



The forgotten NATO enlargement dove in the Kremlin

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Abstract

Has Vladimir Putin always stood against NATO's eastward enlargement? Detractors claim that Moscow has invariably objected to the transatlantic organisation moving towards its borders. This article challenges the prevailing orthodoxy by demonstrating that at the turn of the century, the Russian head of state was quite comfortable with NATO 'setting up shop' in Eastern Europe. Drawing upon declassified US diplomatic cables and other historical sources, the presented material speaks to selective forgetfulness on the part of the Russian leadership. The first years of 'Putinism' were not marked by assertions that NATO's eastward expansion complicated relations with the West. On the contrary, his public remarks suggested that Russia was not opposed to this process. Simply put, Putin's own words at that time refute his present-day arguments and display of grievances.

Keywords

Vladimir Putin, Russia, NATO enlargement, The Baltics, America, Moscow's selective forgetfulness

Introduction

March 2024 marked the twentieth anniversary of NATO's 2004 eastward enlargement, when several countries joined NATO at once. A substantial body of scholarly and policy commentary has been produced on the topic of NATO expansion and the geopolitical

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consequences that it brought about. Detractors have framed it as a calamitous error that jeopardised future cooperation with Moscow, while the pro-enlargement camp insists that the incorporation of Eastern Europe was a far-sighted crowning achievement. Two decades later, the topic continues to spark a fierce debate. Despite the seeming wealth of various accounts, one historical aspect has fallen by the wayside, namely that in the early years of his authority Russian leader Vladimir Putin was quite comfortable with the significant redrawing of the European strategic map. He accepted not only the inclusion of less-contested member countries such as Slovakia and Slovenia, but also the three Baltic countries. Today the prevailing orthodoxy holds that Russian leadership has always stood against NATO absorbing the nations on its borders. This article challenges that notion, drawing upon declassified US diplomatic cables as well as historical open-source materials. Going against the grain of conventional wisdom, it serves as a reminder that the man in the Kremlin was fine with NATO's 2004 'big bang' expansion. Indeed, he told us so in his own words.

Moscow's selective forgetfulness

Today, in grievance-filled rhetoric, Russian leader Vladimir Putin repeatedly insists that the addition of Eastern Europe to NATO was a mistake of enormous proportions. Just before Moscow pulled the trigger on its full-scale attack against Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin demanded that NATO withdraw its forces from the eastern part of Europe and retreat to where it had stood in 1997 (Meyer and Arkhipov 2021). In this context, NATO sceptics have charged that Moscow has invariably voiced its opposition to the enlargement project, and therefore the blame for broken relations between the West and Russia lies squarely on the former (Mearsheimer 2014; Menon and Ruger 2020). A closer inspection of the historical record, however, reveals a selective forgetfulness on the part of the Russian leadership. If anything, at the turn of the century, Vladimir Putin was a NATO enlargement dove, not a hawk. The first years of 'Putinism' were not marked by assertions that NATO's presence on Russia's doorstep complicated relations with the West. On the contrary, his public remarks, corroborated by the Western officials who engaged him diplomatically, confirm that Putin's reaction at the time was fairly muted and measured. Despite its current posture and non-stop accusations, Moscow in the early 2000s did not attempt to actively derail the process of bringing Eastern Europe under the US defensive umbrella.

To be clear, since the early 1990s, Russian leaders of various ideological stripes had opposed NATO's move eastwards. The idea was a constant irritant to Russian leadership (Marten 2017). Nowhere was this opposition more pronounced than in the case of the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which for decades had lived under Moscow's imposed direct military rule. Indeed, Russian policymakers bluntly conveyed to Western interlocutors that the Baltics represented a red line to them and that they could never accept their integration into Western military structures (US Department of State 1996). The leading Russian newspaper at the time, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, quoting Russian military staff, asserted that if NATO demonstrated its willingness to take on the Baltic states, the Russian armed forces would seek a direct military intervention to derail their membership aspirations (*Baltic News Service* 1995). There is no denying

that for the better part of the 1990s, Russian authorities vehemently objected to Baltic NATO membership (Banka 2019). Simply put, Moscow conveyed that Baltic NATO aspirations would not be realised. Describing the general atmosphere of those times, Latvian Foreign Minister Valdis Birkavš noted in 1997, 'NATO says the door is open, but the Russian dog is sitting in the entrance barking at us not to go in' (Asmus 2002, 233).

A dove, not a hawk

However, by the turn of the century and the arrival of Vladimir Putin on the political scene, Moscow's criticism vis-à-vis NATO enlargement had visibly 'softened', a fact often untold by NATO expansion sceptics. To the surprise of many, in March 2000, already in his role as Yeltsin's appointed acting president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin openly stated that he had trouble imagining 'NATO as an enemy' (Hoffman 2000). He later doubled down on this assessment by declaring that from Moscow's vantage point, the transatlantic alliance was no longer a hostile organisation (Baker 2001). Just 10 days before the September 11 terrorist attacks, Putin visited Helsinki and granted an interview to a Finnish daily newspaper. During the discussion, he was asked to comment on the prospects of Baltic NATO membership. While arguing that a better solution would be to anchor these nations in some kind of common European security architecture, Putin nonetheless noted that Moscow was well on its way to developing constructive relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which would benefit everyone (US Department of State 2001). In Putin's eyes the threats of the time were international terrorism, the drug trade and organised crime, challenges that they could all fight together. Indeed, at the time the Kremlin went to great lengths to convey that NATO was no longer a threat to Russia (Terriff et al. 2002, 716).

US officials who interacted directly with Vladimir Putin likewise took notice of his tempered reaction to NATO moving eastward. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott, one of the key NATO enlargement architects on the US side, in conversation with the Finnish foreign minister, opined that this particular Russian leader did not come across as being 'as anxious on the question of Baltic membership in NATO as his predecessors have been' (US Department of State 2000a). He brought up a similar point in conversations with the Lithuanian foreign minister: 'In the past, Russian opposition to NATO was paranoid, based on the fear that NATO was anti-Russia. Putin's mindset is different', Talbott said, sharing his measure of the man in the Kremlin (US Department of State 2000b).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks further softened Putin's tone. The US and Russia utilised the crisis moment to redefine their relations around a common threat. In November 2001 Putin was interviewed by US-based National Public Radio. One of the questions from a listener was this: 'Do you oppose the admission of the three Baltic republics into NATO?' In a long-winded explanation, Putin suggested that this was not an issue that could be addressed with a simple 'yes' or 'no' (Putin 2001). He proceeded to argue that twenty-first-century threats were different and that therefore NATO enlargement made little sense to him. Nevertheless, he added that Russia could not 'forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way' (Putin

2001, 14:07). A year later, while discussing Estonia, Putin once again veered off of the traditional anti-NATO enlargement script and suggested that Tallinn's prospects of joining the alliance would not harm Russia's bilateral relations with the Baltic nation (Warren 2002). Other Russian leaders likewise sought to mirror Putin's softened policy line. 'The question of enlargement is not our business. It is NATO's business', Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov told international media (Mannion 2002).

Recalling interactions with Putin in the 2000s, NATO Secretary General George Robertson later underscored the point: 'In all the meetings and conversations I had with him, he never complained about NATO enlargement, not once' (Braw 2022). Prominent US national security figures such as Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet, US Ambassador to Moscow Alexander Vershbow and Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice all observed that Russian reactions to NATO's official invitation to the Baltics at the time were 'low-key' (Tenet 2003; Vershbow 2019; Ash 2023, 113). During the 2003 US Senate hearings on NATO enlargement, Indiana's Senator Richard Lugar submitted that Russian opposition to Baltic integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures had eased and that Russians had recognised that the enlargement process was not directed against them (US, Committee on Foreign Relations 2003). As a confidence-building measure, in 2003 Russia sent its naval forces to conduct joint military drills in the Baltic Sea, where they trained side by side with NATO member countries (Banka and Bussmann 2023, 11). For years to come, the Russian navy would take part in BALTOPS, these annual naval military drills.

At the end of March 2004, seven new members, including the Baltic republics, formally joined the NATO ranks. On 29 March 2004 Belgium's F-16 air force jets symbolically 'touched down' in Lithuania to assume the alliance's air policing mission. A few days later, a smiling Vladimir Putin stood by the side of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and proclaimed that Moscow's relations with the transatlantic alliance were developing in a positive direction. 'As to NATO enlargement, we have no concerns regarding the security of the Russian Federation', he publicly assured listeners (Thumann 2022). The same positive NATO–Russia 'spirit' continued over the next several years. At NATO's annual summit in 2006, the key object of discussion among the gathered government officials was not some issue related to strategic planning but whether to invite Vladimir Putin to French President Jacques Chirac's birthday party, which he celebrated in Latvia (Goulliaud and Bouilhet 2006; Dempsey 2006). While in the end Putin did not take part in the NATO summit in Riga, the fact that this possibility was seriously raised and discussed perfectly captures the ease with which NATO engaged Russia at the time. As noted by Stephen Sestanovich, professor of political science at Columbia University, in his early years Putin constantly telegraphed that he was fine with NATO enlargement and that it posed no threat to Russia (Sestanovich 2024).

Conclusion

The material presented in this article disproves the notion that Vladimir Putin has always stood staunchly against NATO's eastward enlargement. Those who uncritically repeat

Moscow's current claims that Russia never accepted NATO expansion to the east ought to square those claims with the Russian leader's declaratory statements during the early 2000s. Putin's own words at that time contradict his present-day arguments. According to long-time Russia scholar Angela Stent, the Russian government has sought to 'retroactively' complain about NATO enlargement, though at the time Moscow was quite accepting of it (Stent 2017). Indeed, closer scrutiny of this issue reveals that only after his infamous 2007 Munich speech did Putin begin to backtrack on NATO enlargement and selectively instrumentalise bits and pieces of the historical record to fit his own crafted political narrative. As argued by Robert Person and Michael McFaul (2022), when it comes to NATO enlargement, many have overlooked 'the fact that in the thirty years that have elapsed since the end of the Cold War, Moscow's rejection of NATO expansion has veered in different directions at different times'. Contrary to the message actively peddled by the Russian authorities today, it is important to record the fact that Moscow at the time accepted without protest NATO's expansion to the east.

Since NATO's enlargement in 2004, another myth has grown around this historical event. Russian leadership, as well as some voices in the West, have attempted to 'dress up' the enlargement in clothes of American imperialism. Such a narrative implies that Washington imposed its will on Eastern Europe and pulled these countries into the transatlantic alliance against the wishes of their citizens. In the telling of the former British ambassador to Moscow, Rodric Braithwaite, it was the 'relentless US pressure' that expanded NATO borders to 'within spitting distance of Russia and Ukraine' (Braithwaite 2022). This interpretation, however, is ahistorical. No one was dragged against their will. As US historian Robert Kagan submits, 'The impetus for NATO enlargement was not the US. Washington did not run around to Poland and Hungary and say would you like to join NATO' (Kagan 2019). On the contrary, it was the Eastern Europeans' fondest desire to join Western security structures. They were the ones pressing for the opening up of the transatlantic alliance, 'banging on its door' insistently. As NATO celebrates two landmark events—20 years since NATO's eastward enlargement in 2004 and the seventy-fifth anniversary of NATO's establishment—it is crucial to set the historical record straight and not allow Russia to bend history to its own liking and political expediency.

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