



BACKDATING THE BLAME

HOW RUSSIA MADE NATO A PARTY TO THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

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One of Russia's greatest successes in its information war over Ukraine has been its ability to portray NATO as a party to the conflict.

This paper will examine the extent to which NATO was involved in the conflict, the attempts Russia made to craft a narrative which would justify the annexation of Crimea, and the ways in which that narrative changed during the early stages of the conflict, until it fixed the blame on NATO retrospectively, four months after the pro-EU demonstrations in Kiev began.

In the Russian narrative as it now stands, one of the key triggers of the Kremlin's decision to annex Crimea was the danger that Ukraine was about to join NATO - the latest in a series of aggressive and provocative moves by the alliance to advance closer and closer to Russia.

President Vladimir Putin made exactly this point when he confirmed the annexation of Crimea in a [speech](#) on 18 March 2014.



Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.

Despite the fact that, as we now know, the Crimean annexation was planned on the same day that then-President Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine, and therefore predated any mention of the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, the accusation has stood ever since. Depending on the speaker, NATO's expansion has been portrayed either as a deliberate and treacherous act of aggression against Russia, or a thoughtless and ill-judged decision to which Russia had to respond for its own security. Either way, NATO is seen as the guilty party, and Russia the victim.

As a result, the Ukrainian conflict has come to be seen as a struggle for influence between Russia and NATO. That, in turn, has created a tendency in the mainstream media to give equal credence to Russian and NATO statements - despite their radically unequal contributions to the crisis on the ground.

In fact, NATO's involvement in Ukrainian events from the start of the "Maidan" protests in November 2013 was minimal. In the three months leading up to the flight of then-President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, its contribution to the diplomatic activity around Ukraine was limited to two official statements.

The [first](#), made by foreign ministers on 3 December 2013, urged all sides to refrain from provocations and violence, and to engage in dialogue. The [second](#), made by defence ministers on 26 February 2014, called for "inclusive political process based on democratic values, respect for human rights, minorities and the rule of law, which fulfils the democratic aspirations of the entire Ukrainian people".

Neither one mentioned Russia, or the concept of NATO enlargement, at all. The closest the alliance came to mentioning Ukraine's status was when defence ministers underlined that "NATO Allies will continue to support Ukrainian sovereignty and independence, territorial integrity, democratic development, and the principle of inviolability of frontiers, as key factors of stability and security in Central and Eastern Europe and on the continent as a whole".

Indeed, the only mention of Russia in the bloc's official statements during that same period was an entirely positive one. On December 4, 2013, the foreign ministers of the NATO-Russia Council issued a rare joint statement in support of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Uniquely, they said that they "stand ready to consider further assistance to the OPCW-UN Joint Mission if requested".

From December 2013 to February 2014, NATO and Russian officials worked on drawing up a joint mission to escort the U.S. ship the Cape Ray, which was to destroy Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons at sea. It was only on 5 March, after Russia's action in Crimea, that then-NATO Secretary

General Anders Fogh Rasmussen [announced](#) that NATO had decided to suspend the planning of what would have been the NRC's first joint mission.

Thus, the buildup to the annexation of Crimea was in fact accompanied by the most striking example of NATO-Russia cooperation ever conducted.

Nor was this lost on Russia. At the same foreign ministerial meeting, Russia's Sergei Lavrov gave the following [characterization](#) of NATO-Russia relations:

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We have conducted quite a satisfactory session of the NATO-Russia Council... The session has shown that although we do not agree on all issues, still, if we adhere to the principles of equality, really taking into account each other's concerns and interests, which were used as a basis when creating the NATO-Russia Council, we can achieve results.

It is hardly the language of a man whose main concern is the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO. Moreover, during his press conference he was also asked about Georgia's relations with NATO. He replied to criticize the concept of NATO enlargement in general, but made no reference to Ukraine in that context.

He was similarly upbeat in a year-end [interview](#) with Interfax:

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In our relations with NATO, we advanced our vision of collective work for the formation of the system of equal and indivisible security in the European Atlantic region. ... We intend to continue our interaction on equal and mutually respectful basis.

If Russia was worried about Ukraine joining NATO, it certainly was not showing it at that stage. Throughout the January and February that followed, Lavrov reserved his harshest words for the European Union, such as this comment on 14 February at a [press conference](#) with the German foreign minister:

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Others want to create such a sphere of influence, appealing to Ukraine to choose one side, warning it that its choice will be an 'either-or' choice – EU or Russia.

Five days later, he was still praising relations with NATO, at a [press conference](#) with the Estonian foreign minister:

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We discussed our relations within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, where we do a lot of valuable things on a practical scale.

He went on to say that Russia was concerned by NATO's ongoing construction of missile defences in Europe, and by the fact that NATO had conducted collective-defence exercises in Europe; but there was not one word of possible Ukrainian membership.

Yet as is now known from his own testimony in the film “Crimea: Way back home” (A.Kondrashov), Putin gave the order to annex Crimea on 22 February, just three days after Lavrov's comments.

In other words, by the date Putin decided on the annexation, there had been no mention by Russian or Ukrainian officials of the prospect of Ukraine's joining NATO. The issue had simply not arisen, because at that point, Yanukovich had only just fled, NATO had played no role in the diplomacy around Ukraine, and even the Maidan demonstrators had focused their demands on closer ties between Ukraine and the EU.

That is enough to reveal Russia's claim that NATO started the trouble by wanting to expand into Ukraine as a smoke-screen.

However, it is instructive to see how Russia's thinking on NATO then developed, because it reveals the extent to which the blame for the annexation was backdated to include the alliance.

The first mention of possible Ukrainian NATO membership came as a [question](#) to Rasmussen on 27 February, at the meeting of defence ministers. The Euronews network - majority-owned by Russia - asked him on his arrival at the meeting whether Ukraine's NATO membership could be back on the agenda.

Rasmussen's response began with these words:

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That's for the Ukrainians to decide. Actually, I don't think it's the most urgent priority for the new Ukrainian leadership.

That's for the Ukrainians to decide. The comment was in line with NATO's longstanding policy - a policy which Russia knew extremely well. Yet one day later, as Russia was finalizing its special-forces invasion of Crimea, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a remarkable [statement](#) blaming the tensions in Ukraine on "militants" and reacting to Rasmussen's comment:

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When NATO starts reviewing the situation in Ukraine, it sends the wrong signal. It even seemed appropriate for the NATO Secretary General to mention that 'Ukraine's membership of NATO is not an urgent priority of the Ukrainian leadership'. Does this mean that membership should be a priority, but not an urgent one? They are attempting to decide for the Ukrainian people again.

To accuse Rasmussen of "attempting to decide for the Ukrainian people" after he had just said that the question was "for the Ukrainians to decide" is a staggering piece of diplomatic dishonesty; but it also could be read, in retrospect, as the first official salvo in an attempt to shift the blame for the planned annexation to NATO.

The relationship between NATO and Russia deteriorated sharply in the week that followed. Between 2 and 6 March, NATO ambassadors held a series of emergency meetings at 28 and with their Ukrainian and Russian counterparts in which they [condemned](#) "Russia's military escalation in Crimea", [accused](#) Russia of violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and [suspended](#) all practical cooperation with Russia - including the long-heralded Cape Ray mission.

Strikingly, however, even then the Russian Foreign Ministry's response did not mention the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO. Instead, a new [statement](#) blamed the crisis "exclusively" on "the internal political crisis in the country", and stated that "the formations of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea do not get involved in Ukrainian internal political events". (The latter statement was factually untrue.) Rhetoric levelled at NATO was limited to an accusation of "distortion of facts and the escalation of tensions (which) do not contribute to the normalisation of the situation in Ukraine and the building of trust in our relations with NATO countries".

So even after the military operation, Russia's prime concern was not to prove that NATO was to blame for it. The reason is that Moscow had another target in mind, as becomes apparent from a simultaneous [statement](#) made in response to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry:

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The United States and their allies turned a blind eye to the atrocities of the militants in Maidan, their mistreating of political opponents and plain civilians, the violent Russophobia and anti-Semitism, the besmearing of the memory of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. Washington has also ignored that the newly-created Kiev regime trampled on the agreement of the 21 February, which was signed by the German, French and Polish foreign ministers, and formed a 'government of champions', having actually announced a war against the Russian language and everything associated with Russia. Allies of the west have now turned into being open neo-Nazis, who destroy orthodox temples and synagogues.

At this stage, Russia's overwhelming narrative goal was to portray the new government in Kiev as a Nazi-led putsch of genocidal Russophobes. Ukraine's leaders, rather than NATO, were Moscow's main target - understandably, given the Kremlin's loathing of any regime around its borders which is seen to have its roots in mass pro-democracy movements.

In fact, throughout March, Russian figures focused their attention far more on the claim of "Nazi Kiev" than of NATO enlargement. On 7 March, foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich did react to the decision on suspending cooperation by [warning](#) against bringing "the 'NATO factor' to the complicated and fragile situation in Ukraine" - an implicit recognition that NATO had not been a factor before.

But otherwise, Moscow's rhetoric focused on the "[ultranationalists](#) who endanger the life and legal interests of Russians and the entire Russian-speaking population"; on the "[atrocities](#) reigning in eastern regions of Ukraine as a result of the actions of militants of the so-called Right Sector with the connivance of the new authorities (as they call themselves)"; on the "[racist](#), anti-Semitic and xenophobic views" of the demonstrators.

Indeed, the period from 20 February to 18 March can best be characterized as the month in which Russian officials of all levels and through all channels attempted to portray the Ukrainian government as neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, racist and anti-Russian. This, in itself, was a major narrative departure from earlier claims of the protesters as stooges of an interfering EU, but it did nothing to implicate NATO.

So where did the claim that the Crimean annexation was a result of an impending Ukrainian accession to NATO actually originate? To the best of this author's knowledge, it was first aired by Putin in his 18 March speech: "We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO."

But where had Putin heard such declarations? When acting premier Arseniy Yatseniuk visited NATO on 6 March (passing by on the way home from an EU summit), he [said](#) that the prospect is "not on our radars". Indeed, the month before the Maidan broke out, [support of membership](#) was at just 20%. It was not until after the annexation of Crimea that [opinion](#) began to swing towards NATO.

The first official mention of the issue came on 1 April from Ukraine's acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, in a comment which the Russian Foreign Ministry [interpreted](#) as "considering" the renunciation of non-bloc status.

It took another nine months for the Verkhovna Rada to begin and conclude the process of lifting that non-bloc status. Even then, Yatseniuk [stressed](#) that the order of proceedings would be to revoke

non-bloc status, implement sweeping reforms to the security sector, politics, economics and the justice system, hold a referendum on membership, and then apply to join NATO.

Yet increasingly, from March 2014 onwards, Russian officials invoked NATO's "aggressive expansion" as the reason for the annexation of Crimea, and, later, the outbreak of fighting in Donbass. By the time of the September NATO Summit in Wales - during which the first Minsk ceasefire was announced - the Russian Foreign Ministry felt justified in releasing a scathing [statement](#) blaming the entire situation on NATO:

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The results of the summit have graphically demonstrated that NATO, whose policy is dictated by the United States and hawks in some European capitals, has been striving for military domination in Europe in violation of the agreements on the importance of a system of equitable and indivisible security for the Euro-Atlantic region, that have been reaffirmed numerous at all levels. ... The summit adopted a line towards NATO's eastward expansion and build-up of its presence near Russia's borders. These plans were nurtured for a long time and the Ukrainian crisis became merely an excuse for the start of their implementation. The gist and tone of statements on the situation around Ukraine and the announced plans of NATO countries to conduct a joint drill with Ukraine on its territory before the end of this year are bound to escalate tensions, threaten the start of progress regarding a peaceful settlement in Ukraine and contribute to the deepening of the split in Ukrainian society. Moreover, they testify to NATO's unreserved support for Kiev's neo-Nazi and extremist forces.

The rhetorical transformation was complete. NATO had become the aggressor, "dictated" to by the U.S. and European "hawks", "striving for military domination in Europe" and providing "unreserved" support for the neo-Nazis of Kiev. Since then, Russian officials have consistently stuck to that line, claiming (like Putin) that NATO "promised" not to enlarge in 1990, despite a total lack of [evidence](#).

But it is vital to remember Russia's rhetoric in the build-up to the crisis. At no time during the Maidan demonstrations, the outbreak of violence or the covert Russian takeover of Crimea did the Kremlin attempt to pin the blame on NATO. Instead, it initially focused on criticizing the EU, before turning its fire on the demonstrators themselves. It was Putin, in his 18 March press conference, who first mentioned the potential for NATO enlargement as one of the reasons for the annexation. Once he had mentioned it, the Russian communications machine gradually swung into line behind his accusation.

Thus, Russia only started a serious attempt to portray NATO as a party to the conflict four weeks after the decision to annex Crimea had been taken. The attempt began well before Ukraine had taken any serious steps to prepare for the abolition of non-bloc status. And it began with Putin's address to the nation.

In effect, Russia's approach to NATO in the Ukrainian conflict has been to backdate the blame, accusing the alliance after the event of offences which it did not even mention at the time.

This technique should be borne in mind the next time Russia accuses an international partner of provoking it.

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