

### Why Ukraine's Hope for NATO Membership Is Understandable, But Will Remain Unfulfilled

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IMAGE ATTRIBUTE: UKRAINIAN AND NATO FLAG / SOURCE: INFO-NEWS.EU

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## *OPINION / Why Ukraine's Hope for NATO Membership Is Understandable, But Will Remain Unfulfilled*

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For obvious reasons, Moscow's aggression against Kyiv has led to a marked growth in Ukrainians' support for, and salience of, accession to NATO. During the last two years, Ukrainian public opinion has made a U-turn from skepticism against the Atlantic alliance to its enthusiastic embrace. Until 2013, almost two-thirds of Ukraine's population was strictly against NATO membership. Today, around half of the Ukrainians explicitly want to join the alliance, with only a relatively small minority speaking out against. Kyiv is both actively introducing NATO standards in its army, and pressuring the West to finally open NATO's doors to Ukraine.

Yet, the Ukrainian government's and civil society's loudly pronounced NATO accession plans are built on a grave analytical confusion. It is true that no NATO member country would wish ill to the Ukrainians and that all the alliance's governments would very much welcome increasing security in Eastern Europe. Yet, only some NATO member countries would be prepared to commit themselves to participating in military defense of the post-Soviet republics that are currently outside NATO. Arguably, the quick accession of certain East European countries to NATO in 1999 and 2004 was based on a temporary West European misunderstanding of the nature and strength of Russian nationalism. Especially, the Baltic republics may have simply been lucky.

Until recently, public opinion of many European countries stubbornly ignored or consciously downplayed both historic Russian imperialism and more recent political developments after



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the break-up of the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, they did so although, already in the 1990s, the writing on the wall seemed obvious. Among early indications of the continuing threat emanating from Moscow were the Kremlins' ardent supports for Slobodan Milosevic's imperial schemes in former Yugoslavia, or Russia's consistent intransigence to withdraw its illegally stationed troops from Moldova. Other ominous signs included the shocking surges of such outspoken fascists as Vladimir Zhirinovskii, in Russian parliamentary politics in the mid-1990s, and Aleksandr Dugin, in post-Soviet intellectual life in the late 1990s. These and a number of similar phenomena already occurred during the first decade post-Soviet Russian history, and thus before Putin's rise. Yet, they were not or insufficiently problematized within the EU's relevant epistemic communities, i.e. foreign policy think-tanks, high-brow mass media, specialized governmental departments, relevant international organizations, and European political science associations.

The dearth of published research and specialized journalism on post-Soviet Russian neo-imperialism led to a lack of adequate alarmism among Europe's opinion and decision makers. Until today, the entire international community of full-time researchers of post-Soviet Russian ultra-nationalism – arguably, one of the greatest threats to humanity today – consists of about a dozen long-term experts. Most of them live on temporary contracts and are busy with sustaining their daily lives, rather than able to fully focus on advancing and publishing their findings on the various permutations and sources of the post-Soviet extreme right as well as its impact on current Russian domestic and foreign affairs.

After decades of practical experience with Tsarist and Soviet imperialism, the older nations of Eastern Europe – not least, the Balts – had a deeper understanding of the cycles and impulses of Russian politics, and were thus eager to act swiftly. During the mid-1990s, they spotted their small window of opportunity, and pressed hard for NATO membership, before the window closed again. Consciously or not, they took advantage of the misunderstanding of Russian affairs in Western mass media and political elites. As Russia was widely perceived as a modernizing, saturated and self-sufficient nation-state, it seemed of little relevance whether this or that East European country would be included into NATO, or not.

Only recently, the Western public has come to perceive Russia as what it has always been since 1991: A post-imperial state whose chances of democratization and moderation, without massive Western help and resolute European integration, would be dim. Fortunately, for NATO's new East European members, most people in the West remained unaware of the high security risks related to a possible resurgence of Russian imperial revanchism. They thus did not understand how far-reaching obligations their countries took upon themselves when the Washington Treaty's reach was extended to Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius. It is not too bold a speculation to suspect that Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania would have today no chance to enter NATO – had they not already done so, in 2004. And if, in turn, Estonia were not a NATO member now, then – all other things being equal – its Eastern city of Narva would probably today be occupied by Russia.

It should not surprise that Ukraine, Georgia and other post-Soviet countries are deeply worried, about their current and future security. Against the background of their confrontation with one of the largest military powers on Earth, Ukrainians are naturally looking for NATO to provide them with help. Yet, these hopes are destined to remain unfulfilled, as the West today itself has become afraid of Russia. Today, not only Western unwillingness to invest into the security of such countries as Ukraine and Georgia constitutes a hindrance. After Russia's manifest military interventions on Crimea, in the Donetsk Basin and in Syria, many people in Western Europe would be strictly against committing to a possible war with a



country that has the capacity to eradicate the whole of humanity. Oddly, Ukraine and Georgia will now only have a chance to enter NATO once their confrontations with Russia are fully over, i.e. when they would not need NATO's protection anymore.

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