# Russian-Western Relations in the 1990s as Present History

Dijk, Ruud van

# Russian-Western Relations in the 1990s as Present History

*Ruud van Dijk*

## Russian-Western Relations in the 1990s as History

Relations between the West and Russia are worse than they have been in decades, and on both sides, choices Western governments made in the 1990s get most of the blame. The first post-Cold War decade has come to be viewed as an era of missed opportunities to set the relationship on a more productive, less antagonistic footing. In this way, the early post-Cold War era resembles the early post-World War II years, when, according to a still-influential interpretation, the West also missed opportunities to develop a more pragmatic relationship with Stalin's Soviet Union.

'Missed opportunity'-type arguments have made the rounds ever since the process in 1990 that led to Germany's unification and its membership in NATO, but they are increasingly also the subject of historical study. Thanks to declassification of archival holdings in the United States, but also Great Britain, Germany, Russia and elsewhere, East-West diplomacy in the 1990s has for several years been a very active area of research, comparable to the historiography of the early Cold War during the early 1970s.[1] As with the debate about the origins of the Cold War, we surely have another 'argument without end' on our hands, which is not to say that some explanations of what went wrong could not be more persuasive than others, or that consensus on some important aspects is beyond our reach.

This article tries to take stock of the problem on the basis of especially recent scholarship, without laying any claim to being a comprehensive survey. The primary goal will be to think about the interplay between longer-term factors on both sides on the one hand, and more short-term decision-making on the other, that has taken both sides, in the words of Russian president Boris Yeltsin in 1994, from the Cold War to merely a 'cold peace'.[2]

One reason comprehensiveness would be an unrealistic goal in a relatively short essay, is that the general problem of Russian-Western relations

[1] An important difference with that era in Cold War historiography is the current availability of many more primary sources conveying the Russian side of things.
[2] E. Sciolino, 'Yeltsin says NATO is Trying to Split Continent Again', *The New York Times*, November 6, 1994: 1, 10.

in the 1990s should and has been approached from many different angles, each by now having produced significant bodies of literature. On one of the central issues between Russia and the West especially, NATO enlargement, the historical and social-science literature is especially rich.[3] But other, partially overlapping, historiographies are relevant too: of U.S. foreign relations, Russian history in the 1990s, U.S.-Russian relations during the era, scholarship on the role of European governments, from London to Kiev, and most certainly also the historiography of the Balkan wars of the era. On top of an already bountiful array of open sources, students of all these topics now have access to a growing body of primary documents. Memoirs of heads of government and their advisers, and more analytical works written by such participants, represent another important source of information and interpretation. In addition, a good amount of serious oral history work has been done on various aspects of relations between Russia and the West during the 1990s.

In order to identify key issues and pivotal moments in this history, it may be useful to begin with a recent example of the latter category, a series of interviews with former United States ambassadors to the Soviet Union and Russia since the late 1980s by journalist Jill Dougherty.[4] The interviews consistently returned to key issues in U.S.-Soviet/Russian relations. The former ambassadors were encouraged to second-guess policy decisions by

[3] A good discussion, mostly on the first instance East and West confronted the issue of NATO enlargement, is C. Nünlist, 'Krieg der Narrative -- Das Jahr 1990 und die NATO-Osterweiterung', *Sirius -- Zeitschrift für Strategische Analysen* 2.4 (2018) 389-387. Also, very recently: M. Trachtenberg, 'The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?', *International Security* 45.3 (2020/2021) 162-203. Focused more on the consequences of enlargement, but also a useful overview: J. Goldgeier and J.R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, 'Evaluating NATO enlargement: scholarly debates, policy implications, and roads not taken', *International Politics* 57.3 (2020) 291-321. This essay doubles as the introductory essay for this issue of *International Politics*, entirely devoted to the issue of NATO enlargement.

[4] *The Ambassadorial Series: A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews*. Compiled and edited by the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies, Middlebury Institute of International Studies, May 2021. https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/monterey- initiative-russian-studies/ambassadorial-series. (Accessed 12 August 2021). The only U.S. ambassador missing from the 1987-2019 years is William J. Burns, who recently published his own memoir: *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and The Case for its Renewal* (New York 2019).

their government at the time, or to reflect more generally on the course of the relationship since the Cold War.

Reading the interviews, one of the key premises of this article–the pivotal, indeed, decisive role of developments in the 1990s–gets called into question. In the experience of these former ambassadors, there was no real point-of-no-return during the decade, or even during the initial years of the first presidency of Vladimir Putin. As William Burns also suggests, if there was a turning point at which relations took a definitive turn for the worse, with a productive partnership increasingly out of reach, it may have been the year 2004.[5] This does not mean, and the interviews and much other evidence do not suggest, that opportunities for a different evolution may not have been squandered during the 1990s. However, it does seem to make the significance of the most-discussed and criticized development of the 1990s, NATO's enlargement, less decisive than it sometimes appears.

Still, NATO enlargement is one of the key issues from the very beginning of the story. Or put differently, the West's decision in 1990 to build a new security structure in post-Cold War Europe with NATO at its core, further burdened an already heavily taxed relationship with Moscow, in spite of several well-intentioned and theoretically quite viable ideas to include Russia. The way Western leaders discussed their intentions in 1990 with the Soviet leadership has been the cause of a good deal of controversy. As Jack Matlock, the first former ambassador to be interviewed, puts it:

> We kept expanding NATO, something that the first President Bush had promised Gorbachev we would not do if he allowed the unification of Germany and Germany to stay in NATO. Step by step we pulled out of even our most basic agreements and then, increasingly, are surrounding Russia, right up to their borders, right up to beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, with a military alliance which they are not in.[6]

For phase two of this part of the story, when the Clinton administration put enlargement on the agenda, we can refer to Ambassador Thomas Pickering, serving in Moscow from 1993 to 1996:

[5] Burns, *The Back Channel*, 208-209.
[6] *The Ambassadorial Series*, 5.

> [O]nce we began to get wind of the NATO enlargement as a serious policy option, certainly not in any way offset by the notion that we will keep a door open for you, Russia, we wrote back quite serious telegrams to Washington, saying that they had to calculate the effect of NATO on the Russian policy. Rarely, if ever, did we get answers (...)[7]

Burns, one of Pickering's deputies at the embassy in the mid-90s, connects the issue of NATO enlargement to the other major source of tension between Russia and the West at the time, when he quotes from one of these cables: 'it is very clear that the Russian elite sees NATO expansion (...) and Bosnia as parts of a whole--with concerns about NATO's role in Bosnia deepening Russian suspicions about NATO and its enlargement.'[8]

While divisive issues in their own right, the Balkan wars–Bosnia-Herzegovina until 1995, and Kosovo in 1998-1999–became connected to the NATO issue due to the alliance's central role in international efforts to stop the violence. To underline the corrosive effect of NATO's intervention in the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo in 1999, then U.S. ambassador James Collins commented in retrospect: '[President Yeltsin] had sought to keep us from any military intervention in Serbia, unsuccessfully. The result was, essentially, the most profound turn against Yeltsin and the Americans that I remember or experienced.'[9]

Thus, three key moments can be identified during the 1990s when the relationship between Russia and the West faced a major challenge: the early months of 1990, when the question of a united Germany's possible membership in NATO had to be resolved; 1993-1995, when the West put NATO enlargement on the agenda, and concurrently the alliance intervened militarily in the Bosnian war; and the 1998-1999 Kosovo crisis, when NATO once again intervened militarily, to great anger in Russia. In at least two of these three cases, the relationship between Russia and the West was damaged, and Russia's participation in Europe's new, NATO-centered, security structures became more tenuous.

A selection such as this one is naturally limited, leaving out perhaps most prominently financial-economic interactions, but also the part played by countries aspiring to become NATO members. The latter do play a

[7] *The Ambassadorial Series*, 19.
[8] Burns, *The Back Channel*, 105.
[9] *The Ambassadorial Series*, 35.

significant part in studies and memoirs analyzing the choice to enlarge NATO; the former can be seen as part of a wider context for the policy choices on both sides in general, and the three key moments identified here in particular. That context also includes developments inside Russia and in U.S. domestic politics. More fundamentally, as authors have also pointed out, at least implicitly, it includes respective visions for a post-Cold War international order. For their part, these visions were driven by interpretations of history, and by the way both sides viewed themselves in relation to the rest of the world.[10] In this contest of competing visions for the future, too, this era in Russian-Western relations recalls that of the early Cold War. In order to explain the course of the relationship during the 1990s, this wider context deserves serious attention as well.

## 1990: The German Question Returns

Regarding the case of 1990–did Western leaders formally pledge to Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev that in return for his consent to united Germany's membership in the alliance, NATO would not be enlarged beyond the territory of the former East Germany?–we are close to a consensus, at least on the narrow issue of whether there was a formal pledge, or not. Representative for the view that not only was there no promise, but that there could not have been one, remains Mark Kramer's *Washington Quarterly* article from 2009. Discussions in 1990, he argues, focused exclusively on the question of Germany's membership; East and Central European countries were themselves not yet asking to be considered for NATO membership (they were still in the Warsaw Pact, which had yet to be dissolved); and there is no document from any party involved demonstrating that Gorbachev received a formal pledge, or that the Soviet leader ever demanded one himself.[11]

The most powerful counterargument to this interpretation has been that while not incorrect, it still does not tell the full story of 1990. In an article published in 2013, Kristina Spohr analyses a range of discussions in 1990 between Western officials such as West-Germany foreign minister Hans-

[10] Which is not to suggest that governments of 'the West' always automatically shared the same vision for the post-war security order in Europe.

[11] M. Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *The Washington Quarterly* 32.2 (2009) 39-61.

Dietrich Genscher and U.S. secretary of state, James Baker, and Soviet officials. Confirming Kramer's conclusion, she also argues that 'during the unification negotiations key U.S. and West German political actors ... did make comments to Soviet officials that (…) might have been interpreted as more far-reaching (…)'.[12] In the same vein, but more emphatically, Tom Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya have argued that the Soviet leaders were 'led to believe' that following Germany's unification NATO would not be extended further toward the East. Also highlighting numerous examples from meetings between Western and Soviet officials in 1990, they conclude that 'Gorbachev went to the end of the Soviet Union assured that the West was not threatening his security and was not expanding NATO.'[13]

These and other works, and the documents provided in support, do make clear that in 1990 there was much talk among Western governments, including the Americans, and in West-East diplomacy, of recasting relations between the West and, at that time still, the Soviet Union. Just about every Western leader and official at one point or another emphasized that German unification and the liberation of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe should not lead to a situation where the Soviet Union was left outside of any new order in Europe or might see its security interests threatened. The role of the Conference (soon Organization) for Security and Collaboration in Europe (CSCE/OSCE) was to be elevated. In addition, at the end of 1991 NATO established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) to promote collaboration with the countries of the former Warsaw Pact.[14]

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western leaders had an opportunity to make a fresh start on European security and cooperation

[12] K. Spohr, 'Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The 'NATO Enlargement Question' in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990-1991', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14.4 (2012) 4-54: 48-49.

[13] 'NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard', National Security Archive website, December 12, 2017. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early. (Accessed 12 August 2021). See also M.E. Sarotte, 'Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: the 1990s Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and Move NATO in', *International Security* 35.1 (2010) 110-137, and J. Shifrinson, 'Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion', *International Security* 40.4 (2016) 7-44. See also the exchange between M. Kramer and J. Shifrinson, 'NATO Enlargement--Was There a Promise?', *International Security* 42.1 (2017) 186-192.

[14] The best account of these events is now K. Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989* (London 2019).

where East and West had failed in the mid 1940s. They identified the right challenges, and they also seemed to head down the road leading to a harmonious future. There are many documents and public statements that confirm it--for 1990-1991, and, indeed, much of the rest of the decade. And yet, in the end, the attempt failed once more.

In her book published the same year as Kramer's article, also largely focused on the East-West diplomacy of 1990, Mary Elise Sarotte began to explain why.[15] The crucial element, not yet discussed here but central to Sarotte's argument, is the insistence during the crucial discussions of 1990 by the administration of George H.W. Bush on making NATO the cornerstone of any new security architecture in Europe. Exactly how this would evolve was not yet clear, but for the time being, concessions to Gorbachev on NATO's future would have to be minimized to the greatest extent possible. Sarotte and others have highlighted President Bush's bottom line, expressed on February 24, 1990 during a meeting with West Germany's Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, at Camp David: 'We prevailed and they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat.'[16] The comment referred specifically to the idea of compromising on Germany's membership in the alliance, but much of the new scholarship on these events--indeed much scholarship on U.S. foreign relations during the entire decade and beyond--suggests that we can take it as broadly representative for the prevailing view in Washington.[17]

The statement also is reminiscent of what Harry Truman reportedly said in April of 1945 about his expectations for the post-war era: 'we could (...) not expect to get 100 percent of what we wanted but (...) on important

[15] M.E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton 2009). In 2014 a new paperback edition included a new afterword 'Revisting 1989-1990 and the Origins of NATO Expansion' (Princeton 2014) 215-229.

[16] Sarotte, *1989*, from the new afterword, 227. See also Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square*, 226.

[17] An influential proponent of the interpretation emphasizing the U.S. quest for 'primacy' is H. Brands, 'Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era', *Texas National Security Review* 1.2 (2018) 8-33. Taking issue with this view, and emphasizing the Bush administration's commitment to multilateralism, and the importance of the role played by other countries and institutions, is a work by two participants in the U.S. government: P. Zelikow and C. Rice, *The Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York 2019).

matters he felt we should be able to get 85%.'[18] The end of the Cold War was, like the end of World War II, a moment when U.S. power and prestige were at historic highs. Both president Bush and president Truman were seriously interested in international cooperation. Of course, they defined cooperation as other countries accommodating themselves more to U.S. objectives than vice-versa. In 1990-1991, placing NATO at the heart of the new era ensured that the United States would play a central, indeed, decisive part in Europe if push came to shove. The alternatives promoted at the time all seemed much less reliable from a U.S. perspective, and certainly not in alignment with how American policymakers perceived their country's interests, or defined its aspirations, in the post-Cold War world.[19]

United States power and ambitions being what they were, the 1990 decision to make NATO the mainstay of security in what was a rapidly changing Europe made the alliance's eventual expansion beyond the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, if not inevitable, then certainly predetermined. After all, if old realities to the East of the alliance's traditional area ceased to exist, something else would have to take their place. The break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991, and the war that erupted in its wake, was only the clearest example of how, if political instability and strategic uncertainty prevailed, the 'something else' could be chaos and violence, death and destruction, and surely the danger of a wider conflict.

But in key member states of the disintegrating Warsaw Pact (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia) democratic reforms were driving developments, leading to democratically-elected governments sustained by a flourishing civil society environment very much connected to societies in the West. The new governments in Central Europe soon began to express an interest in joining the key institutions of the West: the European Union (EU) and NATO. The latter organization, of course, had since its founding proclaimed that membership was open to any democratic country in the wider North Atlantic

[18] Memorandum of Conversation by Charles M. Bohlen, Assistant to the Secretary of State, Washington, April 20, 1945. *Foreign Relations of the United States* 1945.5 (Washington, D.C. 1969), 231-234: 232.

[19] For President Bush's firm belief in a leading U.S. role in Europe through NATO, and how the international history since the Second World War vindicated this belief in his eyes and those of his close advisers, see J.A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the end of the Cold War* (New York 2017) 75-81, chapter 17. Also: T. Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO. and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY 2019) chapter 10.

region; the former, it soon turned out in the embarrassing 'hour of Europe', was utterly helpless to do anything about the violence in the former Yugoslavia. Finally, and crucially, the United States, its own vital interests tied up with the cause of peace and security in Europe, viewed NATO, and NATO alone, as the foundation of any solution.

While in 1991-1992 it was not clear if, let alone how or when, the alliance would take in new members, in hindsight one could say that the way the Cold War had been wound up in 1990 made enlargement highly likely. Given the President's own views and the way his administration had approached the question of German unification, it certainly is no surprise, as Joshua Shifrinson has shown, that, as they looked to the future of European security, Bush administration officials continued to be guided until the end by the assumption that enlargement could, indeed should, happen.[20] This line of thinking was reinforced, according to Liviu Horovitz and Elias Götz, by the administration's global economic strategy: 'American engagement in Europe promised the security benefits of a continent at peace, but was also necessary to ensure Europe's commercial openness and international economic cooperation.'[21] With reference to Melvyn Leffler's landmark study of the Truman administration's national security policies, the authors point to similarities in their evidence on the early 1990s with U.S. policy in the second half of the 1940s: '(...) absent security guarantees from Washington, European polities might either become unstable or drift leftwards, and thus be less prone to support US-led globalization.'[22]

## 1993-1995: Russian Dysfunctionality, Balkan Atrocities, and NATO as the Key

One of the main differences between the 1940s and the 1990s is that where after 1945, the United States and its partners essentially abandoned any hope

[20] J.R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, 'Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO enlargement, and suppressing the Soviet and Western European alternatives, 1990-1992', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43.6-7 (2020) 816-846.

[21] L. Horovitz and E. Götz, 'The overlooked importance of economics: why the Bush administration wanted NATO enlargement', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43.6-7 (2020) 847-868: 848.

[22] Ibid., 866. Leffler's study, of course, is *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford 1993).

that Stalin's Soviet Union would accommodate itself to the Western vision for the postwar world within two years, in the 1990s they never really stopped trying. The same could be said for Russia's efforts to find a place for itself in the post-Cold War order dominated by the United States and its allies. The Clinton administration and its allies persisted in trying to accommodate Russia in spite, or perhaps because, of ever diminishing chances that the country would be able to do so. William Burns remembers the country:

> (...) struggling to absorb simultaneously three immense historical transformations: the collapse of Communism and the tumultuous transition to market economics and democracy; the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the security it had provided to historically insecure Russians; and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, and with it a Russian empire built gradually over several centuries. Any one of those would have been difficult to manage; all three together were profoundly disorienting.[23]

Reflecting on the choices made in the 1990s, especially by his government, and their impact on Russia, Burns concludes 'Russia was never ours to lose'– NATO expansion 'damaged prospects for future relations with Russia, but not fatally.'[24] Given the Russian turmoil, the question is justified if it would have made much difference had NATO enlargement--the most divisive of all Western choices–been put off, or if the West had chosen a different approach to the carnage in the former Yugoslavia. If the West could not have 'lost' Russia, how much could have been gained from different choices? Also, to what extent do Russian choices figure in these reassessments? Did it miss opportunities to make relations with the West less acrimonious? Although in a much tougher position than the U.S. and its allies, Moscow surely wasn't completely devoid of agency itself?

In December 1994, NATO's commissioning of a study on enlargement was only the most recent confirmation that adding new members from the former Warsaw Pact had become a matter, not of 'if', but of 'how' and 'when'.[25] In early 1993, when Clinton took office, this had not yet been decided. In fact, for most of 1993 and into 1994, it appeared that

[23] Burns, *The Back Channel*, 88.
[24] Ibid., 110, 111.
[25] 'Final Communique', NATO M-NAC-2(94)116. https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c941201a.htm. (Accessed 12 August 2021).

Washington and its allies believed that in the interest of developing a productive relationship with the Yeltsin government an alternative course was required. Not adding new members to NATO for the time being would strengthen–at least, not weaken–President Yeltsin and reformers in Russia who promoted democracy, market reforms, and collaboration with the West.

The launch of the so-called Partnership for Peace (PfP) in late 1993 symbolized this middle way. For the foreseeable future, it would be the venue for security cooperation between NATO and members of the former Warsaw Pact, very much including Russia. Under it, NATO membership would remain on the table, but as a remote prospect. The way the PfP was launched and presented to President Yeltsin and his government, can now be reconstructed from declassified documents; the same goes for how in the course of 1994 Western priorities shifted. The new evidence has given rise to questions, even charges, that, just as specialists have alleged for the 1990 case, Western leaders (especially Americans) misled the Russian leadership. As so often, the National Security Archive has done invaluable pioneering work on this question, not only by publishing many key documents for the first time, but also by providing critical analysis. 'What Yeltsin heard', the authors conclude, was 'that the Partnership for Peace was the alternative to NATO expansion, rather than a precursor to it', even though the alliance simultaneously planned for enlargement.[26]

Marie Elise Sarotte has published on this episode too, and she concludes that by choosing NATO enlargement and relegating the PfP to the margins only months after it had been announced, an opportunity may have been squandered 'to sustain cooperation with Russia while enlarging the alliance.' The choice may have had an effect inside Russia too, she believes, because it came 'at a critical moment in the Russian domestic political debate,

[26] S. Savranskaya and T. Blanton, 'NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard: Russian president led to believe Partnership for Peace was alternative to expanded NATO. Documents show early Russian opposition to 'neo-containment'; more U.S. assurances to Russia: 'inclusion not exclusion' in new European security structures.' *National Security Archive Briefing Book # 621* (Washington, D.C., March 16, 2018), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard. (Accessed 12 August 2021). Also: J. Goldgeier, 'Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO In 1993 And Why It Matters', *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/. (Accessed 12 August 2021).

as elites in Moscow shifted their priorities away from democratization and toward preservation of great power status as the country's highest goal.'[27] However, in her reconstruction, Sarotte also demonstrates that several developments at the time made the choice for enlargement over the PfP seem prudent in American eyes, and politically the least costly. Major developments were:

> (...) (1) missteps by Russia, which was allowing corruption to derail internal reforms; trying unsuccessfully to use the PfP and OSCE to dilute or weaken NATO; and conducting an unsuccessful conflict in Chechnya, raising fear of future such conflicts elsewhere; (2) pressure from [Central and East European] states for quicker NATO enlargement; and above all (3) success by the Republicans in the 1994 [U.S.] midterm elections on the basis of a platform that endorsed swifter expansion.

In addition to these factors, Sarotte also points to the withdrawal from Germany of the last remaining former Soviet troops, and the start of the removal of Soviet-era nuclear weapons from Ukraine, both reducing the importance for the West of building a robust PfP.[28]

Meanwhile, Yeltsin was told time and again that none of the Western choices were directed against Russia, and that there was still a place for Russia, not only in the PfP, NACC, and OSCE, but also the G-7. But this gets to the heart of the problem, namely the relationship essentially being one of the West making room for Russia. In an examination of the memorandums of conversation between Clinton and Yeltsin, James Goldgeier, one of the most prolific authors on the relationship during the 1990s, highlights a telling passage from a meeting in 1995. It has Clinton addressing Yeltsin precisely on this issue, and his choice of words speaks volumes: 'You have to walk

[27] M.E. Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-1995', *International Security* 44.1 (2019) 7-41: 40. Sarotte is finishing a new book on the 1990s: https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300259933/not-one-inch. (Accessed 12 August 2021).

[28] Ibid., 39. See also S. Talbott, 'Bill, Boris, and NATO.' in: D.S. Hamilton and K. Spohr, ed., *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C. 2019) 405-424. Talbott, President Clinton's key adviser on relations with Russia at the time, emphasizes how German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, too, pushed hard for early enlargement.

through the doors that we open for you.'[29] As Goldgeier comments: 'The Russians wanted to be treated as equals, and the idea of walking through doors the United States was opening for them made clear they were not.'[30]

As Goldgeier's analysis underlines, a big part of the story of the 1990s was that in just about every aspect of the relationship with the West, Russia was not equal, and this was a big part of the problem. Clinton and his advisors believed they could have their cake and eat it too, but in the end, as Goldgeier has argued recently, they were proven wrong. [31] NATO enlargement becoming a concrete, near-term prospect, meant, in Yeltsin's words, 'nothing but humiliation for Russia.' The quote, from the same 1995 meeting where Clinton used his poorly-chosen open-door metaphor, is in the title of an important new article on the Russian side of this story by Sergey Radchenko.[32]

As in the case of the Cold War, in order to assess what the West did and whether it may have missed any opportunities to put the post-Cold War relationship on a more fruitful course, the Russian side of things is an essential part of the story. The work we are getting, if anything, shows the depth of the challenge everyone faced back then.

Radchenko's research underscores the vital importance for leaders and others in Russia of having equal status to the United States and seeing this reflected in the make-up of post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe. 'NATO enlargement was seen as perfectly acceptable, as long as it was inclusive of Russia, which would thus gain in status as America's key partner and ally.'[33] Radchenko also highlights the chaotic state of Russian politics in 1993-1994, and the erratic behavior of Yeltsin himself. There was growing opposition from both sides of the political spectrum to the president's collaboration with the West–and this resistance was sanctified by the Russian electorate in the December 1993 parliamentary elections. Two months prior to that, the world had been able to watch the showdown between the president and a rebellious parliament, resolved by Yeltsin through military

[29] Conversation on May 10, 1995, in Moscow. Quoted in J. Goldgeier, 'Bill and Boris: A Window Into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship', *Texas National Security Review* 1.4 (2018) 52.
[30] Ibid.
[31] J. Goldgeier, 'NATO Enlargement and the Problem of Value Complexity', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22.4 (2020) 146-174.
[32] S. Radchenko, '"Nothing but humiliation for Russia": Moscow and NATO's eastern enlargement, 1993-1995', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43.6-7, 769-815.
[33] Ibid., 772.

force. And just before those events, Yeltsin himself had gone on record as recognizing the right of former member states of the Warsaw Pact to choose their own alliances–only to backtrack soon afterwards. Radchenko documents how for Clinton's advisers, it became important to design policies that would hedge against the possibility of further upheaval in Russia.[34]

Status, or lack of it, also determined Russia's response to the UN-sanctioned Western intervention in the Bosnian war in 1994-1995, according to Radchenko. On the one hand, Russia went along with UN resolutions authorizing economic sanctions on Serbia, no-fly zones, and so-called safe areas. It did so reluctantly and pressured by the West. On the other hand, Moscow increasingly chafed at its side-car status as NATO's bombings inflicted damage on Bosnia's Serbs and economic sanctions made life difficult for Belgrade. '[T]here was no hiding the reality of growing estrangement between 'Bill' and 'Boris', nor the widening gulf between what NATO had to accomplish to maintain its own credibility and Moscow's need to be seen as the protector of the Serbs and a self-respecting great power.'[35]

Radchenko is of two minds about any missed opportunities: 'Both sides undoubtedly share the blame, though perhaps the Russians less so, given how desperate they were ... to be taken into account.'[36] But later, commenting on Russia's terms for being taken into account, he writes: 'Ideally, the Russians would have liked to have their cake and eat it, too, i.e. to be accepted as equal partners in Western institutions while retaining freedom of maneuver in what Moscow regarded as its immediate sphere of influence.' And also: 'Yeltsin and [foreign minister Andrei] Kozyrev sought more than just a place at the table–they wanted a place for Russia at the head of the table, right next to America's.'[37]

NATO and Bosnia gave many Russians the impression that the West was taking advantage of their country at a time of great instability and weakness, indeed, trauma. This, authors such as Sarotte and several former U.S. ambassadors to Moscow suggest, has had a negative impact on political

[34] Ibid., 773-800.
[35] Ibid., 792.
[36] Ibid., 796.
[37] Ibid., 802, 810. Former U.S. diplomat W.H. Hill, too, emphasizes how 'From the very beginning of the post-Cold War era, Russian foreign and security policy in Europe contained a considerable element of the classic geopolitical approach to its neighboring states and regions as a Russian sphere of influence.' *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions Since 1989* (New York 2018) 9.

developments inside Russia. It may have contributed to the rise of far-right nationalists and communists, making it more difficult for the Yeltsin government to sustain its reformist, pro-Western course. Absent especially the choice for NATO enlargement (this would be the implied suggestion) the various reactionary forces in Russia might have been kept at bay.

Kimberly Marten isn't having any of this. In an article based on open sources, secondary literature, and interviews with key U.S. and Russian policymakers, her central conclusion is that domestic politics in both the United States and Russia best explain the foreign policy choices both sides made in the mid-1990s. Crucially, she argues that Russia's anti-liberal and anti-Western turn preceded any concrete plans in the West to clear the way for the expansion of NATO into Central and Eastern Europe.

> It didn't really matter whether NATO expanded quickly or slowly. As long as Russia was not getting into Western security institutions, as long as those institutions were not subsuming themselves to CSCE/OSCE or the UN, and as long as Russia was denied the right to veto the use of US and NATO force, Russian elites would not be satisfied.

And the only way Western policymakers might have considered this alternative arrangement with Russia at the head of every table, she adds, is if 'Russia had followed the more liberal democratic pathway of its [Central and East European] counterparts. It was already clear by 1993 that this would not happen any time soon.'[38]

Marten makes much of the work of Anne L. Clunan, who has argued that the shift away from liberal internationalism among Russian political elites was initiated as early as April 1992, when Yeltsin ally and State Chancellor Sergei Stankevich broke away from the pro-Western, pro-reform line. The influential Stankevich

> redefined Russia's Eurasian identity as positive and superior to that of the West. Furthermore, he linked that superiority to Russia's historical status as a global great power and a multicultural empire ... Stankevich and others suggested that being like the West was not a sufficient source of national self-esteem for Russia; given its notable history,

[38] K. Marten, 'Reconsidering NATO expansion: a counterfactual analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s', *European Journal of International Security* 3.2, pt.2 (2017), 135-161: 161.

national self-esteem required distinguishing Russia in positive ways from the West.[39]

**1999: Russia Begins to Create Some Facts of Its Own**

Work on Russian-Western relations during the 1999 Kosovo crisis is not as rich as that on the NATO issue earlier in the 1990s. However, on the basis of newly released evidence on U.S.-Russian diplomacy at the time, Stephan Kieninger has shown how patterns from those earlier years repeated themselves in the spring of 1999. In March 1999, over Russian objections, NATO launched its air war against Serbia on behalf of the Kosovars. This seriously strained relations between the two presidents, with Yeltsin once or twice ending telephone conversations abruptly, but with Russia eventually re-engaging diplomatically. What was different was that Kosovo in 1999 brought the first major instance of unilateral, Russian push-back, by way of the deployment of Russian troops to Pristina airport after Serbia's capitulation in June, but ahead of the arrival of NATO troops. Kieninger quotes Yeltsin's retrospective explanation, which confirms Russia's preoccupation with its status as a great power: "'Russia had not permitted itself to be defeated in the moral sense (...) This last gesture was a sign of our moral victory in the face of the enormous NATO military.'"[40] There would be more to come under Yeltsin's successor, but that was some time into the future. As scholarship on the early 2000s eventually is likely to show, the scope and nature of any additional Russian push-back was as yet not only undetermined, but also, as we know already from open sources and a variety of secondary materials, contingent on Western policies.

History is the work of humans, but they are never entirely free to choose, not even when in positions of great power. As they deliberated over relations with Russia in the context of a new but still evolving situation in Europe, Western leaders, especially in Washington, in 1990 and in 1993-1995, did consider alternatives to the policies they adopted in the end. But these policies always

[39] A.L. Clunan, 'Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47 (2014) 281-290: 284.
[40] S. Kieninger, 'The 1999 Kosovo War and the Crisis in U.S.-Russia Relations', *The International History Review* 43:4 (2021) 781-795: 790. The quote is from Yeltsin's 2000 memoir *Midnight Diaries*.

were the most likely outcome. In hindsight, it is clear that the chances for alternative scenarios to be implemented were severely limited from the beginning. This was not just due to the crucial choices made by the Bush administration in 1990. Most important was the fundamental incompatibility of a Western system, Western ambitions, and Western policies that only left room for Russia as a subsidiary partner at best, and a Russian polity that not only was in constant and deepening turmoil, but also insisted on a great power role for the country that was no longer in line with post-Cold War political and economic realities.