Exposing the myth of Western betrayal of Russia over NATO's eastern enlargement

Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is still peddling the old myth of Western betrayal of Russia by expanding NATO eastward after the end of the Cold War. Both Vladimir Putin and his Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov have used this myth to demand formal Western security guarantees and that NATO rules out future membership for Ukraine and other ex-Soviet republics. **Kristina Spohr** *explains why this narrative is based on not only a misinterpretation of the treaty that reunified Germany, but also a misunderstanding of the diplomatic process that led to it.*

The Kremlin under Putin finds the security order developed in Europe since the end of the Cold War unacceptable. Fundamental to this order is the principle (enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act) that each sovereign state is free to choose its own alliances. Russia wants to create instead a buffer zone between itself and the West, thinning the US presence in Europe and once again dividing the continent into spheres of influence. Putin's reasoning is straightforward enough: he has long viewed NATO enlargement as a threat. To bolster his case, he argues that the Alliance's 'open door' policy is in direct contradiction to 'Western assurances' given to the Soviet leadership in 1990 and to Russia after 1991. He is wrong. No such assurances were ever made.

Putin's myth of Western betrayal is not new. As early as 1993, his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, called NATO's eastward expansion 'illegal'. Four years later, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, a former adviser to Mikhail Gorbachev and head of Russia's foreign intelligence service, stated that several Western leaders had 'told Gorbachev that not one country leaving the Warsaw Pact would enter NATO'. Ten years after that, at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin complained: 'what happened to the assurances given by our Western partners after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact'? During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he again spoke of the 'treason' of 1990. Then, amid massive Russian troop deployment on Ukraine's eastern border in December 2021, Putin claimed that NATO has 'brazenly betrayed' his country with 'five waves of expansion' against Russian interests.

'Not one inch eastward' – and what it really meant

Did NATO make a binding promise to refrain from eastward enlargement, only to make a clandestine volte-face?

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, German and Soviet leaders had to confront a number of complex problems, including what would happen to the 380,000 Red Army soldiers stationed in East Germany (GDR) and when and how the USSR would give up its Allied reserved rights over Germany. Eventually, Moscow agreed to withdraw its troops and to relinquish its rights as WWII victor power. As part of this negotiation, a unified Germany also gained full sovereignty. It was therefore free to choose its alliance affiliation, which resulted in it remaining a NATO member, even though it had grown in size.

In Putin's narrative, Moscow only conceded on these issues because NATO had assured the Kremlin that it would not expand 'one inch eastward'. US Secretary of State James Baker uttered these much-quoted words on 9 February 1990. (They were not, as is sometimes claimed, made by US President George H.W. Bush, who had ultimately responsibility for American policy.) Baker's main aim was to allay Soviet fears of a larger, unified Germany by offering assurances that neither NATO command structures nor NATO troops would be transferred to the 'territory of the former GDR'. Yet Baker's 'not one inch eastward' formula would have made it impossible to apply NATO security guarantees (especially Article 5) to the whole of Germany. Bush therefore suggested to Chancellor Helmut Kohl that he should, in the future, speak of a 'special military status' for the GDR. A meeting in Camp David on 24/25 February 1990 confirmed this wording. Special provisions and obligations as regards the GDR territory were subsequently included in the text of the Two Plus Four Treaty (under Articles 4 and 5), which formally re-established German unity. This treaty placed significant restrictions on the deployment of foreign NATO troops and nuclear weapons on East German soil. In return for his willingness to compromise on these points, Kohl granted Gorbachev, in bilateral talks, a financial package totalling around DM 100 billion, in the form of loans and economic aid, which financed the withdrawal of the Red Army soldiers.

To be clear, then, the talks in February 1990 were never about NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. They were confined to the specific issue of NATO's defence in the wake of German unification – and the two issues should not be conflated. It is also important to remember that the Warsaw Pact was still in existence during these talks, so NATO enlargement was a moot point.

The real turning point: dissolution of the Warsaw Pact

The collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, and the preceding dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, led to a deterioration of relations between the Kremlin and the West – and, in turn, prompted the 'war of narratives' over the 1990 talks. The disappearance of the Soviet empire fundamentally changed Europe's security policy parameters, since a security vacuum emerged in the so-called 'Europe in between' (*Zwischeneuropa*) – the ex-satellite states and ex-Soviet republics from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

Russia's tragedy after the end of the Cold War had less to do with American triumphalism or the survival of NATO and more to do with Yeltsin's failure to democratise Russia, create a stable market economy, establish law and order, and build a partnership with the US and NATO. In fact, the West extended him a 'hand of friendship' via the new North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a process of rapprochement that continued even after the sudden Soviet disintegration in December 1991.

As soon as the new Russian Federation sank into political chaos in 1993 (giving rise to ultranationalist voices), the governments of *Zwischeneuropa* embarked on an active search for security, which inevitably meant ever closer ties with the 'institutional West'. Many US politicians, believing in the inexorable 'universalisation of Western liberal democracy', greeted this search with glee. It is crucial to remember, however, that the push for NATO's opening eastward above all came from the Eastern Europeans and Balts. Contrary to the claims of current Russian propagandists, NATO had no institutionally driven expansion plans aimed at 'encircling' Russia.

'*Spirit* of the treaty'

Beset by chaos at home, an increasingly beleaguered Yeltsin turned to historical revisionism. He began to interpret the Two Plus Four Treaty as a ban on NATO expansion east of Germany, on the basis that it only permitted alliance activities on East German territory. He (and later Putin) claimed that the failure to mention Eastern Europe, together with the stipulated restrictions in relation to former GDR terrain, meant an implicit Western rejection of eastward enlargement. The '*spirit* of the treaty', Yeltsin wrote to the new US President Bill Clinton in September 1993, ruled out 'the option of expanding NATO territory eastward'.

Four years later, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov declared that it would be unacceptable for 'NATO's infrastructure to move towards Russia'. Such an action, he added, would be 'the real red line'. Yet at the same time, negotiations were taking place that would culminate in the NATO-Russia Founding Act (NRFA), signed in Paris on 27 May 1997. This Act, which paved the way for cooperation between the two sides, came well before the Madrid summit, during which the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were invited to join the Alliance.

Negotiations over NRFA had directly confronted the issue of expansion. At preliminary bilateral talks in Helsinki in March 1997, Clinton refused to respond to Yeltsin's call for binding restrictions on the establishment of NATO security infrastructure in new member states. Yeltsin's attempt to introduce a Russian veto into the Act – to be directed against a future round of expansion in the ex-Soviet republics, 'particularly Ukraine' – also failed.

Even so, after all the display of public agreement before the world press following the Act's signing, Yeltsin, in the face of domestic criticism, knowingly went on to mis-describe the content of the NFRA in a radio address to the Russian people as a reinforcement of NATO's promise of 'no nuclear weapons on the territories stationing of its new member countries – neither building up their armed forces near our borders […] nor making preparations for any relevant infrastructure.' It was another key moment, for Yeltsin's deliberately false statement has become a central propaganda motif of Russian state media since.

Yet a close reading of the historical records in both East and West shows that the narrative of broken promises is simply not true.

Date originally posted: 2022-03-02

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/exposing-the-myth-of-western-betrayal-of-russia/

Blog homepage: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/

Note: the above is a shorter version of an article first published in German on Dekoder on 10 Feb. 2022, re-published here with thanks.

About the Author

Kristina Spohr is Professor of International History at LSE. Her latest book is *Post Wall Post Square – Rebuilding the World After 1989* (WilliamCollins/Yale UP, 2019/2020).

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