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Deborah Boucoyannis

Who Was Afraid of Russia? The Forgotten Evidence of the 1990s

In the long-standing debate about the causes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the side advocating for NATO enlargement—and now the accession of Ukraine—has long claimed an advantage: that it alone correctly predicted that Russian aggression was inevitable and that therefore NATO expansion was not only necessary, but the legitimate democratic demand of the people of Eastern Europe. As a result, this is the side that should be listened to today. The problem was not NATO expansion, they argue, it was that it did not extend into Ukraine—and this should be rectified.[1] Indeed, in 1993, Polish leader Lech Walesa privately impressed upon President Clinton that "We are all afraid of Russia … If Russia again adopts an aggressive foreign policy, that aggression will be directed toward Ukraine and Poland." Walesa worried that Moscow "won't stop at the old Soviet frontier."[2] From the vantage point of 2025, this warning appears eerily prescient, seemingly confirming the view that the countries freed from Soviet occupation were right to seek NATO admission and that, following Russia's 2022 invasion, NATO should again expand to include Ukraine as a member.

What the forgotten (or obscured) evidence from the 1990s shows, however, is that few agreed with Walesa's claim across the former Eastern Bloc. Almost no one in the region feared Russia would become a *military* threat (with exceptions in Poland and Romania). Accordingly, most Central and Eastern European publics, including in Ukraine, were indifferent or opposed to NATO enlargement. The argument in favor of NATO enlargement was predicated, by major

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figures such as former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, on the claim that Russia no longer posed a threat. As we will see, supporters of enlargement claimed that it would help Russia democratize and would *inhibit* its "imperialist" tendencies.

It was, ironically, the *opponents* of NATO enlargement who warned, in apocalyptic terms, of the dangers of Russian militarism in the future. In 1997, an open letter to President Clinton by fifty foreign policy experts, including ambassadors, senators, military officers, diplomats, historians, political scientists, and state officials, called it "a policy error of historic proportions."[3] In a *New York Times* article from the same year, diplomat George Kennan's predictions read like a checklist of the current crisis: the "most fateful error" of expansion, he wrote, would "be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking."[4] However, complacency about Russia was so widespread that both the public and official policy ignored these warnings.

Complacency about Russia was so widespread that these warnings were ignored

The difference between Walesa and opponents of NATO expansion was not about Russia's potential for military aggression, it was about the best means to prevent it from re-emerging. Supporters argued for the creation of a bloc that excluded Russia, opponents warned this was guaranteed to produce the outcome all wanted to avoid. Now, as Poland, the Baltics, and other European countries are preparing for future war with Russia themselves,[5] it is clear NATO expansion has failed to inhibit Russian militarism. The point of this article is that this failed policy acquired majority support not due to fear of Russia but due to flawed predictions about the future and problematic narratives about NATO's role in the newly emerging order.

When interest in NATO did rise, it had little to do with threats from Russia. It rose when NATO accession was framed instead—with an incongruity that is worryingly missed nowadays—as consolidating the new democracies and ensuring they joined "the West." This overcame the widespread public indifference to NATO while securing the United States' continuing involvement in Europe. The framing—"first we take NATO, then the EU"[6]—proved successful for all applicants at the time (Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic entered in 1999, and the Baltics, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia in 2004).

This desire to join "the West" helps explain why Ukraine continues to plead for admission despite NATO's decade-long refusal to defend it against Russia, even in the face of devastating destruction. After all, that Ukraine is not a member does not suffice to explain NATO's refusal: Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya were not members either, but that did not prevent NATO from mounting more than 160,000 sorties (of which 17,000 were strike sorties) to protect their populations from aggression. Ukraine, on the other hand, has not even been granted a no-fly zone. The desire also explains why the hope of admission is indefinitely postponed to after the end of the war[7]—a deeply perplexing expectation, since membership is meant to protect you from attack, not reward you ex-post for single-handedly defeating the enemy. Ukraine persists, not because of but despite the Russian threat, as it wishes to reproduce the steps of its neighbors.

The aspiration is legitimate and understandable. However, the 1990s framing only worked because at the time Russia was itself hoping to join NATO and had in any case no capacity to resist its expansion; at the same time, the United States was eager to preserve dominance in the European continent. None of these conditions operate today. In fact, as NATO accession is a clear stumbling block to peace for the Russians, it drastically *undermines* Ukraine's security, as well as that of NATO countries.[8] The more the demand—or future prospect—of admission remains on the table, the more the Russians will reject any offers. After all, the precedent of agreements being used to buy Ukraine time to re-arm was admitted by Chancellor Merkel herself.[9] At a time when the United States is disengaging from the continent, the continued prospect of NATO accession for Ukraine risks not only perpetuating a war devastating Ukraine but a pan-European one where there can be no winner. The Swedes and the Poles are not going to defeat Russia, only provoke it.[10] Moreover, efforts today[11] to force its key member, the United States, to fight a war it is not committed to will threaten the alliance itself.

At such a crucial moment, the policy debate is dominated by the side that got both the assessment of Russian reactions and the core predictions about the future drastically wrong; it continues to persist in ignoring warnings that have already come true. Why? A neglected explanation involves these narratives about the past that have misconstrued NATO's role as an agent of *political* integration for a whole generation of Europeans, especially in Eastern Europe. The transformation of NATO into a promoter of democracy and integration into the EU in the late 1990s aimed to overcome its decreasing relevance among Europeans. As such, however, it violated a fundamental principle of democratic

Redefining NATO as an agent of political integration never convinced those outside "the West"

politics: that the military, even under civilian control, is never used to shape domestic affairs (except under emergency conditions). This redefinition, moreover, never convinced those outside "the West," for whom NATO has remained simply the most powerful military alliance in the world. As the Russian liberal Gregory Yavlinski argued in *Foreign Affairs* back in 1998: "Talk that this is a different NATO, a NATO that is no longer a military alliance, is ridiculous … It does not matter how you dress it up; a pink tank is still a tank."[12] The out-of-area bombings of Serbia and Kosovo in the 1990s, and Libya in 2011, confirmed those beliefs.

To establish these points, we need to revisit each of these claims in detail. The article first shows that elites on both sides of the Atlantic built their case for NATO expansion by categorically dismissing any threat from Russia. It then surveys the data showing that the people in the region broadly shared that view and that, accordingly, support for NATO enlargement across most countries was very low throughout the 1990s—posing the puzzle of why support suddenly rose on the eve of accession. This rise was due to NATO presenting itself as a stepping stone toward integration in the West. The article then presents the threats that did attract concern: old animosities among Central European countries and the threat of Russian *political* interference (not military invasion) in the newly liberated countries. The analysis concludes by pointing out two major errors that precipitated the crisis. First, a military alliance was used to counteract the feared political interference by Russia. More importantly, though these fears were legitimate, they were addressed in a manner that forgot the lessons of 1919: the West excluded from the alliance the one state capable of threatening the European order, Russia itself. The problematic narratives that presented NATO as an antechamber to democracy (which, as we will see, empirical studies have disproved) were instrumental in this fateful exclusion.

> Those arguing for NATO enlargement were the ones discounting a military threat from Russia

Elites Didn't Fear Russia

Contrary to Walesa's assertions, the staunchest and most eminent advocates of NATO expansion in the United States built their case by systematically denying Russia was a threat, certainly at that time but also in the future. No less than Henry Kissinger, ardent defender of NATO expansion, even claimed in 1994, "I don't think the Russian situation will *ever* become a clear-cut military

threat."[13] Brzezinski argued in 1995 that in "expanding NATO, one should note that neither the alliance nor its prospective new members are facing any imminent threat. Talk of a 'new Yalta' or of a Russian military threat is not justified, either by actual circumstances or even by worst-case scenarios for the near future." In fact, he warned, "the expansion of NATO should … not be driven by whipping up anti-Russian hysteria that could eventually become a self-fulfilling prophecy. NATO's expansion should not be seen as directed against any particular state, but as part of a historically constructive process of shaping a secure, stable, and more truly European Europe." The author's similarly wise caution regarding Ukraine's special relationship to Russia was also ignored.[14]

In the crucial Congressional debates over expansion in 1997, Brzezinski categorically asserted that "the Russian threat … currently … does not exist." Jean Kirkpatrick, foreign policy advisor to Ronald Reagan, concurred, arguing that "there is no one major threat to peace and security throughout the region today."[15] Influential civil society actors like George Soros also systematically asserted, as in an article from 1993, that the Russian threat had disappeared.[16] When a threat from Russia was admitted, for instance by Brzezinski, it was as an aside, couched in terms of a theoretical probability: "one cannot exclude its reappearance and, hence, some insurance against it is desirable."[17]

Elites from even the most vulnerable countries in the region were as emphatic. There was no fear in the Estonian prime minister's dismissal of Russian President Vladimir Putin's objections to NATO expansion in 2000: "Russian comments won't make any difference to us."[18] This was a country of 1.4 million people that still violated European directives on minority treatment, while 30 percent of its population were Russian-speakers.[19] In Lithuania, then-Chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament Gabrielius Landsbergis stated in 1997 that "We are not afraid of aggression, because it is hardly probable."[20] In 2002, Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus was categorical: "I reject this philosophy that Russia's the enemy waiting to invade Western Europe … Those days are over." If there was any threat that mattered, it was of the kind materializing after 9/11.[21]

It is precisely such complacency that NATO expansion opponents tried to warn against in vain. There was indeed no "enemy" *then*, in the early 2000s, as Putin was trying to enter NATO, or a decade later, as openness to Russian NATO membership persisted.[22] Moreover, Russia was weak. But since the problem was not NATO enlargement, but, as future US Ambassador Michael McFaul presciently warned in 1997, Russia's *exclusion*, once that happened, the threat would emerge.[23] As it did.

Thus, those arguing for NATO enlargement were ironically the ones naively discounting a military threat from Russia. But they convinced the public (as we will see below). It was their predictions about the future impact of expansion that proved decisive, but these have turned out to be drastically wrong. According to

Kissinger during the 1997 Congressional debates, "NATO expansion will … improve our long-term relations with Russia."[24] Then-Senator Biden (D-DE) and Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) agreed.[25] Brzezinski argued that "NATO's enlargement helps a democratizing Russia by foreclosing to it the revival of any self-destructive imperial temptations regarding Central Europe … The progressive expansion of NATO can similarly resolve the question of disproportionate Russian power in Europe."[26] The expectation was, as Czechia's President Václav Havel argued in 1994, "that step by step ... we will see democratization and a market economy" in Russia, as long as NATO contained it.[27] In 2002, Adamkus "called Russia a new Eastern European democracy which still had a long way to go, but which didn't threaten the EU."[28] In retrospect, it is unclear if these expectations regarding expansion reflected naivety, wishful thinking, or defiance encouraged by NATO's overwhelming military superiority.

No doubt *some* actors were motivated by fear. At a Budapest seminar in 1997, for instance, a participant exclaimed, "Why can't we tell the truth? That we need membership because we're afraid of Russia?"[29] Some were distinguished and highly learned, like the historian Bronislaw Geremek, who delivered the NATO treaty ratification as Poland's Foreign Minister.[30] Maybe this minority consisted of experts who got it "right?"

However, political and military experts also saw no threat. That is why, in 1991, NATO invited what was then still the Soviet Union to enter the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, declaring the Rome Summit "a historic step forward in our relationship."[31] Already by 1992, the US Army had halved both troops and installations in Europe.[32] Nuclear arms agreements slashing stockpiles were ratified.[33] By 1994, Russian troops had evacuated the region. In any case, no one feared they might reassert the occupation, only that unpaid troops would predate on locals.[34]

Further, the original Clinton approach of "not drawing new lines in Europe" led to the Partnership for Peace in 1994, which included Russia, and the NATO-Russia Founding Act. By 1997, Kissinger even worried that these were empowering Russia at the expense of countries like Poland (concerns that ultimately led to the demise of the approach).[35] Defense expenditures in the United States and Russia reached their lowest level since 1945 (at about 3 percent).[36]

In any case, this was not a political or military elite that feared Russian reactions, either at the time or in the future. In the 1990s, there was anything but "appeasement:" NATO expansion happened precisely *because* fears of Russia were dismissed. Russia's objections were defied, as Russia was correctly perceived as weak. Ukraine was not spared to "appease" Russia, but because its people were opposed: until 2014, NATO was supported by less than 20 percent of the Ukrainian population.[37] In 2008, when President George W. Bush invited Ukraine

(and Georgia) to join NATO, 43 percent of Ukrainians actually deemed NATO "a threat;" only 15 percent saw it as "protection."[38] The invitation thus blatantly violated Ukrainian democratic will and fostered divisions within Ukraine in favor of a tiny sympathetic minority—it also violated Article 10 of the NATO treaty that required member unanimity for any invitation (France, Germany, Italy, and others were deeply opposed). Worse still, it was ultimately a promise the West never intended to truly honor.

The People Did Not Fear Russia Either

Was NATO expansion promoted because Central and Eastern European *publics* feared Russia, making it a democratic demand? In fact, contrary to Walesa's assertions, in 1990 most Poles feared Germany more than Russia. In one poll, 88 percent feared Germany and only 25 percent the then USSR (down to 58 percent vs. 45 percent in 1992).[39] In other polls, about 30 percent thought both countries were equal threats, elsewhere 20 percent thought Germany was the greatest threat and only 8 percent thought Russia was. But that did not prevent 73 percent thinking Polish *independence* faced no threat.[40] When Walesa spoke in 1993, in some polls 39 percent expressed fear of Russia, in others majorities did so, but Germans still held the lead.[41] Polish fears of Russia continued to rise, but local sources typically explain them as a response to Russian resistance to Poland's NATO plans[42]—the kind of security dilemma critics of NATO expansion had warned about.

In any case, Poland's fears were shared only by Romania. Despite the (failed) Communist Party coup in August 1991 and Russian interventions in Moldova (1992) and Georgia (1992/3), former Warsaw Pact countries on average mostly instead feared neighboring states (49 percent), ethnic minorities (40 percent), and immigrants (35 percent), with Russia ranked fourth as a threat (at 28 percent) in 1992.[43]

The fear-based explanation of the demand for NATO accession seems ex-post intuitive, especially after the brutal Russian suppression of the Chechen uprising (1994-96). However, given the departure of Russian troops from the Baltics and Poland by 1994[44] and President Clinton's statements in support of Russian territorial integrity,[45] most in the region accepted it as an internal affair: by 1998, 75 percent of respondents across applicant countries thought Russia posed "little" or "no threat at all."[46] The European Commission's Eurobarometer found that less than 7 percent of respondents said they wanted to join NATO because they feared Russia (though the response rate was limited on this question).[47] However, when we occasionally do find polls reporting high levels of fear, the concern, as we will see below, was with Russia's *influence*, not its troops, especially

Using a military alliance to address threats to national identity was a momentous error

the *civilizational* threat that the "Western identity" of applicant countries would be compromised (especially in the Baltics which had substantial Russian-speaking minorities).[48] Using the world's foremost military alliance to address threats to national identity and cohesion was a momentous error. Nevertheless, Eastern European publics were not misinformed about the lack of *military* threat—as we have seen, elites across the board agreed.

But logic alone counsels against the widespread assumption that NATO expansion stemmed from fear of Russian *military* aggression. If that were the key factor, it would have been perverse to only offer admission to three fairly large countries that did not border mainland Russia—Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—as was initially done. It would have been even more perverse to do so while excluding for more than a decade the small Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—which not only bordered Russia but also had Russian minorities deprived of citizenship rights, thus providing Russia with a *casus belli*.[49] Nor did these most vulnerable countries display any fear. In Latvia, "in 2000, only 10% of respondents … thought that the external threats were a real danger for Latvia's security and defence. [In] 2001, 7% felt this way, and in 2002 only 4% did so."[50] In Estonia, Russia was not even mentioned as a military threat in the National Security Concept of 2001.[51] In Lithuania, before 2004, fear of Russia had subsided, and despite later fluctuating polls on whether Russia was a threat, the fear was again not military: "polls indicated that defence occupied last places in the lists of concerns of the Lithuanian public" until 2014.[52] In Ukraine (which is now assumed to have had the most to fear) in 1996, 43 percent of Ukrainians and 83 percent of ethnic Russians were at least open to unification with Russia.[53] Though that subsided, as late as 2009, more than 90 percent had highly positive attitudes toward Russia and up until 2014 almost 70 percent wanted open borders with Russia.[54] Accordingly, it was not even being discussed as a NATO candidate.[55]

Finally, it would have been even more absurd if these countries truly faced a threat from Russia, yet NATO suddenly demanded a "functioning democratic political system" as a condition of entry, which none of these countries initially possessed. No such conditions had been placed on authoritarian Portugal, nor did authoritarian coups eject Greece or Türkiye in the past. Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" report has ranked freedom under Türkiye's regime next to Pakistan and Uganda since at least 2016, with no consequences on its NATO status.[56]

Low Support for NATO

With little fear of Russia, it is unsurprising that public interest in NATO throughout Central and Eastern Europe was originally muted. This was obscured by triumphant press claims of majority support for NATO accession, which in reality were statistical artifacts. Some reported referendum results, as in Hungary, where participation was limited (49.2 percent) and thus not truly representative (in anticipation of a low turnout, the constitutional threshold was lowered to 25 percent a few months before).[57] The Eurobarometer polls reported majorities of at most 53 percent—but these aggregated the skeptical countries with outliers like Poland and Romania, which indeed had over 60 percent of the population in favor.[58] The Eurobarometer polls also typically included only "those who have the right to vote," thus excluding the Russian-speaking populations deprived of citizenship, as in Estonia and Latvia (these could amount to about 28 to 34 percent of the population).

Once again, the countries that should have felt most threatened were the ones with among the lowest support for NATO enlargement before 1998: the Baltics. In major polls, Latvia fluctuated between 34 percent and 36 percent; Lithuania declined from 38 percent to 31 percent; Estonia went from a high of 47 percent in 1995 to a low of 32 percent in 1997.[59] If the Russian-speaking populations deprived of voting rights were included in the polls, support in Latvia and Estonia fell to less than 27 percent.[60] Results varied depending on how the question was asked, of course. In the 2001 *New Baltic Barometer*, an average of 21 percent across all three states found NATO "very beneficial" (12 percent including Russian speakers). 38 percent found NATO "somewhat beneficial" (25 percent including Russian speakers). Polls often combine these two numbers to derive levels of support.[61] However, one does not necessarily vote for something merely "somewhat beneficial"—nor is it clear that the benefit was protection from a Russian military threat.[62]

Across cases, support either rose glacially or even declined as the '90s progressed. According to the Eurobarometer, support in Slovakia ranged from 27 percent to 31 percent (though polls run by local institutions sometimes reported higher numbers).[63] In Bulgaria, barely 24 percent of the population favored NATO in 1993, up to 27 percent in 1996 (or 38 percent in local polls).[64] In the Czech Republic, more people were against NATO in 1991 (40 percent) than for it (39 percent); despite rising to 47 percent in 1993, favorability fell to between 28 and 38 percent in 1996.[65] Slovenia, after fighting a war against the former Yugoslav army in 1991, generally showed higher levels of support (even over 60 percent in 1997) but was down to 36 percent in 2003, and by 2001, of all possible threats, *military* ones had the lowest ranking (drugs and crime lead the list).[66]

After all, even if you are afraid of Russia, it is not obvious that NATO is the best solution;[67] many alternatives were originally considered across the region, neutrality being a common contender. Until 2019, neutrality was mandated in the constitution of Ukraine since support for NATO had historically been under 20 percent.[68] The constitutional amendment rejecting neutrality was passed in 2019 without ever achieving majority support (the highest level reported before 2019 was 46 percent, years after the first invasion of Crimea in 2014).[69]

This poses a puzzle, however. If support for NATO was so low originally, how did majority support suddenly transpire in the countries slated for membership on the eve of accession? In 1998, support rose to 61 percent in Hungary[70] and 55-61 percent in Czechia,[71] while by 2003-4, it had reached 67 percent in Bulgaria,[72] 68.5 percent in Latvia, 70 percent in Estonia, and even reaching over 75 percent in Lithuania.[73] Why?

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: NATO's "Civilizing Mission?"

"NATO is a guarantee that we'll join the civilized world," Jaroslav Hutka, a Czech musician and democracy activist, said at a rally in November 1997. "And even though today it appears that we don't have anyone to defend ourselves from, who knows what things will look like in 10 years? … For me, membership in NATO is the first binding tie that we'll have with Western Europe." Hypothetical future threats shored up the main goal of integration with the West. Hutka was one among many "longhaired ex-dissidents" who started "chas[ing] NATO 'civilization'" in 1997.[74] The Czech president, Václav Havel, himself defended NATO expansion for some years, arguing that "entry into NATO and the EC [European Community] is central to expanding democracy not just to Central Europe, but also to the NIS [Newly Independent States]."[75] This framing continued into the second round of NATO admissions in 2004. In 2002, then-Slovak defense minister Joseph Stank stated that "membership to NATO will ease the process of European integration … It's very important for us to be recognised as a democratic nation. And an invitation to NATO is recognition of our democratic state."[76]

In fact, as scholars Petr Mareš and Iva Šmídová argue, NATO membership was "more of a guarantee for society of its irreversible turn away from the past. It is considered more a release from the potential risk of internal regression of the social system than a protection against external danger." Many countries saw "NATO as wonder-solution to all their problems. Their efforts to join NATO are not so much to provide security for the country as to lift it up from its post-communist misery and to provide permanent and primarily quick

welfare."[77] NATO was clearly seen at the time as a "cure-all," an antechamber to the West and to stable prosperity.[78] This powerful narrative has shaped the evolving Ukrainian attitudes to NATO as well[79]—only at a time when the steps cannot be replicated without the outcome NATO was supposed to protect from: war and devastation.

This narrative is now so pervasive that it is hard to understand the incongruity of iconic dissidents asking to join the world's foremost military alliance while invoking Western civilization, democracy, and European integration. It seems now forgotten that NATO had an authoritarian regime—Portugal—as a founding member, and that two of its members—Türkiye and Greece—had human rights-abusing dictatorships for substantial periods of time. If a member tortured and imprisoned its citizens, like the Greek junta did, or annexed 36 percent of a neighbor's territory, like Türkiye did, NATO was unconcerned (Türkiye has the second largest army after the United States; it is hardly a marginal member).

It now seems forgotten that NATO had an authoritarian regime as a founding member

The Cold War's end did not change NATO's indifference to democracy: Türkiye remains a member though it is an illiberal and unfree state (its Freedom House score is 33 out of 100) and Hungary is only partly free (its Freedom House score is 65). It is also forgotten that identifying NATO with American domination (rather than democracy) was not just a relic of communist propaganda, but why De Gaulle removed France from NATO's integrated command in 1966 (it only returned in 2009).[80] Yet, official rhetoric on "promoting democratic values" is uncritically reproduced by analysts.[81]

NATO is the world's most powerful military alliance that was founded to block communism. It defended the stability of governments upholding free markets; in practice, democracy was expendable. It was supported when circumstances permitted, but when "security" concerns predominated, democracy was (and is) easily cast aside. The association of NATO with democracy was so incongruous even the *New York Times* criticized it in 1996, writing that "the [US] Administration has dressed up its plans [for NATO enlargement] with rhetoric about consolidating democracy and free markets … but it has yet to make a good case why a cold-war military alliance, rather than the European Union, is the best way to secure those aims."[82]

There is, in fact, an *inverse* relation between fledgling democracy and spending billions on expensive weapons to modernize the army.[83] Military expenditures in the 1990s reduced funds for the social reforms required for EU accession and IMF programs. Such demands also violated the democratic will of the people, as at the time, less than a quarter of applicant populations supported spending more on

defense, with good reason as no external threat existed.[84] Unsurprisingly, evidence has shown that NATO had "little to no influence on democratic development" in Eastern Europe; it was the EU that incentivized and guided the transition[85] (NATO did foster civilian control over the military,[86] but this does not necessarily mean control by the people nor is it exclusive to democracies).

Yet, "targeted information campaigns" by Central and Eastern European governments tied accession to democratization and integration into Western Europe. The Slovak prime minister publicly announced such a campaign, making reference not to Russia but to collective security, reduced costs of defense, even "direct investments and new job opportunities" instead. Similar drives occurred throughout applicant countries, thus succeeding in reversing the policy's low popularity.[87] The main theme was integration in the West and democratization. According to former Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, the accession to NATO and the EU was how "Eastern Europe" became Central Europe.[88] It also likely explains why Havel shockingly pivoted early on, from originally advocating dissolving both NATO and the Warsaw Pact and creating a "Europe without pacts"[89] to defending NATO accession by 1991. Though he publicly discussed the new security concerns of drugs, crime, and regional conflicts,[90] privately his reasoning reflected his lifelong commitments. As he told Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1992: "I am not a fan of the military. We just want to join the Western democracies full-scale. Don't you?"[91]

Even if Havel was placating Russia, reframing NATO accession as a democratic EU antechamber achieved three purposes. First, it increased domestic support for NATO accession by tying it to a goal that did enjoy broader support: integration with the West and economic development (though EU favorability also varied widely and over time). Second, it secured American involvement in the ongoing transformation of Europe[92] and regenerated the alliance that was losing its purpose[93]— thus fulfilling a demand formalized in Newt Gingrich's *Contract with America,* a deeply controversial Republican legislative agenda (a point strangely missed by liberal defenders of the policy today).[94] Finally, it provided Eastern and Central Europeans with the strongest possible ally, the United States, while pressuring Western Europeans to proceed with the integration they seemed reluctant to complete.[95] As foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman observed at the time, "Russian missiles and Russian tanks are a nebulous and distant danger to Western Europe. But Polish hams and Polish workers are a clear and present danger. NATO expansion is the bone EU members throw the East Europeans instead of letting them into the European common market."[96] This was a highly successful strategy for the other former Warsaw Pact countries, as they were eventually admitted into "the West." For Ukraine, it has meant devastation.

There was, however, another catastrophic aspect to this rhetoric about democracy: it was used to slowly exclude Russia during the 1990s, reversing the steps toward integration into the Western alliance structure. The irony was again profound: between 1993 and 1999, Russia had a better democracy score than Türkiye, at least according to the main index then available by Freedom House.[97] By moving the goalposts for admission, however, and excluding Russia, political actors of the time failed to exploit the one way in which NATO *did* address security concerns and enable stability.

This rhetoric about NATO and democracy was catastrophically used to slowly exclude Russia

The Threats That Did Exist: Instability and the "Security Vacuum"

As explained, it was not the Russian threat that secured public support for NATO expansion; it was the promise of becoming "part of the West." But two powerful and valid arguments about security *were* made from the early stages of the debate, even though they had not sufficed to sway the public. One was that too many historical animosities in central Europe would prove destabilizing if not addressed. The other was that Russia would seek to reassert its influence there—the problem of the so-called "strategic vacuum" between Russia and Germany. NATO enlargement proved an excellent mechanism to address the first threat. It was, however, never applied to deal with the only country that could someday pose a threat to the region—Russia itself. By using a *military* instrument to repel Russia's unwanted *influence*, Europe is now dealing with military invasion—exactly as expansion opponents warned.

Instability

It is a testament to how successfully Western institutions integrated these countries that the threat-based argument that *was* pervasively invoked in the 1990s has been entirely forgotten. The threat NATO advocates kept emphasizing referred not to Russia but to the old animosities of central Europe; it was the "instability in the region" going back to the "two world wars."[98] Madeleine Albright, whose Czech family after all fled the Nazis, not the Soviets, identified the key tensions. She emphasized the "centuries of enmity" between Romanians and Hungarians; the "years of suspicion" between Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians; and the "decades of mistrust" between Czechs and Germans—which were all being overcome by the prospect of NATO admission. Russia was mentioned, but last.[99] Senator Biden similarly argued that if "the countries between

Germany and Russia were not admitted, they would inevitably seek other means to protect themselves, creating bilateral or multilateral alliances as they did in the 1930's."[100] Here again, influential analysts and private actors concurred.[101] It was thus no accident that, among the minority numbers that did support NATO expansion, by far the most frequently invoked reason (reaching 52 percent in the Eurobarometer) was that "NATO will guarantee security and stability in our region," with fear of Russia at most at 7 percent.[102]

These statements might seem like generic invocations of a history long forgotten and brutally overshadowed by current Russian aggression. At the time, however, they were anything but. The remarkable numbers mentioned earlier, of up to 88 percent of Poles in some polls fearing Germany, had a shocking trigger: in 1990, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had refused to accept the Polish border.[103] This caused such fear that the Solidarity prime minister of Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, had "invited the Soviets to stay on until 'the German problem' is resolved"[104] (admittedly, not a popular position). Even after the issue was settled, the Oder-Niesse line became "the most heavily policed border in Europe."[105] In 1993, 56 percent of Poles still found Germany more threatening, while only 30 percent selected Russia. Another 42 percent of Poles thought Ukraine was the biggest threat![106] These numbers fluctuated greatly by year, but that was precisely the instability NATO was meant to address.

German trouble continued. In 1995, the German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel, in a Bundestag speech, asked the Czechs to recognize the right of return of almost three million Sudeten Germans expelled in 1938.[107] The call was later repeated by the German Minister of Finance Theo Waigel, who also asked the Czechs to "recognise the[ir] crimes perpetrated" on the Germans, triggering a Czech response that still festered on the eve of accession.[108] An equal fear of Germany and Russia was thus observed in the Czech Republic.[109] Hungary and Romania had the long-standing problem of Transylvania, which erupted in a violent clash in 1990, only to be resolved in 1996. There were many more instances.[110] The 90 to 95 percent of Albanians who supported NATO in the 1990s[111] were responding to threats from Serbia, not Moscow, explaining why Albania was among the earliest signatories to the Partnership for Peace agreement in 1994.

NATO as a Dispute-resolution Mechanism

NATO accession helped all these countries resolve or sideline these historical fears because doing so was a condition imposed for entry (including on Germany for unification with its eastern part). By contrast, excluded Yugoslavia descended into war and genocide after 1991. As Polish defense minister Janusz Onyszkiewicz noted at the time: "The fact is that all of our countries have elements like those that destroyed the former Yugoslavia. We have to show

our peoples that the Western way is best economically and in terms of security. NATO can help on both counts."[112]

The lessons of the 1990s were thus clear. Where real security concerns existed, the best strategy was to subject all parties to an institutional framework that obligated them to resolve all such concerns as a condition of entry, with economic assistance as the carrot and stick. Weak powers are better off when their big, threatening neighbor is subjected to a common institutional framework. Yet, Russia was left out. Why? The reasons are complex, but one of them was key.

Why was Russia left out? The reasons are complex, but one of them was key

The "Security Vacuum"

One fear that *was* pervasive among elites and public alike, especially in applicant countries, if NATO did not expand was that of a "security vacuum" between Germany and Russia. As Kissinger put it, "A Russia facing a divided Europe would find the temptation to fill the vacuum irresistible."[113] Brzezinski built his own defense of enlargement on this principle. He warned that an American rapprochement with Russia, combined with "Western political indifference," meant former Eastern Bloc countries would be dominated by an "imperialist" Russia; hence US-Russian cooperation was distrusted and undermined.[114] Landsbergis similarly clarified the legitimate Lithuanian fears: "We do not want pressure on us or restrictions of our independence." For Latvia, NATO would guarantee that "no one will be able to make any agreements behind our back without our participation." The Estonian prime minister also correctly observed Russians simply "feared losing influence in areas once ruled by the Soviet Union."[115] In 1993, 57 percent of Poles rightly feared that "NATO countries agree with Russia about Poland behind its back." As the Polish government asserted in 2019, NATO expansion aimed to fill "the security void" between Europe and Russia.[116]

Furthermore, a nuclear Russia in European institutions would shift the balance and weaken US dominance in Europe. In other words, expansion proponents wanted to perpetuate the Cold War doctrine of keeping the Americans in and the Russians out. This aligned with American interest groups committed to US "primacy." The policy thus reflected many congruent trends.[117]

Eastern European elites and their Western allies thus believed they would be better insulated from Russian influence if Russia was kept outside common institutions. Instead of the new "Western way" of integration, this was the old "European way" of exclusion and blocs. With rising Russian power, it has now produced the result it was long predicted to: war.

What Went Wrong

The "security vacuum" was, in fact, an influence vacuum. Legitimate fears existed about Russian influence, but influence cannot be counteracted with F-16s or a modernized military. A military alliance was used to stop Russia from exerting influence in countries that felt too insecure about their capacity to resist it. As Ojars Kalnins, Latvia's ambassador to Washington, put it: "Our biggest concern is the perception of rejection. It is not so much that we fear a Russian invasion if left outside NATO's security umbrella. Of greater concern is the psychological impact perceived rejection will have on our populace, and our continuing commitment to pro-Western reforms and democratization."[118] These were real, legitimate concerns. Admission into Western institutions was indispensable for the transition of these societies to a stable democracy and a prosperous economy.

The current crisis stems from the incapacity of decisionmakers to extend the same understanding to the country that needed inclusion the most: Russia. The West ignored the entreaties by Russian liberalizers such as Grigory Yavlinsky, who argued that the "most important message of NATO expansion [in a way that excluded Russia] for Russians … is that … Western Europe and the U.S. do not believe that Russia can become a real Western-style democracy within the next decade or so" (or ever, one might add). In 1997, he warned that "signing a treaty expanding NATO eastwards will be comparable in its effect on Russia to the ill-fated Treaty of Versailles in 1919 had on Germany." [119] Anatoly Chubais, one of the most pro-Western Russian liberal reformers, protested in 1997 that NATO, which he originally supported, was the one issue that forced him into the same camp as the ultra-nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky and the Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.[120] Supporters of NATO expansion were "providing grist for the mill of the anti-democratic and anti-Western forces in Russia," making it the "biggest mistake in the last 50 years."[121] In doing so, the West also ignored the relentless and urgent entreaties against the policy by its own experts discussed above, who warned that expansion would embolden the very military reaction we are now seeing.

The "Western way," instead, was one of inclusion: Russia should never have been excluded. The most inspired approach was the one expressed by Michael McFaul himself, who in 1997 warned that "If there is to be a second expansion of NATO [after East Germany], then Russia should be included … If Russia is not included, the next expansion will have far greater domestic consequences."[122] He upheld that recommendation in 2001, even in 2006 (McFaul later served as US Ambassador to Russia and has since reversed his position on the impact of NATO expansion on Russian domestic politics).[123] This was, after all, the approach that built post-War Europe. In 1945, the West did not

repeat the mistakes of 1919. It understood that when faced with a power that can upset the European order, you do not isolate it, you do not humiliate it, and you do not punish it: you integrate it.

The "Western way" was one of inclusion: Russia should never have been excluded

Prominent Western analysts deny that such exclusion mattered, blaming Russia's "imperialism" and Putin's "fear of democracy" instead.[124] They invoke various measures, like the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (1997) or the NATO-Russia Council (2002), as evidence that efforts to include Russia were made. What all these policies had in common, however, leading to their failure, is that they refused to treat Russia as an equal partner and give it the same veto power accorded to tiny Luxembourg or any other entrant. The policies did not make sense even to Americans, from President Clinton to experienced officials in charge.[125] It is thus hardly surprising that most Russians viewed NATO with suspicion.[126] The dismissiveness exhibited by NATO was clear in a discussion reported by its then head, Lord Robertson, in 2000, when Putin asked for an invitation to join: in violation of Article 10 of the NATO treaty, Robertson told Putin countries did not get invited; Russia would have to submit an application instead.[127]

So, West Germany was invited to join NATO barely a decade after committing the worst atrocity in world history, the Holocaust, and despite requiring the death of more than seventy million people before its murderous spree was stopped. The Russian people, by contrast, ended communism through "paper stones," through ballots not bayonets, adopting democracy without a shot needing to be fired by the West (let alone invasion or occupation), and they elected a Westernizing liberal (Boris Yeltsin) by almost 60 percent. Yet, the door to them was slowly closed. The country that is now presented as an existential threat to Europe was asked to wait in line after countries like Bulgaria that faced no threat from anyone and posed no threat to anyone. Russia's size and weak and corrupt institutions were a real problem, but exclusion was the worst way to address it; alternatives existed.[128] This was indeed a "catastrophic error" of judgment; it was a war postponed.

The predictions of NATO supporters have proven tragically incorrect, and those of expansion opponents have materialized exactly as warned: the more the West expanded without including Russia, the more Russian democracy succumbed to what were originally electorally marginal forces. Of course, many domestic factors pushed in that direction.[129] The question, however, is whether such forces would have prevailed if Putin and Russian elites had been incentivized to meet accession standards—that is what accession prevented in all other candidate countries. If Poles and Lithuanians pleaded for admission to avoid

descending into ethnic wars, as in Yugoslavia, or seeing their fledgling democracies unravel, why did the logic not apply to Russia, in fact to a greater degree?

A full account of the causes for this failure exceeds the scope of this article. But Russia's struggling democracy was only a pretext, since it was hardly worse than Türkiye's. Instead, the goalposts were moved. And a crucial factor was that the countries that fought to be relabeled from "Eastern" to "Northern" have treated Russia as "Eastern," and not part of the same cultural space. Already in a 2002 NATO speech, Havel proclaimed that Russia, as a "Euro-Asian power," would "weaken" NATO's coherence because it did not share its "values," the Chechen massacres being his example.[130] But would Russia have been so brutal in Chechnya if it were trying to comply with NATO membership requirements, as all Russian leaders requested, only to be rebuffed? Did all ten admitted countries not clamor to enter NATO to *prevent themselves* from acting this way, thereby conceding they, too, were capable of such abuses, as they had been in the past? Yet, they also clamored to leave the biggest threat of all out of this protective mechanism.

Continuing to treat a military alliance as a mechanism for development and "belonging,"[131] as an incubator of a "Western identity," while excluding the country that so many now claim to always have been afraid of, is an incoherent policy that has had catastrophic consequences on the poorest European country: Ukraine. It now risks embroiling the continent in war. The more Europe insists on pushing Newt Gingrich's and George Bush's approach to NATO expansion in a way that made Russia the avowed enemy, the more Russians will escalate. As this article has shown, far from expressing the democratic will of the people, support for expansion was originally a minority view in the region itself until "information campaigns" and predicted (and thus avoidable) military aggression in Ukraine altered public opinion. The West can now choose whether it will repeat its old history of exclusion and revanchism or seek the transcendence conveyed to Germany that secured seven decades of peace.

Continuing to treat a military alliance as a mechanism for development now risks a wider war

If war prevails, however, and NATO is expanded to include Ukraine today, it should be clear that this time Europe can't expect that the United States will come to the rescue or that it will rebuild Europe with a Marshall Plan. But we must expect, with the highest likelihood, that persisting on NATO enlargement to Ukraine and the return of Crimea would mean a nuclear war, almost certainly first in Ukraine itself. Putin lies tactically, as all leaders do, but he

has always said what he will do strategically.[132] NATO members are under no conventional threat from Russia, as long as they cease pursuing a failed policy that can in any case only be achieved through the further destruction of Ukraine. NATO enlargement supporters can continue ignoring the warnings, as they have done since the 1990s, at the risk of not just Ukraine, but now of the European experiment itself, and most likely beyond.

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