izoria said that if the legislature adopted

this reserve concept, a 'pilot' programme for selecting participants and concluding service contracts would start in 2018. It is a good idea to carefully evaluate the pilot programme before continuing with the rest of the aforementioned reserve components. Back in 2012 a similar 'pilot' project was launched and 13,000 volunteer reservists (out of an envisaged 100,000) were recruited. At the time, the new recruits accounted for less than 1 per cent of Georgia's defence budget (US\$3.5M). The author does not know whether Izoria took recent experience into account and it is unclear whether resources allocated to the reservists is money well spent.

There is one very important point on which the author and Maisaya agree, with the latter stating: "Georgia still does not have an overarching comprehensive military strategy to replace the now outdated one adopted after the August 2008 war and that would define the role of the reservist force vis-à-vis the regular army." And as long as such a strategy has not been prepared, reforms of the reserve forces are likely to fail.

To conclude, there are currently more questions than answers. What is clear is that even the good intentions in the West translating into training of the GAF for missions in Af-

ghanistan is not sufficient help for Georgia at this crucial juncture for training in homeland defence. The meagre defence budget and its improper allocation, namely 67 per cent for salaries and social benefits, while the rest goes towards military equipment and so on, impair the country's abilities to purchase urgently needed modern arms. Western reluctance to sell modern arms lessens the ability of GAF to defend Georgia. Whether or not Izoria's negotiations would ultimately lead to the signing of a contract for the purchase of French-made air-defence systems is not a foregone conclusion. Thus far Emmanuel Macron, President of France, has not given any hints about the signing of a contract. Therefore, the issue of Georgian air-defence capability remains unresolved and the country remains unprotected. In addition, even if the aforementioned reform with the reserve forces looks great on paper there is no guarantee for its success. It should be remembered that past experience showed that reform of the reserve forces ended in failure and no conclusions were drawn from the past failed experience. And finally, it remains unknown whether or not the current minister of defence will retain his position, or be dismissed as his predecessors and subsequently a new wave of reforms will be initiated. ■