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Invited but Denied: Ukraine's Enduring Position Outside NATO

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JCSP 47

Master of Defence Studies

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INVITED BUT DENIED: UKRAINE’S ENDURING POSITION OUTSIDE NATO

By Major Matt Arndt

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ABSTRACT

Using a twenty-year time horizon, this essay demonstrates that while Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership will endure, vital interests will compel Russia to prevent the Alliance from fulfilling NATO's "open door policy" pledge. Despite previous inconsistencies in foreign policy, Ukraine's political leadership has been committed to pursuing NATO membership since 2014. Ukraine's desire for credible security guarantees, the symbolic value of NATO as a Western institution, and the reduced influence of Russia in domestic politics are shown to solidify this trajectory moving forward. Despite NATO's explicit pledge in 2008 to grant Ukraine membership, the current positions of key members are used to demonstrate how subsequent geopolitical developments have dampened enthusiasm for enlargement within the Alliance. NATO's desire for a non-confrontational relationship with Russia while it concurrently seeks to maintain its credibility and uphold its values and normative interests is shown to have resulted in the Alliance's current state of paralysis on the issue. A study of Russia's vital interests allowed for the development of potential future scenarios that confirm NATO's hopes of awaiting more favorable conditions to fulfil its pledge to Ukraine are misguided. Building on the Russian future scenarios, potential future outcomes are developed for scenarios where Ukraine either achieves or fails to achieve reforms with or without a successful resolution of the status of Donbas. In all cases, the Alliance's refusal to admit Ukraine in the face of an aggressive Russia is established. The implications of this refusal to grant Ukraine membership are dependant on the particulars of Ukraine's situation with respect to reforms and the status of Donbas.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Central and Eastern European (CEE) states have increasingly sought geopolitical re-alignment away from the Russian Federation and towards the United States of America (USA or U.S.) since the dissolution of the United Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) in 1991. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to be a central component of this process of realignment through its “open door policy.” This policy has helped achieve U.S. President George H.W. Bush’s vision of “a Europe whole and free”¹ by incentivising the significant political, economic and military reforms required of CEE states through an offer of full membership in the Alliance. In the last three decades NATO has expanded from 16 to 30 members.

NATO’s “open door policy” eventually led to a pledge at the Alliance’s Bucharest Summit in 2008 that Ukraine, along with Georgia, would one day be granted membership.² Internally divided on the issue, Ukraine subsequently opted against pursuing NATO membership. However, Ukraine’s confrontational relationship with Russia since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution has led it to pivot back towards NATO and seek fulfilment of the Alliance’s pledge. Russia’s objections to Ukraine’s membership in the Alliance have been explicit. Russia’s destabilizing activities in the country since 2014 are widely seen as an effort to inhibit Ukraine’s accession. The re-emergence of an assertive Russia has prompted significant discussion and debate amongst observers about the prudence and feasibility of granting NATO membership to Ukraine given the current geopolitical context. This essay will demonstrate that while Ukraine's pursuit of NATO

¹ George H.W. Bush, “A Europe Whole and Free,” Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany, 31 May 1989.

² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” issued 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

membership will endure, vital interests will compel Russia to prevent the Alliance from fulfilling NATO's "open door policy" pledge.

Chapter 2 will examine Ukraine's increased interest in joining the Alliance since the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 and demonstrate why this foreign policy shift will endure in the long-term. In light of NATO's "open door pledge," Chapter 3 examines the overriding interest within the Alliance to avoid a confrontational relationship with Russia. Chapter 3 further demonstrates how this interest competes with the organisation's credibility, values and normative interests to produce an unstable position of paralysis on the issue of Ukraine's accession. Chapter 4 focuses on Russia's perceived threat to its vital interests from the broader enlargement process and Ukraine's unique role within this process. This Chapter closes by demonstrating how these vital interests will ensure Russia's resistance to Ukraine's NATO membership persists in the long-term. Chapter 5 analyzes the likelihood of Ukraine overcoming the obstacles to fulfilling NATO's membership criteria. Chapter 5 then builds on the positions of Ukraine, NATO and Russia presented in previous chapters to demonstrate Ukraine's likely future outside the Alliance.

The analysis presented in this essay is based on a twenty-year time horizon. Three general time-frames have been defined. The "short- (or near-) term" is defined for this essay as a period of four to six years, selected to generally coincide with a single term for most democratic election processes. The "mid-term" defines the broad period of time beyond six years and approaching the twenty-year extend of the analysis. The "long-term" or "enduring" is used to denote predictions anticipated to persist to or beyond the

full 20-year time horizon selected. Unless directly quoted from reference material, these terms are consistently used throughout this essay as defined here.

CHAPTER 2: UKRAINE'S PURSUIT OF NATO MEMBERSHIP

A Legacy of Pivoting Foreign Policy

Ukraine's stance on potential NATO membership has fluctuated much like its broader foreign policy since gaining independence from the USSR. This section provides a quick overview of formal policy developments before exploring the implementation of this policy by successive Ukrainian governments and closing with an overview of Ukraine's regional divisions. This background is provided to demonstrate how Russia's intervention in Ukraine since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution has shifted Ukraine's political and public opinion towards NATO membership. Figure 2.1 is provided as a reference summarizing significant events that either aided or inhibited progression toward NATO membership and general developments in Ukraine's official policy on the matter. The events and general positions identified in Figure 2.1 are discussed further throughout this essay.

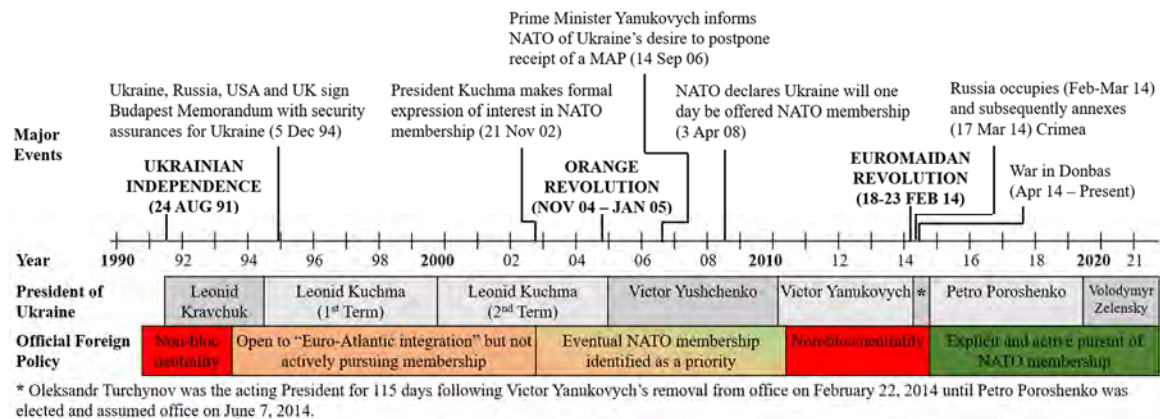


Figure 2.1: Summary of significant events and Ukraine's general foreign policy development with respect to NATO membership since independence

Development of Ukraine's Official Foreign Policy

In 1990, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic produced the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine which commenced the process that resulted in

independence from the Soviet Union on 24 August 1991. Article 9 of this document stated the “intention of becoming a permanently neutral state that does not participate in military blocs.”³ Ukraine thus emerged from the Cold War charting a course as a non-aligned, neutral state.

As the post-Cold War European security situation developed, Ukraine’s parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, opened the door to potential NATO membership in 1993 with the resolution “On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy.” This document acknowledged that the previous position of non-bloc neutrality had to be adapted to allow for Ukraine’s inclusion in the emerging pan-European security architecture. This included potential membership in NATO to ensure “external guarantees of its national security.”⁴ In 1997, NATO and Ukraine signed the “Charter on a Distinctive Partnership” which provided the basis for developing relations and established the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) that continues to be the primary means for formal consultations between the two parties.⁵ Official foreign policy shifted further towards NATO membership with the 2003 law “On the Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine,” which identified integration into the Euro-Atlantic security space as not only a possibility, but a priority.⁶

Despite deep political divisions on the issue, Ukraine’s official position on NATO membership didn’t change until 2010 when the Verkhovna Rada passed the law “On the

³ Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. *Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine*. Kyiv: Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, 16 July 1990.

⁴ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. *On the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy*. Kyiv: Ukraine, 2 July 1993.

⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Topic: Relations with Ukraine,” last modified 27 April, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm.

⁶ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. *On the Fundamentals of National Security of Ukraine*. Kyiv: Ukraine, 19 June 2003.

Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy” which formally withdrew Ukraine’s aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Article 14 of the law rendered the 1993 resolution invalid and revised the 2003 resolution by removing all references of pursuing NATO membership, thus returning the country to its original position of non-bloc neutrality.⁷

In summary, the official position of Ukrainian governments prior to the Euromaidan Revolution has predominately been to pursue deeper integration with NATO, with the exception of the periods of 1990 to 1993 and 2010 to 2014 when Ukraine adopted non-bloc neutrality.

Ukraine’s Informal Foreign Policy

In addition to the periods of formal non-bloc neutrality, there were inconsistencies between the government’s official position and its implementation from 1993 to 2010. Dr. Taras Kuzio, a political scientist and Ukrainian expert, asserted that Leonid Kuchma’s two-term presidency, from 1994 to 2004, is a prime example of such a “disconnect” between foreign policy objectives and formal practices.⁸ Kuchma ran on a pro-Russian platform in his first electoral campaign and a pro-Western platform for his second term.⁹ In practice, Kuzio notes Ukraine’s relations with key NATO members were more strained in Kuchma’s second term, under a pro-Western mandate, due to a regression in democratic principles and major political scandals.¹⁰ Despite the strained

⁷ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. *On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy*. Kyiv: Ukraine, 1 July 2010.

⁸ Taras Kuzio, “Is Ukraine Part of Europe's Future?” *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2006), 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

ties, in 2002 Kuchma formally announced Ukraine's interest in pursuing NATO membership.¹¹

Inconsistency persisted following the 2004 Orange Revolution, largely due to the dynamic between pro-NATO President Viktor Yushchenko and pro-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich. With the positive American response to Yushchenko's electoral victory, Kuzio anticipated that Ukraine would receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Alliance's 2006 Riga Summit.¹² However, prior to the summit Yanukovich travelled to Brussels to secure the postponement of a MAP.¹³ Caught off guard by this, Yushchenko continued to work unsuccessfully to revive Ukraine's transatlantic integration throughout the remainder of his term in office, which ended in 2010.¹⁴ Therefore, despite an official policy of pursuing integration into NATO between 1993 and 2010, membership was in fact either not actively or not consistently pursued.

In 2009 Dr. Jeffrey Simon, an American specialist in European military issues, described Ukraine's inconsistency on NATO integration since independence as an internal "struggle against herself."¹⁵ Simon further noted that Russia was becoming "more assertive and intrusive in tugging [Ukraine] towards a Eurasian direction" and correctly anticipated that this would persist moving forward.¹⁶ Swedish social scientist Dr. Karina Shyrokykh summarized the competing Western and Russian influences on Ukraine's foreign policy up to 2018 as follows:

¹¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Official Text: The North Atlantic Treaty," last modified 10 April 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

¹² Kuzio, "Is Ukraine Part of Europe's Future?" 94.

¹³ Jeffrey Simon, "Ukraine Needs to Decide its Strategic Alignment," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009), 367-382.

¹⁴ Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine's Relations with the West since the Orange Revolution," *European Security* 21, no. 3 (2012), 401.

¹⁵ Simon, "Ukraine Needs to Decide its Strategic Alignment," 372.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 377-379.

On the one hand, Euro-Atlantic integration constituted an appealing path; on the other, Russia exercised significant leverage via multiple interdependencies and security challenges... Since independence, Ukraine has tried to find a balance between its aspirations to integrate into the EU and transatlantic security structures and being a ‘good neighbour’ to Russia, not provoking Moscow to use negative externalities, including trade wars or energy cuts.¹⁷

Russia’s coercive power resulted in a need to appease Russia and drove the Ukrainian government’s hesitancy with respect to NATO membership. An overview of the regional divisions in Ukraine helps to appreciate the scale of this coercive power and how it was eroded by Russia’s direct intervention in Ukraine following the Euromaidan Revolution.

Internal Divisions in Ukraine since Independence

Competing aspirations in Ukraine are often generalized as a Western Ukraine seeking greater integration with Europe while Eastern Ukraine seeks to retain ties with Russia. The country is sometimes further divided to establish four informal “macro-regions” as depicted in Figure 2.2.



Figure 2.2: Geographic grouping of Ukrainian into four macro-regions

Source: Wikimedia Commons

¹⁷ Karina Shyrokykh, “The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine: External Actors and Domestic Factors,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018), 836.

Ukraine's most recent census, conducted in 2001, determined that ethnic Ukrainians constituted 77.8% of the population, while ethnic Russians comprised 17.3%. Ukrainian Canadian Historian Dr. Serhy Yekelchuk indicated that ethnic Russians are a minority in all regions except Crimea.¹⁸ The two most prominent languages used in Ukraine are Ukrainian and Russian. Figure 2.3 provides the percentage of the population by region who identified Russian as their “mother tongue” in the 2001 census.¹⁹ It shows Russian speakers as the majority in only the two most eastern regions and Crimea, but still constituting a significant minority throughout Southern and Eastern Ukraine.

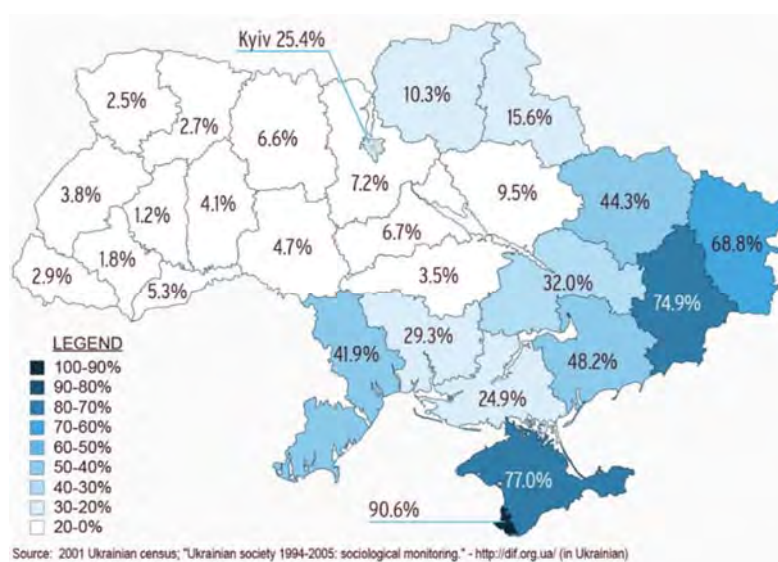


Figure 2.3: Percentage of Ukraine's population by region that indicated Russian as their unique mother tongue according to the 2001 census

Source: Brookings, www.brookings.edu

Perhaps the most illustrative depiction of the geographic nature of the divisions in the country is the regional breakdown of the percentage of votes captured by Pro-

¹⁸ Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

¹⁹ Thomas Young, "10 Maps that Explain Ukraine's Struggle for Independence," last modified 21 May 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/05/21/10-maps-that-explain-ukraines-struggle-for-independence>.

Comparing the data presented above it is clear that support for pro-Russian politicians has historically extended beyond the proportion of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers. For this reason many observers, such as Yekelchyk, reject characterizations of Ukraine's internal divisions along ethnic or linguistic lines. Yekelchyk sees a civilizational conflict between the aspirations of "the new Western-style civil-society" competing against "the strong paternalistic state" that resulted from "the painful process of overcoming the ambivalent Soviet legacy in the region."²²

Notably, over 92% of Ukrainians voted for independence from the USSR in a 1991 referendum with majority support in all regions including Crimea.²³ More recently a KIIS opinion poll conducted in April 2014 in the immediate aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea found that only 15.4% of the population in Southern and Eastern Ukraine supported seceding to join the Russian Federation while 69.7% were opposed.²⁴ Therefore, while many Eastern and Southern Ukrainians have sought to maintain ties to Russia, for most this doesn't negate their aspirations for independence.

The Post-Euromaidan Push for NATO Membership

Political Consensus for NATO Membership

The election of President Petro Poroshenko in May 2014 resulted in renewed efforts to obtain NATO membership. This was most clearly demonstrated though the prompt implementation of legislation rescinding Ukraine's non-bloc status less than a month after the first post-Euromaidan Revolution elected parliament commenced work

²² Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine...*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁴ Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, "The Views and Opinions of South-Eastern Regions Residents of Ukraine: April 2014," last modified 20 April 2014, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=302&page=9&y=2014>.

on 27 November 2014.²⁵ This legislation reversed the position of non-bloc neutrality taken in 2010 to re-assert Ukraine's NATO aspirations. The constitution was subsequently amended in 2019 under Poroshenko's leadership to include statements on the "irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine" and "the strategic course of the state towards Ukraine's full membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."²⁶

The move towards NATO remained consistent following a significant transition in both the presidency and parliament in 2019. Political newcomer and populist Volodymyr Zelensky handily won the presidency focusing on domestic concerns and promoting a message of engagement with Russia. According to political scientist Viktoriia Demydova, Zelensky's preference for diplomacy to resolve the ongoing conflict in Donbas contrasted with Poroshenko's staunchly pro-Western and nationalist position.²⁷

Zelensky's success was significant for reasons beyond his policy positions. Zelensky was born in a Russian-speaking area of Central Ukraine yet managed to secure broad support across the country, including significant portions of the South and East.²⁸ However, Zelensky has maintained continuity in Ukraine's progression towards NATO integration. Steven Pifer, a Senior Fellow with the American think tank Brookings Institute and a former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, highlighted that upon becoming

²⁵ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. *On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Concerning Ukraine's Refusal to Implement a Non-Bloc Policy*. Kyiv: Ukraine, 23 December 2014.

²⁶ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. *On Amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine (Concerning the Strategic Course of the State for the Acquisition of Full Membership of Ukraine in the European Union and in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization)*. Kyiv: Ukraine, 21 February 2019.

²⁷ Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: How Zelensky was Elected?" *Karadeniz Arastirmalari: Journal of Black Sea Studies*, no. 67 (2020), 588.

²⁸ Central Election Commission, "Voter Support for the Candidate for President of Ukraine in the Region - Zelensky Vladimir Alexandrovich," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vp2019/wp302pt001f01=720pt021f01=233.html>.

president, Zelensky prioritized a visit to Brussels to meet with the leaders of the EU and NATO.²⁹ When Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was asked in November 2020 if Ukraine still sought a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO he indicated that the only acceptable alternative would be full NATO membership.³⁰ When Ukrainian Oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyy, who has ties to Zelensky, stated that Ukraine needed to turn back towards Russia, Zelensky responded in a December 2020 New York Times interview:

These are statements of a businessman, one of oligarchs. As for our strategic partners, Ukraine has chosen strategic partners - the EU, the Alliance (NATO - ed.), the United States - these are our important partners... We have become a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner. These are actions, not words. And great actions, so they lead to results. And anyone's statements cannot influence public opinion about Ukraine's geopolitical course.³¹

Tymoshenko, who placed third in presidential voting after Poroshenko in 2019, also made NATO membership a central component of her campaign platform.³² Pifer confirmed in 2020 that “Ukraine’s political elites appear committed to drawing closer to NATO.”³³ This consolidated political support is not surprising, given the rise in popular support for Ukraine’s NATO membership aspirations since the Euromaidan Revolution.

²⁹ Steven Pifer, “Ukraine, NATO, and Russia,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2020), 48.

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, “Dmytro Kuleba: Only Alternative to NATO MAP for Ukraine is Ukraine’s NATO Membership,” last modified 17 November 2020, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/dmytro-kuleba-only-alternative-nato-map-ukraine-ukraines-nato-membership>.

³¹ The Presidential Office of Ukraine, “Interview of Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the New York Times,” last modified 19 December 2020, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-volodimira-zelenskogo-new-york-times-65705>.

³² Yulia Tymoshenko, “A New Strategy for Peace and Security,” accessed 2 May, 2021, <https://defence.nku.com.ua>.

³³ Pifer, “Ukraine, NATO, and Russia,” 48.

Growing Public Support for NATO Membership

In 2009 Simon indicated popular support in Ukraine for joining NATO was “consistently at only 20%” while the idea was “met with apprehension” by approximately 60% of the population.³⁴ Consolidated multi-year polling data from two publications by Ukrainian-based think tank the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) have been amalgamated in Figure 2.5 to show the marked shift in public opinion since 2014.³⁵ Where multiple polls were conducted in the same year or where the datasets of the two publications overlapped, results were averaged.

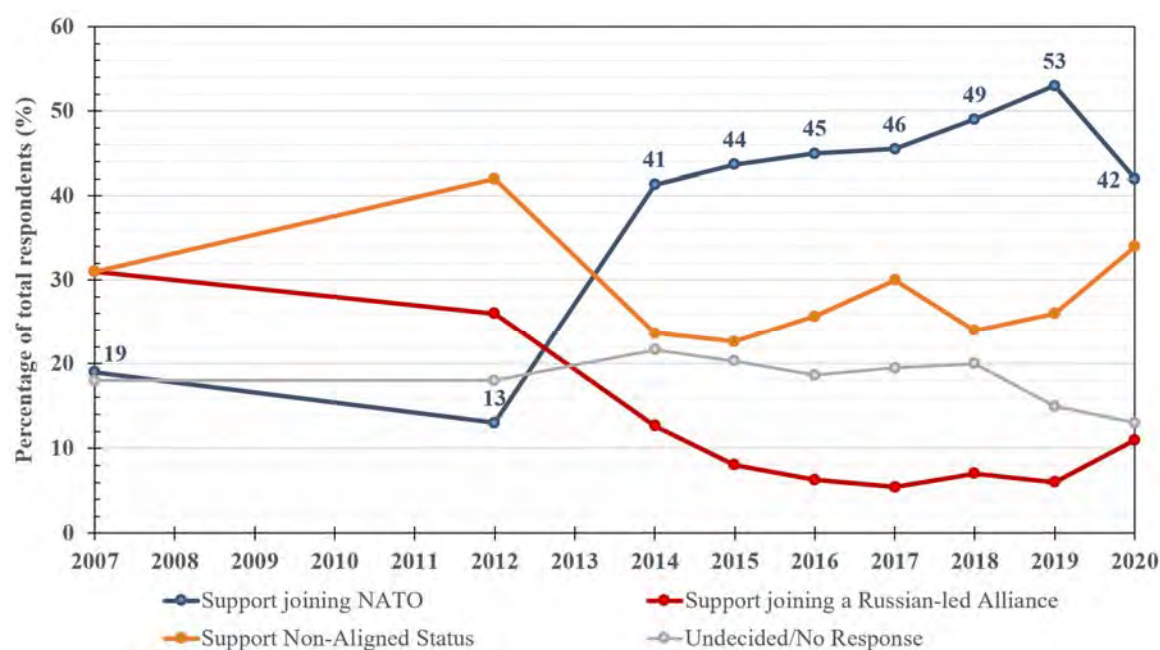


Figure 2.5: Ukrainian popular support for NATO membership over time

Source: modified from Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation

Figure 2.5 supports Simon’s assertion of low levels of support for NATO membership prior to 2014 and highlights how this changed dramatically thereafter.

³⁴ Simon, “Ukraine Needs to Decide its Strategic Alignment,” 367-368.

³⁵ Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, “What Ukraine and the World Experienced in 2020 and What to Expect in 2021: Political and Economic Forecasts,” last modified 21 December 2020, <https://dif.org.ua/article/shcho-perezhili-ukraina-ta-svit-u-2020-rotsi-y-chogo-nam-chekati-2021-go-politichni-y-ekonomichni-prognozi>.

The KIIS conducted the survey seven times since 2014 asking respondents whether they would vote for or against Ukraine's accession into NATO if a referendum were held.³⁶ These results, provided in Table 2.1 show a consistent preference for joining NATO over opposing it.

Table 2.1: Percentage of respondents that indicated they were for or against Ukraine's accession into NATO over time

Date of Poll	For NATO accession	Opposed to NATO accession	Undecided
September 2014	48	32	20
May 2015	40	32	26
September 2016	39	31	30
February 2017	41	32	27
March 2017	41	32	27
September 2017	45	27	28
February 2019	40	31	29

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

In January 2021, Kuzio summarized the persistence of the post-Euromaidan transformation in public opinion with respect to NATO membership as follows:

The elections of 2019 underlined how the war [in the Donbas] has tipped the balance decisively towards Euro-Atlantic rather than Eurasian integration. Support for this westwards trajectory has spread from western and central Ukraine to the south and east of the country, taking root in what were once staunchly pro-Russian regional capitals such as Dnipro, Zaporizhia, and Kherson.³⁷

Notwithstanding Kuzio's claims of progress in the South and East, the appeal of NATO membership remains substantially stronger in the Western and Central regions as Table 2.2 demonstrates.³⁸

³⁶ Yulia Sakhno, "Geopolitical Orientations of the Residents of Ukraine: February 2019," last modified 27 February 2019, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=827&t=3&page=1>.

³⁷ Taras Kuzio, "President Zelenskyy's New Year Message Misreads Ukraine's Patriotic Progress," last modified 9 January 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/president-zelenskyy-s-new-year-message-misreads-ukraines-patriotic-progress>.

³⁸ Sakhno, "Geopolitical Orientations of the Residents of Ukraine: February 2019."

Table 2.2: Percentage of respondents that indicated they were for or against Ukraine's accession into NATO by region in February 2019

	West	Centre	South	East
For joining	56.2	49.6	24.0	14.0
Against joining	10.3	21.6	52.2	59.9
Chose not to participate	6.5	8.8	8.6	10.3
Hard to say / Refused to answer	26.9	20.0	15.2	15.8

Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

Given the strong political support and surge in popular support for NATO integration, Shyrokykh assessed that a return to the former approach of seeking to appease Russia was unlikely in the “short- and mid-term,” particularly as war in the Donbas continued.³⁹ In fact, Ukraine's NATO aspirations have great potential to persist beyond this timeframe given the new-found importance that the Ukrainian government places in the matter.

Ukraine's Enduring NATO Aspirations

Having established that Ukraine has transitioned towards a pursuit of NATO membership, the focus now shifts to demonstrating why it will maintain this trajectory. The credibility of the security guarantee and the symbolic value of the institution will be shown to be essential components that make Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership enduring.

The Need for a Credible Security Guarantee

While several observers have proposed variants of non-bloc neutrality as a means of Ukraine obtaining external security guarantees, these security mechanisms proved themselves inadequate in 2014. Ukraine built its post-Cold War security architecture on “The Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to

³⁹ Shyrokykh, “The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine...,” 843.

the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons” (or Budapest Memorandum). The Budapest Memorandum was signed by Ukraine, Russia, the USA and the United Kingdom in 1994. Through this agreement, Ukraine relinquished its nuclear arsenal in exchange for an agreement by the other signatories to “respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and “to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.”⁴⁰ Pifer commented that:

The political importance that Ukraine attached to the memorandum and assurances was evident by the fact that Kyiv treated the memorandum as, in effect, an international treaty, including by publishing the document in a compendium of Ukraine’s international treaties⁴¹

Disagreements with Russia over matters of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity that persisted since the dissolution of the Soviet Union made these security assurances important. American political scientist Dr. Paul D’Anieri noted that “[w]hile it was recognized that the declaration would not compel anyone to do (or not do) anything, it was regarded as significantly reassuring Ukraine that Russia would not use force and that the United States and United Kingdom would respond if it did.”⁴²

Russia’s actions in the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution clearly demonstrated the fallacy of Ukraine’s conviction. Russia proved itself an unreliable security partner when it not only violated the Budapest Memorandum but also the position of neutrality it coerced Ukraine into pursuing in 2010. Any potential security

⁴⁰ United Nations Treaty Collection, *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, Budapest, Hungary, 5 December 1994.

⁴¹ Steven Pifer, *The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons*, The Brookings Institute, 2011, 28.

⁴² Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 87.

arrangement that includes Russia as a guarantor is therefore unlikely to be acceptable to Ukraine. A note accompanying the 2014 legislative amendments that removed non-bloc neutrality from law confirmed as much. It stated that in light of Russia's aggression, Ukraine needed "more effective guarantees of independence, sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity" as quoted in Radio Free Europe (RFE).⁴³ In assessing the prospects of Ukraine re-adopting a position of neutrality D'Anieri concluded in 2019 that:

Unfortunately, the war [in Donbas] has had the effect in Ukraine of making neutrality much less attractive, not more, especially since neutrality of the sort that Austria had during the Cold War is dependent upon precisely the kind of agreements of noninterference contained in the failed Budapest Memorandum on Ukraine.⁴⁴

Ukraine's government understands that its sovereignty and territorial integrity are reliant on credible security guarantees. The only means of providing a credible security guarantee is through full-membership in NATO and for this reason Ukraine is unlikely to cease in its efforts to achieve it.

The Symbolic Value of NATO Membership

The Ukrainian government promotes the image of Ukraine as a western-style democracy and European country to both domestic and international audiences. The Ukrainian government has championed membership in both the European Union (EU) and NATO to help build this image. This is visible in the designation of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration of Ukraine. This emphasis on the symbolic value of western institutions was common in the post-Cold War reform of other CEE states. D'Anieri noted that as these countries "sought membership in western

⁴³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Ukraine Votes to Abandon Neutrality, Set Sights on NATO," Radio Free Europe, 23 December 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-abandons-neutrality/26758725.html>.

⁴⁴ D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 271.

institutions to bolster their democracy, to confirm their identity as ‘European’ states, and to provide security.”⁴⁵

San Francisco State University professor Andrei Tsygankov noted that despite its low pre-2014 appeal, “Kiev actively worked toward gaining membership in the alliance by increasingly casting it as a pro-European and pro-Western ‘civilizational’ choice.”⁴⁶ The symbolic value of NATO membership is further highlighted by Political scientists Dr. Valentina Feklyunina and Dr. Valentyna Romanova. They noted that as public dissatisfaction grew with the country’s progress on reforms in the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukrainian authorities sought out “symbolic support [in] a promise of Ukraine’s eventual membership in the EU and NATO.”⁴⁷

The symbolic importance was once again highlighted when Zelensky indicated in February 2021 that he intended to ask new American President Joe Biden why Ukraine was not yet a NATO member. Kuleba noted that the “question generated a lot of debate and ended up reaching a wide audience.”⁴⁸ Zelensky was certainly aware of the inhibitors to Ukraine’s NATO membership. But by raising the question he was able to draw attention and sympathy to the fact that Ukraine was still aspiring to integrate into the community of Western democratic and European countries.

The appeal of Ukraine as a Western democratic and European country, and NATO’s value in affirming this orientation, is not uncontested in the country as the

⁴⁵ D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 260.

⁴⁶ Andrei Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand: The Sources of Russia’s Ukraine Policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2015), 289.

⁴⁷ Valentina Feklyunina and Valentyna Romanova, “Ukraine and Triangular Diplomacy: Kyiv’s Legitimacy Dilemmas in the Midst of the Crisis,” in *Triangular Diplomacy among the United States, the European Union, and the Russian Federation: Responses to the Crisis in Ukraine*, eds. Vicki Birchfield and Alasdair Young (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017), 152.

⁴⁸ Dmytro Kuleba, “Why is Ukraine Still Not in NATO?” Ukraine Alert (blog), 16 February 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-ukraine-still-not-in-nato>.

regional divisions previously identified confirm. However, in the most modest assessment, NATO membership is likely to retain its symbolic value in the influential and rapidly mobilized population of Western Ukraine as well as the diaspora.

A Decline in Russia's Political Influence

In contrast to NATO's increased appeal amongst Ukraine's political elite, Russia's ability to influence Ukrainian foreign policy through pro-Russian politicians in the country has eroded. The annexation of Crimea and Russian support to Non-Government Controlled Areas (NGCA) of Donbas have resulted in a direct and indirect reduction in Russian influence.

The direct component of Russia's reduced influence stems from the fact that since 2014 the NGCAs do not participate in Ukraine's electoral process. The Ukrainian government refers to both areas as "temporarily occupied" and continues to seek their reintegration.⁴⁹ However, there is near-universal belief amongst observers that Crimea is likely to remain permanently under Russian control. The future of the Donbas is less certain. Both Russia and Ukraine are, at least rhetorically, committed to returning the regions to Ukrainian control through the Minsk agreements. However, the process has remained stalled due to disagreements over the particulars of its implementation. Zelensky has maintained the position of his predecessor of refusing to concede to Russian efforts to link the return of the Donbas to formal assurances or de facto arrangements that would prevent Ukraine's NATO aspirations, stating:

There is nothing in the Minsk agreements about NATO membership, in the Normandy format there is nothing about NATO membership as well.

⁴⁹ The Presidential Office of Ukraine, "Following the Crimean Platform Summit, Coordinated International Tools for Deoccupation of the Peninsula should Emerge - Ihor Zhovkva," last modified 18 January 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/za-rezultatami-samitu-krimskoyi-platformi-maye-zyavitisya-sk-66057>.

Regarding the amendments to the Constitution in the sphere of decentralization, we say: this is in accordance with the Minsk agreements, we are ready for that. To change the Constitution in the way that we sometimes hear about in the media from the Russian Federation - here they know my position, I told [Russian President Vladimir] Putin directly that I do not agree with that.⁵⁰

The exclusion of the NGCAs from the electoral process affects the balance of power in both the presidential and the parliamentary voting. D’Anieri highlights the impact here by considering the 2010 Presidential election. Of the 3.8 million votes in what are now NCGAs, he noted that 3.3 million were cast for pro-Russian candidate and eventual President Yanukovich. Importantly, D’Anieri shows the loss of these votes would have been enough to transition the 2010 presidential vote to a decisive victory for runner-up Tymoshenko.⁵¹

In terms of the parliamentary elections, the multiple revisions to the system make the impact more difficult to quantify. The electoral system used from 2012-2019 awarded 50% of the seats through a “first-past-the-post” method and the remaining 50% of the seats based on proportional representation. The next scheduled parliamentary election, in 2023, will be determined entirely by proportional representation. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, NGCAs contributed 2.5 million votes, or 12% of the national total of just over 20 million votes.⁵² Over 80% of votes in these areas went to pro-Russian parties. D’Anieri analyzed the 2012 results using the pre-2023 electoral system. The reduction in seats for Yanukovich’s Party of Regions in this analysis led him to conclude that “[c]ontrolling the parliament solely by appealing to eastern/southern Ukraine is no

⁵⁰ The Presidential Office of Ukraine, “Interview of Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the New York Times.”

⁵¹ Paul D’Anieri, “Gerrymandering Ukraine? Electoral Consequences of Occupation,” *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 1 (2019a), 89-108.

⁵² D’Anieri, “Gerrymandering Ukraine...,” 98-99.

longer a viable strategy.”⁵³ The seats awarded through a “first-past-the-post” method only amplified the Party of Regions’ success, therefore D’Anieri’s assessment would remain valid with their removal from the process.

The Potential for and Impact of a Reintegration of the Donbas

The direct component of Russia’s loss of influence in Ukraine becomes less significant if Donbas is fully reintegrated into Ukraine. This scenario would potentially be enough to restore the ability of the Eastern region to dominate the presidential and parliamentary elections according to D’Anieri.⁵⁴ However, the factors preventing the return to power of a pro-Russian party are more significant than the factors working towards such an outcome.

First, the probability of the area being returned to Ukrainian government control in the short term is low. D’Anieri highlight that “Although the death toll and economic cost continue to mount, both Russia and Ukraine can sustain the post-Minsk level of conflict indefinitely.”⁵⁵ He further noted that:

While it is tempting to assume that sooner or later Russia will want to resolve their status – by annexing them, supporting their independence, or facilitating their reintegration into Ukraine – the experience of Transnistria indicates that a “grey” status might become somewhat permanent. As with Transnistria in Moldova, the ambiguous status of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics facilitates Russia’s leverage over Ukraine and avoids the political and economic costs of integrating the territories into Russia or supporting their sovereignty.⁵⁶

The British-based International Institute of Strategic Studies similarly concludes that Russia is content with the current status of Donbas, however, it suggests formal

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁵ D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 269.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

recognition of the breakaway “republics” is an eventual possibility as “Russia has been gradually enhancing its formal engagement with the territories.”⁵⁷

Ukrainian political scientists and pollsters Olexiy Haran, Maksym Yakovlyev and Maria Zolkina analyzed the results of opinion polls conducted from 2014 to 2019. They found that Ukrainians overwhelmingly support the reintegration of the NGCA of Donbas, but that a substantial majority are passionately opposed to doing so in the manner that the Russian government has consistently advocated.⁵⁸ Haran et al. concluded that the Ukrainian public seems willing to make concessions only “if political provisions of the Minsk agreements are interpreted flexibly” and with the condition that “security comes first.”⁵⁹ Strong opposition from the Ukrainian public has resulted in the Ukrainian government stepping back from earlier efforts to enact the political provisions of Minsk.⁶⁰ Despite Zelensky’s prioritization of ending the war in Donbas he has also been unable to find a compromise that Russia views as suitable. Given that Russia seems content in waiting for the Ukrainian government to yield, the reintegration of Donbas is unlikely.

If Donbas was reintegrated, there are indirect impacts of Russia’s aggression that make it uncertain that a pro-Russian consensus or party would re-emerge. Extended delays in reintegration allow for Euro-Atlantic policies and cooperation to become further entrenched. These delays will also likely amplify the divisions between the reintegrated parts of Donbas and the remainder of the Eastern and Southern regions.

⁵⁷ International Institute of Strategic Studies, “Russia and Eurasia,” in *Strategic Survey: The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics*, International Institute of Strategic Studies, Vol. 119 (Routledge, 2019), 239.

⁵⁸ Olexiy Haran, Maksym Yakovlyev and Maria Zolkina, “Identity, War, and Peace: Public Attitudes in the Ukraine-Controlled Donbas,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 6 (2019), 695.

⁵⁹ Haran, Yakovlyev and Zolkina, “Identity, War, and Peace...,” 697.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 695.

If a consensus successor to the Party of Regions does emerge, it will have to contend with the diluted nature of pro-Russian sentiment in government controlled regions of Donbas, and indeed throughout the country. A 2019 KIIS opinion poll showed a positive view of the people of Russia and a strong desire to maintain relations with Russia persists country-wide. However, the poll also showed significant dislike for current Russian leadership. The most favorable results were the 34% and 14% positive views of the current Russian government in Eastern and Southern Ukraine respectively in 2019.⁶¹ The generalization of these regions as being “pro-Russian” therefore does not necessarily mean they remain supportive of the Russian government’s aspirations for Ukraine.

Haran et al. found that interest in a military or economic union with Russia has “collapsed” in government controlled parts of Donbas. With respect to a military union, interest dropped from 50% to 9% between 2014 and 2018. While interest in NATO membership increased, from 1% to 16%, Haran et al. found the overwhelming preference in the area was for non-bloc status.⁶² While this might suggest a strengthening of the potential return to a position of non-bloc status, this is in fact not the case. It is not insignificant that non-bloc status now represents one extreme of the national debate rather than the compromise it was promoted as previously. On this matter, Kuzio noted that “Ukrainians who support NATO membership are actively lobbying for this goal while

⁶¹ Volodymyr Paniotto, “Attitude of the Population of Ukraine Toward Russia and of the Population of Russia Toward Ukraine, February 2019,” last modified 12 March 2019, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=831&page=9>.

⁶² Haran, Yakovlyev and Zolkina, “Identity, War, and Peace...,” 692-693.

those who are opposed have decreased in number since 2014 and are far more passive than the supporters.”⁶³

Given the shifted landscape, it is unlikely that a pro-Russian party could do much more than slow the progression of NATO integration for limited periods of time. Haran et al. do caution however that these gains are not irreversible “should adequate support from Ukraine’s Western partners be lacking,” a factor that will be explored in subsequent chapters.⁶⁴

Summary

This chapter began by exploring inconsistencies in Ukraine’s efforts to integrate into NATO since achieving its independent in 1991 until the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014. The broad-based political consensus and growing public interest for NATO membership that has since emerged was then demonstrated. This newfound commitment to NATO membership was shown to be an enduring foreign policy trajectory. This was established by considering Ukraine’s desire for a credible external security guarantee and the symbolic value NATO provides in the development of Ukraine’s western democratic and European identity. The reduced political influence of Russia in Ukrainian politics was subsequently confirmed. The potential impact of the reintegration of the non-government controlled Donbas was considered and shown to be unlikely to prevent NATO membership on its own. With Ukraine’s interest in NATO membership confirmed, Chapter 2 will turn its attention to NATO and its challenge to

⁶³ Taras Kuzio, “The Case for Ukraine’s Membership of NATO,” *New Eastern Europe*, 18 May 2018, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/05/18/case-ukraines-membership-nato>.

⁶⁴ Haran, Yakovlyev and Zolkina, “Identity, War, and Peace...,” 693.

foster a non-confrontational relationship with Russia while uphold its organisational values and normative interests.

CHAPTER 3: NATO'S INTERESTS AND VALUES

NATO's Relations with Russia

NATO has an overriding interest in fostering a non-confrontational relationship with Russia. At its most basic level this interest includes preventing events that could escalate to direct conflict, especially nuclear war. More broadly, it includes promoting a climate of trust and mutual understanding to facilitate the coordination of matters of shared interest. Ideally, the NATO-Russia relationship would go beyond non-confrontation to achieve cooperation.

The differing perspectives and competing interests of NATO and Russia have prevented the attainment of the ideal relationship in the post-Cold War era. Similarly, there are competing perspectives within the Alliance on how to manage this non-ideal relationship with Russia. The differing viewpoints of NATO members are a complex product of their individual geographic realities, historical experiences, national interests and values. The result is that NATO has struggled to arrive at a consensus on the matter of Ukraine's prospective NATO membership in the face of Russian opposition. Internal divisions within the Alliance were apparent at the April 2008 meeting of the North Atlantic Council, NATO's governing political body, in Bucharest.

The 2008 Bucharest Summit Pledge to Ukraine

The declaration that followed the Bucharest Summit remains the most explicit commitment to Ukraine's potential accession into NATO:

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO...MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on

their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP.⁶⁵

On the surface this would appear to be a resounding endorsement for Ukraine's future accession into the Alliance. However, this position was in fact a compromise that emerged from a hotly contested debate. Dr. Ronald Asmus, an American diplomat and political analyst involved in the NATO enlargement process, noted that the Americans, with support from the UK, Canada and several CEE countries, pushed hard to obtain MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia in support of President George Bush's initiative to promote democratic expansion.⁶⁶

Resisting the initiative according to Asmus, were Germany and France, who were supported by Italy, Spain, Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands. Asmus asserts this group was primarily concerned the move would strain ties or provoke conflict with Russia, stating:

Many of them simply thought enlargement had gone far enough in terms of straining NATO cohesion or irritating Russia. They had doubts as to whether NATO should take a first step in this strategic direction because they did not want to start a process they could not later stop... When they said that Ukraine or Georgia was not ready, they were also saying that they were not ready either⁶⁷

For these countries the summit declaration successfully avoided the formal issuance of a MAP to Ukraine and Georgia.

The internal friction that resulted from the deliberations on Ukraine's prospective NATO membership at the summit highlighted how the allies assessed the stakes of aggravating Russia against their own interests differently. These differing perspectives

⁶⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," issued 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

⁶⁶ Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 117.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

will be explored in subsequent sections after examining geopolitical developments since the Bucharest Summit.

Post-Bucharest Summit NATO-Russia Relations

Russia's "disproportionate military action" in Georgia in August 2008 was the most immediate destabilising influence on NATO-Russia relations following the Bucharest Summit.⁶⁸ However, it wasn't until Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014 that the breaking point was reached. Russia's illegal annexation and militarization of Crimea, as well as its poorly masked involvement in the war in Donbas perpetuate the tensions between the parties. The interventions in Georgia and Ukraine are widely viewed as a deliberate effort to prevent the Alliance from fulfilling its pledge of future membership to these countries.⁶⁹ NATO acknowledged these and other events as part of Russia's "destabilising pattern of military activities and aggressive rhetoric [that] go well beyond Ukraine."⁷⁰ It further defined its objections to include:

Russia's military activities, particularly along NATO's borders, have increased and its behaviour continues to make the Euro-Atlantic security environment less stable and predictable, in particular its practice of calling snap exercises, deploying near NATO borders, conducting large-scale training and exercises and violating Allied airspace. Russia is also challenging Euro-Atlantic security and stability through hybrid actions, including attempted interference in the election processes and the sovereignty of nations, widespread disinformation campaigns and malicious cyber activities.⁷¹

In addition, Russia's use of banned chemical agents in targeted attacks on former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal on British soil in 2018 as well as Russian

⁶⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Relations with Russia," last modified 21 April 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm.

⁶⁹ Thomas de Maizière et al., *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* (Brussels, BE: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020), 16.

⁷⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Relations with Russia..."

⁷¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Relations with Russia..."

opposition figure Alexei Navalny in 2020 have escalated tensions.⁷² Within this context, the foreign policy positions of the USA, Germany and France who represented opposite sides of the 2008 debate on Ukraine and Georgia's membership will be examined next.

American Foreign Policy since the Bucharest Summit

The USA has historically been NATO's primary advocate for enlargement. Dr. Henrik Larsen of the Center for Security Studies in Switzerland summarized this rationale and how it shaped the American opinion on Ukraine's membership:

The American discourse on NATO in Eastern Europe is rich in historical references to the accomplishment of 'Europe whole and free'. History as justification for using NATO as a democratising force is a powerful explanatory factor behind the risks the United States was willing to run in terms of confrontation with Russia and trust in proclaimed domestic reformers.⁷³

The USA is also viewed by Ukrainian public as their most important ally according to a DIF poll in March 2021.⁷⁴

Since the Bucharest Summit, American foreign policy has been shaped by the presidential administrations of George W. Bush (until 2009), Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021) and most recently, Joe Biden (since 2021). The American approach under Obama initially sought to "reset" relations with Russia, but with Russia's actions after 2014 the relationship became confrontational. Trump was often accused of appeasement or even admiration for Putin. More broadly, Trump's presidency was also marked by regular friction with NATO allies. Joe Biden has begun

⁷² Richard Pérez-Peña, "What is Novichok, the Russian Nerve Agent Tied to Navalny Poisoning?" New York Times, 2 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/world/europe/novichok-skripal.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

⁷³ Henrik B. L. Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony After the Return of History*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2019), 75.

⁷⁴ Peter Burkovsky, "Tell Me Who Your Ally Is," last modified 18 March 2021, <https://dif.org.ua/article/skazhi-meni-khto-tviy-soyuznik>.

his presidency attempting to reassure NATO allies of a return to a traditional and predictable American foreign policy. Despite the contrasts between Presidents, official U.S. policy towards Russia and Ukraine has largely been consistent since 2014.

America's official position asserts that "Russia has attempted to position itself as a great power competitor" to the U.S. and "aims to undermine core institutions of the West, such as NATO and the EU, and to weaken faith in the democratic and free-market system."⁷⁵ It dictates that Russia must "take demonstrable steps to show it is willing to be a responsible global actor" for relations to improve.⁷⁶

Despite the emerging potential for a Biden-Putin Summit in summer 2021, Biden's two new rounds of sanctions and the expelling of Russian diplomats in his first 100 days in office suggest relations will remain strained in the short-term.⁷⁷ Drawing from Trump's presidency, even with a more sympathetic leader, the broader U.S. government will likely continue to respond confrontationally to perceived Russian aggression. Long-term prospects for U.S.-Russia relations will depend on how Russia responds to the American position, which will be explored in Chapter 3.

Since the end of the Bush presidency in 2009, U.S. policy towards Ukraine's NATO aspirations has remained supportive, but less explicit statements suggest the idea has lost much of its appeal. Even before the events of 2014, Security of State Robert Gates noted that Obama saw NATO membership for Ukraine as not only "premature,"

⁷⁵ Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Russia: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," last modified 22 July 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-russia>.

⁷⁶ Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Russia..."

⁷⁷ Natasha Bertrand, "White House Hammering Out Details of Increasingly Likely Biden and Putin Summit," CNN, 26 April 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/26/politics/us-russia-summit-ukraine/index.html>.

but “strategically unwise.”⁷⁸ The most senior official to comment on the matter during Trump’s administration was Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. During a visit to Ukraine in January 2020 he reaffirmed “[w]e have maintained support for Ukraine’s efforts to join NATO.” However, given the mistrust of the Trump administration in general and more specifically the strong allegations of Trump tying American foreign policy on Ukraine to personal interests, an issue that ultimately resulted in his impeachment, this verbal commitment carries uncertain credibility.⁷⁹

The U.S. government currently indicates that it “support[s] the development of a secure, democratic, prosperous, and free Ukraine, fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community.”⁸⁰ The U.S. Embassy in Kyiv highlighted a recent military aid package to assist Ukraine with “reforms to advance its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.”⁸¹ These statements suggest support for Ukraine’s NATO membership aspirations, but they are less explicit than the declaration from the Bucharest Summit. Biden is widely perceived as sympathetic to Ukraine and as Vice-President expressed support for its NATO aspirations in 2009.⁸² It is therefore notable that he has yet to directly acknowledge Ukraine’s membership aspirations, even as he officially recognized the anniversary of the Ukraine’s 2014 revolution.⁸³ A fair assessment of America’s official policy towards

⁷⁸ Robert Michael Gates, *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post-Cold War World*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 280.

⁷⁹ Sharon LaFraniere, Andrew Kramer and Danny Hakim, “Trump, Ukraine and Impeachment: The Inside Story of how we Got Here,” New York Times, 11 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/11/us/ukraine-trump.html>.

⁸⁰ Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Ukraine: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” last modified 18 December 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-ukraine>.

⁸¹ U.S. Embassy Kyiv, “Defense Department Announces \$125M for Ukraine,” 1 March 2021, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/defense-department-announces-125m-for-ukraine>.

⁸² The New York Times, “Biden Says U.S. Still Backs Ukraine in NATO,” The New York Times, 22 November 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/22/world/europe/22biden.html>.

⁸³ The White House, “Statement by President Biden on the Anniversary of Russia’s Illegal Invasion of Ukraine,” 26 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements->

Ukraine's NATO membership is therefore that it has not changed from its position of support. There are, however, indications of a reduced level of enthusiasm for the endeavour based on the limited and less-explicit affirmation of the position.

Looking forward, the rise of China as a geopolitical competitor is likely to continue to shift American attention away from Europe and increasingly towards the Asia-Pacific region. Retired British senior diplomat Peter Ricketts commented that with its focus on China, the U.S. National Defence Strategy of 2018 represented “the beginning of a real divergence in strategic priorities among NATO member states.”⁸⁴ In addition to this shifting focus, Dr. Jack Thompson, an analyst at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, noted that the underlying issues that led to the rise of the Trump presidency are likely to remain unresolved “any time soon.” He therefore anticipated that the “US will probably become a less dependable member, one that oscillates between phases of constructive engagement and periods in which it is more ambivalent about the relationship.”⁸⁵ Given that Ukraine's membership bid is reliant on strong U.S. leadership to overcome the natural reservations of other members, the prospect of fluctuating American interest in NATO will not help Ukraine's long-term outlook.

[releases/2021/02/26/statement-by-president-biden-on-the-anniversary-of-russias-illegal-invasion-of-ukraine.](#)

⁸⁴ Peter Ricketts, “Rediscovering a Strategic Purpose for NATO,” *Prism* (Washington, D.C.) 9, no. 1 (2020), 25.

⁸⁵ Jack Thompson, “The US Role in NATO: Past, Present and Future,” in *NATO and Transatlantic Relations in the 21st Century: Foreign and Security Policy Perspectives*, ed. Michele Testoni (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 28.

Germany's Foreign Policy since the Bucharest Summit

Germany indicates that relations with Russia are “overshadowed” by “violations of fundamental principles enshrined in international law.”⁸⁶ It noted its support for a democratic Ukraine, but makes no mention of Ukraine’s NATO aspirations.⁸⁷ In 2020, following a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas indicated Germany would continue to support Ukraine’s “ties with NATO.”⁸⁸ This statement was sufficiently vague so as to provide no clear indication of support for membership as it could equally be attributed to Ukraine’s status as a NATO partner. Russian media outlet RT quoted Germany’s deputy Spokesperson, Ulrike Demmer in April 2021 stating that “no further steps towards [Ukraine’s] membership are currently envisaged” in response to Zelensky’s pleas to advance the issue in response yet another snap Russian exercise near the Ukrainian border.⁸⁹

Asmus believed Germany had no further interest in NATO’s expansion in 2008, despite their support for previous rounds:

Now that Germany was encircled by friendly allies, Berlin saw its national interest in the enlargement process as achieved. While it continued to support NATO’s principle of an open-door policy rhetorically, it was a sated power. Its priority now was deepening cooperation with Moscow.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Federal Foreign Office, “Germany and Russian Federation: Bilateral Relations,” last modified 21 November 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/russischefoederation-node/russianfederation/218616>.

⁸⁷ Federal Foreign Office, “Germany and Russian Federation: Bilateral Relations...”

⁸⁸ RFE/RL Ukrainian Service, “Top Ukrainian and German Diplomats Talk NATO and Conflict in Eastern Ukraine,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2 June 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-germany-russia-nato/30649307.html>.

⁸⁹ RT, “NATO has an Open Door Policy, but Ukraine Unlikely to Walk through it any Time Soon, German Officials Say Amid Donbass Escalations,” RT, 7 April 2021, <https://www.rt.com/russia/520378-germany-ukraine-nato-unlikely>.

⁹⁰ Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World...*, 119.

More recently, Larsen described Germany's position with more nuance. He noted that guilt for its role in World War II and gratefulness to Russia for facilitating German reunification in 1990 should not be discounted.⁹¹ Based on these factors, he stated:

While Germany is committed to Europe's democratic reunification as a general impulse based on the positive experience of the end of the Cold War, its specific lessons connected to Eastern Europe, both negative (guilt) and positive (gratefulness), provide a very strong ideational imperative against NATO moves that would estrange Moscow.⁹²

Germany's economic interests in Russia have been noted by many observers. On this Larson stated that "a stable relationship with Russia, surpassing any benefit, actual or potential, in any other East European country."⁹³ Figure 3.1 shows Germany's foreign trade turnover since 2005 with Russia, Ukraine, the three CEE states that currently rank higher than Russia in this metric, as well as the United States and China for context. Figure 3.1 illustrates how Germany's trade with Russia was comparable to Poland until 2012 when it peaked.⁹⁴ In June 2013 German news outlet DW reported that a political confrontation over Russia's democratic regression was straining commercial ties between the countries.⁹⁵ A range of EU sanctions on Russia in place since its intervention in Ukraine in 2014 have undoubtedly contributed to the subsequent reduction in turnover.⁹⁶ Thus, it is the economic potential of the relationship between Germany, as the fourth

⁹¹ Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 81-82.

⁹² Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 82.

⁹³ Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 84.

⁹⁴ Destatis, "Database of the Federal Statistical Office of Germany," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online>.

⁹⁵ Nikita Jolkver and Roman Goncharenko, "Political Tensions in Russian-German Trade," DW, 20 June 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/political-tensions-in-russian-german-trade/a-16896580>.

⁹⁶ European Union, "Infographic - EU Sanctions Against Russia Over Ukraine," last modified 25 November 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-sanctions-against-russia-over-ukraine>.

largest world economy in 2019, and Russia, in the 11th position, that is most significant from a trade volume perspective.⁹⁷

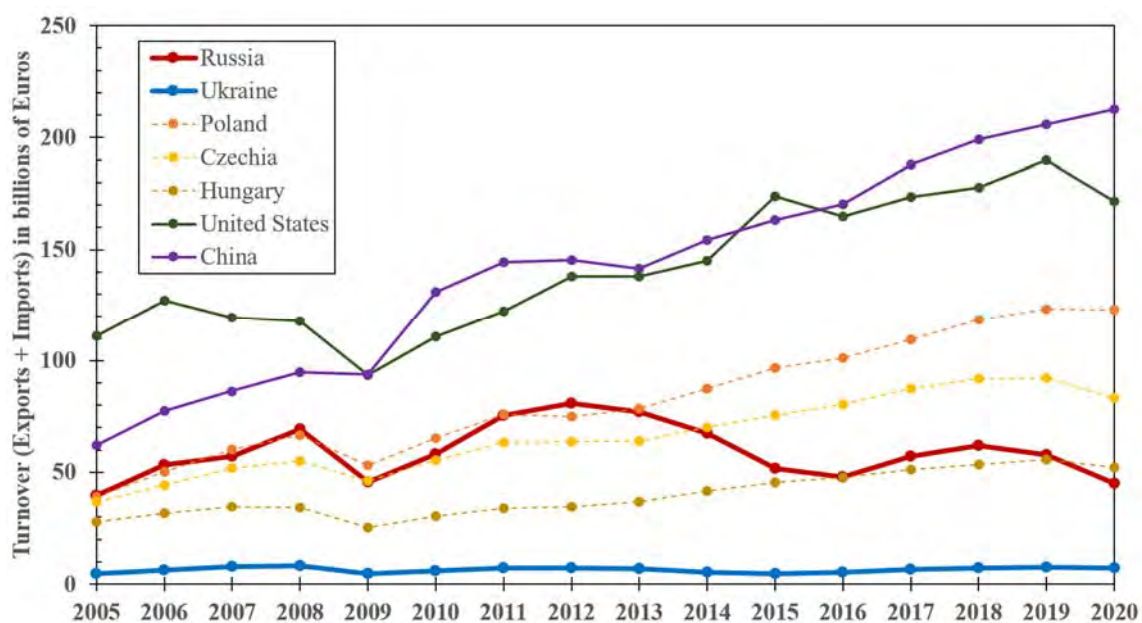


Figure 3.1: Germany's foreign trade with select countries over time

Source: Destatis (Federal Statistics Office Germany)

Even more important to the present discussion is what is being traded. Germany, similar to much of Europe, is highly dependent on Russia for energy. Figure 3.2 demonstrates this by depicting the percentage of gas European countries imported from Russia in 2017. Figure 3.2 also depicts the major pipelines servicing Europe from Russia. Of note, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is nearing completion will expand direct delivery of Russian gas to Germany. The project continues despite sustained American efforts to disrupt its completion through sanctions and diplomatic pressure.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ United Nations Statistics Division, "National Accounts - Analysis of Main Aggregates (AMA)," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/index>.

⁹⁸ EURACTIV, "EU Says it does Not Need Nord Stream 2, but Only Germany can Block It," EURACTIV, 24 February 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-says-it-does-not-need-nord-stream-2-but-only-germany-can-block-it>.



Figure 3.2: European dependency on Russian gas imports in 2017

Source: modified from Bloomberg, www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/russian-gas

The U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) summarized the most commonly cited arguments against the Nord Stream 2 project in 2021. The CRS notes that opponents, which include “successive U.S. administrations and congresses,” argue the pipeline gives “Russia greater political and economic leverage over Germany” and that it will “leave some countries more vulnerable to supply cutoffs or price manipulation by Russia, and increase Ukraine’s vulnerability to Russian aggression.”⁹⁹ Equally significant, Larsen notes that the pipeline “reduces Ukraine’s strategic significance and goes counter to U.S. aspirations for a Southern energy corridor.”¹⁰⁰ The concept of a southern energy corridor for Europe has been promoted by Americans as a means of reducing Europe’s dependence on Russia. The promotion of energy security was one of the few interests-based arguments for Ukraine and Georgia’s inclusion in NATO.

⁹⁹ Paul Belkin, Michael Ratner and Cory Welt, “Russia’s Nord Stream 2 Pipeline: Continued Uncertainty,” <https://crsreports.congress.gov/> (accessed Mar 6, 2021).

¹⁰⁰ Larsen, *NATO’s Democratic Retrenchment...*, 84.

Germany's position can therefore be described as eager to pursue cooperation with Russia. It is resistant to NATO's enlargement at the expense of relations with Russia, as comments by Asmus and Larsen combined with a lack of official endorsement of Ukraine's membership aspirations demonstrate. Germany has interests in upholding international law and democratic principles which will be explored further in the context of the broader Alliance in a subsequent section. Germany has also sacrificed economic interests in solidarity with Ukraine and broader Europe. However, the continuance of the Nord Stream 2 project highlights that Germany's core economic interests will ultimately prevail. The move has also undercut one of the only areas where Ukraine had a degree of leverage on Russia as well as the most significant strategic argument for Ukraine's NATO membership. Germany's inherent reluctance for further NATO enlargement will only strengthen with the uncertainty of America's future commitment and its own increased energy dependence on Russia to create a strong resistive force towards Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations.

France's Foreign Policy since the Bucharest Summit

The French Government indicates its relationship with Russia has been "undermined" by Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine.¹⁰¹ Yet in 2015, President François Hollande, while trying to de-escalate the still volatile conflict in the Donbas, publicly stated that "France is not in favor of Ukraine joining the Atlantic Alliance."¹⁰² This was a clear, public departure from the Alliance's official position by the most senior

¹⁰¹ Ministère de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères, "France Diplomacy - Russia," last modified 14 May 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia>.

¹⁰² Yves-Michel Riols, "Franco-German Last Chance Initiative to End the Conflict in Ukraine," *Le Monde*, 5 February 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/02/05/initiative-franco-allemande-de-la-derniere-chance-pour-sortir-du-conflit-en-ukraine_4570845_3214.html.

French official. David Cadier, who focuses on French and Russian foreign policy, argues that during this timeframe broad French and American defence cooperation “may have fostered greater convergence between [their] strategic outlooks,” although he noted that this did not go so far as to prompt France “suddenly to embrace the US view of Russia.”¹⁰³ This suggests that even under favorable French-American relations, France is likely to remain opposed to Ukraine’s NATO membership.

Under current French President Emmanuel Macron, the French government highlighted that “authorities maintain very regular dialogue at the highest level with Russia.”¹⁰⁴ These efforts to engage with Russia have routinely led to accusations amongst observers, and allied government officials, that France is undermining the Alliance’s stance on Russia.¹⁰⁵ The preference for engagement with Russia under Macron represents a traditional French foreign policy approach according to Larsen. Larsen noted that France’s actions can be explained by its longstanding preference to provide a counterbalance to American influence in Europe and promote a more multilateral European security arrangement that includes Russia and where France plays a leadership role.¹⁰⁶

Looking forward, Cadier offers that Macron’s traditional approach to Russia hasn’t yet “fundamentally reversed” France’s previous movement towards a foreign

¹⁰³ David Cadier, “Continuity and Change in France’s Policies Towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2018), 1358.

¹⁰⁴ Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères, “France Diplomacy – Russia...”

¹⁰⁵ Joel Gehrke, “NATO Allies Warn France: Don’t Undermine Ukraine in Upcoming Summit with Russia,” *Washington Examiner*, 7 December 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/nato-allies-warn-france-dont-undermine-ukraine-in-upcoming-summit-with-russia>; Roland Oliphant, “France Seeks Support for ‘Nimble’ Russia Policy Despite Fears of Appeasement among Allies,” *The Telegraph*, 2 March 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/02/france-seeks-support-nimble-russia-policy-despite-fears-appeasement>.

¹⁰⁶ Larsen, *NATO’s Democratic Retrenchment...*, 91.

policy more aligned to the Americans. He ultimately concluded that France's future foreign policy preference between either a traditional or progressively more-pro-American approach is uncertain largely due to the destabilizing effect of the Donald Trump presidency.¹⁰⁷ President Hollande's comments highlight that strong and persistent American leadership would be required for Ukraine's membership aspirations to even have a chance of French acquiescence. Therefore, regardless of France's future foreign policy approach, it is likely to remain opposed to Ukraine's NATO membership.

Having reviewed the positions of the most influential members of the Alliance with respect to Ukraine's NATO aspirations it is clear that Ukraine will be confronted with strong reluctance to its bid in the face of Russian opposition. Poland has remained a source of support for Ukraine's NATO aspirations and leveled aggressive rhetoric towards Russia's intervention in its neighbour.¹⁰⁸ However, Poland alone lacks the ability to sway the opinions of the major allies in Ukraine's favor. While the UK is a major voice within the Alliance, Larsen noted that it "has been generally indecisive about the integration of Georgia and Ukraine."¹⁰⁹ For the remainder of the Alliance there are varying degrees of sympathy for Ukraine's position, but ultimately the threat of Russia is enough to if not withhold support at least prevent overt advocacy on the issue. The focus will therefore return to examining the collective risks and interests of NATO as a cohesive group.

¹⁰⁷ Cadier, "Continuity and Change in France's Policies Towards Russia...", 1368-69.

¹⁰⁸ Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 85-86.

¹⁰⁹ Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 92.

Ukraine's Stalled NATO Progression

For NATO, the post-Cold War emphasis on cooperative security and minimization of conventional defence has ended. This is evident in the contrast between NATO's 2010 strategic vision calling for a "strong and constructive partnership" with Russia and the official statements that have followed Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine.¹¹⁰ The acknowledgement of Russia as a threat by the Reflection Group, a collective of experts gathered to make policy recommendations to aid development of NATO's 2030 Strategic Concept, reinforces that this shift in perception is likely to persist beyond the short-term.¹¹¹ The ongoing war in Donbas makes the risk to the Alliance of being dragged into conflict with Russia under these conditions simply too high. Even the most ardent supporters of Ukraine's efforts confirm as much. Pifer concluded that even receiving a MAP appears out of reach and he advised that "Ukraine needs to play a long game."¹¹² Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that Ukraine will obtain NATO membership in the short-term.

Given Russia's increased willingness to challenge NATO and the imbalance of intrinsic interests with respect to Ukraine, several observers even doubt Ukraine's long-term prospects for NATO membership. Dr. John Mearsheimer, a prominent International Relations (IR) scholar, is perhaps the most often cited critic. He argued that the driving force behind the enlargement process has been a tendency amongst American foreign policy decision makers to favor a liberal IR approach. Mearsheimer contends that this

¹¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Lisbon, Portugal: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2010), 30.

¹¹¹ de Maizièrre et al., *NATO 2030...*, 12.

¹¹² Pifer, "Ukraine, NATO, and Russia...", 52.

approach erroneously elevated the importance of normative interests, ideals and values over a rational cost-benefit analysis of strategic interests.¹¹³ Political scientist Dr. Rajan Menon and foreign policy expert Dr. William Ruger concur with Mearsheimer's assertion that Ukraine should not be incorporated into the Alliance. They noted that even if the war in Donbas were resolved, the residual potential for conflict to reignite between Russia and Ukraine would remain present.¹¹⁴ Mike Sweeney, an analyst with Defence Priorities, noted that given its geography, the defensibility of Ukraine renders its membership in NATO "infeasible" now that the potential for conflict with Russia is a necessary planning consideration.¹¹⁵ These are all strong arguments that cannot be completely mitigated in any potential future scenario.

Yet NATO, as an organisation, has continued to acknowledge and support Ukraine's membership aspirations.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Russia's destabilization of Ukraine and perpetuation of the war in the Donbas is seen by many observers, including Larsen and the British-based think tank the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), as a means of preventing Ukraine's NATO membership.¹¹⁷ The continuation of this effort therefore suggests that Russia still views Ukraine's accession as plausible. D'Anieri offered insight as to why this is, stating:

The relationship [between Russia and the West] now embodies both a conflict of values and a conflict of interest, making it harder to solve,

¹¹³ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs (New York, N.Y.)* 93, no. 5 (2014), 89.

¹¹⁴ Rajan Menon and William Ruger, "NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment," *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (Jun, 2020), 390.

¹¹⁵ Mike Sweeney, "Saying "no" to NATO - Options for Ukrainian Neutrality," last modified August 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/saying-no-to-nato-options-for-ukrainian-neutrality>.

¹¹⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Enlargement," last modified 5 May 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.

¹¹⁷ Larsen, *NATO's Democratic Retrenchment...*, 68; International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia...", 239.

because giving in on the principles would also require giving in on the presumed territorial division of Europe between the West and Russia.¹¹⁸

Thus, Ukraine's membership represents something larger than itself for NATO. At stake are the Alliance's values and principles. Beyond that, NATO's continued insistence that it will not accept Russia's disregard to its post-Cold War vision of a Europe "whole and free" will increasingly challenge NATO's credibility. These aspects are unlikely to propel Ukraine's membership forward, but they will prevent the Alliance from departing from its commitment to Ukraine's eventual membership, at least while it holds out hope for a more favorable geopolitical environment.

NATO's Credibility, Core Values and Normative Interests

NATO's Credibility

NATO's Bucharest Summit declaration in 2008 was unequivocal on Ukraine's future membership in NATO. Therefore, any departure from that position will damage the credibility of the Alliance. Article 10 of the founding North Atlantic Treaty states the Alliance may extend membership to "any other European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area."¹¹⁹ It is this component of the Treaty that forms the basis of NATO's "open door policy" to enlargement.¹²⁰ The connection between this open door policy and NATO's credibility is acknowledged by Nicholas Williams, a former NATO official now with the British-based European Leadership Institute, who stated:

Keeping NATO's "Open Door" open is important for allies and partners alike. To close the door to further enlargement, or to procrastinate

¹¹⁸ D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 266.

¹¹⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Official Text: The North Atlantic Treaty," 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

¹²⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Enlargement."

indecisively, would risk NATO's credibility. It would reward Russia for its aggression in Ukraine and intimidation of Georgia.¹²¹

NATO fleshed out its process and criteria for Post-Cold War enlargement in the 1995 Study on Enlargement. Despite the Study's age NATO continues to reiterate its validity.¹²² This document emphasizes that NATO's decisions, including with respect to enlargement, "cannot be subject to any veto or droit de regard by a non-member state."¹²³ NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recommitted to this position following a NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and as the Ukrainian Crisis developed.¹²⁴ In 2018, the North Atlantic Council once again actively reaffirmed the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration while formally acknowledging Ukraine's renewed interest in accession into NATO.¹²⁵ These positions also remain explicit in NATO's official policies.¹²⁶

Looking forward, NATO's Reflection Group offered that "NATO's Open Door Policy should be upheld and reinvigorated" and in the subsequent statement "NATO should expand and strengthen partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia."¹²⁷ Some might see nuance in this position, as NATO partnership and membership are quite different, but it is difficult to see how NATO's open door policy can be upheld and reinvigorated if NATO reneges on Ukraine's membership commitment. It therefore appears that NATO

¹²¹ Nicholas Williams, "NATO Enlargement: Avoiding the Next Missteps," European Leadership Network, 3 March 2021, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/nato-enlargement-avoiding-the-next-missteps>.

¹²² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Enlargement."

¹²³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement* (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1995), Paragraph 27.

¹²⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Foreign Ministers Agree Alliance's Door to New Members Remains Open," 25 June 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_111257.htm.

¹²⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Official Text: Brussels Summit Declaration," issued 11 June 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm.

¹²⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Enlargement."

¹²⁷ de Maizi re et al., *NATO 2030...*, 15.

will continue to maintain its official positions: that it is open to future enlargement, that it welcomes Ukraine's membership aspirations, and that the matter of accession is strictly a decision between the Alliance and Ukraine. Ukraine's lagging reforms and the active nature of the war in Donbas provide the Alliance time to resolve the potential future challenges to its credibility. An assessment of how these issues will be resolved over time is saved for Chapter 5.

Williams' previous comments highlighted that excessive procrastination will also degrade NATO's credibility. While all indications are that NATO will be very rigid in the application of the membership criteria, if it has no real intention of fulfilling its commitment, it has an obligation to inform Ukraine. Sweeney argues that "the sustained false hope of NATO membership discourages Ukraine from examining more pragmatic and necessary options."¹²⁸ These comments highlight the moral imperative to either uphold the commitment, or as Sweeney advocates, be honest with Ukraine about its membership prospects. Military politics and democratization expert Dr. Zoltan Barany reinforced this position when he argued that NATO's insistence it has an open door policy mean it "has a moral obligation to deliver on its pledge."¹²⁹ While his comments were in support of a prior round of enlargement in 2003, they are no less true despite the changed geopolitical context.

In summary, NATO's credibility is based on its resolve and willingness to follow through on its commitments. Since 2014 NATO has consistently maintained its official position on Ukraine's eventual membership, its open door policy, and its insistence that

¹²⁸ Sweeney, "Saying "no" to NATO..."

¹²⁹ Zoltan D. Barany, *The Future of NATO Expansion: Four Case Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

the matter does not involve Russia. The longer NATO maintains this position, the more its credibility is compromised if it fails to follow through. While this “status quo” position may be the simplest course to chart in the short-term, there are moral implications if this commitment turns out to be disingenuous. NATO has thus far demonstrated its intention to maintain its commitment to Ukraine, though it will likely find itself under increased pressure to uphold its commitments in the long-term.

NATO's Core Values and Normative Interests

NATO's core values and normative interests will challenge the organisation to accept Ukraine's accession in the event it meets the membership criteria. The principles of democracy and rule of law are identified in the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty, and are reaffirmed in NATO's current Strategic Concept.¹³⁰ With respect to the value of democracy, Asmus noted that those arguing on behalf of Ukraine and Georgia's membership at the Bucharest Summit saw it as a “moral imperative” given their democratic development and aspirations. Asmus highlighted the issue was more than simply an ideal for advocates who believed that promoting this democratic transition could “strategically help lock in stability in Eurasia and around the Black Sea.”¹³¹ The current geopolitical context has undoubtedly reduced the appeal within the Alliance for active democratization efforts. Larsen analyzed the shifting tone of official policy in the USA. He observed that “democracy support stands out as a luxury objective that Washington can afford to pursue under permissive circumstances.” While the Alliance's appetite for democracy projection has cooled, its values are more broadly tied to promoting a rules-based international order. Thus, while its enlargement efforts will

¹³⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence...*, 6.

¹³¹ Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World...*, 116.

become passive, NATO will likely continue to reaffirm its values and their importance to upholding the international system.

NATO's 1995 Enlargement Study stated that "commitment to the shared principles and values of the Alliance will be indicated by [an aspirant country's] international behaviour and adherence to relevant OSCE [Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe] commitments."¹³² This highlights that NATO views its principles and values as not merely applicable to internal politics, but also relevant to a state's behaviour in international relations. The reference to the OSCE is particularly notable as this organisation is the pan-European cooperative security organisation that includes NATO member states and Russia within its membership. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975, established by the OSCE precursor organisation and signed by NATO member states and Russia, affirmed that every European state has "the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance."¹³³ Russia's disregard for this principle in opposing Ukraine's NATO aspirations is commonly cited by observers as disregard for international norms.

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept tied NATO's values to a larger goal of unifying all of Europe within the NATO security architecture. It stated "[o]ur goal of a Europe whole and free, and sharing common values, would be best served by the eventual integration of all European countries that so desire into Euro-Atlantic structures." The North Atlantic Treaty, Enlargement Study and Strategic Concept also all reaffirm the Alliance's commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (UN). Of note, Article 2 of the UN Charter indicates these principles include the

¹³² North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement...*, paragraph 38.

¹³³ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Helsinki Final Act," 1 August 1975, Helsinki, Finland: OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>.

“sovereign equality of all its [m]embers” and that members “refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”¹³⁴

Therefore, for NATO, a nation’s behaviour in international relations is a reflection of their commitment to the values espoused by the Alliance. These values are tied to a larger concept of a unified and peaceful Europe. Beyond the values explicitly identified, NATO has consistently tied its purpose to the principles of a larger international governance structure. This includes upholding the principles of the UN Charter and the OSCE. Upholding the principles of these international organisations can be seen as a normative interest of the Alliance. NATO explicitly tied its relationship with Russia to these normative interests in the 1995 Enlargement Study, asserting:

This [NATO-Russia] relationship can only flourish if it is rooted in strict compliance with international commitments and obligations, such as those under the UN Charter, the OSCE, including the Code of Conduct and the CFE Treaty, and full respect for the sovereignty of other independent states¹³⁵

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its blatant interference in Ukraine are significant examples, amongst others, of Russia’s indifference to NATO’s normative interests. Cadier notes that even France, an opponent of Ukraine’s NATO membership, has a normative interest in the “perpetuation of the post-1945 order” in which it enjoys “a privileged status that is not really commensurate with its actual material power.”¹³⁶ The issue of Russia’s disregard for the international order therefore has significance beyond the realm of mere ideals and has the potential to disrupt the international system that

¹³⁴ United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations: Chapter 1,” 26 June 1945, San Francisco: UN, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-1>.

¹³⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement...*, paragraph 27.

¹³⁶ Cadier, “Continuity and Change in France's Policies Towards Russia...,” 1352-53.

NATO members have predominantly benefitted from. For these reasons, NATO will be reluctant to be seen as rewarding Russia's behaviour. This will likely prevent NATO's formal recognition of the annexation of Crimea, it will necessitate continued criticism for Russia's actions in Donbas, and it will discourage NATO from reneging on its commitment to Ukraine's future membership.

The Next Step: MAP

The competition between NATO's interest to foster a non-confrontational relationship with Russia on one hand and maintain organisational credibility and uphold its normative interests on the other hand will lead to its paralysis on the subject of Ukraine's membership. As noted previously, Ukraine's lagging reforms and the active nature of the war in Donbas will largely facilitate this position's desirability in the short term. However, the Bucharest Summit identified MAP as the next step in the membership process and this step has traditionally occurred in advance of an aspirant country's fulfilment of all criteria.

While NATO and the US government have been silent on the topic, advocates for Ukraine's NATO membership have promoted the issue. American foreign policy expert and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO Policy from 2001–2005, Ian Brzezinski advocated in 2020 that Ukraine “should be provided a clear path to NATO membership” to end the ambiguity of its geopolitical position. Ukraine's Foreign Minister echoed the uncertainty Ukraine feels in its current position, stating in 2021 that:

Ukrainians understand that a Membership Action Plan is not the same as membership, but it would nevertheless be a clear signal that the idea of future NATO membership is not merely a declaration. This step would prove that the alliance upholds its own commitments made in Bucharest in

2008. It would send a clear signal that NATO is committed to defending the values of democracy and freedom, to which the right of nations to choose their own future is fundamental.¹³⁷

The IISS noted that reaffirmation of NATO's commitment to Ukraine is particularly important following the Trump-Ukraine political scandal. This scandal saw the Trump administration threaten to withhold U.S. aid to Ukraine unless Zelensky publicly committed to opening an investigation into Trump political rival, and now U.S. president, Joe Biden.¹³⁸ The IISS stated these events "strengthened those who believe that the West regards Ukraine as a bargaining chip with Russia and a resource to be exploited by internal forces in domestic battles unrelated to its well-being and security."¹³⁹

NATO and many of its individual members can demonstrate enormous political, economic, military training and moral support they have provided Ukraine since 2014. Ukraine has and will likely continue to express its gratitude for this. However, as noted in the previous chapter, Ukraine ultimately seeks a credible security guarantee, and this support does not meet that need. A more detailed assessment of the likelihood for progression of Ukraine's NATO aspirations requires further consideration of Russia's opposition and the likelihood that it will persist in the 20-year time horizon of this essay.

Summary

This chapter demonstrated that NATO's decision on Ukrainian membership will be paralyzed by a competition between its overriding interest to foster a non-confrontational relationship with Russia and the preservation of its organizational values

¹³⁷ Dmytro Kuleba, "Why is Ukraine Still Not in NATO?" Atlantic Council Ukraine Alert (blog), 16 February 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-ukraine-still-not-in-nato>.

¹³⁸ Charlie Savage, Josh Williams, "Read the Text Messages Between U.S. and Ukrainian Officials," New York Times, 4 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/04/us/politics/ukraine-text-messages-volker.html>.

¹³⁹ International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia," in *Strategic Survey: The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics*, International Institute of Strategic Studies, Vol. 120 (Routledge, 2020), 248.

and normative interests. An examination of the internal debate within NATO that resulted in the commitment to Ukraine's future membership identified the significance that the relationship with Russia holds for members of the Alliance. Based on developments since the Bucharest Summit, resistance to Ukraine's membership has only increased amongst NATO members, rendering its membership unlikely in the short term. It was further demonstrated that NATO's credibility, core values and normative interests will prevent a departure from its official position that Ukraine will one day join the Alliance despite limited inherent interests in Ukraine. NATO is therefore likely to prolong the membership process in the hope that a more constructive relationship with Russia will emerge.

CHAPTER 4: RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND FUTURE

Points of Friction in NATO-Russia Relations

Russia's deep-seeded mistrust for NATO and the broader intentions of the West forms a critical component of its resistance to Ukraine's NATO aspirations. Since the end of the Cold War, this mistrust has been reinforced by NATO and EU enlargement processes as well as NATO and U.S. military activities, particularly in Europe.

NATO Enlargement: From Tempered Objections to Confrontation

NATO's post-Cold War expansion has spanned over the last three decades. The process has incorporated countries that were formerly part of the USSR-led Warsaw Pact military Alliance as well as countries that were former constituents of the USSR itself, as depicted in Figure 4.1.

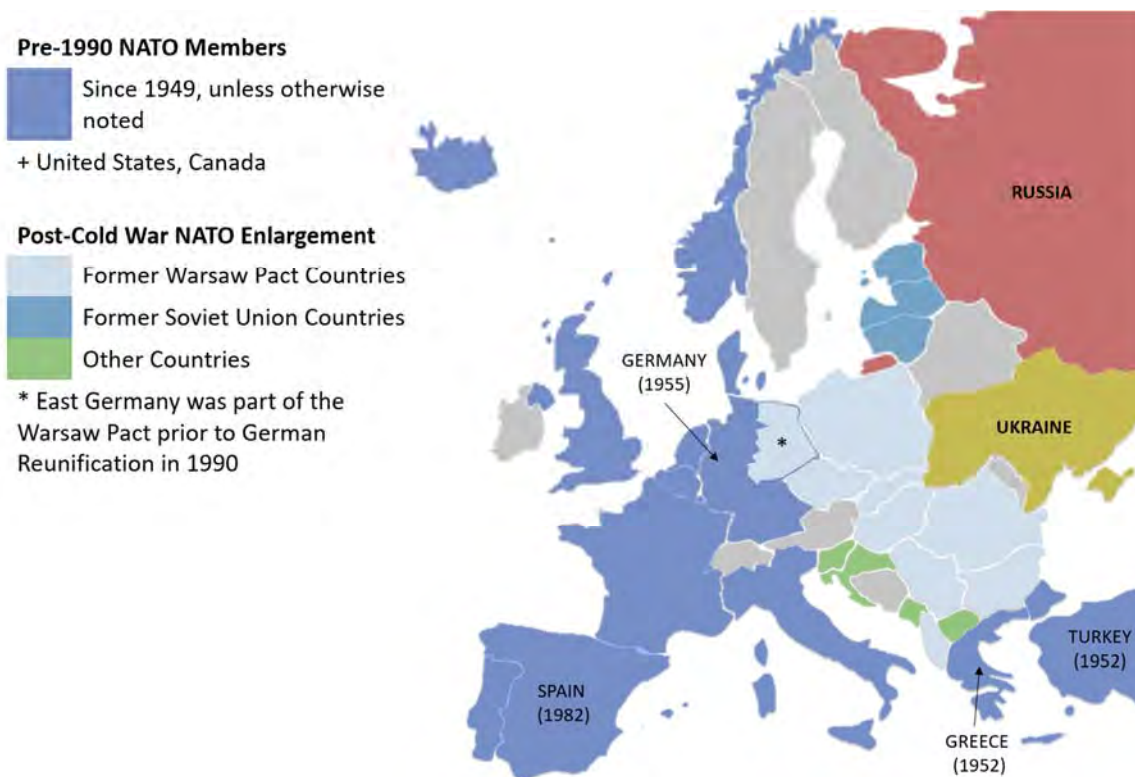


Figure 4.1: NATO's post-Cold War enlargement in Europe

Source: Base Map from PNGHut.com; Data from NATO, Britannica.com

Russia's March 1999 declaration to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in the immediate aftermath of the accession into NATO of the former Warsaw Pact countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary made clear Russia's early objections to the process:

Russia's attitude to NATO enlargement has not changed, and remains negative. The enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance will not be conducive to the strengthening of trust and stability in international relations, but on the contrary may lead to the creation of new lines of division.¹⁴⁰

This first round of post-Cold War enlargement was initiated during Russian president Boris Yeltsin's time in office. Yeltsin, who served from 1991-1999, was personally supportive of the initiative but his perspective did not reflect Russia's wider political and public opinion.

Andrey Kozyrev, a reformer and Yeltsin's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to 1996, noted that in 1993 he had to persuade Yeltsin to abandon his hastily formed intention to publicly endorse Poland's NATO aspirations, not on principle, but due to domestic factors. The information quickly leaked to the public and "trigger[ed] a never-ending firework of political agitation across the spectrum of conflicting opinions and interests in Russia and elsewhere" according to Kozyrev.¹⁴¹ Kozyrev summarized how things unravelled from there, highlighting the prominent role of Russian politician and at the time Director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, Yevgeny Primakov:

By the end of 1994, the hard-liners were winning the day in Moscow... Yeltsin was yielding to their pressure. Already in November 1993

¹⁴⁰ Russian Federation, *CD/1577 - Declaration to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament*, 1999.

¹⁴¹ Andrei Kozyrev, "Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider's Account," in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2019), 457-458.

Primakov published a report that NATO was still a threat to Russia. In this vein, [Primakov] insisted on changing the policy formula on NATO from “No hasty enlargement—Yes partnership!” to the simple and bold proclamation: “No enlargement!” In early 1995 Yeltsin approved that change.¹⁴²

Strobe Talbott was the Deputy Secretary of State and ambassador-at-large from 1994 to 2001 and played a key role in the first round of post-Cold War enlargement. Talbott indicated that enlargement negotiations with Russia had to take a “partial hiatus” in 1996 “so that Yeltsin could get himself re-elected without too much ruction and criticism.”¹⁴³

In 2004, the enlargement process continued, breaching another significant boundary through the inclusion of three former Soviet states, namely Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (the Baltics). According to Talbott, Yeltsin had unsuccessfully sought assurances from Clinton at a meeting in Helsinki in 1997 that the process “would not ‘embrace’ the Baltics.”¹⁴⁴ Asmus and political analyst Richard Nurick similarly noted in 1996 that “[m]ost Russian officials and commentators” had cautioned they “[would] not accept Baltic membership in NATO.”¹⁴⁵ However, the actual accession of the Baltics occurred with muted Russian opposition.

Historian and political scientist Dr. Andres Kasekamp pointed to the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York as a key event that facilitated this quiet re-alignment. He noted that opposition to NATO Enlargement in this period became “temporarily less strident” due to Putin’s eagerness to “forge an equal partnership with the USA” in

¹⁴² Kozyrev, “Russia and NATO Enlargement: An Insider’s Account...,” 456.

¹⁴³ Strobe Talbott, “Bill, Boris and NATO,” in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, eds. Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2019), 411-416.

¹⁴⁴ Strobe Talbott, “Bill, Boris and NATO...,” 416-417.

¹⁴⁵ Ronald D. Asmus and Robert C. Nurick, “NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States,” *Survival (London)* 38, no. 2 (1996), 128-129.

confronting global terrorism.¹⁴⁶ Tsygankov provided a similar assessment of the cause of the muted resistance.¹⁴⁷

Putin's efforts to build bridges with the West eventually had led to the formation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002. British journalist Angus Roxburgh quoted an upbeat Putin at the NRC agreement post-signing press conference stating:

for a very long period of time it was Russia on one side, and on the other practically the whole of the world. And we gained nothing good from this confrontation... Russia is returning to the family of civilised nations. And she needs nothing more than for her voice to be heard, and for her national interests to be taken into account.¹⁴⁸

These comments demonstrated Russia's aspirations to regain influence and protect its interests. They demonstrate Putin believed he was more likely to achieve these by prioritizing engagement with NATO rather than resisting the second round of enlargement that was already in motion.

Putin's address at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 confirmed he was not satisfied with how the partnership turned out. Roxburgh's account of Putin ranting to Bush privately in 2005 about many of the same themes suggests the relationship in fact soured long before the conference.¹⁴⁹ Toward the end of a very blunt speech, Putin took direct aim at NATO enlargement:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces

¹⁴⁶ Andres Kasekamp, "An Uncertain Journey to the Promised Land: The Baltic States' Road to NATO Membership," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6-7 (2020), 20-21.

¹⁴⁷ Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 282.

¹⁴⁸ Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris & Company, 2011), 87.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?¹⁵⁰

These comments tied back to Russia's 1999 statement of distrust in the underlying intentions of the process. They also allude to a sense of containment at a time when the Alliance was increasingly considering the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia. Roxburgh indicates Putin lectured U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice privately in 2006 that the U.S. was "playing with fire" on the topic of Ukraine and Georgia's NATO membership.¹⁵¹

Russia's 2008 military intervention in Georgia shortly after NATO's Bucharest Summit declaration publicly endorsed future membership for the former Soviet state confirmed the transition point from tempered to confrontational opposition. Then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's comments in the intervention's aftermath have since been widely cited. In dismissing Western criticism of its actions, Medvedev stated that "there are regions in which Russia has privileged interests." When pressed on the bounds of this region Medvedev stated "The countries on our borders are priorities, of course, but our priorities do not end there."¹⁵² Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and research scientist Jeffrey Edmonds indicate this idea of privileged interests is based on a perceived right to maintain "nominally independent but compliant states along [Russia's] periphery."¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, speech, Munich Conference on Security Policy, Munich, Germany, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

¹⁵¹ Roxburgh, *The Strongman*..., 172-173.

¹⁵² President of Russia - Transcripts, "Interview Given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV," 31 August 2008, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.

¹⁵³ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Jeffrey Edmonds, "The Evolution of the Russian Threat to NATO," in *Future NATO: Adapting to New Realities*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 66.

In December 2015, Putin issued a presidential decree outlining a revised National Security Strategy, Russia's basic document for strategic planning. Article 15 identified the "further expanding of the Alliance" as a "threat to national security." Article 17 indicated "the West" aimed to "creat[e] hotbeds of tension in the Eurasian region" and defined the instability in Ukraine as a product of Western policies.¹⁵⁴

Additional Factors in Russia's NATO Enlargement Opposition

Some observers have contested how significant a role NATO enlargement actually played in deteriorating Western relations with Russia. According to political scientist Dr. Kimberly Marten there are many other variables. She acknowledged there was "no question" enlargement was "a major irritant" but pointed to EU enlargement and NATO's past operations as potentially more significant factors.¹⁵⁵

On the matter of EU enlargement, NATO's 1995 Enlargement Study highlights that the two enlargement processes are complimentary in developing the European security architecture. It is therefore often difficult and unnecessary in this case to distinguish the influence of the two. Russia is aware that membership one institution, often NATO, has generally led to membership in the other. In fact, Tsygankov argued that Russia saw the EU's Eastern Partnership offer to Ukraine as "a Trojan horse for getting them into NATO."¹⁵⁶ The study also promoted the view that security, and therefore NATO's role, extends beyond military aspects to incorporate political and

¹⁵⁴ President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," 31 December 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>.

¹⁵⁵ Kimberly Marten, "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences in Russia," *International Politics (Hague, Netherlands)* 57, no. 3 (2020), 403-404.

¹⁵⁶ Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 290.

economic elements.¹⁵⁷ For these reasons Russia's perceived threat of NATO enlargement, and its sense of containment, are not interpreted here in a strictly military context.

Putin has made a number of general comments about his displeasure for the unipolar, American-led world. At the 2007 Munich Conference, Putin criticised the "world in which there is one master, one sovereign." Article 12 of Putin's 2015 National Security Strategy stated in part that:

The pursuit of an independent foreign and domestic policy by the Russian Federation provokes opposition from the United States and its allies, which are striving to maintain their dominance in world affairs. The policy of containment they are pursuing envisages putting political, economic, military and informational pressure on it.¹⁵⁸

These comments explicitly defined Russia's perception of its containment as spanning various components. More recently, in a 2020 address to the Federal Assembly Putin alluded to his policy of contesting the U.S.-led world order and provided an assessment of the strategy's success, claiming that "Russia has returned to international politics as a country whose opinion cannot be ignored."¹⁵⁹

These general statements incorporate themes of reduced global status and a sense of containment that will be shown in this essay to be relevant to future NATO enlargement and Ukraine's specific role in Russia's vital interests.

NATO's operations have been an additional, and significant, aggravating factor in NATO-Russia relations. Talbott noted that Russians widely perceived NATO's bombing of Bosnian Serbs during the conflict in Bosnia in the mid-1990's as the "killing their

¹⁵⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement* (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1995).

¹⁵⁸ President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," 31 December 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>.

¹⁵⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," Moscow, Russia, 15 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.

fellow Orthodox Slavs.”¹⁶⁰ NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999 caused even greater Russian anger that still lingers today according to Dr. William H. Hill, an American expert on Russia and East-West relations.¹⁶¹ D’Anieri suggested the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has an underappreciated impact on Russian foreign policy.¹⁶² In Putin’s speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club in October 2014 he interprets the Western perspective towards Russia before contrasting these and other Western-led operations with Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea:

There is no need to take into account Russia’s views, it is very dependent... we can do whatever we like, disregarding all rules and regulations. This is exactly what is happening. [French Prime Minister] Dominique [de Villepin] here mentioned Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia before that. Was this really all handled within the framework of international law? Do not tell us those fairy-tales. This means that some can ignore everything, while we cannot protect the interests of the Russian-speaking and Russian population of Crimea.¹⁶³

These comments tie back to Russia’s disdain for the unipolar world and the lack of Russian influence in decision-making.

Russian Popular Opinion towards NATO

NATO’s enlargement, operations and activities have therefore all contributed to Russian mistrust of the organisation. In November 2020 independent Russian public opinion researcher the Levada-Center asked Russians to name any “enemies” of Russia, permitting no or multiple responses, without providing options. 70% of respondents

¹⁶⁰ Talbott, “Bill, Boris and NATO...,” 405-424.

¹⁶¹ William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 139.

¹⁶² D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 257-258.

¹⁶³ Vladimir Putin, speech, Valdai International Discussion Club, Sochi, Russia, 24 October 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.

identified the USA, while only 3% named NATO.¹⁶⁴ However, earlier that year in January 2020 a more specific question asked “does Russia have reason to be wary of Western countries belonging to NATO?” It produced a 52% majority that indicated either “definitely” or “probably” yes. The results of the same question in 16 previous surveys conducted semi-regularly dating back to 1997 were provided for comparison. Historical responses fell between 49-64% in all 16 surveys, with a combined average of 58% of respondents indicating “definitely” or “probably” yes as depicted in Figure 4.2.¹⁶⁵

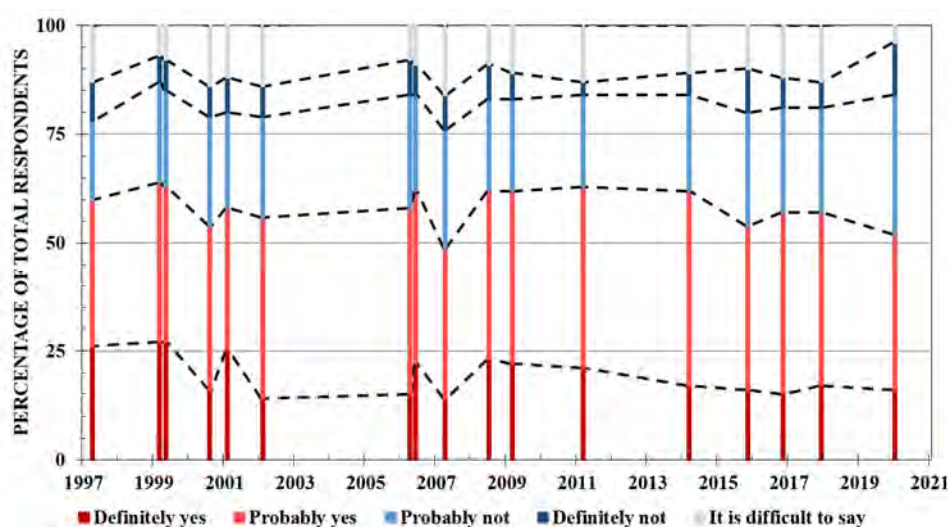


Figure 4.2: Russian public opinion, does Russia have reason to be wary of Western countries belonging to NATO

Source: Levada Center

The significant discrepancy in results between NATO as an unprompted “enemy” or as a pre-identified entity that is cause for “wariness” can potentially be explained in a few ways. First, it is possible that in identifying the USA specifically, Russians felt they had singled out their primary source of animosity with the Alliance. However, it could

¹⁶⁴ Levada-Center, “Enemies,” last modified 5 November 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/11/05/enemies-2>.

¹⁶⁵ Levada-Center, “Russia and the West,” last modified 28 February 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/02/28/russia-and-the-west>.

also be that the nuanced terms used in each case produce a different response in Russians. Perhaps Russians do not see NATO collectively as a direct military threat and thus an “enemy,” but rather see the action of certain “Western countries belonging to NATO” as a more generally unnerving process that they should be “wary” of. Having explored the broader factors influencing Russian decision makers and the public’s perspective of NATO, the focus will now shift to Ukraine’s significance in the matter.

Russia’s Vital Interests in Ukraine

Observers have offered a number of reasons for Russia’s resistance to Ukraine’s NATO membership. These arguments are based on, and often span, various interests that are typically connected to the broader sentiments towards NATO and the enlargement process highlighted in the previous sections. Some experts argue convincingly that Putin feared the domestic implications of political reform in Ukraine.¹⁶⁶ However, this interest to preserve Russia’s authoritarian regime might not be applicable to any post-Putin regime, especially one that seeks political reform. For this reason, this essay will focus on the two inter-related aspects of Russian identity and global status that the previous sections suggest would remain present in some degree in any future Russia.

Russian Identity

Preventing Ukraine’s accession into the Alliance is seen as a vital interest to Russia because of the impact Ukraine’s NATO membership would have on Russia’s identity and status as an independent great power. While some observers have highlighted Russia’s self-image or global status as independent factors, more often than not they are presented as interconnected. These aspects are at times further combined

¹⁶⁶ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault...,” 89.

with arguments about Russia's sense of security, neo-imperialist ambitions and nationalistic tendencies, which are accepted or rejected to varying degrees by those promoting the broader concepts.

With respect to Ukraine's significance in Russian identity, Dr. Gerard Toal, an expert in geopolitics, commented on the complex dynamics at play in the broader post-Soviet space:

Russia's new borderland states were familiar parts of the same country for decades and, for the most places, lands within the Russian Empire before then. It was difficult for many Russians to let go of memories of these places as parts of their country, just as it was difficult for some beyond Russia to reconcile themselves to living in a separate country. Confusion and mixed emotions were common.¹⁶⁷

These comments highlight the emotional aspect of the disintegration of the Soviet Union for Russians within and beyond the borders of the newly independent Russian Federation. An important aspect which added to the confusion and emotion was, and remains, how Russian identity is defined given the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and civic dimensions.

Tsygankov highlighted the deep cultural and historical ties specific to Russians and Ukrainians:

With respect to Ukraine, the dominant Russian perception stresses strong cultural and historical ties between the two peoples. Predominantly Slavic and Eastern Christian, they have fought against common enemies at least since the seventeenth century and were members of the same imperial state. Russians consider Ukrainian people to be "brotherly" and are resentful of what they view as the Western nations' attempts to challenge the established cultural bond.¹⁶⁸

The extent of the bond between Russian and Ukrainian people is a contentious issue when considering the legitimacy of Russia's identity claims. Prominent opposition

¹⁶⁷ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

¹⁶⁸ Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 287-288.

activist Alexei Navalny's statements on these ties highlight the broad appeal in Russia and the sensitive nature of the issue. In a 2014 interview referenced in the Moscow Times he stated he did not "see any kind of difference at all between Russians and Ukrainians," a comment the Moscow Times emphasized caters to Russian nationalism's "dismissals of Ukraine's claims to a separate culture, language and ethnicity."

As Toal's comments indicated, Russia's complex cultural and historic links extend beyond the people to include the territory of Ukraine, making the identity aspects even more controversial. D'Anieri noted that "[t]he city of Kyiv plays an especially important role in Russia's origins story."¹⁶⁹ At NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit Putin referred to Ukraine as an "artificial creation and a state whose final formation was not complete," according to Asmus.¹⁷⁰ Chapter 2 highlighted that Russia has struggled to accept Ukraine as a sovereign and independent country prior to Putin. In 2014, Putin briefly publicly adopted the Czarist era term "Novorossiia," or New Russia, a reference to a substantial part of Southern and Eastern Ukraine.¹⁷¹ The term is favored by Russian nationalists. Tsygankov downplayed this as an attempt to leverage nationalist sentiments rather than endorse them.¹⁷² Regardless, Putin's catering to these sentiments highlights both their persisting popular appeal and why Russia's views of its cultural and historical ties can cause anxiety amongst many Ukrainians.

¹⁶⁹ Paul D'Anieri, "Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 1 (2019b), 110.

¹⁷⁰ Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World...*, 136.

¹⁷¹ Paul Sonne, "'Novorossiia' Falls from Putin's Vocabulary as Ukraine Crisis Drags; Revival of Czarist-Era Term for 'New Russia' Fades Ahead of European Decision on Sanctions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/novorossiia-falls-from-putins-vocabulary-as-ukraine-crisis-drags-1432936655>.

¹⁷² Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 295.

Putin's strong boost in approval ratings, which jumped from 61% in December 2013 when Ukraine's Euromaidan protests had just commenced to 88% in November 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, is a testament to popular support for Russia's actions to assert its claims on territories and peoples viewed as Russian.¹⁷³ In Putin's comments to the Valdai International Discussion Club presented in the previous section, he focused his arguments on protecting the people, identifying both ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers.

Statements from Navalny once again provide potential insight into the degree of policy deviation within the political opposition. In his 2014 interview he stated he would not return Crimea to Ukraine, but indicated Russia should end its involvement in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁷⁴ In a 2017 interview with German news outlet Spiegel International, Navalny indicated that Russia "should fulfill the Minsk Protocol," while emphasizing the impact of sanctions.¹⁷⁵ Navalny's focus on the financial implications was likely an attempt to broaden the appeal of his position. Ukraine's importance for Russia's sense of identity is further strengthened due to the central role it plays in affirming Russia's status as an independent great power.

Russia as an Independent Great Power

Hill described deep resentment in Russia in the late 1990's due to the inability of the "former global power" to prevent NATO's enlargement.¹⁷⁶ His comments emphasize

¹⁷³ Levada-Center, "Indicators - Putin's Approval Rating," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings>.

¹⁷⁴ Anna Dolgov, "Navalny Wouldn't Return Crimea, Considers Immigration Bigger Issue than Ukraine," The Moscow Times, 16 October 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/16/navalny-wouldnt-return-crimea-considers-immigration-bigger-issue-than-ukraine-a40477>.

¹⁷⁵ Christian Esch and Christian Neef, "Interview with Alexei Navalny: 'The Kremlin Blocks Every Alternative to Putin'," Der Spiegel, 21 April 2017, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-alexei-navalny-about-protests-and-putin-a-1143752.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Hill, *No Place for Russia*, 138.

how the enlargement process was viewed as a reflection of Russia's status. Polish-American diplomat, political scientist and former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated in 1994 that there was a widespread view in Russia that Ukrainian independence was "a threat to Russia's standing as a global power."¹⁷⁷ He later claimed that "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire."¹⁷⁸

Tsygankov strongly rejected arguments that Russia's ambitions in Ukraine are imperialist.¹⁷⁹ Emphasizing Russia's security concerns and threats to its cultural and historical links to Ukraine, he pointed to Russia's sense of vulnerability. He argued that Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 were a defensive response to NATO encroachment and the West's disregard for Russia's values and interests.¹⁸⁰ Tsygankov's assessment is consistent with Russia's official statements highlighted in previous sections.

Yet in developing this argument Tsygankov acknowledged "the critically important role that Ukraine played in the Kremlin's foreign policy calculations."¹⁸¹ Based on his own interviews with Russian foreign policy experts he also stated "[m]any in the Kremlin perceive the connection to Ukraine as the last pillar of Russia's stability and power that could not be undermined if Russia were to survive and preserve its sovereignty, independence, and authentic political culture."¹⁸² These statements tie Russia's security, power and independence to its need to deny Ukraine of its independence. They therefore merely represent an alternate way of framing Russia's desire to be a great power, projecting it as a defensive necessity. D'Anieri's comments

¹⁷⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Premature Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, 1994, 74.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷⁹ Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 294-295.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁸² Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 288.

further demonstrate how assertions of Russia's defensive necessity and aspirations to preserve its independence are linked to its great power status:

Security in western Europe is built on great power restraint in a way that many have failed to appreciate. For Russia to join Europe, it would have to model its role not on that of the United States (which for geographic and historical reasons is seen as less threatening), but on Germany... Where Germany recognized that its power and history cause fear in others that stokes the security dilemma and undermines Germany's interests, Russia insists on retaining its historical role and relishes the fear it induces.¹⁸³

For political scientist Dr. Kari Roberts, Putin combined "cultural and historical ties with Russian borderlands" with "cultural and security vulnerabilities generated by the West's treatment of Russia, evidenced by the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" to form his foreign policy narrative.¹⁸⁴ She argued that Putin has promoted Russia as a "historically unique" nation that sees its "neighbours as a lost component of its exceptional past."¹⁸⁵ Her perspective on Russia's intervention in Ukraine ties Russian identity and global status together, demonstrating their inter-relation:

It has taken post-Soviet Russia some time to "find itself" so to speak. Perhaps Russia is now finally in a position to understand its identity as it relates to its interest, and Putin's narrative, 20 years after the fall of the USSR, has captured Russia's emergent identity and its readiness to act on it.¹⁸⁶

These comments relate to Toal's comments about a sense of "confusion and mixed emotions" in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

¹⁸³ D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 275.

¹⁸⁴ Kari Roberts, "Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse," *International Journal (Toronto)* 72, no. 1 (2017), 28.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸⁶ Roberts, "Understanding Putin...", 50.

Russia's Future

Putin's Future

Having identified the historical context and vital interests influencing Russia's policy towards Ukraine's NATO aspirations, the focus will now turn to Russia's future. Any assessment of Russia's future foreign policy must begin by considering Putin's political future. Russia's constitution would have restricted Putin from running again in 2024 due to a provision in Article 81 that limits presidential terms to two.¹⁸⁷ However, constitutional amendments in 2020 reset these limits permitting Putin to potentially remain in office for a fifth and sixth term, each of six years. This could extend his presidency out to either 2030 (9 years) or 2036 (15 years), at which point he will be 78 or 84 years old respectively.

Given his age, the most significant risk to Putin's continued presidency is the potential for deteriorating health. All indications are that Putin is currently in good health, his active lifestyle is well documented, and his status assures him of high-quality healthcare. For these reasons, the average life expectancy of 58 years for an individual born in Russia in 1952 should be considered of little significance.¹⁸⁸ It is more appropriate to seek a comparable in other world leaders, such as the two most recent U.S. Presidents. Trump left office at age 74 after an unsuccessful bid at a second term that would have taken him to age 79. Biden began his current presidency at 78 years old. These two are part of the exception amongst world leaders however, particularly if

¹⁸⁷ Government of the Russian Federation, "The Constitution of the Russian Federation," accessed 16 March 2021, <http://archive.government.ru/eng/gov/base/54.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Life Expectancy: What does this Actually Mean?" Our World in Data, 28 August 2017, <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy-how-is-it-calculated-and-how-should-it-be-interpreted#:~:text=By%20definition%2C%20life%20expectancy%20is,will%20be%20when%20they%20die.&text=You%20can%20think%20of%20life,not%20change%20over%20their%20lifetime>.

nominal heads of state such as King Salman of Saudi Arabia and Queen Elizabeth II are excluded. Thus, the following analysis considers it highly likely that Putin will remain in power until 2030 and unlikely yet possible that he remains until 2036.

If Putin chooses to run for the presidency he will likely succeed. This determination is based on his strong approval ratings, consistency between 59-89% throughout his presidency according to the Levada-Center.¹⁸⁹ It is also based on the overwhelming 79% vote of approval for constitutional amendments in March 2020, as well as his decisive control of state institutions and media.¹⁹⁰ The scale of periodic popular protests ongoing at the time of writing are notable, but less threatening than the 2011 Moscow protests that demonstrated Putin's ability to persevere through these types of challenges. A 2019 IISS assessment acknowledged domestic dissatisfaction but places it within the context of Putin's broader appeal:

Polling data suggests that, while generally disaffected with the quality of governance at home, many Russians remain proud of Putin's international achievements... While most Russians would like to see a better relationship with the West – and with Europe in particular – there does not appear to be any support for unilateral Russian concessions. Rather, most Russians firmly believe that their country is in the right.¹⁹¹

Public discontent is therefore not insignificant. While it is unlikely to alter Putin's prospects for re-election, it is a potential factor in the post-Putin outlook, particularly for a new regime that is still consolidating power.

¹⁸⁹ Levada-Center, "Indicators - Putin's Approval Rating," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings>.

¹⁹⁰ Sarah Rainsford, "Putin Strongly Backed in Controversial Russian Reform Vote," BBC, 2 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53255964>.

¹⁹¹ International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia...", 252.

Scenario Building: Assumptions

For the purpose of building potential future scenarios, this essay assumes a minimum six-year time period is required from the point that a pro-Western Russian leader, similar to Yeltsin, assumes power to when Ukraine could begin the accession process. This assumption is based on three factors.

First, it is assumed the West would want a minimum of one successful re-election or democratic transfer of power between reform-oriented presidents before it would be confident in the security implications of accepting Ukraine into NATO. This is supported by the significant interests within NATO highlighted in Chapter 3 to minimize any potential for confrontation with Russia.

Second, the issue would likely still be politically damaging for a reform-oriented leader, as it was with Yeltsin. NATO, in particularly Western Europe, would be sensitive to the risk of compromising the Russian reform process.

Third, there are several higher priority issues in NATO-Russia relations and several Russia-Ukraine specific issues that would need to be resolved prior to Ukraine's accession into NATO. With respect to Russia-Ukraine issues, priorities include resolving the status of Donbas and reducing Russian military presence in Crimea.

Scenario Building: Framework

Herman Prichner Jr., President of the American Foreign Policy Council, offers a rare outline of distinct post-Putin scenarios, but does not attempt to evaluate their probability. Prichner sees three general outlooks for Post-Putin Russia. The first is that someone from within the political elite emerges to largely continue Putin's policies. The second is that a reform-oriented government takes power. Finally, a third scenario sees a

descent into chaos due to an inability to decisively implement one of the first two options.¹⁹²

Using Prichner's scenarios as a framework, a range of expert opinions will now be considered to assign a general degree of likelihood to each of these outcomes. With Putin's stay anticipated to consume 9-16 years of the 20 year time horizon of this study, the focus will be on what could occur in the remaining 4-11 years.

Scenario Building: Expert Perspectives

In 2019 D'Anieri dismissed hopes of waiting out Putin's passing to resolve Ukraine's predicament as "wishful thinking" stating:

Putin's attitudes toward Ukraine in general and Crimea in particular have been widely shared in Russia since the Soviet collapse. Therefore, whether there is a contest to succeed Putin as autocrat, or a democratic election to choose a new leader, the candidates will face powerful pressures to show that they can maintain or extend Russia's gains in Ukraine.¹⁹³

D'Anieri later stated that "if adopting democracy means surrendering Russia's great power identity, many Russians will oppose it."¹⁹⁴ Thus D'Anieri sees the Russia's vital interests in Ukraine as an issue that will likely be too significant to be overcome regardless of Putin's successor. The challenges Yeltsin faced with respect to enlargement support D'Anieri's assessment of popular resistance to accommodating NATO enlargement. Navalny's statements highlighted the limited potential for deviation from Putin's Ukraine strategy.

¹⁹² Herman Pirchner Jr, *Post Putin: Succession, Stability, and Russia's Future* (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 47-48.

¹⁹³ D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 269-270.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

Kendall-Taylor and Edmonds both have extensive experience as American intelligence experts focused on Russia. Their 2020 assessment of Russia's future foreign policy outlook is consistent with D'Anieri's:

the broad contours of Russian foreign policy, including the Kremlin's great power ambitions and claim to a sphere of influence in regions along its border, are widely shared across Russian foreign policy and security circles, including among younger professionals, and will persist beyond Putin's time in office.¹⁹⁵

American geopolitical consultant and former intelligence analyst Dr. David Oualaalou saw no likelihood of change to Russia's foreign policy in his 2020 outlook.¹⁹⁶ From these accounts, it can be concluded that Prichner's first scenario of a transition to Putin-like successor has a strong probability.

D'Anieri's prior comments highlight that even if this government is less authoritarian, a significant change in Russia's Ukraine policy is not guaranteed. Kozyrev provided a more optimistic perspective in 2019, although he is vague on a time horizon:

The prospects of a new opening in Russian–NATO relations will depend on the resilience and firmness of the Alliance and on deep changes in Moscow's domestic and foreign policy. I believe that sooner or later the Russian people will follow the suit of other European nations in finding their national interest in democratic reforms and cooperation with NATO and other Western institutions.¹⁹⁷

Continuing to focus on the plausibility of the other two scenarios, in 2020 the IISS assessed that Russia's political system "is performing poorly for domestic reasons," and highlighted challenges that are expected to persist "to 2024 and beyond"¹⁹⁸:

Elite manoeuvring and infighting testify to the growing anxieties even of those who have benefited most from the regime. But beyond this turbulence and unease, a deeper force may be driving change. Despite the

¹⁹⁵ Kendall-Taylor and Edmonds, "The Evolution of the Russian Threat to NATO," 54-66.

¹⁹⁶ David Oualaalou, *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics: Remaking the Global Order* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2020).

¹⁹⁷ Kozyrev, "Russia and NATO Enlargement..." 458.

¹⁹⁸ International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia..." 240.

problems Russia faces, it is an upper-middle-income country with a sophisticated, highly educated and globally connected population. The more rigid and repressive the system that rules it, the more incongruous, even incompatible, the relationship between state and society appears.¹⁹⁹

Growing domestic discontent with a repressive political system and economic opportunities are themes highlighted by several observers. The theme of economic hardship was also reinforced by Navalny's previous comments on seeking the removal of sanctions. However, opinions on the scale of discontent, as well as the effectiveness of Western sanctions, vary widely.

Oualaalou acknowledged "challenges" related to Russia's economic and political structure, but did not foresee these altering foreign policy.²⁰⁰ In advocating for a policy of détente, he offered a solution in stark contrast to Kozyrev. He asserts that creating positive U.S. relations with Russia:

involves acknowledging Russia's security concerns and considering their interests... if Russia concludes that it will remain the target of U.S. sanctions forever, there will be no incentives for Moscow to dial down the rhetoric and change the course of its aggressive foreign policies.²⁰¹

Tsygankov, as a Russian expert whose broader perspective generally contrasts with common Western observers, concurs. He indicated "[c]ounter to the prevailing expectation, sanctions and military pressures are likely to strengthen the potential for anti-Western nationalism inside Russia."²⁰² Taken as a whole, comments on political and economic discontent and sanctions relief suggest that Prichner's second scenario of a reform-minded government is possible, but less likely than the first scenario.

¹⁹⁹ International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Russia and Eurasia...", 240-241.

²⁰⁰ Oualaalou, *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics...*, 123.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁰² Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand...", 299.

The IISS's previous comments also suggest that disunity amongst the political elite or public discontent could jeopardize the consolidation of power in a post-Putin transition, resulting in Prichner's third scenario of chaos. Prichner referred to Soviet and Russian history to conclude that with "multiple power centres and no monopoly on the use of force," the consolidation of power could take anywhere from two to over 10 years time.²⁰³ This assessment highlights the potentially long duration of the system's vulnerability in the case of a lack of a consensus successor. A descent into chaos is unlikely to improve the prospects of Ukraine's NATO membership as the Alliance would be reluctant to advance to the Russian border at a time when the country was struggling to consolidate power and its future trajectory was uncertain.

Scenario Building: Russia's Most Likely Future

Based on the previous expert perspectives this study anticipates a number of potential outcomes that would not lead to NATO-Russia relations improving to the point of facilitating Ukraine's NATO membership within the next 20 years. This envelope of potential outcomes is collectively considered Russia's most likely future, although individual outcomes are considered more or less plausible. Figure 4.3 summarizes the all potential future Russia scenarios developed in this section for reference.

²⁰³ Pirchner, *Post Putin...*, 9-10.

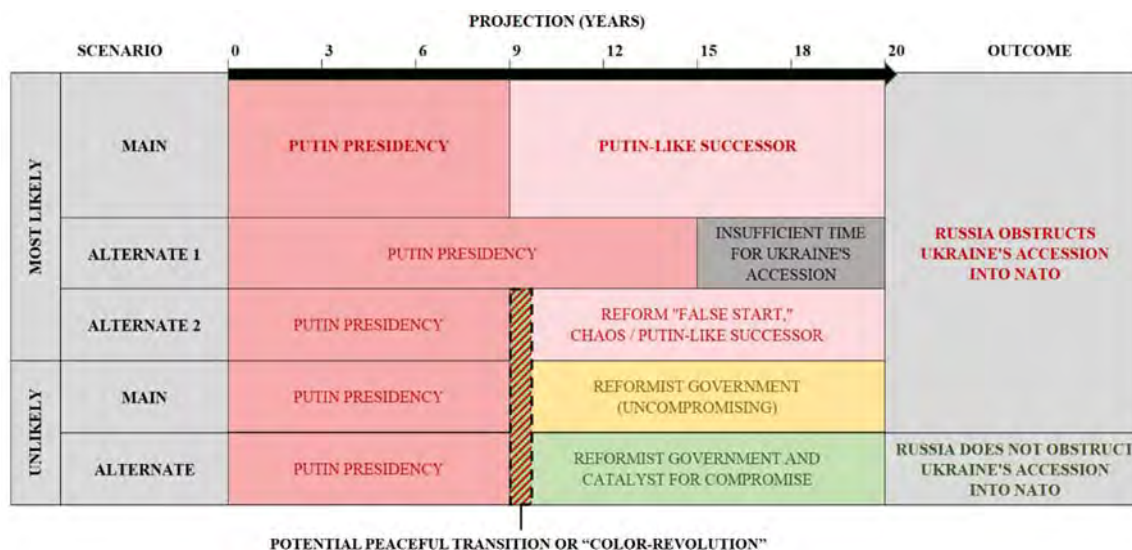


Figure 4.3: Summary of future Russia scenarios

The most likely outcome is that Putin remains in power for a fifth term (9 year point) before transitioning to a chosen successor. This successor largely consolidates power during a first presidential term and is therefore successful in their bid for a second term, extending the authoritarian system out beyond the 20 year horizon of this study as depicted in the “Main” branch of the Most Likely Scenario of Figure 4.3.

There are several less probable but inconsequential alternate outcomes which include Putin remaining for a sixth term prior to transitioning to a successor. At this point in time (15 year point), a failure of Putin’s successor to consolidate power due to elite infighting or popular discontent would not facilitate Ukraine’s integrate into NATO within the 20 year horizon.

A second alternative is that upon completion of Putin’s fifth term in office (9 years), a successor may not enjoy broad political or public support. An unopposed or “color revolution”-type transition to a political reform-minded government either immediately following Putin’s fifth term in office (9 years) or during a successor’s efforts to consolidate power is possible based on the expert assessments above. This outcome is

the only one with any potential to create an opportunity for Ukraine's NATO membership. However, the successful transition to a reform-oriented government would not be assured.

Yeltsin's struggles to promote engagement with NATO and his eventual need to court opponents was highlighted earlier in this chapter. The lost opportunity of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and Ukraine's ongoing public dissatisfaction with failed reforms since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution provide further cautionary tales. In Ukraine's case, the existential threat of Russia has provided an impetus to persist, something that Russia would not necessarily have. Targeted attacks on Ukrainian presidential candidate Yushchenko in 2004 and various Russian opposition figures over the past decades, including Navalny, further highlight the threat Russia's security agencies could pose to a popular candidate working towards an outcome they view as undesirable.

Therefore, even with the emergence of a reform-oriented president, there are several risks that could cause a "false start" or setback in the process. Any false start would likely plunge the country into chaos and increase the likelihood of an authoritarian leader emerging to establish stability.

Scenario Building: An Unlikely Path to Ukraine's NATO Membership

The narrow path to Ukraine's successful integration into NATO requires both a significant change in the president as well as a catalyst to decisively shift perceptions of external threats. As previously noted, if Putin left office immediately after a fifth term (9 year point), there is time for this to occur.

Popular aspirations to preserve Russia's identity aspects and global standing as well as resentment over issues such as prior NATO enlargement and operations would

persist in some degree regardless of the transition to a democratic government. This sentiment would work against the process of re-building mutual trust and only have potential to recede over the long-term. As this chapter highlighted, while many Russians are eager for improved relations, they are not interested in unilateral concessions, particularly on matters seen as vital interests. Sanctions relief alone would not likely be sufficient to sway popular opinion. Thus, a reformist government that remains uncompromising on the matter of Ukraine's accession into NATO is considered the "Main" branch of this scenario, as depicted in Figure 4.3.

The catalyst for changing threat perceptions is difficult to predict, but two possibilities are offered here. The long-term development of public discontent or unease with Russia's relationship with China is one possibility. The unnatural fit of Russia and China as geopolitical allies has been identified in arguments that Russia could turn back to the West. Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst argued that "[a]t some point in the next generation" Russia would realize that the U.S. was less threatening than China. While he stated that this "does not require a change in the current authoritarian political system," if the thaw in relations were to be significant enough to permit Ukraine's NATO membership it would likely require coupling to a democratic transition.²⁰⁴

Russia's pivot back to the West is by no means certain or even likely. Public opinion on China amongst Russians is relatively strong with 65% of Russians having a "very" or "generally" positive view in a 2020 poll by the Levada-Center.²⁰⁵ Oualaalou

²⁰⁴ John Herbst, "Resisting Russia," *The National Interest*, 28 February 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/resisting-russia-178866?page=0%2C1>.

²⁰⁵ Levada-Center, "Russia and the West," 28 February 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/02/28/russia-and-the-west>.

acknowledged that Russia's relationship with China may only be "provisional," and emphasized their views differed on how a multipolar world should be constructed.²⁰⁶ Yet he insisted the relationship was being reinforced by America's current policies and tied the issue back to arguments the U.S. would have to concede to Russian interests to disrupt the Russia-China partnership.²⁰⁷ Kendall-Taylor and Edmonds acknowledged "historic mistrust and growing power asymmetry" between Russia and China, but anticipated the potential "to cooperate in the next 10 to 15 years in ways that could threaten US and European interests."

Alternatively, history demonstrated that the common threat of violent extremism was sufficient for a new leader, namely Putin, to set aside Russian objections to enlargement. Both the West and Russia perceive themselves to be vulnerable to large-scale terrorist attacks. Depending on the context, a major terrorist attack on Russia could significantly alter threat perceptions as it did in America in 2001. This could foster renewed efforts for greater partnership with the West.

If the West embraced the opportunity, the partnership would be susceptible to the same friction points it suffered previously. NATO enlargement contributed to this friction, but as it was noted, it was not the sole aspect. There would be several hurdles to overcome, including finding a compromise between Western and Russian perceptions of Russia's global and regional role. Russia would need to be assured that its views and interests were appreciated and duly considered in NATO decisions. Solutions are difficult to imagine, but with the benefit of the lessons learned from the unipolar era perhaps history wouldn't repeat itself.

²⁰⁶ Oualaalou, *The Dynamics of Russia's Geopolitics...*, 123.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

Summary

This chapter highlighted Russia's longstanding mistrust for NATO's post-Cold War NATO enlargement process and its concern for the impact it would have on Russian influence and interests. Russia's frustration with the unipolar, U.S.-dominated world order and resentment over many of NATO's operations since the 1990's were shown to have solidified Russia's opposition to NATO's expansion into the post-Soviet space. Ukraine's unique role in Russian identity and Russia's standing as an independent great power was shown to be central to Russia's desire to prevent Ukraine from obtaining membership in the Alliance. With Russia's perspective and interests defined, its future was considered. The likely extension of Putin's presidency into the mid-term was demonstrated. Russia's most likely post-Putin future was broadly defined, as was an unlikely, yet plausible, alternative scenario that would permit Ukraine's accession into NATO.

CHAPTER 5: UKRAINE'S BLOCKED PATH TO NATO MEMBERSHIP

Ukraine-NATO-Russia Interaction

Chapter 2 demonstrated why Ukraine would continue to pursue NATO membership through the long-term, provided that it deemed NATO's "open door" pledge was credible. Chapter 3 demonstrated that NATO will continue to reaffirm this commitment, but will not fulfil it in the presence of a hostile Russia. Chapter 4 demonstrated that Russia is likely to maintain its aggressive resistance to Ukraine's NATO aspirations throughout the 20 year horizon of this study. With this in mind, attention will now turn to how events will likely unfold in the long-term.

As Chapter 3 noted, NATO is likely to rigidly uphold the membership criteria in the case of Ukraine. This criteria is summarized in the 1995 Enlargement Study as including:

a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to resolve conflicts peacefully; an ability and willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions.²⁰⁸

For Ukraine to make a credible case that it has met the criteria, most observers agree it must overcome two major obstacles. The first is to resolve the status of Donbas and the second is to implement broad reforms. The disputed status of Crimea and the treatment of ethnic Hungarians are additional potential obstacle that has been identified by some observers. The subsequent section therefore explores these four issues, their significance and the probability of Ukraine to successfully overcome them.

²⁰⁸ Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) – Press & Media Section, "Factsheet: NATO Enlargement & Open Door," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/144032.htm>.

Ukraine's Major Obstacles in Meeting NATO's Membership Criteria

Hungarian Minority Rights

Ukraine and Hungary continue to pursue a resolution on the sensitive issue of minority rights for the approximately 150,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine.²⁰⁹ The dispute is a side effect of Ukrainian legislation passed in 2019 that aimed to privilege Ukrainian language, and diminish the status of the Russian language within the country. While the issue has disrupted some practical cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, Hungary set it aside and endorsed Ukraine's elevated status as a NATO "Enhanced Opportunity Partner" in June 2020.²¹⁰ Thus, while the disagreement between Hungary and Ukraine could delay the accession process, it is difficult to imagine it ultimately preventing Ukraine's membership in the long-term. The issue is therefore not considered in the scenarios developed here.

The Status of Crimea

Territorial disputes could be used to argue Ukraine's non-compliance with NATO's membership criteria. As indicated in Chapter 3, NATO continues to refer to the 1995 Enlargement Study on this matter. The Study indicates that:

States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ About Hungary, "FM: Hungary-Ukraine Intergovernmental Working Group should Begin Consultations to Resolve Differences," About Hungary, 28 January 2021, <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-hungary-ukraine-intergovernmental-working-group-should-begin-consultations-to-resolve-differences>.

²¹⁰ Oleksiy Sorokin, "Ukrainian Language Becomes Obligatory for Service Industry," Kyiv Post, 16 January 2021, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ukrainian-language-becomes-obligatory-for-service-industry.html>.

²¹¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Study on NATO Enlargement*.

This wording suggests NATO has given itself some flexibility. By identifying territorial disputes as “a factor,” the Study doesn’t definitively exclude an aspirant country on the basis of the issue. However, Rasmussen’s assessment in 2019 that “the criteria for eligibility makes it virtually impossible for any country with a territorial dispute to become a NATO member” provides insight into how the 1995 criteria has been interpreted.²¹² Notably, Rasmussen directed his comments specifically towards the Donbas and its potential to revert to a “frozen” conflict, while not specifically addressing the status of Crimea.

Officially, NATO has not publicly commented on how Ukraine’s territorial disputes might effect its eligibility. Ukraine has regularly consulted with the Alliance and has increased its efforts to obtain membership since 2014. This suggests Ukraine does not foresee the issue being a barrier. In the case of the Donbas this could be attributed to a belief, misplaced or not, that the territorial dispute can be resolved. Yet on the issue of Crimea there is no realistic scenario where it is returned to Ukrainian control, at least in the foreseeable future. Several observers have suggested that Ukraine may ultimately have to cede their claim of sovereignty over Crimea.²¹³ However, as D’Anieri argues, the West would be equally challenged to find a way to legitimize Russia’s ownership even if it wanted to recognize such a resolution.²¹⁴

Focusing on NATO’s membership criteria as written, it obligates a prospective NATO member to seek peaceful resolution of territorial disputes pursuant to OSCE

²¹² Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “NATO’s Duty at 70,” Project Syndicate, 4 April 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nato-accession-for-ukraine-georgia-without-russia-veto-by-anders-fogh-rasmussen-2019-04>.

²¹³ D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia...*, 271.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

principles. This is something Ukraine can demonstrate it is doing on the issue of Crimea. In fact, the violations of OSCE principles have been committed entirely by Russia through its occupation and subsequent illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. These OSCE principles, which include the “inviolability of frontiers,” the “territorial integrity of States” and “refraining from the threat or use of force” are originally defined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.²¹⁵ Russia is a signatory to this agreement and re-affirmed its commitment to these principles as recently as the 2010 Astana Summit Meeting.²¹⁶ Russia has also belatedly acknowledged it covertly deployed military forces to the territory to facilitate its occupation before annexation.²¹⁷

UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 of 2014, “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” included the Helsinki Final Act among its references in rejecting Russia’s effort to legitimize its claim over Crimea.²¹⁸ This resolution, adopted in March, received overwhelming international support with 100 UN member states in favor, 11 opposed and 58 abstentions.²¹⁹ For these reasons, NATO would undermine its own efforts to promote OSCE principles, and its broader normative interests in upholding international law, if it argued that Ukraine’s territorial dispute with respect to Crimea rendered it ineligible for NATO membership. For this reason, Crimea’s status is not considered as an obstacle to Ukraine’s fulfilment of the membership criteria.

²¹⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Helsinki Final Act.”

²¹⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community*, Astana: OSCE, 2010.

²¹⁷ RT, “Putin Acknowledges Russian Military Servicemen were in Crimea,” RT, 17 April 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-defense-russian-soldiers-108>.

²¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *A/RES/68/262: Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, New York, UN, 68th sess., 27 March 2014.

²¹⁹ UN News, “Backing Ukraine’s Territorial Integrity, UN Assembly Declares Crimea Referendum Invalid,” UN News, 27 March 2014, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/03/464812-backing-ukraines-territorial-integrity-un-assembly-declares-crimea-referendum#.UzgPNqLRUdw>.

While there are significant risks related to Crimea's unresolved status that NATO would assume if Ukraine joined the Alliance, these will be explored in a subsequent section. While these risks will undoubtedly contribute to the Alliance's reluctance to grant Ukraine membership, they cannot be credibly attributed to Ukraine's failure to meet the membership criteria. Withholding membership solely on the issue of Crimea's status would represent the "prudent" shift from a "value-driven to an interest-driven process" that Williams advocated for enlargement.²²⁰ But to do so NATO would have to acknowledge the principles upon which the 1995 Enlargement Study was developed are no longer valid. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, NATO has consistently resisted changing its stance on its "open door" policy since 2014.

The Status of the Donbas

Unlike Crimea, Donbas' future is more uncertain since Russia's ultimate objectives are unknown and could potentially evolve over time. Also unlike Crimea, the "line of contact," the frontline between militants of the Donbas and the military forces of Ukraine, remains active. NATO supports Ukraine's claims of sovereignty over the region and has assessed that the conflict is being perpetuated by Russia's direct intervention.²²¹ Russia insists that the conflict is a civil war induced by radical Ukrainian nationalists and that any Russians involved are volunteers acting independently from the Russian military.²²²

²²⁰ Williams, "NATO Enlargement: Avoiding the Next Missteps."

²²¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Topic: Relations with Ukraine," last modified 27 April 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm.

²²² BBC, "Ukraine Conflict: Deadly Flare-Up on Eastern Front Line," BBC, 18 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51543463>.

The war in the Donbas reflects Ukraine's longstanding regional divisions and no one disputes that militants in the Donbas are predominately indigenous to the area. Both Russia and Ukraine share responsibility in the failure to implement the Minsk accords that are the basis for resolving the conflict. Further, issues such as Ukraine's 2019 legislation on language rights discussed earlier strengthen arguments that Ukraine is not adequately considering the needs of its sizable Russian minority. Given these complexities, NATO could, and likely would, attribute the unresolved status of the Donbas to a failure on Ukraine's part to fulfil the membership criteria.

Some observers argue NATO should adapt its interpretation of the membership criteria in light of Russia's strategy of leveraging territorial disputes to inhibit NATO enlargement. Rasmussen advocated for an approach similar to the EU when it granted membership to Cyprus despite the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus. However, these views are uncommon.²²³ Therefore, it seems likely that NATO could maintain its credibility amongst most Western observers if it maintained opposition to membership on the basis of the Donbas' unresolved status.

The perspective in Ukraine would likely differ. As noted previously, the issue's relevance to the membership criteria tends to be minimized amongst Ukrainian observers. For example, Kuleba omitted the issue from his "rationale analysis" of Ukraine's outstanding membership requirements in February 2021.²²⁴ Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Olha Stefanishyna did not identify the issue either in her "three priorities for rapprochement with NATO" in March 2021. Here Stefanishyna stated that "[a]ny issues related to NATO membership lie in the realm

²²³ Rasmussen, "NATO's Duty at 70."

²²⁴ Kuleba, "Why is Ukraine Still Not in NATO?"

of domestic reforms" according to Ukrainian news outlet UNIAN.²²⁵ Kuzio builds a similar argument to Rasmussen that NATO should adapt its process to accept Ukraine despite its territorial dispute.²²⁶ All these views suggest the credibility of NATO would likely be perceived differently within Ukraine if it denied membership solely on the basis of the status of the Donbas.

The likelihood of a resolution to the status of the Donbas has been discussed throughout this essay. Chapter 2 demonstrated that the Ukrainian government would continue to at least rhetorically seek reintegration, but would resist doing so under unfavorable terms. Chapter 4 highlighted that even with a change in leadership, Russia's most likely position will be to wait out for Ukraine to give in on the concessions Russia is seeking. The Ukrainian and Russian positions contrast suggesting the most likely scenario is the prolongation of the Donbas' ambiguous status.

In the long-term there is the potential for military activity along the line of contact to be reduced or cease altogether depending on Russia's ambitions. However, it is unlikely that a shift to a "frozen" conflict would be enough to credibly argue that NATO's membership criteria was fulfilled. A formal resolution to the conflict, either through reintegration or Ukraine's recognition of the independent status of the NGCA of Donbas is a likely requirement for Ukraine to meet the membership criteria. The significant domestic resistance to ceding sovereignty over the Donbas was outlined in

²²⁵ UNIAN, "Ukraine's Government Outlines Three Priorities for Rapprochement with NATO," 23 March 2021, <https://www.unian.info/politics/nato-ukraine-outlines-three-priorities-for-rapprochement-with-the-alliance-11363185.html>.

²²⁶ Kuzio, "The Case for Ukraine's Membership of NATO."

Chapter 2, but some observers have argued the merits of such a move.²²⁷ Therefore, either of these outcomes are possible, but unlikely.

Implementation of Reforms

With respect to political, economic and military reforms, Ukraine still struggles to make progress seven years after the Euromaidan revolution. Britain-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) provides a democracy index “based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.”²²⁸ Results spanning from 2006 to 2020, the full range of data available, have been used to generate Figure 5.1.

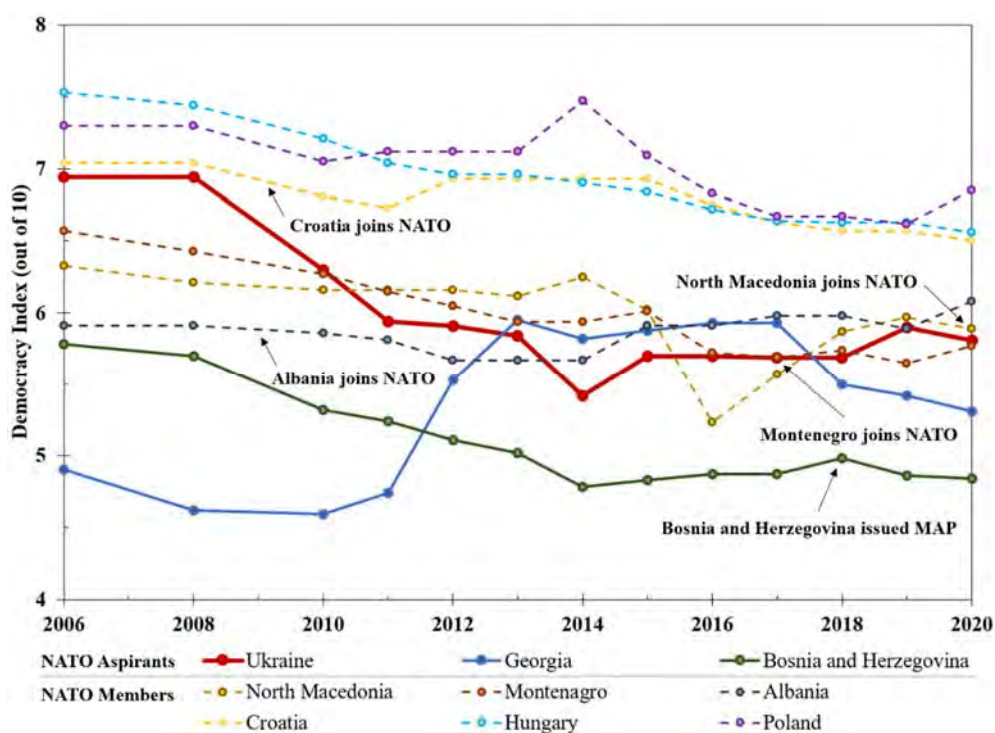


Figure 5.1: Democracy index for Ukraine and select other countries between 2006 and 2020

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

²²⁷ D’Anieri, “Gerrymandering Ukraine...,” 105.

²²⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and In Health?” 2021

In addition to Ukraine, Figure 5.1 includes the four most recent states to join the Alliance (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Croatia), the two other NATO aspirants (Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and two major CEE NATO members widely criticised for democratic regression (Poland and Hungary) for context. Ukraine's democracy index is comparable to three of the four new NATO members and currently better than other states seeking NATO membership. However, Ukraine experienced a significant regression after 2008, even more dramatic than that of Poland or Hungary. Ukraine also hasn't made substantial progress since 2014.

American-based think tank Freedom House provides an independently compiled democracy score based on "national and local governance, electoral process, independent media, civil society, judicial framework and independence, and corruption."²²⁹ The emphasis on the judiciary and corruption, which are not explicitly identified by the EIU's democracy index, are noteworthy given Ukraine's particular challenges in these aspects. German-based Transparency International compiles an annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) which draws from 13 data sources including the EIU and Freedom House. The most recent data from both these indices are provided in

²²⁹ Freedom House, "Freedom House - Countries and Territories," accessed 2 May 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>.

Table 5.1 for the same countries selected for Figure 5.1.

Table 5.1: Democracy Scores and Corruption Perceptions Index for Ukraine and select other countries in 2021

Country	Democracy Score – in percent (2021)	CPI – in percent (2020)
Ukraine	39	33
Georgia	36	56
Bosnia and Herzegovina	39	35
North Macedonia	47	35
Montenegro	47	45
Albania	46	36
Croatia	54	47
Hungary	45	44
Poland	60	56

Source: Freedom House, Transparency International

Ukraine’s democracy score of 39 places it in the “transitional or hybrid regime” category along with the two other aspirant countries. The separation of scores between these countries compared to the NATO members is notably more distinct here than with the democracy index. While Ukraine’s CPI is comparable to NATO members North Macedonia and Albania, it is nonetheless the lowest score in the list.

Consolidating the results of all three indices, selective arguments can be made that the current state of Ukraine’s democratic system is comparable to the state of NATO members either currently or at the time of accession. But this would be arguing from a position of weakness and ignoring historical context. Ukraine’s previous history of inconsistency on NATO membership, its pronounced democratic regression since 2008, and its lack of success in addressing corruption since 2014 give the Alliance justification to insist on measurable progress. For Ukraine to convincingly argue that it has succeeded in reforms, it will likely need to identify Poland as an appropriate benchmark.

Zelensky and his party won resounding electoral victories in 2019 and 2020 respectively largely based on an image of being untainted by political corruption and the message that they would target corruption. However, a March 2021 assessment from

Pifer noted that despite a promising start, “reforms have stagnated, oligarchs retain undue political and economic influence... and the judicial branch remains wholly unreconstructed.”²³⁰ Given the current state, significant reforms appear highly unlikely in the short-term.

Looking mid to long-term, there remains the potential for Ukraine to overcome the reform challenge. The absence of expert predictions on the matter is perhaps an indicator of the level of uncertainty. Limited progress since 2014 might suggest the potential to reform is low, however, the enablers for reform remain present. Political scientist Dr. Tor Bukkvoll, working with Volodymyr Solovian of the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmaments Studies in Ukraine, reviewed the progress of high-level Ukrainian defence reforms from 2014-2019. They concluded that progress was mixed and primarily inhibited by vested organizational interests, dominant organizational ideas and corruption.²³¹ However, they also took a positive perspective on the future potential for reform, noting:

such factors are in the longer run not enough to stop reforms. They are only enough to significantly slow them down. In all areas discussed in this study the combination of pressure from foreign governments, reform minded individuals within the institutions in question and pressure from civil society were able to force some degree of reform. That was, despite numerous attempts, almost never the case before the Russian aggression.²³²

²³⁰ Steven Pifer, “Order from Chaos: The Biden Presidency and Ukraine,” Brookings (blog), 28 January 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/28/the-biden-presidency-and-ukraine>.

²³¹ Tor Bukkvoll and Volodymyr Solovian, “The Threat of War and Domestic Restraints to Defence Reform - How Fear of Major Military Conflict Changed and Did Not Change the Ukrainian Military 2014-2019,” *Defence Studies* 20, no. 1 (2020), 34-35.

²³² Tor Bukkvoll and Volodymyr Solovian, “The Threat of War and Domestic Restraints to Defence Reform...,” 35.

On the matter of pressure from foreign governments, Pifer advocated a firmer approach from the USA under Biden to revitalize Ukraine's broader reform efforts.²³³ U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken "highlighted the importance of Ukraine maintaining progress on fighting corruption and implementing rule of law and economic reforms" in his February 2021 conversation with Ukraine's Foreign Minister.²³⁴ That was followed up a month later by a symbolic "public designation" of Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyy that bars him from travelling to the USA "due to his involvement in significant corruption."²³⁵ These early actions have been interpreted as confirmation by some observers that Biden intends to pursue the approach advocated by Pifer.²³⁶ Therefore, sufficient internal and external influences are present to consider Ukraine's reform in the mid to long-term as a real possibility, no more or less likely than its probability of failing in the endeavor.

Russia's Escalation Dominance

Before presenting potential scenarios, it is worth highlighting some of the means Russia has available to prevent NATO from granting Ukraine membership. With respect to Ukraine's future, Russia enjoys a position of "escalation dominance" according to American political scientist Dr. Graham Allison and Russian-born, U.S.-based Russia

²³³ Pifer, "Order from Chaos..."

²³⁴ Ned Price, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba," U.S. Department of State, 1 February 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-ukrainian-foreign-minister-dmytro-kuleba>.

²³⁵ Antony Blinken, "Public Designation of Oligarch and Former Ukrainian Public Official Ihor Kolomoyskyy due to Involvement in Significant Corruption," U.S. Department of State, 5 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-oligarch-and-former-ukrainian-public-official-ihor-kolomoyskyy-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption>.

²³⁶ Editorial, "Opinion: Ukraine's President again Comes Under U.S. Pressure — this Time, for Good Reason," The Washington Post, 12 March 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/ukraines-president-again-comes-under-us-pressure--this-time-for-good-reason/2021/03/12/5da8f148-828c-11eb-ac37-4383f7709abe_story.html.

expert Dimitri Simes. After dismissing Europe's resolve to confront Russia, they argue that Russia enjoys "the upper hand at every step up the escalation ladder... unless America is willing to go to war itself."²³⁷

Observers are virtually unanimous that all the major powers within NATO have no interest in risking a conventional war, let alone a nuclear confrontation, with Russia over Ukraine. Mearsheimer noted that the West has already confirmed this through their reluctant response to Russia's 2014 military intervention in Ukraine.²³⁸

Since unanimous endorsement from all NATO members would be required, it is unlikely that Russia needs to resort to any significant escalation to prevent Ukraine's membership bid. However, if Russia believed more was needed, it has a wide range of options available. These options could include activities targeted directed at NATO or Ukraine to emphasize the risk of deteriorated relations.

Options for Broad Escalation towards NATO

In either case, Russia would seek to limit escalation to the minimum level it felt necessary in order to manage associated risks. However, Russia would likely be willing to escalate the conflict as far as necessary to either prevent Ukraine's accession or discredit the Alliance in the event it was presented with a "fait accompli" confident that it would ultimately be willing to endure more than the Alliance.

Russia has demonstrated the capacity and intent to conduct a range of activities that have aggravated the West while avoiding direct confrontation. Examples include the 2007 cyber attack on Estonia, snap military exercises near the borders of the Baltics and

²³⁷ Graham Allison and Dimitri Simes, "Russia and America: Stumbling to War," The National Interest, 20 April 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-america-stumbling-war-12662?page=0%2C2>.

²³⁸ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault...", 89.

persistent efforts to undermine democratic processes and propagate disinformation in the West. Kendall-Taylor and Edmonds highlight that these types of activities are “effective only because they are backed by hard power,” signifying the importance of Russia’s military power even in an indirect capacity.²³⁹ They further argue that Russia’s approach to conflict consists of “phases,” or levels of escalation, that intend “to communicate to the adversary that, should conflict continue, greater levels of damage will follow.”²⁴⁰

Dr. Anya Loukianova Fink, a research analyst focused on Russian strategy at U.S.-based CNA, summarized Russia’s indirect use of military power during the Ukraine crisis and how it was applied beyond the region of conflict:

Russian leadership highlighted Russia’s nuclear status to signal that Russia’s stakes were higher than those of the West. In addition, Russian diplomats and former officials threatened nuclear use against NATO members and partners. Russian aircraft “buzzed” vessels, risking accidents, and engaged in other hazardous activities.²⁴¹

These activities highlight one way Russia can use its military power to emphasize the costs of a confrontational relationship while avoiding direct military engagement that could escalate into war.

Options for Localized Escalation toward Ukraine

A more localized alternative for Russia is to escalate the conflict in Donbas while increasing military manoeuvres near the Ukrainian border. The Russian narrative in the most recent case of this tactic was that Putin was engaging European leaders to pressure

²³⁹ Kendall-Taylor and Edmonds, “The Evolution of the Russian Threat to NATO,” 60.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴¹ Anya Loukianova Fink, “The Evolving Russian Concept of Strategic Deterrence: Risks and Responses,” *Arms Control Today* 47, no. 6 (2017), 16.

the Ukrainian government to de-escalate the situation and prevent an undesirable descent into war.²⁴²

This type of activity is appealing for Russia for a number of reasons. First, there's no risk of direct engagement with NATO. Second, Russia can assert that its military movements are a prudent defensive response to instability near its borders, while benefiting from the uncertainty such an activity creates within Ukraine and NATO. Finally, Russia can develop a narrative for domestic and international audiences that is difficult to disprove. This can foster division within an individual NATO member's political system as well as between NATO allies when seeking an approach to resolving the issue.

Denying access or harassing Ukrainian movements through the Kerch Strait represents another means of escalation that would remain open to Russia even if the status of Donbas were resolved. As a result of its annexation of Crimea, right of passage through the Kerch Strait, which provides access to the Sea of Azov along Ukraine's southern coast, is disputed. The strait is significant for economic reasons due to the port of Mariupol and also militarily for Ukraine to assert sovereignty over its shoreline.

Russia could target commercial shipping if the goal was to minimize escalation. Its direct military engagement and seizure of Ukrainian naval vessels transiting the strait in 2018 exemplifies a more aggressive option. This type of response could be appealing to Russia as it emphasizes the Alliance's limited options to respond in a proportionate manner since NATO's presence in the Black Sea is limited by the "[Montreux]

²⁴² Sputnik News, "Kiev should be Forced to Cease Provocations in Donbas - Kremlin," Sputnik News, Mar 31, 2021.

Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits.”²⁴³ The disputed nature of the Kerch Strait and Russia’s implementation of control over obtaining passage through it again allows Russia to easily craft a narrative that would dispute the particulars of the incident and blur attribution of responsible for any confrontation.

Ukraine’s Future

This essay has defined the positions of Ukraine, NATO and Russia on the issue of Ukraine’s NATO membership. With this information, general scenarios over the 20 year horizon of this study can be developed. The most likely scenario includes two equally plausible variants that have distinct implications for NATO’s credibility as a partner to Ukraine. An unlikely yet plausible alternative is also presented. Unless explicated stated otherwise, all scenarios are built on Russia’s most likely future presented in Chapter 4. Figure 5.2 provides a summary reference of the scenarios presented in detail in the subsections that follow.

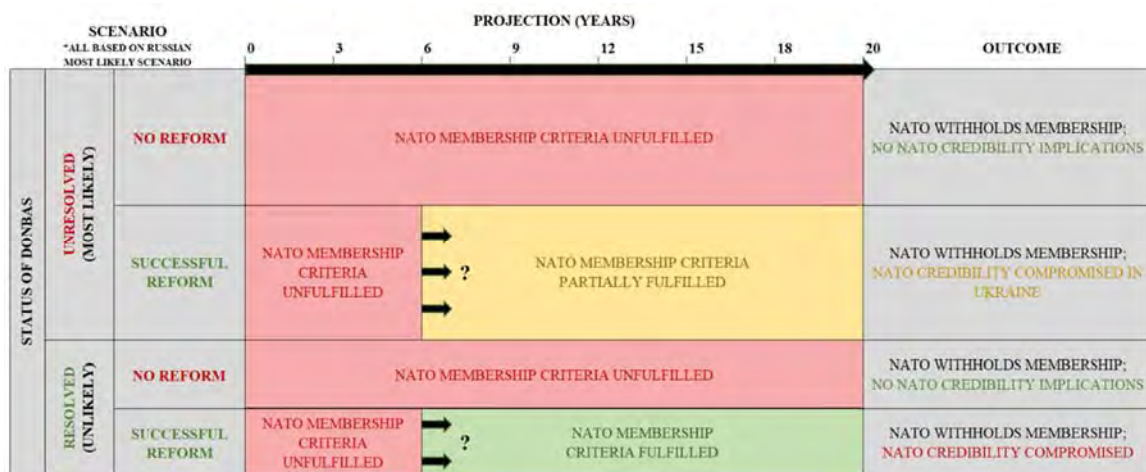


Figure 5.2: Summary of future Ukraine scenarios with respect to NATO membership

²⁴³ United Nations Treaty Collection, “Convention regarding the Régime of Straits,” Montreux, Switzerland, 20 July 1936, <https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280166981>.

Scenario Building: Ukraine's Most Likely Future

Ukraine's ability to resolve the disputed status of the Donbas was previously assessed to be unlikely in the long-term and therefore forms the basis of Ukraine's most likely future. It was further demonstrated that Ukraine was unlikely to achieve significant reform in the short-term. With both these obstacles in place, NATO would not feel any pressure to advance the membership process and could credibly withhold the MAP. Russia would have no requirement to escalate tensions with NATO on the specific issue of Ukraine. Russia would likely maintain its low-intensity conflict in the Donbas and continue to propagate disinformation in Ukraine to perpetuate instability, but would not seek broader confrontation.

In the mid-to-long term there are two equally plausible trajectories for Ukraine's reform process. If Ukraine is unsuccessful in its reform efforts, there would be no change to NATO's position. Ukraine could intensify its lobbying that Russia's aggression was inhibiting the process and likely gain some limited sympathy amongst NATO governments. However, NATO's position would largely be viewed as appropriate by observers and would not risk its credibility with respect to its "open door" pledge. This outcome is no different in the unlikely scenario where the status of the Donbas is resolved, but Ukraine fails to reform, as depicted in Figure 5.2.

If Ukraine is successful in its reforms in the mid-to-long term, NATO would still not grant membership due to the unresolved status of the Donbas. As explained previously, the credibility of this position would be a matter of dispute. Most observers and NATO publics would likely see the position as credible, but it would most certainly be perceived differently within Ukraine. If Russia felt threatened by the level of support

for Ukraine's position amongst NATO governments, it could opt to escalate tensions to deter any change to the status quo. While NATO could feel pressure to at least grant a MAP, it would likely use any Russian threats or acts of aggression as justification for not doing so out of concern it would render Ukraine more vulnerable without appropriate security guarantees.

Progression beyond this point is difficult to predict as there are no palatable options for Ukraine. A decisive pivot away from the West seems unlikely given Ukraine's reliance on it for political, economic and military aid. The resentment towards NATO would likely be significant, but not likely greater than that held towards Russia. However, Ukraine's isolated position could present the opportunity for the pro-Russian opposition to advocate "pragmatic" engagement with Russia.

If Ukraine accepted the idea of engaging Russia on the status of the Donbas it would do so under Moscow's terms. These terms would certainly exclude the potential for NATO membership. Chapter 2 noted that similar compromises have been rejected by Zelensky and the Ukrainian public, but a sense of disillusionment toward the West could facilitate a reluctant agreement. Given the greater resentment towards Putin, this would be most likely after the transition to a post-Putin Russia, even if the new regime is not substantially different. This outcome may not improve relations between Ukraine and Russia within the 20 year time horizon for this study, but would at least create conditions favorable to Russia's distant objective of restoring its influence over Ukraine.

Scenario Building: An Unlikely NATO Credibility Crisis

An alternative branch to the previous scenario, equally undesirable for Ukraine, would be for it to voluntarily cede sovereignty over Donbas once reforms were achieved.

In this case, Ukraine would prioritize its pro-Western alignment. As noted previously, any government that opted for such a move would face stiff domestic opposition and would likely only do so if it was confident that membership in the EU or NATO was certain. In the case of potential NATO membership, this confidence would likely be misplaced. This scenario could similarly develop if Russia sought the reintegration of Donbas with Ukraine either in an attempt to restore its indirect influence in domestic politics or to off-load itself of the economic burden of reconstruction while Russia maintained an aggressive posture.

In this case, NATO would be subjected to significant pressure to fulfil its “open door” pledge. This would likely render its position of paralysis on the issue unsustainable. Russia would certainly escalate tensions with NATO and directly with Ukraine to convey the potential costs to NATO of granting membership. Unable to muster unanimous support for Ukraine’s membership in such conditions, the Alliance would be forced to acknowledge that the geopolitical context it faces in Europe has evolved since its 1995 Enlargement Study.

A formal policy of *détente* that would legitimize Russia’s claim of a sphere of influence that some observers have advocated is possible. However, it is more probable that the Alliance would simply formally acknowledge what is already widely accepted amongst observers, namely that Russia’s belligerence is successfully preventing the Alliance from fulfilling its post-Cold War vision of a Europe “whole and free.” NATO would essentially concede that Russia does indeed have a vote when it comes to the development of European security structures. This outcome would damage NATO relations with Ukraine and discredit NATO as an institution while providing Russia the

level of recognition it seeks in European security matters. NATO would still likely seek to reaffirm its values and normative interests, but their universality would be compromised, potentially eroding their significance. Whether Russia would be content with this outcome or seek further gains in Europe would be a subject of concern for NATO. Despite these significant consequences, NATO would avoid the more catastrophic impact to its credibility that would occur if it offered security assurances to Ukraine that it was unwilling to fulfil.

Scenario Building: An Unlikely Path to Ukraine's NATO Membership

This essay has demonstrated that Ukraine's path to NATO membership is simply not feasible in the presence of an aggressive Russia. The only variations between these scenarios is how Ukraine and NATO are affected by the events. The only outcome through which Ukraine obtains NATO membership is built on Russia's unlikely path to realignment with the West presented in Chapter 4. Under these conditions a solution for Donbas would only be inhibited by lingering tensions between the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian militants. While a resolution could be fragile, it should ultimately be achievable.

If Ukraine's reform efforts were still incomplete, it could at least anticipate the receipt of a MAP. While there would likely be some reluctance amongst Western European countries to expand the Alliance further, the desire to seize the opportunity to resolve the issue would likely prevail. If Ukraine had substantially met the reform requirements, NATO would likely move quickly through the MAP and accession process to fulfil its "open door" pledge.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated that the Euromaidan Revolution and Russia's subsequent intervention have fundamentally shifted Ukraine's foreign policy towards a consistent pursuit of NATO membership. Ukraine's need for credible external security guarantees and the symbolic significance of NATO membership in demonstrating its "civilizational choice" will reinforce this trajectory. Regional divisions will remain, however, public interest in Ukraine's accession into the Alliance has strengthened while interest in developing economic and military ties with Russia has all but vanished.

NATO meanwhile finds itself paralyzed by competing interests to foster a non-confrontational relationship with Russia while preserving its credibility and upholding its values and normative interests. In 2008 NATO made an explicit statement of support for Ukraine's future NATO aspirations at the Bucharest Summit and, as an organisation, has routinely reaffirmed this position. However, hesitancy for Ukraine's membership has only increased amongst NATO members since the Summit, rendering its membership unlikely in the short-term. Fractured relations with Russia require the Alliance to increase emphasis on conventional defense and the prospect of being drawn into an undesirable conflict as considerations in its decision. Ukraine's current hostile relations with Russia, its geographic vulnerabilities and territorial disputes therefore make its admittance into NATO an imprudent move. These facts have stalled progression on Ukraine's membership, while the Alliance awaits more favorable conditions to fulfil its commitment.

Unfortunately, Russia's deep mistrust of NATO and of the purpose of the enlargement process, combined with Ukraine's significance for its identity and status as

an independent great power, will compel it to aggressively resist Ukraine's aspirations. This sense of a need to preserve Russia's distinct interests against a hostile West is widely shared within Russia's political elites and the broader public. Thus, while Putin is anticipated to retain power for the next 9-15 years, the post-Putin transition is unlikely to result in a dramatic foreign policy shift. Even with the unlikely transition to a reformist Russian government, vital interests and popular sentiments will limit compromise on key matters related to Ukraine. A catalyst, such as the emergence of a confrontational relationship with China, would be required to supplement a Russian reformist transition to have any chance of creating favourable conditions for Ukraine's accession into NATO.

With the positions and future trajectories of Ukraine, NATO and Russia determined, potential general outcomes were developed. These outcomes were dependant on Ukraine's ability to fulfil NATO's membership criteria and NATO's resolve to acknowledge such an occurrence. The most likely outcome sees the uncertain status of Donbas persist, with or without successful reforms, resulting in the refusal of the Alliance to progress Ukraine's membership status in the face of an aggressive Russia possessing escalation dominance in the matter. An unlikely outcome where Ukraine successfully reforms and resolves the status of Donbas was shown to only lead to NATO membership when combined with Russia's unlikely scenario of reform combined with a catalyst. Thus it was confirmed that while Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership will endure, vital interests will compel Russia to prevent the Alliance from fulfilling NATO's "open door policy" pledge.

The implications of such an outcome are dependant on whether Ukraine achieves reforms or not. If Ukraine is unsuccessful in its reforms, NATO's position can persist

with no implications to its credibility. If Ukraine is successful in its reforms while the status of Donbas remains unresolved and NATO fails to uphold its pledge, there is the potential for conflicting interpretations of Ukraine's fulfilment of the membership criteria.

Ambiguity in the criteria related to territorial disputes and NATO's failure to explicitly identify the issue as a requirement would likely result in significant frustration in Ukraine. This frustration could open the possibility for the eventual re-establishment of "pragmatic" dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. However, a return to the dramatic shifts in Ukrainian foreign policy remains unlikely as the success of reforms would further entrench political, economic and military integration with the West. Despite this contrast in perspectives, NATO would likely largely retain its credibility in the broader international community. Only in the unlikely case that the status of Donbas is resolved and Russia maintained an aggressive posture would the Alliance face a credibility crisis and be forced to acknowledge the generally accepted reality that Russia does indeed have a veto in prospective membership of aspirant countries.

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