

# NATO enlargement is not to blame for Russia's war in Ukraine

*Is NATO enlargement partly responsible for the Russia-Ukraine war? Zofia Stemplowska argues that rather than blaming countries in eastern Europe for their desire to join NATO, we would be better served by examining the role Russian energy exports to western Europe have played in propping up Vladimir Putin's regime.*

Many voices in the UK and US press – in the [Financial Times](#), the [New York Times](#), [the Guardian](#), and others – suggest that NATO is partly to blame for the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. The argument is that by accepting NATO enlargement up to Russia's borders, and by failing to decisively rule out Ukrainian membership, NATO holds some responsibility for Russia's invasion.

Does it matter whether NATO is partly to blame now that the war is underway, and all reasonable people condemn the aggression? I would argue that it does. First, we owe those who are defending themselves the correct moral evaluation of the causes of the war. Second, our views about who is to blame for a war influence our views on what is permissible as part of it, what is to be done after it has ended, and – crucially – how to behave in similar situations in future, when, for instance, Finland and Sweden apply for NATO membership.

However, blaming someone does not merely mean attributing to them causal responsibility for an outcome. It involves suggesting that things should have been done differently and that there are things to answer for. The reality is that western states do hold some blame for making the invasion possible, but not because of NATO enlargement. By buying Russian energy on Russian terms, western states have effectively facilitated corruption and authoritarianism inside Russia, strengthening Vladimir Putin's regime despite its treatment of its neighbours.

## Russia's fears

Supporters of the 'blame NATO' argument offer the following rationale. Russia saw the enlargement of NATO as a threat to its security. Nonetheless, NATO proceeded to admit new members right up to Russia's borders and refused to rule out further enlargement. The resulting war is unjustified since it is an act of aggression. But this act of aggression is in part an expression of Russia's legitimate fear for its interests which it views as threatened by NATO.

When talking about Russia, I have in mind the Russian ruling group – chiefly Vladimir Putin – whose world view may be inaccurate but whose access to information is not restricted. Ordinary Russian citizens, in contrast, now find it increasingly difficult to learn what the world is like as opposed to what Putin would like them to believe.

When it comes to Russian officials, there can be no doubt that they have repeatedly expressed fears concerning NATO enlargement. It is worth noting that Russia has talked of NATO 'expansion', but that language carries connotations of territorial annexation. The Russian Federation 'expanded' when it annexed Crimea. NATO was enlarged, just as the EU was, when the new member states willingly joined.

Boris Yeltsin is quoted as saying that NATO enlargement would be 'nothing but humiliation for Russia.' He suggested a pan-European peace force. Regarding Ukraine in particular, the head of the CIA, William Burns, wrote in [2008](#) that the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO 'is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players...I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.'

In light of the present-day expressions of fear from Russia about the allegedly genocidal government in Ukraine, we know that Russia's assertions about its fears can be entirely made up. But even if we credit the past and present statements about NATO enlargement as genuine, we can ask ourselves how legitimate or reasonable they were or are. If the fears express a desire to dominate Russia's neighbours then those who indulge in them are to [blame](#) when those neighbours seek protection.

## Russia's fears express expectations of domination of the region

So how reasonable was Russia's fear of NATO enlargement in the 1990s and since? NATO invaded Afghanistan and a US-led coalition of states invaded Iraq. But these wars were not against Russia. What of the fact that Russia was previously invaded from its western borders? Napoleon tried to conquer it. Hitler invaded it two years after both him and Stalin together invaded Poland (an act of long-planned aggression that the Soviet Union presented at the time as a defensive move). The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth captured the throne in Moscow in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

But it is not reasonable to assume that the past and disavowed conduct of a country is bound to be repeated no matter how the country has changed. NATO members do not celebrate the past Polish, French and German aggressions on Russia. They cannot be reasonably seen as indicative of any current aspirations. If we thought countries could not change, we would have to conclude that France currently poses a threat to the UK and Germany to Poland. Instead, Poland rejoiced when in the first week of the Russian war against Ukraine, on 27 February 2022, Germany announced its rearmament.

It is difficult to understand why Russia would fear its neighbours joining NATO if it cared about its own safety rather than its control of the region where it once had an empire. Why is it a 'humiliation' for Russia, as Yeltsin suggested, to have NATO members as its neighbours? A humiliation, moreover, that has to be dealt with, by Putin, with military attacks.

Why was there not a single voice in Russia in 2008, as Burns reported, that argued it would be acceptable for Ukraine to join NATO? If the fear in Russia is, as sometimes stated, that Ukraine's nationalist policies threaten a civil war in Ukraine, which in turn threatens Russia's border security, then we should expect at least some voices arguing for Ukraine to join NATO and the EU. Russia's borders are the most stable where its neighbours have managed to join NATO and the EU.

So how does the Russian government portray NATO as a threat to itself? It falsely claims that its own aggressions towards its neighbours are defensive. In effect, Russia attacks with lethal force and claims to be defending itself. It is the equivalent of an abuser justifying the murder of their victim on the grounds that they both have a right to defend themselves. The 'blame NATO' argument obscures this asymmetry in NATO-Russia relations. It does so when it credits Russia's fear as legitimate.

### **Blaming the victims**

The 'blame NATO' argument also fails to credit the claims of the new, and aspiring, NATO members that Russia's threat fully justifies NATO's enlargement. Ukraine's sovereign and democratic aspirations to join NATO, though unsuccessful, were purely defensive. Ukraine was occupied by Russia up to 1991 and for centuries beforehand.

It suffered the Holodomor in the 1930s: the deaths of millions as a result of Soviet policies that created a famine in Ukraine. The occupation and the brutal treatment of Ukrainians has not been disavowed by the current government of Russia, which sees itself as the inheritor of the Soviet Union and the Tsarist imperial vision beforehand. Ukraine has also suffered malicious interventions from Russia in its politics and ongoing attacks and coercive controlling of some of its territory – all within the last decade.

Russia's insistence that Ukraine is not allowed, on pain of invasion, to democratically decide to join NATO and the EU amounts to insisting that countries that share a border with Russia are not entitled to be sovereign. For the same reason, those who mention what Russia allegedly was or was not 'promised' about Ukraine by the US or NATO miss the fundamental point that Russia is not entitled to decide what that future will be.

Some countries that had been dominated or controlled by the Soviet Union have succeeded in joining NATO. The narrative of NATO 'expansionism', which presents it as a negligent or even offensive strategy, obscures how difficult it was for those new member states to join. The fact that Russia continued to be feared by those states despite the demise of the Soviet bloc reflected Russia's insistence that it would not accept their democratic decisions; that there was either going to be a new world order approved by Russia or no order at all.

This unwillingness to grant agency to the new member states is visible in much of the media coverage of the war in Ukraine. Questions such as 'should NATO fear Putin?' are sometimes posed and answered in the negative. It is true that Putin does not threaten the sovereignty of the old NATO members through the conventional method of territorial war. But if we see NATO as composed of all its current members, including those that have good reason to fear Putin, then blaming NATO enlargement for Russia's aggression – and blaming Ukraine for aspiring to be in NATO – means blaming the victims.

### **Partial blame does fall on those outside of Russia**

Blaming NATO also averts our gaze from where it should be fixed. There are tangible things that NATO member countries did that are worthy of criticism. The most important is the role of non-Russian states and capitalist structures in facilitating corruption in Russia. As Leif Wenar has argued in [Blood Oil](#), countries that buy goods from corrupt and abusive regimes are buying goods that are stolen from the populations suffering under those regimes. Those who trade with corrupt dictators are partly to blame for encouraging this stealing. Using Wenar's analogy, what would happen in New Jersey if Manhattan were to announce that any car from New Jersey could be legally sold in Manhattan with no questions asked? We would see a boom in car theft in New Jersey.

The Russian ruling group and its associates steal natural resources present on Russian territory by disproportionately capturing the revenue for themselves as private individuals. The stratospheric wealth of Putin is [estimated](#) by some at over 100 billion US dollars. But countries and corporations buy Russia's natural resources, and build pipe networks to ease their delivery, even though they know that they are thereby sustaining this theft. They also know that Russia uses its wealth to attack people in other states such as Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine.

We should applaud the desire to criticise one's own actions first. But since there is much to criticise in how 'the West' accommodated Russia, such self-criticism can be easily accomplished without the need to blame the victims of Russia's imperial nightmare. The descriptor of 'Eastern Europe' has long served those in the West to signal that the region is to be excluded from the normal expectations of what is acceptable for people there to endure. Blaming the war in part on NATO's enlargement, as if the new members did not need protection or did not need to be able to act on their sovereign decisions, resurrects this way of thinking about the region.

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