

The Views of the Russian Elite Toward NATO Membership

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April 2000
PONARS Policy Memo 126
IMEMO

Odi et amo: qua re id faciam, fortasse requiris

Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love: you may inquire, why am I doing it:

I don't know, but so I feel, and it's excruciating.

--Cattulus

During more than half a century of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) existence, the attitudes of Soviet and Russian leaders to this alliance have been anything but indifferent. At its inception in 1949, no less than Joseph Stalin (regardless of what his intentions might have been) privately conveyed his interest in joining the club. His failed bid was followed by the flare-up of the Cold War (including venomous anti-NATO rhetoric in Moscow) and then by the Alliance expansion to include Greece and Turkey. In March 1954, a year after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leaders gave the idea another try. In their official response, Britain, France, and the United States dismissed the Soviet request for membership as "completely unreal." The following year saw the birth of the Warsaw Pact and the accession of West Germany to NATO.

Thirty-five years later, in December 1991, Boris Yeltsin--whose government was not yet even universally recognized--dispatched a message to the session of the North Atlantic Council bluntly raising the issue of Russia's membership in the Alliance. A few days later, Russia's foreign ministry explained that a clerk had missed the word "not" in the final version of the document: "today, we are not raising the issue of Russia's membership... ." For almost a decade both sides agonized over the problem of NATO's (further) eastward enlargement, and then over the Alliance's military action in Kosovo. Although at least until 1997 the option of NATO membership for Russia was openly debated by Russia's senior experts and politicians, the appearance of an unshakeable anti-NATO consensus emerged with the start of Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia. By that time, virtually everyone, including former proponents of Russia's integration with the Alliance, was forecasting a long-term freeze in NATO-Russia relations. But another jolt was soon to come.

Putin and NATO

In February 2000, NATO's Secretary-General, Lord Robertson, was welcomed as a guest in Moscow. In March, Vladimir Putin told a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interviewer that he did not see why Russia would not join NATO--under certain conditions, of course. NATO's predictable response was that Russian membership was "not on the agenda." In a couple of days, with considerable help from other Russian officials, Putin retreated (not unlike his predecessor) by explaining his statement to the Russian public as entirely hypothetical.

The cyclical pattern of this saga is familiar to those Russians who believe that history--their history, at least--repeats itself, and yet its lessons are rarely if ever learned. It is more difficult to figure out the purpose and the timing of Putin's remarks, in the context of his domestic political considerations and Russia's national interests. Putin's knock at the door of the Alliance was certainly a boost for proponents of NATO expansion in the West as well as in the East. Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) allies might see this as another sign of Russia's inconsistency, which in turn might make them feel less bound to the Tashkent Treaty. At home, Putin's initiative came under attack from both of his closest electoral rivals--Gennady Zyuganov (which might be predictable to Westerners) but also the leading democrat in the race, Grigory Yavlinsky. Yavlinsky observed that one of the negative consequences of Putin's statement would be that if NATO expands to the Baltic states and Ukraine, Russia would now be compelled to absorb this in silence.

Of course, from the towering height of his popularity rating, the acting president did not feel particularly bothered by their critique. But neither could he expect to attract new voters by making an overture to NATO, less than a year after a nationwide upsurge of solidarity with the bombarded Serbs and mass demonstrations in front of the US embassy. Evidence suggests that Putin, feeling and behaving as an anointed winner, made his statement without regard for the electoral campaign that was under way. One may suspect that he wanted to defuse Western critique of the Chechen war, but embracing NATO seems rather extreme. Besides, the fact that Putin represents the fifth generation of Russian leaders contemplating the idea of joining the bloc that was created with the purpose of defending its members from the Red Army prods us to look beyond short-term rational calculations. Putin's signal of interest in the NATO military machine appears to come "from the heart."

What is different in comparison with 1991 and even 1954 is that Putin's dovish stance on NATO (also visible in the foreign policy sections of the new National Security Concept and military doctrine, both of which coincidentally expand the grounds for internal repression) is markedly at odds with his draconian domestic profile. On the domestic front, he is sincere and straightforward in his expressions (which helps explain the extent of his public approval). He does believe that all Chechen fighters that resist the Russian army after three years of de facto independence are gangsters that deserve to be "rubbed out in the loo;" simultaneously, he does believe that it is acceptable for a Russian government agency to negotiate with gangsters over exchanging a Russian citizen

employed by a foreign radio station for Russian soldiers. He does believe that the Russian party system should consist of his own bloc created overnight by government officials and of the domesticated communist party, dispensing with all other organizations and societal forces.

This combination of repressive inclinations at home with a pro-NATO stance in foreign policy would be hard to imagine some seven to ten years ago, in the rosy period of Russia's democratic aspirations. For Putin's predecessor, democracy and the West were closely related. Yeltsin's retreat from the values of the democratic movement that had brought him to power went generally hand-in-hand with his anti-Western evolution. In this regard, the worldview of Putin and his cohorts represents a sea change. It says as much about Russia's own evolution as about its changing perceptions of the West.

It is tempting to label this policy pragmatic and rational, as opposed to ideological. First of all, pragmatism is a distinct ideology in its own right. Secondly, Putin's is a very special type of pragmatic ideology. Informed by recent evidence, it is based upon the belief that not just domestic but also international public opinion is easily manipulated and does not really matter--at least at the present stage in history. This is an element of the enduring doctrine of authoritarian Westernization. The Kremlin is confident that the West will close its eyes upon whatever happens in Russia, no matter what newspapers say, because of its interest in arms control, IMF-style economic policies, and debt repayment--and because in the wake of the Balkan war the West's own gloves are less than spotless.

This brings us to the third feature of this "pragmatism:" the Putin detente resembles in certain key elements the Nixon-Brezhnev era (which, coincidentally, was the formative period of Putin's career). He is a quintessential detente politician--a global horse trader. Although many Westerners, as well as Russians, would find a comparison between Chechnya and Kosovo inherently wrong and repulsive, pro-government media in Moscow subtly portray the West's muted response to Chechnya as *quid pro quo* with NATO's Kosovo campaign. (Or, to use Putin's jargon, the Caucasus is our "loo" and the Balkans is yours.) It was also not by chance that, of all Western leaders, Putin chose to stage a royal reception for none other but Tony Blair, the principal Kosovo hawk. A Soviet-era diplomat who was active in the late 1960s and 1970s privately admitted to this author clear historical parallels with that period--when US actions in Vietnam were believed to justify Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, and when it was acceptable to trade a dissident Soviet citizen, like a hostage, for a Soviet foreign agent. This was the era when the gap between Western values and the behavior of Western elites on a domestic and global scale became more apparent, and Soviet commercialized nomenklatura (intertwined with intelligence networks) filled this gap with their ideology and practices.

In choosing NATO as the focal point for his diplomatic offensive, Putin steps right into the middle of a controversy that has been one of the central topics in Russian foreign policy over the past ten years. Albeit a newcomer to this debate, he is certainly not alone in his belief that NATO and Russia (under the Yeltsin political dynasty) would fit each other well. Indeed, an array of prominent politicians and top security experts, some of

them just recently converted Cold War hawks, promoted at different points Russia's accession to the Alliance. As late as 1997, the most vocal and insistent "lobbyist" for this idea was financial "oligarch" Boris Berezovsky, acting in person as well as through his media empire and political allies. The Berezovsky case is indicative for all those who believe that even in sheer power politics, psychology always matters. In one of his programmatic articles, he wrote that the West's denial of Russia's integration into its security alliance would be no less than "totally aggressive" with regard to Moscow. Soon afterwards, the Berezovsky media outlets turned unabashedly to anti-Western rhetoric.

It is worth noting that not only most Russian democrats, but also committed Westernizers among them, such as Sergei Kovalyov or Ella Pamfilova, were never on record as advocates of Russian membership in NATO. For his part, Aleksei Arbatov, the top security expert of Russia's democratic camp, as early as 1992 analyzed the idea from a strategic point of view and concluded that it was senseless and counterproductive for both NATO and Russia.

Thus, Putin's overtures to the Alliance did not come out of the blue. They reflect the predominant policy outlook, a sort of operational code, of the new Russian nomenklatura. This elite group (which can be described as hard-line or authoritarian Westernizers) seeks a wholesale identification with the North American and Western European establishment "mainstream," viewed as a single entity, standing in opposition to the "Asiatic" and "underdeveloped" world and to Russia's own unbearable "backwardness." The latter--a product of its unfortunate location at the frontier of the "civilized" universe--must be eliminated through comprehensive westernization of society. Given Russia's diversity even within the ethnic Russian majority (not to speak of other ethnicities), a significant strata of society, while not necessarily anti-Western, will never fit into such a monolithic, homogenized, indeed fundamentally intolerant vision of a westernized Russia. Which means that authoritarian methods, social engineering, manipulation and coercion--especially against "backward" social and ethnic groups--are seen as a legitimate way to remove these obstacles. People with this mindset are emphatically modern, technocratic, speak foreign languages, and are well-dressed and polished--but they are fundamentally illiberal and disdainful of democratic procedures. In fact, for these individuals, the goal of such a Westernization is not human progress nor improving the lot of the Russian people: rather, it is a way to confirm by force their own superior "vanguard" status in society and politics.

Today, of all the many faces of the contemporary West, they are inclined to choose NATO as their privileged partner. Obviously, this is a rather selective view of integration with the West. Why not integrate by starting to observe the norms and regulations of the Council of Europe, or by signing the European Social Charter, as Russian liberals advocate? But these are clearly not the priorities of Putin and his team.

Still, why NATO? What is in it for Russia's hard-line Westernizers, or, to use NATO's own parlance, what would be its mission from their standpoint in the unlikely occasion that it decides to expand to the borders of Iran and China? Given the material and moral condition to which Russia's political leadership has driven its military, present-day Russia

could only be a net consumer, not a net provider of Alliance security. Does the Kremlin envision NATO as a guarantor of Russia's borders with smaller nations? Or, perhaps, Putin and like-minded members of the elite would eventually welcome NATO's help to keep peace at home, starting with the Caucasus? But this does not really require NATO membership? Maybe they are simply interested in the institutional assets of the club. But being unable or unwilling to maintain a proper institutional presence in CIS bodies and in those NATO structures that are open to them (such as Partnership for Peace), why would they expect to feel any better in the North Atlantic Council?

This is a fundamental issue for Russia's foreign policy debate, but also one that NATO and other Western actors should reflect upon as well. Over the past decade, a lot has been written and said on this score by Russian experts and politicians favoring membership or some form of integration with NATO. Below is an attempt to systematize these views by their underlying images of what a NATO including Russia would represent, and Russia's purpose in join the Alliance.

Authoritarian Westernizers' Images of NATO

1. Balance of power view: NATO as the European Concert

This nostalgic vision, shared by some in Russia's military and security establishment, sees Russia's military integration with the West essentially as a restoration of the 19th century European Concert of Powers, each with its respective sphere of influence. With its fundamentally hierarchical vision of the world, it sees NATO as a gateway to the balance of power system. This approach has been fairly obvious in the Kremlin's haughtiness and reluctance to deal with small European countries, its belief that everything can be arranged in Washington and Bonn and its addiction to such dysfunctional assemblies as the European troika. No wonder those small European countries, including former Soviet allies, were reinforced in their desire to join NATO. Among Russian "Euroatlanticists" of this vintage some would join the Alliance to help keep Germans down, while others hope that Russia in such a multipolar NATO would become a counterweight to the United States.

2. Ideological view: NATO as an anti-communist Holy Alliance

This image is apparent in Moscow elites' recurrent talk about the desirability of transforming NATO into a "political" rather than a military alliance. This view of NATO was certainly a factor in Yeltsin's failed attempt to join. The problem with this approach in the 1990s was that among old and aspiring members of the alliance many have communists in the legislature as well as in the government. As for Russia, promoting integration with the alliance for "political" reasons was often a poorly disguised attempt to involve foreign actors in the Kremlin's struggle with the leftward-leaning parliament.

3. The global government view: NATO as a club of world rulers

Another variation of the Great Power syndrome, this approach was most evident in the linkage that Russian experts and diplomats made, from 1994 on, between NATO expansion and Russia's ceremonial seat at the G-7. Yeltsin finally conceded to NATO expansion by signing the NATO-Russia Founding Act in May 1997, under the informal condition of G-7 extension to G-8.

4. Developmental view: NATO membership as a reward for political and economic development

This is from the repertoire of the classical "vanguard" mentality of Russia's modernizers. In the 1990s, a number of advocates of NATO integration with Russia opined in public that Russia would have already joined the Alliance if not for certain social strata that were "still unprepared for it." This instilled in some a genuine hope that Russia would be welcome in the Alliance once it achieves "maturity." Although perhaps stimulating for some, the idea was illusory and fraught with misunderstanding. NATO is clearly neither a tool of nor a reward for economic or political development--whatever is meant by these terms--otherwise Switzerland would be a member and Portugal would probably not.

5. Containment view: NATO as protection against Muslim and Chinese pressure

This was a rather diverse set of arguments that remained forever in the inchoate and undifferentiated stage. The objects of containment were the old fears of Russia's ethnic nationalists--the "Yellow" and the "Green" peril. Sometimes it implies the threat of a traditional war on Russia's Asian borders, sometimes just the inability to contain migration and commercial penetration from the East. Aside from regular security concerns, this perspective has a distinctly racial undercurrent. It is not a coincidence that some of the new Duma leaders who welcomed Putin's overture to NATO have been known for their rabidly anti-Muslim and anti-Caucasian animus. Given the profound rift between those who believe that Russia is a squarely European power (some of them ethnic Russian nationalists) and those who see it as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Eurasian community, some of the former would welcome NATO as another voice in Russia's internal debate over its civilizational identity. They would also welcome NATO assistance in the fight against Islamic terrorism.

6. Crusader's view: NATO as the pillar and the battering ram of Western civilization

An expanded variation of the containment view, this belief, which harks back to Russia's Byzantine legacy, was part of the grand utopian vision of Russia's self-anointed Westernizers in the early 1990s. Thus, Andrei Kozyrev, when arguing for Russia's integration with the NATO, spoke of "the need to 'advance eastwards' the lines of 'common defense' ...of the values of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe," and reminded his Western audience that on the Asian borders of this zone "the main burden is ... shouldered by Russia..." In other words, Atlanticists at the helm of Russian foreign policy had no problem in principle with the idea of an "eastward

expansion" of "European values" (i.e., the West) against the Asian "rest." The only divergence between them and some Western proponents of NATO expansion was whether Russia was entitled to be a part of the West's expansionary drive, or whether it should be relegated to "the rest."

7. Neo-mercantilist view: NATO as a market for the Russian arms industry

In this author's opinion, this was perhaps the only defensible argument in favor of Russia's integration into the Alliance, at least in the early 1990s, that grew not out of ideological whims of the establishment but out of national economic needs. Entering Western arms markets with Russia's military products, if it were possible, would help rescue Russia's high-tech industries, reduce the brain drain and the current spread of Russian weapons and military technologies to countries potentially hostile to Russia and the West. (In fact, the centrality of this goal for the survival of the most advanced sector of the Russian economy may explain the otherwise remarkable acceptance and support by Russia's military industrialists, like Arkady Volsky, to the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact and even the loss of previous weaponry consumers in the Third World.) But this was a very complicated foreign policy task that required, inter alia, a substantially different scenario of economic reforms. Furthermore, arms markets in all NATO countries are of strategic concern, and Russia's attempts to enter them would mean a tough game, as long as Russia's military production still remained competitive by NATO standards. The idea looks largely anachronistic these days, when Russian arms traders struggle to preserve their markets in countries such as India. But Rosvooruzheniye's recent predictably failed attempt to sell military aircraft to Turkey (in spite of Putin's personal intervention, which virtually coincided with Putin's NATO remarks) underscores the link between the Russian government's belated efforts to rescue its high-tech industries and its recurrent interest in the possibility of admission to NATO.

These are the perspectives advanced at different times by advocates of Russian membership in NATO. Some of them are more defensible than others, but none of them conform to NATO's original mission, nor those new tasks to which it has been (unwisely) expanded. From a Western standpoint, the Alliance is not (and was not intended to be) a balance of power mechanism in the 19th century style, much less a global directorate, a vehicle for an international Westernizing crusade or a Judeo-Christian bastion against hostile civilizations. It is hard to deny that it does represent a closed weaponry trading cartel, though it was not so by design. But the whole point of this analysis is that NATO is consistently viewed as such by NATO-friendly parts of the Russian elite, who would be delighted to join. And as we all know, in politics perception and reality are not that far apart. Besides, Russia is NATO's key outside partner on a strategic scale, and its elites' perceptions supposedly have some impact upon the evolution of the NATO identity. There are certain reasons (not only in Russia but also in NATO) why Russia's security establishment, including Putin himself, is inclined to see NATO in such a light, why they see no obstacles to membership in this kind of an Alliance, and why they believe that this way of integration into the West is not incompatible with authoritarianism. To put it otherwise, there is an increasing convergence between real NATO actions, as they have evolved since 1994, and Russian elites' views of the Alliance.

It may be open to debate whether Moscow elites' alternating bouts of love and hate toward their strategic adversary were a major catalyst for NATO resurgence in the 1990s and the disproportionate role that it assumed in regional and global politics. If the theory of vicious cycles has any value, one can expect another burst of self-confidence by interventionists in the West, NATO's further expansion and involvement in poorly thought-out ventures, new resentment in Moscow, and a likely shift from pro-Western to anti-Western authoritarianism.

Before following the Kremlin's lead to enter this vicious circle, the governments of NATO countries would be well advised to reexamine their policies. If Russians with Putin's and Berezovsky's outlook and background are eager to join, while Russia's progressive, democratic forces are not enthusiastic with the idea, something went wrong. It turns out that NATO today stands very far from the values that its members were supposed to uphold. History bears out the idea that zealous and aggressive projection of power for power's sake tends to subvert those principles on which the power was built, and for which it was supposed to serve as an instrument.

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