NATO:
Russia’s Response to Its Growing Presence

Jenna M. Patterson

University of North Georgia

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Abstract

In the nearly thirty years since the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation has experienced a complex transition to democracy, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implementation of shock therapy and a shift to a market economy and has dealt with numerous security threats from terrorism to international involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. This paper looks to examine the relationship between Russian security and foreign policy formation and its relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In order to best understand and explain the growing instability along Russia’s western border, it is imperative that the extensive history between NATO, the former Soviet Union, and Russia be examined. This paper seeks to accomplish this by providing a brief history of NATO prior to 1991 before delving into the eras of Russian foreign policy after the Soviet Union’s collapse and how each approached Western institutions and NATO. This is followed by an evaluation of current Russian President Vladimir Putin and his public thoughts on NATO and current issues facing Eastern Europe and Russia. The goal of this research is to determine the role that NATO has played in Russian foreign policy formation since 1991 which has led to increased border defense and activity along Russia’s western border with the Baltic states and Ukraine. This paper argues that the continuation of NATO activity in the region following the fall of the Soviet Union, in conjunction with its inability to incorporate Russia into the organization, has led to decades of pushback from Russia and has most recently culminated in the implementation of Civilizationist ideology into their foreign policy development.

Keywords: Russian Foreign Policy, Civilizationism, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), Expansionism, Security - European
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Literature Review

Over the course of this research, interviews, journals, and articles served as the primary sources for information, opinions, and decisions with regard to the dependent and independent variables. The existing literature on the subject of Russia and NATO focuses on the strategic power balance the United States and Russia have attempted to maintain since the end of the Cold War and, especially, the rise of Vladimir Putin (Diesen, 2015; Fernandes & Finney, 2016; Karagiannis, 2013). This approach is largely realist in theory, as it narrows the analysis to the ideas of power and security. The literature focuses on the importance of maintaining this power balance to prevent the next global conflict (Spechler, 2010). While the situation does lend itself to being argued and supported from a realist perspective thanks to the history of power dynamics between Russia (and the former Soviet Union), the United States, and NATO, the realist theory fails to incorporate the identity and goals of the states involved in the conflict. Several works bring in the economic relationships between Russia and NATO countries in an attempt to explain the complicated relationship (Diesen, 2015; Neumann & Williams, 2000). However, given the underlying idea that wars tend not to occur between democratic countries, liberalism fails to explain why these countries have continued to operate without significant conflict even as Russia has lost its democratic status. With this understanding, both the realist or liberal analysis fail to explain why Russia continues to maintain relatively strong ties to Europe – particularly NATO-allied countries. They do not incorporate the force of the Russian identity and its corresponding goals, nor its role in the formulation of policy. In an attempt to fill in the missing pieces the realist and liberal approaches leave behind, as seen in the current literature, this research examines the role of NATO in the creation of Russian policy with a combination of constructivist and realist perspectives in order to incorporate the ideas and identities of the various actors at play.
NATO: A Brief Background to Expansion

In an increasingly globalized international system, international organizations have become a pillar of diplomacy alongside traditional concepts of cooperation and communication. Europe has become a poster child for this new age of democracy with the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the United Nations joining a long list of international organizations present on the continent. However, none of these organizations have been around for more than seventy-five years – this kind of cooperation in the international system is new. Liberalism saw its rise after nearly half a century of realist thought dominated the continent. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is no exception to this new liberal thinking, though it is less of a union and more of an institutionalized alliance.

Following the end of World War II in 1945, Europe was, put lightly, unstable. It was clear by 1948 that instability was only growing. The Greek Civil War was still ongoing as the Greek government worked to fight off Communist insurgents. Communism was on the rise in Italy. Czechoslovakia turned Communist in early 1948 as the result of a Soviet-backed coup. The Soviet Union had instituted a blockade around West Berlin in order to challenge the Allied-controlled portion of the city. The security situation was deteriorating quickly from both a Western European and American perspective. Concerns were growing as to where those in Central and Eastern Europe would look for security. The U.S.S.R. was steadily cultivating its influence in the region, and Communism and its ideals were spreading – those in the West were worried about the spread of Communism and threat the U.S.S.R. posed to democracy. After evaluating the situation, the United States sought a new military alliance in Europe. The alliance had to include support from countries outside of Europe because those within lacked the funding required for such an alliance so soon after the damage they had received in World War II. Collective defense was secured with the 1948 Brussels Treaty. It included countries in Western
Europe and was a stepping stone to the next goal: a security treaty to prevent Soviet involvement in security-related decisions. The United Nations Security Council provided the U.S.S.R with a veto vote that prevented other members of the Council from bringing military action against the nation. By 1949, a security treaty had been established that worked within the parameters of the United Nations. Known as the North Atlantic Treaty, the agreement created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and became the start of collective security against the growing threat of the Soviet Union.

This Western collective security effort was quickly countered by the Soviet Union with its creation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955 following NATO’s addition of West Germany to the organization and their efforts to re-arm the territory. The Warsaw Pact initially included seven Eastern European countries in addition to the Soviet Union. Both alliances remained throughout the Cold War. Deterrence was the key defensive policy used by both NATO and the Warsaw Pact through the 1960s in order to prevent nuclear war. The mid-1960s led to a détente between the sides and military responses other than nuclear threats were introduced to the scene. However, Soviet military movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Afghanistan and the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles over Europe led to the first true NATO retaliation. NATO deployed the Pershing II weapon system equipped with ground-launch cruise missiles in 1983. The European situation cooled down once more by the late 1980s with the signing of the INF Treaty\(^1\) between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact came approximately six months before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Though the international system shifted from bipolar to unipolar dominance and the threat of nuclear war fell along with it, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization chose to continue its operations.

\(^1\) The INF Treaty, officially the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, required the parties to destroy their intermediate-range ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles and their corresponding missile systems in order to decrease the nuclear threat in Europe (U.S. Department of State, 1987).
Despite its establishment on the basis of European collective security and the perception that a force needed to be created to counter the increasingly aggressive Soviet Union, NATO spent the years after the fall of the U.S.S.R. defending their argument that operations needed to continue in Europe. The organization shifted from focusing on military threats to the country to concentrating on political threats. The fall of the Soviet Union resulted in a power vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe. Former members of the Soviet Union and former satellite states were now dealing with transitioning to democracy and market economies, as was the Soviet powerhouse Russia. NATO rebranded itself as a key player in assisting former Soviet states with their transition. This included promoting stability, democratic institutions, and integration with Western Europe and its institutions and organizations. NATO’s collective security efforts began to expand to protect not only members’ democracies but democracies across the continent. NATO influence in the former-Soviet region began in December 1991 with the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council\(^2\). The Council encouraged conversations between the West and East, and it became a tool for the 1994 NATO Partnership for Peace program. Both the Council and Partnership for Peace programs encouraged information sharing between states and the development of an individualized relationship between single countries and NATO with the goal of eventual membership to the organization. These actions were occurring as Russia itself was recovering from serious economic problems, transitioning from Communism, and working to determine its new foreign policy stance.

**Russian Foreign Policy and NATO**

Domestically, two lines of thought were influencing Russian foreign policy after the Cold War. Westernizers were pushing for the Western approach to policies: rapid economic transition

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\(^2\) The North Atlantic Cooperation Council was later succeeded by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997. Both served to facilitate conversations between NATO and former Warsaw Pact members. Later, Asian countries joined the council.
to a market economy through shock therapy, pursuit of membership to Western institutions and organizations, and decreased concentration on former Soviet states (Tsygankov, 2016, p.). This way of thinking aimed to reduce the level of Russian involvement in geopolitics and regional military involvement in Eastern Europe, but not all Russians shared this train of thought. Statist thinking rose as the Westernist concepts were implemented by the first president of the Russian Federation and his foreign minister, Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Kozyrev respectively. Statists argued that NATO, their former enemy, was expanding its influence closer to Russia and criticized Westernists as they were okay with such efforts and even had prospects of Russia joining the organization, especially after Russia joined Partnership for Peace in 1994. This insecurity was present immediately following the end of the Cold War and only intensified as NATO carried out air campaigns in 1993 against Serbs in the Bosnian War and grew its connections with former Soviet states starting in 1991. These actions came after military presence in Eastern Europe had been reduced under both former Soviet President Gorbachev and then-President Yeltsin and followed Russia’s concession to Western requests for arms reduction even as NATO expanded in the early 1990s. Andrei Tsygankov writes that “overwhelmingly, the Russian foreign policy community perceived the expansion as a violation of… the very spirit of the post-Cold War transformation” (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 107).

Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov came into office in 1994 and began shifting Russian policy away from the Westernizer’s approach in favor of Statism. Despite growing security concerns, Primakov chose to embrace NATO for what is was in an attempt to place Russia in a position where they could at least influence the organization and its eastward expansion efforts. He worked to establish cooperation and permanent lines of communication with the organization and achieved it to some degree by both joining Partnership for Peace and helping to negotiate the 1997 Founding Act between Russia and NATO. Unfortunately for
Russia, the Founding Act did not offer them a significant voice in NATO decision-making or NATO’s involvement in the Bosnian/Serbian conflict. The unilateral American-led NATO bombings in Belgrade in 1999 were perceived as aggressively expansionist by Primakov and the foreign policy community at his back. These bombings led to the end of Russian involvement in the Founding Act. However, there were other factors at play. By 1999, NATO had extended membership offers to the Visegrád group which included Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Though unilateral military movements in the Balkans were serious, permanent eastward expansion was equally, if not more, concerning for Russia. Many foreign policy experts had interpreted the Founding Act to mean that NATO expansion was over (Hill, 2016). So, it was not just NATO involvement in Kosovo that prompted such a sharp, negative turn against NATO but a combination of that event and the first round of NATO enlargement that truly encroached on former Soviet areas of influence.

At the time of the Russian transition of power from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin in 2000, Russians had experienced foreign policy that encouraged cooperation with the West and foreign policy that worked to balance the unipolar hegemon which played the dominate role in NATO, the United States. Putin’s approach essentially combined the two: he worked to cooperate with the West on issues that concerned him like security, terrorism, and the economy with pragmatism. As Russia handled terrorist crises in the Caucuses, the United States approached terrorism in the Middle East following the September 11 attacks. He mostly avoided broaching the issues of NATO, the Balkans, and expansion until the next round of enlargement in 2004. Known as the Vilnius group, the second, and bigger, expansion into Central and Eastern Europe included, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia as well as the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Suddenly, NATO was at Russia’s border after years of small steps toward integrating, democratizing, and liberalizing these post-Soviet states. Putin’s attitude
toward NATO after 2001, one which avoided the issue in favor of more pressing problems, changed after 2004. Despite the organization’s movement eastward, Russia’s ability to join was still out of the question, yet NATO was willing to bring in the country’s border states. Security was being challenged once more. States which had once been firmly under Soviet influence were suddenly ready to begin the membership process, including Ukraine, popularly known as a suburb of Russia, and Georgia, a country all the way in the Caucuses. It was at this point that Russia took a stand against NATO expansion to the east for the first time in the twenty-first century: Russia stated that it would do everything in its power to prevent NATO from taking Ukraine or Georgia (Monaghan, 2015). It became clear that Russia was ending its streak of cooperation: Eastern Europe was its sphere of influence.

The period from 2000-2008 saw NATO involvement elsewhere in the world. Still, work in Europe continued. Regardless of Moscow’s position on the actions, NATO continued support for membership for states in Eastern Europe. All the while, the organization, along with the United States as its own actor, worked to build relationships with states not up for immediate membership to encourage cooperation, especially with regard to military/security relationships with these countries. In doing so, both NATO and the U.S. were able to place weapons, troops, and bases closer to those situated in the Baltic states and, both as a result of the location of the Baltics and also for defensive security purposes, geopolitically closer to Russia and Moscow. The moves continued the signal that had been broadcast for nearly a decade: “the alliance still views it [Russia] as a potential enemy rather than a partner” (Myers, 2004). Russia worked hard to emphasize that it was indeed no longer a threat to Europe and European security as it had been during the Cold War. The country had begun to truly see NATO as a threat to its own security as the organization’s troops and aircraft began to flood the Baltics as the alliance began work on new missile systems (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 217-218).
Little occurred on the NATO front during Dmitry Medvedev’s time as Russian president from 2008-2012. He did address the security threat that NATO missiles and missile systems in the Baltics posed to Russia. Real change did not come until Vladimir Putin came back into the office. By 2014 he had led Russia in a move to annex the Crimean Peninsula, an aggressive move that secured Russian access to the Sevastopol Naval Station and the Strait of Kerch which leads to the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and eventually the Mediterranean Sea. Putin stated in an interview shortly thereafter that the action had come partly as a response to NATO enlargement in addition to “the deployment of these [missile defense] systems near our [Russia’s] borders” (Reuters, 2014). NATO’s immediate response to the action included suspending “all practical cooperation with Russia, military and civilian” (Croft & Siebold, 2014). Additionally, NATO increased the number of aircraft, troops, and the amount of military aid sent to Eastern European members of the organization. NATO military exercises were also bolstered and increased in frequency. Since NATO sent reinforcements to Poland and the Baltics in 2014, Russian troop activity along the state’s western border has increased along with the number of tanks available for use. Missile technology has also been updated in Kaliningrad, the province of Russia located on the Baltic Coast; a nuclear-capable missile launching system known as the Iskandar II has replaced Soviet-era technology that was previously in place in the territory (Smal, 2018). The Russians have also increased their military exercises, particularly in the form of war games. The most recent games took place in the fall of 2017 in mid-September in territory from the Russian-Finnish border down to the Polish/Ukrainian/Belarusian border as well as in Kaliningrad. NATO has reported that troops were practicing exercises other than those which had been previously released, including simulated attacks against a Western-led assault, with far more troops than had been listed as participating in the exercises. Putin’s movements in Southeast Europe have begun

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3 View the *NATO: Response to the Crisis in Ukraine and Security Concerns in Central and Eastern Europe* research completed by the Congressional Research Service for specific figures on U.S. and NATO response.
to have effects on other states on the continent. Increased military activity by both NATO and Russia has resulted in tense relations. As Putin continues to approach his foreign policy from an increasingly Civilizationist perspective, he appears to be re-building a Russian empire from the remnants of the old Soviet sphere of influence.

Despite having not taken a strong stance against NATO until the late 2000s, Vladimir Putin has always kept anti-NATO sentiments in statements. Even going back as far as his speech for Prime Minister candidacy in 1999, Putin gave the assertion that Russia “has always had and still has legitimate zones of interest abroad in both the former Soviet lands and elsewhere” and emphasized that the country should have a say in matters concerning these areas (Bullough, 2014). His sentiments did shift to a more accusatory tone by 2007, following the second major NATO enlargement and the changing Russian attitude with NATO that had begun leading the country away from cooperation. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin targeted the United States, the leading force of NATO, by saying that “the United States has overstepped its borders in all spheres - economic, political and humanitarian” (Jeffries, 2011, p. 281). With U.S. involvement growing around the globe, Putin was able to target U.S. intervention in multiple conflicts. However, the United States was not acting under all of these spheres alone as much as they were through NATO, especially in Eastern Europe and former Soviet lands. By 2016, Russia’s annexation of Crimea was clear. The country was using territory to send a message to NATO about its expansion, and Putin did so openly in a 2016 documentary by American filmmaker Oliver Stone. In Ukraine on Fire, Putin says the following in an interview, “When a country joins NATO, it becomes next to impossible for it to resist pressure from a major NATO leader…And what are we supposed to do? We are forced to take counter measures” (Filipov, 2016; Stone, 2016). Such measures can be seen to include increased border protection and
defense, the deployment of new missile systems in Kaliningrad, and increased military exercises in the Baltic and Belarusian region as were mentioned above.

As Russia heads down a new path, one which deviates from Putin’s original 2000-era method of combining Westernist and Statist thought to create foreign policy, the country’s focus has turned to the defense of former Soviet lands. Such thought is consistent with Civilizationist thinking. Based on the idea that Russia is its own empire with legitimate spheres of influence reaching the surrounding areas, be it Eastern Europe, the Caucuses, or Asia, Civilizationists see the West and its eastern expansion efforts as a significant security threat. Although Civilizationists have been present in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, their ideas have always come across as radical and severely conservative. Yet, Russia has managed to adopt this fundamentalist way of thinking into its foreign policy strategy. This can be seen as a result of continued feelings of domestic insecurity stemming from terrorism in the Caucuses and continued NATO membership expansion, even into 2009 and 2017 with the incorporation of Croatia and Albania as well as Montenegro. Having tried appeasing the West, cooperating with the West, and balancing the West and its influence and failing with each of these approaches, Russians appear to be willing to take on a more conservative, once radical-seeming, method for handling foreign policy. Such an approach has led to risk-taking on their part, from the annexation of Crimea and unrecognized involvement in the Ukrainian conflict\(^4\) to the increase of its Western border defenses. Each of these moves has signaled a policy shift to NATO and all of Europe. Russia has put itself into a new position as opportunities for conciliation, cooperation, and communication with the West change. The new approach places Russian culture at the forefront of policy: protecting ethnic Russians, defending historical geopolitical areas of interest, and redefining the country based on nationalism (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 238-241).

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\(^4\) Putin and Moscow continue to deny the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine and in the Donbas region in particular. Visit the article by Paul Shinkman for a more detailed analysis of Russian involvement in the conflict.
With relation to NATO, efforts to protect such historical interest areas can be seen in the complex relationship between Russia and the Nordic states of Finland and Sweden. The states both joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994 and have since successfully pursued individualized relationships with the organization through the program. However, Finland’s complex history with Russia complicates their ability to join the NATO alliance as a full member even more than Sweden. The territory had been a part of the Russian Empire from the early 1800s until its end in 1917 with the Russian Revolution. Tensions between the countries grew when Finland declared its own independence following a civil war. The idea of Finland joining the alliance brings up the geopolitical nightmare that would most likely ensue. Full membership would give NATO the opportunity to place more nuclear weapons and weapons systems closer to the Russian border and Russian’s own nuclear technologies (Belken, Mix, & Woehrel, 2014, p. 17). A move as big as joining NATO more than twenty years after joining Partnership for Peace is not likely to be on the horizon though. Recent polling data suggests that more than half of the country is not in support of such a move (Yle, 2017). Increased NATO presence in the Baltic Sea is also likely to spur a Russian response. With more than a quarter of the population of the Baltic states being ethnic Russian, increased NATO operations in the area could push the country to act on the information. In 2014, Putin said that “Moscow would continue to defend the interests of ethnic Russians abroad,” and that could be interpreted to include the Baltic states as well. It is unclear what kind of response could be expected from Russia given that their new foreign policy takes a broad approach to concerns of Russians abroad, areas of former Soviet influence, and NATO movements.

To conclude, the Russian Federation has changed its response to NATO operations and enlargement in the Central and Eastern European region. This new approach follows the Civilizationist way of thinking. It is radical in its fundamentalist ideals, and it has led to a
resurgence in Russian imperialist thinking. With an original goal of reestablishing the Russian empire and reintegrating its former territories, the Civilizationists have redefined the objectives of foreign policy. Russia is no longer looking to cooperate with or concede to countries in the West or Western institutions. The longstanding history between NATO, the former Soviet Union, and the current Russian Federation is filled with tension, misperceptions, and unilateral movements. Just as NATO expanded into former Soviet zones of influence, Russia is becoming involved in fringe countries like Ukraine and continuing its influence in Belarus and the Caucuses. These actions can be seen as a response to a longstanding history of the West turning down Russian efforts to integrate into and, later, cooperate with Western institutions while organizations like NATO continued to promote connections with countries Russia has historically been tied to. While the Russian Federation has other foreign policy concerns which may justify a well-defended border, the combination of Russia’s history of tension with NATO, their recent territorial and military expansion efforts, and President Putin’s comments work to confirm the hypothesis of this paper.
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