

The Russian dilemma for NATO and the EU

How the “renewed” West should stand up for its values

Roberta Haar and Gergana Noucheva

The enlargement of the EU and NATO to include Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans has been one of the cornerstones of European security over the last two decades. It has contributed to the peace and prosperity of the whole continent by dismantling old divisions and building new foundations for Europe-wide partnerships in security, democracy and economic well-being. Yet, Russia has balked at these processes, even feeling left out of them. As a result, Russia has progressively increased its challenges to both the EU’s and NATO’s enlargement plans, by resurrecting memories of geopolitical confrontation and external threat.

This poses a fundamental dilemma for both the EU and NATO, which has elicited two divergent responses. On the one hand, both organizations have stood firm when faced with challenges to the values and principles that underpin their enlargement decisions. On the other hand, a recognition that working with Russia enhances European peace and prosperity, prompts them to find commonalities with the Russian state. This policy brief will first examine the EU’s and NATO’s current disparate relationship with Russia. Second, it will assess varying policy scenarios that suggest how the two organizations might go forward in their dealings with Russia.

REVANCHIST RUSSIA

After Russia annexed Crimea and began a military intervention in eastern Ukraine (in response to Kiev’s pro-Western moves), official EU and NATO relations with Russia deteriorated. Tensions between the EU, NATO (the two main anchors of the Western liberal order in Europe), and Russia emerged, in part, because of the former organizations’ advances into the eastern European neighborhood. Russia viewed the absorption of the countries that used to be within the Russian (Soviet) area of influence as unnecessarily confrontational. Additionally, the expansion of the Western liberal policy space increasing-

ly led to Russian fears of a continued loss of influence in the region. Ultimately, gradual enlargement eastward led to intensifying levels of distrust on the part of Russia.

Discounting these feelings of mistrust, or simply being indifferent to them, the official EU and NATO narratives reiterated the classical liberal affirmation of the sovereign right of nations to determine their destiny, including their economic partnerships and security arrangements. Both organizations repeatedly argued that East European countries are free to choose their alliances and navigate their international relations in whatever direction they prefer.

However, Russia viewed these pronouncements with a growing sense of suspicion. Russia confronted what it viewed as Western liberal rhetoric with its own narrative, which articulated historic rights in its borderlands. Such rights were, in turn, linked back to Russian security interests in preventing a further encroachment in its privileged sphere of influence. This circular argument only provoked further denouncement of Russia’s claims, as evidenced by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s remarks to the Ukrainian parliament: “...membership is a decision for the members of the NATO Alliance, and for

those who wish to join it. And for them alone. No outside country has the right to veto. The time of spheres of influence is over.”¹

In order to stymie European and NATO integration, in addition to its annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, Russia also mounted targeted destabilization campaigns at the domestic level within the eastern neighbors. The Russian logic underlying these attacks posits that the more unstable the eastern neighborhood, the more unlikely it is for the region to integrate into the Western policy space. Russia further insisted that Western countries abstain from intervention in the region in response to crises that did erupt, claiming for itself a unique role as a primary regional security provider and mediator.

WHAT ARE NATO AND THE EU TO DO?

How should the EU and NATO respond to these Russian disruptive activities? In the past, Europeans resisted (es-

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pecially France and Germany) American-backed political commitments to eastern enlargement. European opposition was based on a reluctance to further antagonize relations with Russia, which were strained by plans to install a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. But, by 2009, the official NATO position on Ukraine and Georgia, reiterated at the Strasbourg-Kehl summit in April of that year, was that the two states will at some (indeterminate) point become NATO members.²

Similarly, the EU, over time, could not resist expanding its influence, which was most clearly exemplified in its expansion into the Western Balkans. Since the end of the Yugoslav wars, the Western Balkans is an area that has benefited from European resources and EU membership. It is also an area where the EU is actively engaged in a variety of security missions (the largest being the rule-of-law mission in Kosovo).

While the Western Balkans is the area where the EU’s soft power is at its most potent, precisely because the benefits of EU membership are most evident to those on the EU’s direct borders, the same logic was applied further east, where Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have all expressed interest in EU membership. Giving these

countries a chance was always going to be politically risky and would mark a European reset of its relations with Russia. However, since interactions were already becoming increasingly strained under Putin, it was thought a bold throw of the dice was required to demonstrate EU seriousness and leadership.

This brings us to today and the question of whether the EU and NATO should persist with their enlargement plans in the face of Putin’s growing opposition and return to *Realpolitik* behavior? Has EU seriousness and leadership produced the desired outcome in the region or has it produced regional economic rivalries? Has NATO expansion produced a security dilemma that ultimately shifted Russia into an adversarial player that threatens some NATO member states? If all of these developments are true, how should the EU and NATO go forward: do they accommodate Russia or do they patiently wait for Russia to make a policy change?

THE EU’S AND NATO’S POLICIES TO THE EAST: VALUES AT THE CORE

There is no doubt that eastward enlargement consolidated the foundations of a contemporary European rules-based order, both with respect to its security arrangements and its economic policies. Under the tutelage of the EU and NATO, Eastern European countries made decisive steps in modernizing their security and economic structures in the 1990s and early 2000s. More importantly, the region made historic advances in establishing the fundamentals for democratic politics and pluralistic societies, an achievement celebrated by successive NATO accessions by 14 East European nation-states between 1999 and 2020 and 11 East European countries becoming EU member states between 2004 and 2009.

Moreover, the EU’s enlargement policy over the last three decades has defined the political geography of the continent, drawing a line not only between the ins and outs but also between the prospective members and the non-members of the main integration project in Europe. Central Europe, the Baltics and the Western Balkans are all included in this initiative as either full members or potential members. The countries further east were offered weaker integration chances via the Eastern Partnership instrument.

One of the main accession criteria for would-be members, and the stumbling block for the current accession hopefuls, is the quality of democracy found in the applicant country. Likewise, democracy and the rule of law underpin NATO’s accession conditionality. Democracy and the rule of law further play a key role in anchoring allies into a family of shared political values. And, while



After Russia annexed Crimea and began a military intervention in eastern Ukraine (in response to Kiev's pro-Western moves), official EU and NATO relations with Russia deteriorated. Depicted are two Russian soldiers in Crimea following the invasion (2014) (photo: Photo.ua/Shutterstock.com)

the West is sometimes criticized for failing to incentivize a deep and sustainable democratization trend across the region, the *societal* aspirations for accountable and corruption-free governance have grown in all countries in Eastern Europe. Societal pressure may not have resulted in better governance everywhere, but numerous societal mobilizations against corrupt and unaccountable incumbents, or flawed elections, attest to the basic appeal of democracy across the region.

It is tempting to belittle this achievement in a time of democratic backsliding in the eastern part of the continent. For example, in Poland and Hungary—two EU member states that vetoed the EU's 2021-2027 budget because of a new mechanism that links EU funding to the rule of law within the member states. Unfortunately, this is not the only example of liberal democracy being under strain across the globe. However, liberal democracy is particularly in retreat in the Eastern European EU and NATO members as well as the accession candidates and non-candidates further east. This is a worrying trend in a region where swift democratization was one of the most

celebrated achievements in the post-Cold War period. Yet, it is worthwhile imagining what the democracy standards in that same region would have looked like had it not been for EU and NATO anchors in the years immediately following the collapse of communist regimes there. That democracy is a home-grown phenomenon that cannot be imposed from the outside is a commonplace belief. However, the importance of the Western democratic experience in legitimizing the development path taken by Eastern Europe should not be underestimated.

The role of the EU and NATO as democratic anchors is even more important today when democracy is challenged both internally and within the neighborhood. Pro-democracy constituencies in Budapest, Sofia, Kiev or Minsk all look to the EU and the U.S. for support in their domestic struggles. In the case of the United States, whether and how a Biden administration addresses the years of “democratic neglect” in Eastern Europe that Trump practiced, are questions whose response is keenly anticipated. While pro-democracy constituencies in the capitals of the eastern neighbors know that Brussels and



The role of the EU and NATO as democratic anchors is even more important today when democracy is challenged both internally and within the neighbourhood. Depicted is Polish President Andrzej Duda at a NATO summit in 2018 (Photo: Alexandros Michailidis/Shutterstock.com)

Washington cannot provide much practical assistance, they nevertheless cherish the symbolism of the West siding with the East's pro-democracy cause. It is, therefore, hugely significant in symbolic terms for the EU and NATO not to lower their guard on safeguarding the rule of law in the Eastern European member states and not to relinquish the goal of establishing democracy in the aspiring members. NATO and the EU should realize that what they represent in terms of democracy and rule of law in the eyes of Eastern Europe is a strategic asset that they can capitalize upon.

RUSSIA'S POLICY WITH THE EAST: HEGEMONY AT THE CORE

Contrary to Western views on the eastern neighborhood, after some years of disengagement in the period immediately after the end of the Cold War, Russia returned to claim a regional hegemon status. Its quest for domination has multiple manifestations and included an open attempt to restrict the sovereignty of states in the region to decide on their security and economic alliances. Russia adheres to a narrative of non-intervention and respect for the norm of sovereignty. But, in reality Russia pays lip service to the sovereignty norm, invoking it to restrict what it sees as Western encroachments in its

sphere of interest, yet violating sovereignty in order to impose its views on the affairs of its former satellites. Russia adheres to an official pretence of standing up for higher international standards when those apply to others, while actively disregarding those very standards when they apply to its own conduct. Such pretences poorly mask Russia's resurgent hegemonic ambitions in the region.

Just like the West, Russia also reached out to the eastern neighbors with integration schemes, even mimicking EU and NATO approaches. The EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union)³ is Russia's attempt to lure the eastern neighbors into an economic integration project similar to the EU's single market. By banking on infrastructural connectivity, which dates back to the Soviet times, and exploiting the importance of its market for some of the eastern economies, Russia effectively claimed a leading role in underwriting the rules for economic integration in the region. Similarly, through extending a security umbrella to the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization)⁴ members, Russia emulated U.S.-offered security guarantees to the European allies within the NATO framework. Both Eurasian regional initiatives are anchored by Russia's military

and economic muscle and aspire to rival the West with a soft approach based on institutionalization through law-based arrangements. In theory, they are meant to be voluntary schemes open to willing members. In reality, the reluctant eastern countries actively felt Russia's sanctions when they opted out of Russian regional schemes.

Thus, Russia consciously sought to construct an alternative center of gravity by attempting to attract new members to its core. Its power of attraction, however, differed a great deal from what the EU and NATO offered. Moreover, the EU and NATO accepted the choice of those neighbors that opted for the EAEU and/or the CSTO. Russia, for its part, reverted to its coercive instincts *vis-à-vis* the countries that opted for an Association Agreement with the EU, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)⁵ and/or aspired to closer ties with NATO.⁶

By showing respect for the sovereign decisions of their smaller neighbors, the EU and NATO signalled that they had moved beyond *Realpolitik* and the geopolitical logic that the weaker party always suffers the consequences of the choices made for it by stronger players. By contrast, Russia demonstrated its disrespect for the sovereign rights of its smaller neighbors to choose their economic and security alliances, thereby, affirming its hegemonic aspirations in the region. A recent example of this aspiration played out in the South Caucasus where Russia brokered a "peace deal" between Azerbaijan and Armenia after a short Nagorno-Karabakh war. The result of the peace deal was the deployment of 2,000 Russian troops as a "peace keeping" force in the region.

ENLARGEMENT NO MORE?

Given Russia's clear desire to resurrect its influence in the region, should the EU and NATO persist with their enlargement plans or should they abandon them? This, of course, is a complex question that necessitates a complex answer. This policy brief identifies varying policy scenarios that suggest how the two organizations might go forward in their dealings with Russia.

Firstly, the EU and NATO should respond to Russian behavior in the region by emphasizing the eastern neighbors' freedom of choice. Based on the fact that some eastern states have shown a willingness to align their domestic governance with either of the two regional powers, emphasizing freedom of choice may mean support for choosing to join Russian institutions. For example, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova want to be more firmly anchored into the EU's single market while Ukraine and Georgia want to join NATO's security structures. However, Belarus and Armenia have opted for closer ties with Russia as members of the EAEU and CSTO while Azerbaijan

has preferred to keep a distance from both Western and Russian suitors.

Secondly, the eastern neighbors should be supported in determining their strategic orientations. This is a matter of principle. To stand up for the sovereignty of nations is to support the rules-based order of whose future existence both the EU and NATO are an integral part. This is an existential necessity for both organizations. This approach should apply equally to countries that choose a Western trajectory as to those that opt against it. The willing partners should be offered practical support to integrate into the economic and security policy space that the EU and NATO have created. The reluctant partners should be engaged with respectfully, being mindful of their alternative economic and security arrangements.

Thirdly, the EU and NATO should stay true to their political values and should more fully support societies that make a clear pro-democracy choice. This implies endorsing more forcefully societal demands for fair elections, for accountability and for pluralism. The ongoing peaceful protests in Belarus provide the EU and NATO the opportunity to support society over a repressive regime that brutally suppresses individual rights and stifles basic freedoms. In nations where the majority of citizens express a clear preference for democratic governance, it is legitimate for the West to support pro-democracy demands. This is also a matter of principle, irrespective of Russian viewpoints.

Fourthly, the EU and NATO should make their enlargement commitments *vis-à-vis* the Western Balkans a reality. While NATO's enlargement proceeded at a steady pace (accepting Albania and Croatia as full members in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020), the EU's enlargement in the Balkans is at a standstill. A primary obstacle to membership is the deterioration of rule-of-law standards in the would-be members. Yet, the EU has itself contributed to making things worse in this domain by legitimating and propping up governments that have doubtful commitment to the rule of law, as Robert van den Toorn argues in this issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief* with regards to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some 25 years after the Dayton Accords, ethnic Serb nationalism is on the rise there while Milorad Dodik flirts with Russia. Brussels needs to firmly put democracy first in its accession policy and step up pressure on the ruling Balkan strongmen to deliver on the rule of law. For too long security has trumped democracy in the EU's enlargement decisions with the *de facto* result that democracy remains weak in the region today.



Recently Russia brokered a “peace deal” after the short Nagorno Karabakh war. Depicted is the Armenian parliament after it was stormed following the peace treaty signed by the government in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Alex Gakos/Shutterstock.com)

Fifthly, and most importantly, the EU and NATO should make sure that their own members continue to practice what they preach when it comes to democracy and the rule of law. In recent years, the internal threat to liberal democratic values has come from the previously celebrated EU and NATO success stories. The feeble response to the democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, and more recently in Bulgaria, has inflicted serious damage to the West’s credibility regarding support for democracy abroad. This is not the time for a weak response to democratic erosion at home as it undermines the strategic asset through which the EU and NATO realized past successful enlargement policies.

THE WORLD THAT WE LIVE IN

Russia will continue to oppose whatever the EU and NATO do to integrate the non-member East European countries. There is not much the EU and NATO can do to change Russia’s optic and viewpoint. Recent history, however, shows that Russia’s policies in the eastern neighborhood can be self-defeating. Russia is slowly learning from its earlier missteps. This means, that Russia should be left alone to go through a normalization process of its own until it comes and meets the EU and NATO half-way. In the meantime, the EU and NATO should proceed with the

practical integration of the willing eastern partners while fully respecting the choice of the unwilling ones.

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1. Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to the Parliament of Ukraine, October 31, 2019, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_170450.htm?selectedLocale=en.
2. *Strasbourg /Kehl Summit Declaration*, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg (France) / Kehl (Germany), Apr. 4, 2009, Press Release: (2009) 044, Para. 29.
3. The members of the Eurasian Economic Union are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia.
4. The members of the CSTO are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.
5. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have signed Association Agreements, including a DCFTA with the EU.
6. Georgia and Ukraine have been recognised as Enhanced Opportunities Partners in NATO’s Partnership Interoperability Initiative.