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## **POMPEO SAYS GEORGIA WILL HAVE US SUPPORT AS TBILISI CONTINUES TO SEEK NATO MEMBERSHIP**

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The United States will support Georgia in its efforts to become a NATO member, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in joint press remarks with Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze on Tuesday.

"Georgia's efforts give me a great confidence to speak for President Trump and all of the United States government when I say that you will continue to have the support of the United States as you seek to become a NATO member," Pompeo said. "It's also important to note that Georgia is already at two percent of their GDP being spent on defense - the NATO threshold that [the United States] pushed all NATO allies to achieve."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin told Sputnik in February that Georgia's aspirations to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the alliance's military exercises held on the Georgian territory curb the development of Moscow-Tbilisi relations. Moscow is convinced that Georgia's aspirations represent the main threat for the improvement of its bilateral relations with Russia and has been communicating these concerns to the Georgian representatives in bilateral talks, according to Karasin.

The cooperation between Georgia and NATO began soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the country joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992 and NATO's Partnership for Peace program two years later. In 2008, NATO leaders agreed that Georgia would become a NATO member provided that the country met all the requirements for this. During the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, a package of measures to advance Georgia's efforts in its preparations for NATO membership was approved.

Russia has repeatedly accused the US-led bloc of illegally expanding eastward in Europe in violation of its promises. NATO has been building up its military on Russia's eastern flank, pulling troops to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2017, while US warships have been routinely calling on Black Sea ports.

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