

# Discourse on NATO in Russia during the Kosovo War

VLADIMIR BROVKIN

*Tell me what you think about NATO and I'll tell you who you are.*

In contemporary Russia, views on NATO define one's political philosophy and one's view of Russia vis-à-vis the West generally. But these attitudes are inseparably intertwined with domestic Russian politics and the struggle for power. According to conventional wisdom today, Russia views NATO with hostility, irreparable damage having been done to the Russian perception by the 1999 expansion to include three new members; the modernization of American high-tech weaponry; and most important, the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia.

No doubt these policies contributed to the strong anti-American feelings prevalent in Russia during the bombing campaign. Rather than focusing on what the West has done to alienate benevolent Russians, however, a more productive approach to explaining stormy Russia–NATO relations over the past year is to view them in the context of Russian domestic politics, on the assumption that whatever Russian actors did vis-à-vis the West and NATO during the period was a reflection of Russian domestic priorities. Indeed President Yeltsin has changed his tune on NATO at least three times in response to his political struggles during that turbulent year. From Partnership for Peace, he led Russia to a near-confrontation over “NATO aggression,” and then again to business as usual at the G-8 summit. In this article, I attempt to untangle the web of contradictory policies and statements and place Russian policy toward NATO into the domestic context.

## **August 1998: Falling Ruble, Falling Gods**

When the ruble collapsed in August 1998, with it collapsed the faith of the Russian general public in Western-style economic reform. This simple fact has not quite been appreciated in the United States. The August debacle wiped out the confidence among the emerging middle classes that life is getting better. It hurt most the very classes that had believed that pro-Western Russian reform would eventually lead Russia to prosperity and democracy. Among people in their thir-

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Vladimir Brovkin is project coordinator at the Transnational Crime and Corruption Center, American University, and an executive editor of *Demokratizatsiya*.

ties engaged in a variety of business ventures, the West, the U.S.A., NATO, and market economy were positive notions. They did not fear NATO, and they welcomed American ways and American investment. Clearly this constituency was not a majority in Russia. Yet it probably was a majority in the big cities. It was the up-and-coming political force that voted for Yeltsin in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

The ruble collapse discredited the government of Kirienko and with it the entire group of so-called young reformers—Gaidar, Nemtsov, and Chubais—whom Larry Summers had called the dream team of reformers.<sup>1</sup> In the run-up to the August disaster, liberal politicians such as Grigory Yavlinsky and his Yabloko party, the steadfast democratic critics of the Yeltsin regime, had been warning that true economic reforms had not been undertaken, that dependence on Western loans for balancing the budget would get the reformers into trouble, and that an oligarchy was being created. Most of these critical voices went unnoticed both in Russia and in the West. Western banks were enthusiastic about the Russian market. The Clinton administration was happy with Yeltsin and did not want to hear anything about corruption, theft, or embezzlement of state funds.

In August 1998, the time had come to pay the piper. Reformers were discredited, along with the pro-Western course in the economy. Conditions were ripe for forces to emerge that had been known for a reserved, if not outright hostile, policy in regard to NATO.

Yevgeny Primakov's appointment was a reflection of the new climate in the country. Primakov had a reputation as a tough foreign minister who stood up for Russia's perceived rights as a superpower. He had earned the applause of the Communists and nationalist-democrats such as the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, on numerous occasions. The appointment of Primakov was an admission by Yeltsin that the pro-Western course was discredited. The question was how far Russia would go along the anti-Western path.

Primakov turned out to be a virtuoso of compromise. He did not make any rough moves. He kept the Communists, nationalists, and democrats content by simply holding on tight and preventing the economy from spiraling downward. What was expected of him by the Communist-nationalist forces was to show that Russia could stand up to the West, that it could not be ignored or manipulated as a third world country. The painful negotiations with the International Monetary Fund had already created an impression that the West was controlling the Russian economy by offering loans and then imposing controls. Russia was reduced to dependence on Western loans and investments, which were not forthcoming.

Primakov's priority was not seeking confrontation with the West. As is clear in retrospect, it was curtailing the power of the oligarchs, the business clans, who had monopolized most of Russia's industry and had brought disaster to the Russian economy by their speculative ventures of 1996–98. To move forward, Russia needed to curtail the influence of the oligarchs.

Primakov made his move in January 1999, and it appeared that the Berzovskys, Chubais, and Potanins were in jeopardy. Major companies were being investigated. Banks were allowed to go insolvent. Public debate was launched on

the plausibility of admitting Western banks into the Russian domestic market. For the first time in Russian history, the prosecutor general, Yuri Skuratov, asked the Kremlin to account for state revenue. Domestic concerns and the fight against corruption dominated the national agenda in January and February 1999. But three weeks later all of this was conveniently forgotten, and the media focused on NATO aggression against Yugoslavia. Whether it was coincidental or not, the shift of focus was very convenient for Yeltsin.

### **NATO Moves**

Primakov's and Skuratov's attempts at genuine reform of the corrupt system did not find encouragement in Washington. From the very beginning, Primakov was not a friend. Chubais's friends and admirers in Washington downgraded Primakov as a neo-Communist, a former KGB official whose departure would be welcome; the return of the so-called democrats (Chubais's clan) was desirable. But just when Primakov and Skuratov were launching investigations into abuse, theft, and financial improprieties by the most powerful men in Russia, when they questioned financial dealings of the Kremlin, NATO decided to force Serbian president Milosevic into line.

The fact is that the United States did not show support for Primakov, and the new NATO doctrine signaled to the Russians that their reaction was not very important or relevant. The message to Russia in March 1999 was that the United States would pursue its NATO policy and the Russians would have to live with it.

Previous to that, the bombing of Iraq at the end of 1998, during the impeachment of President Clinton, had made the Russian General Staff furious. Russia's ally was bombed, and Russia was not even notified in advance. Yeltsin's regime was helpless. That inaction at the turn of the year contributed to the rise of the mood to resist NATO and the United States next time. Some Western analysts believe that Milosevic calculated his moves, taking into account the mood in Moscow. His intransigence increased, pushing NATO leaders to a forcible solution.

The three prongs of NATO policy before the Kosovo war were addition of the three new members into the alliance; modernization of the Pentagon's nuclear forces; and expansion of NATO's international role. All of this was being discussed with much fanfare in preparation for the fiftieth anniversary of NATO. But timing is everything in politics, and the timing of these initiatives was bad for Russian domestic politics. Public opinion was already relatively anti-Western as a result of the failure of the West's prescribed economic policies. President Clinton's reputation was tarnished by the impeachment proceedings. His friend Yeltsin was vastly unpopular. The bombing of Iraq inflamed passions. In this climate of recrimination and looking for a scapegoat, NATO unveiled its plans. The fact that the three new members were welcomed into the alliance with such fanfare was perceived by the Russians as adding insult to injury.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland used to be Russia's allies in the Warsaw pact. In the popular conscience, the Red army had liberated the three

countries from Nazi rule. Now they were joining NATO, the most powerful military alliance in the world, which not only did not cease to exist after the collapse of the Warsaw pact but expanded at the expense of Russia's allies. It hurt national pride that these countries chose to join NATO rather than seek alliance with Russia, and generated a sense of injured isolation. Russia was alone in Europe, abandoned by its former allies. Russia was being bankrupted by the West, who had stolen its riches and its allies. The admission of NATO's new members emphasized Russia's loneliness, which the Communists equated with uniqueness, separateness, and anti-Westernism.

The debates in the U.S. Congress on the modernization of U.S. forces were equally ill-timed. The Russian public perceived this desire to modernize with consternation. Why did the Americans need a new supersonic fighter? Why were they planning to build nuclear defense systems? Arguments that the United States needed modern weapons against rogue states and international terrorists did not sound very convincing in Russia. The implication drawn by many Russian politicians was that the United States continued to arm when Russia could no longer afford to do so. A few months later, this crystallized in a decision to modernize Russian nuclear forces regardless of the cost.

The third prong in NATO's strategy was that NATO had a right to intervene militarily beyond the area of the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean basin for peacekeeping operations. Russian military observers read into this policy change the intent of NATO and the United States to intervene militarily anywhere in the world, including Russia. Military action in support of humanitarian objectives was a cover-up for aggression, argued Russian analysts.<sup>2</sup> NATO and the United States were striving to acquire world hegemony. This generated a strong impetus to hold onto those international organizations in which Russia still had a voice, such as the United Nations.

Not so much the substance of the new NATO policies as the style, the pompous presumption of omnipotence, the disregard for Russia's views, and the fanfare of the fiftieth NATO anniversary tended to alienate Russia. Almost all Russia's domestic political forces were now ready to welcome a tough stand vis-à-vis NATO. Russia was not going to be ignored. Russia was not going to be excluded from Europe. Russia is still a power to be reckoned with. These were the sentiments widely shared as March 1999 came.

### **Kosovo**

The war over Kosovo did more damage to Russia–NATO relations than any other event since 1991. This is not to imply that NATO should not have pursued the policy it did. The war over Kosovo focused tendencies that were already in the making. The war made it painfully clear that Russia was no longer a great power, and that the West pursued its policies in Europe and elsewhere regardless of Russian objections. Russia had no allies in Europe other than Serbia, an ally that would not even listen to the advice of its only benefactor. Russia was alone, weak, ignored. This was the main source of anti-Americanism and the hysteria that had seized the Russian media.

### The Russian Objections

What was most striking in spring 1999 was the unanimity with which Russians from various walks of life and political parties condemned the NATO bombing. Opponents of NATO launched several Russian Web sites where vigorous debate raged on the merits of NATO actions and Russia's possible response. Many authors pointed out that the record since 1992 did not look favorable to NATO: Russia withdrew from the countries of Eastern Europe, disbanded the Warsaw pact, limited its forces, and the New Independent States abandoned nuclear weapons, whereas NATO expanded to the East, created new arms programs, and violated the sovereignty of a European state.<sup>3</sup>

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Russian critics and experts wrote article after article arguing that the entire system of international relations was based on the UN and its authority. By launching military action in Kosovo without UN sanction, NATO was undermining the very foundation of the world order. Moreover, most international agreements signed in building the world order con-

demned the use of force against a sovereign state. Therefore, NATO's action qualified as aggression.<sup>4</sup>

The principle that NATO could unilaterally decide to use force for whatever reason against any country where human rights were ostensibly being violated was particularly unacceptable for Russia. Why not bomb Northern Ireland, then, or Russia itself? Russians talked about human rights, loss of human life, and the suffering of civilians. Any attempt to remind them that the bombing was undertaken to stop suffering inflicted on civilians by Serb security forces would trigger a quick response that Serb security forces were fighting against separatists and terrorists, and that the refugees were fleeing NATO bombing. Boris Fedorov, former minister of finance, stressed that by unilaterally bombing Serbia, without a decision by the UN Security Council, NATO acted in violation of international law.

### Information Gap

A great discovery for Western observers was that the Russian media, which were supposedly free and fair, were completely one-sided in coverage of Kosovo events. News media essentially reproduced Serbian propaganda and footage. Refugees were fleeing American bombs. There were hundreds of thousands of refugees as a result of NATO bombing. This was repeated day after day. No wonder ordinary Russians condemned NATO bombing.

This was an example of manipulation of the media such as existed in the Soviet era. The difference from Soviet times was that then people were in the habit of

disbelieving official propaganda. Now propaganda lies were perceived as true coverage. In April 1999, I met with academicians, professors, informed people who I thought had to know the real situation. I was astonished to find out that for the most part, they believed official media coverage and condemned NATO. When questioned about ethnic cleansing, they usually answered that Milosovic was a criminal and that they objected to the inhumane bombing by NATO rather than to Milosovic's hold on Kosovo. A prominent columnist, editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* Vitaly Tretiakov, scolded in an editorial those liberals and democrats in Russia who, while mildly criticizing NATO, still

morally condoned the North Atlantic Alliance's actions because in their opinion it was impossible that the civilized West and the civilized Europe be wrong in their striving to "force" the regime of a "barbarian" and a "dictatorial" Milosovic [to] become democratic and adhere to the human rights.<sup>5</sup>

Tretiakov went on to argue that it was morally wrong for Europe to agree to American dictates and to condone killing innocent Serbs for the sake of enforcing human rights. Tretiakov's editorials, always highly regarded in Russian political discourse, are an indication that centrist Russian opinion was shocked by the unanimity of Europe and the United States. He couched his criticism by claiming a moral high ground. He blamed the West for not observing human rights. Yet the logic of his reasoning suggested that, in principle, it was proper to defend human rights, which implied in turn that Russian defenders of NATO's action had a valid point.

Anti-American hysteria was manipulated by political forces that wanted to turn the NATO action to their political advantage. The Communist Party felt triumphant for the moment. Russia was on the side of Slavic and Orthodox brothers fighting aggression by NATO in defense of the Muslims. That NATO somehow always defended the enemies of Russia was the implication of this reasoning.

President Yeltsin had to play along with the nationalist hysteria. He had to admit that NATO action was wrong. He used strong epithets and said that Russia would not get involved militarily. That he had to explain whether Russia would or would not get involved suggests that his Communist and nationalist opponents managed to create a situation in which an explanation was necessary. In other words, domestic politics was driving the response to the NATO action.

General Boris Gromov, who has a reputation as a tough patriot, a hero of Communist resistance to Yeltsin in 1993, echoed Yeltsin and the "patriots": "The policy of Russia must be principled and firm. We will not accept NATO in the role of the world's policeman."<sup>6</sup> However, Gromov continued, providing military assistance to Yugoslavia would imply a return to the cold war, which was unacceptable. This political stance was hardly distinguishable from that of Yeltsin: tough rhetoric and no action.

General Lebed was willing to go much further. He proposed in the Federation Council to declare Yugoslavia a zone of Russia's geopolitical interests. Russia was to oppose NATO aggression and provide military assistance to Yugoslavia. According to Lebed, by fighting, Russia would consolidate its dignity and unify

the nation. This option implied confrontation with the West for the sake of domestic spiritual revival and a claim to great power status.

The Communist faction in the Duma took up the cause of brother Slavs and Christians as its own. Fiery speeches were made about the unity of the Slavic and Christian peoples. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov went to meet Milosevic and prepared a clever move: a vote in the Serbian parliament to the effect that Yugoslavia would join Belarus and Russia in a confederation. The message to the West was that in such a case Yugoslavia would be defended by Russian nuclear might. Chair of the Duma Security Committee, a staunch nationalist and anti-Semite, Viktor Ilyukhin proposed that Russia abandon sanctions against Yugoslavia and provide it with military assistance, including sophisticated air defense systems capable of shooting down American aircraft.<sup>7</sup> An article in a Communist paper, "Clinton's Gang Should Face Trial," stated:

All that Russia has to do now is not much actually: it has to abandon sanctions against Yugoslavia and to dispatch there immediately the required number of anti-aircraft missiles to fight NATO aircraft. When these would have begun shooting them down by dozens, the arrogance of the NATO politicians and generals would have quickly subsided and the bombings would have stopped.<sup>8</sup>

The Communists tried to whip up anti-Western hysteria and to blacken Yeltsin "the friend of Bill" by association. The friends of the West in Russia, the so-called democrats, had already been discredited because of their failed economic policies; the United States was signaling that it did not care about Russian objections; and Yeltsin was mumbling condemnation but ruling out any military action on behalf of the Serbs. This was the situation in April.

The Communists managed to put Yeltsin on the defensive. He could not comfortably explain why Russia was inactive when its "brothers" were being systematically bombed. The only explanation was Russia's weakness, which the opposition claimed was the result of Yeltsin's pro-Western policy. The salvation for Russia, so the argument went, was not to seek favors from the West, not to kowtow to NATO, not to swallow insults, but to show that it still was a power to be reckoned with. Russia had to show to the world that no European problem could be resolved without her. This was the official line of the Russian president, echoed in stronger terms by the Communists and nationalists.

In trying to explain why Russian nationalists were so enthusiastic about defending Serbia from what was called "American aggression," it is useful to turn to the thoughts of Alexander Dugin, one of the staunchest nationalists in Russia, a writer whom many have called an ideologue of Russian fascism. For Dugin, Serbia was a heroic nation worthy of emulation. It was a country that defied NATO and the United States, a country that despite the overwhelming might of the West preferred to stand up defiantly for its orthodoxy, identity, and integrity. Fighting the Muslims, it was fighting a proxy of the real enemy, the United States.<sup>9</sup> For people such as Dugin, fighting the West for Serbia was Russia's destiny. It was its way into salvation out of the slavery to which the current Russian regime was leading the country. It was in a noble fight that the Serbs and the Russians would discover their true destiny.

NATO became a symbol of the enemy for Russian nationalists. In their periodicals and Web pages, they talked about uniting all true Russians for a holy war against NATO and the West: "With us are all those who preserve memory about the last war [World War II]. On the side of the enemy is the Jew Albright in the role of a Himmler of the Serbian Holocaust." What should be done upon victory, argued the author of that article, was to deport from Russia all those who are collaborationists of the West.<sup>10</sup>

Some hotheads went even further, especially in an uncensored Internet discussion. They argued that Russia should lead the world in a noble fight against American dictatorship. It should unite Belarus, Yugoslavia, Iraq, China, and other countries in a worldwide movement against the United States, even if it should lead to world war three. Better now than later, while Russia still had credible nuclear forces. The traitor Yeltsin had to be impeached and dismissed, and Primakov had to take his place as acting president.<sup>11</sup> This agenda, so eloquently expressed, made it clear that a nationalist hysteria, if left unchecked, could sweep Yeltsin from power.

### **The Voices of Reason**

The voices of reason were few and mostly silent. When television stations reported from Belgrade day after day about NATO bombing raids and destroyed bridges, hospitals, and apartment buildings, showing hundreds of thousands of refugees supposedly on the run because of NATO bombing, it was hard to defend NATO actions in Russia. Nevertheless, some did. Little by little their voices began to be heard.

NTV, a major independent television network controlled by certain oligarchs, began showing the plight of Albanian Kosovars and airing stories about Serbian atrocities. This was totally new to the Russian audience. The impact was profound but not noticed in the West. For the Russian public, the images of ethnic wars were all too familiar, conjuring memories of the Chechnya war, the Abkhazia war, the Transdnestr war, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The stories of atrocities generated a feeling of *déjà vu* and noninvolvement. Russia had tried to handle ethnic conflicts several times in recent years and each time had reaped only losses.

This response was voiced by the governor of Samara province, Konstantin Titov, who argued that an ethnic conflict between Albanian Kosovars who were Muslim, and Serbs who were Christian Orthodox, had incited some hot-headed Russian nationalists to demand that Russia support its Christian Slav brothers. Those irresponsible people, argued Titov, forgot that Russia had a sizable Muslim minority among its citizens. If Russia took the cause of one side in a religious and ethnic conflict, this could have polarized Russia herself and "brought the conflict onto the territory of Russia."<sup>12</sup>

Other authors also picked up the line of reasoning that Russia's national interests were poorly served by embracing the cause of Milosovic in his vain attempts to keep a rebellious Muslim province. In a full-page article in *Nezavisimaya*, one jurist argued that the crisis in Kosovo was merely the next stage in the disintegration of Yugoslavia that had begun ten years earlier. Milosovic was the major cul-



culprit in the disintegration, as he had consistently opted for forcible solutions in inter-ethnic relations, with the same negative outcomes. For that author, Milosevic was no more than a bankrupt Communist strongman trying to build his rule on hatred and ethnic cleansing. It was absurd to argue, he continued, as many Russian nationalists did, that Russia had to defend Orthodox Christians in Yugoslavia. Why only Orthodox Christians? he asked. The Southern Slavs who had inhabited the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia were a mix of peoples and religions. The Slovenes and Croats were Slavs but Catholics; the Bosnians were ethnic Slavs but Muslims; the Kosovars were not Slavs and Muslims; and the Romanian minority were non-Slavs but Christian Orthodox. Why would Russia choose to support only one of these groups over all others? How would that serve the cause of peace and Russia's national interest? In an outright defense of NATO, the author wrote:

In order to stop the arrogant dictator, and to defend the peoples of Yugoslavia and of the surrounding states from the coming humanitarian disaster, the international community was compelled to undertake this unpopular but necessary step—forceful action to compel the Yugoslav dictator to accept peace.<sup>13</sup>

Refuting the nationalists' arguments one by one, that observer argued that the entire world knew from the very beginning that NATO's action was not aggression, because NATO had no war aims other than the establishment of peace. NATO was not destroying Yugoslavia; Milosevic was doing so by his ruthless rule and ethnic cleansing. Russia's national interest was poorly served by opposing the international community once again:

Without any need, Russia once again has put itself in opposition to the community of developed nations. This community has begun to get used to such extravagant tricks. And therefore it is not surprising that it has begun making decisions including those about the peacekeeping force in Kosovo without taking into account our interests.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the author explicitly blamed Russia's leaders for unilateral actions that generated Western distrust.

Andrey Kozyrev, former foreign minister and an architect of partnership with the Western powers, expressed the view that anti-Americanism was being used to shift the national attention away from misery and corruption:

The Russian government has managed in the last three or four years to restore a Soviet world outlook, where on the one side there is Moscow and on the other, all the democratic countries. . . . We are re-creating an international situation in which nobody asks anymore if there is corruption or not, if the economy is managed in qualified manner or not. . . . Now the talk is already about building up a pro-war camp against imperialism.<sup>15</sup>

The Anti-Western clamor played out primarily in the media; the majority of the Russian people showed remarkable indifference. They had more prosaic concerns on their mind. Opinion polls demonstrated that most Russians condemned NATO bombing by a large margin, but when asked if Russia should send troops to help Slavic brothers, the vast majority were opposed. The Russian public supported the Serbs as long as it did not cost them anything.

There were no genuine, spontaneous anti-American demonstrations or protests. According to well-informed sources, the violence at the American embassy was orchestrated and staged by the Security Services. On campuses that I visited, American speakers and guests were greeted with applause and welcomes unchanged from previous times. American films were just as popular as before, and "Made in USA" remained the sign of the most sought-after commodities. The nationalists and the Communists managed to create a situation canceling cooperation with NATO, but by the beginning of May had fallen short of driving the president and the country into a defiant confrontation with NATO.

### **Defiant Confrontation: Pros and Cons**

Who would have benefited the most from a confrontation with NATO over Serbia and Kosovo? Who in the Russian political landscape would have lost the most had it happened? The answer to these questions is obvious: the Communists and nationalists of various stripes would have benefited, and Yeltsin would have lost had the course of confrontation with NATO been pursued further. On the other hand, a confrontation with NATO could have created a situation of national emergency, which could have been used as a pretext to ban the Communist Party, thus effectively canceling elections scheduled for December 1999.

Who was the architect of the dash to Pristina airport? Was this a part of the game of the General Staff to create a situation that Yeltsin would have been unable to back out of? Was Yeltsin involved, or was it a *fait accompli* presented to him? Konstantin Titov, governor of the Samara province and one of the leaders of the "Voice of Russia" electoral bloc, expressed the views of many when he wrote,

Up to this very day it is not clear who and how had adopted the decision on shifting two hundred Russian peace-keepers to Kosovo from Bosnia if even the Russian foreign minister was not informed about it.<sup>16</sup>

Much has been and will be written about the deployment of Russian paratroopers to Pristina airport. For the purposes of this discussion on Russia's relations with NATO, it is crucial to interpret the meaning of this incident for domestic Russian politics. Let us start with the assumption that Russian paratroopers stationed in Bosnia would not have dared to march to Pristina on their own. They had orders from very high authority. Did this authority involve the commander-in-chief?

### **General Staff Plan**

The Russian General Staff worked out a plan for military seizure of a part of Kosovo, creating facts on the ground that NATO would have to live with or face a military confrontation. In an intriguing interview for a Russian newspaper, General Leonid Ivashov, one of the key planners of the operation, admitted as much. The main impetus to action, according to Ivashov, was the refusal of the NATO powers to grant Russia a military zone of its own. The arguments presented to the president were that Russia could not afford to be seen as submitting to NATO

demands. "If we had retreated, the world would have taken it as a serious defeat of Russia. Our positions in Europe would have been undermined."

The generals argued that NATO interpreted diplomatic agreements in its favor and presented the entry of NATO troops as victory, wherein the role of the Russians was to deliver Milosovic. Ivashov continued: "They lied to us. They treated us as a fifth-rate power."<sup>17</sup> According to Ivashov, it was President Yeltsin who, after extensive reports by Minister of Defense Sergeev and Foreign Affairs Minister Ivanov gave orders to launch the operation. Either Ivanov lied in saying that he knew nothing about the operation, or more likely, this "lack of knowledge" was a posture adopted to gain time for the unfolding of the operation.

As to the action's wisdom and risks, Ivashov responded: "I can tell you only this: all political and military consequences were calculated in greatest detail. Detachments to reinforce this battalion were kept in full readiness, but this turned out to be not necessary." To the question about the reported refusal of Hungary to grant air space, Ivashov answered: "Requests which we did in this regard, this was plan B. I repeat: everything was calculated. And international law was on our side."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the plan was that a small contingent from Bosnia would seize the airport, and military aircraft would bring in a much more sizable force. This is definitely the style of the Russian General Staff. The seizure of Kabul in 1979 followed the same script.

A Russian contingent consisting of 171 soldiers and officers in 55 vehicles made the 650 kilometers drive from Bosnia to Kosovo in ten hours. This suggests that there were only three men per vehicle. Obviously the plan was based on a speedy arrival of men flown over from Russia to fill the vehicles and establish a Russian presence in Kosovo before NATO troops arrived. As one member of the Russian force put it: "After the arrival of the rearguard column from Bosnia, reception of aircraft with the main contingent of paratroopers from Russia would be assured. That was the reason for starting the whole thing."<sup>19</sup>

Another interesting detail is that the commander of the battalion, General Viktor Zavarzin, was traveling in civilian clothes, in a diplomatic car with air conditioning. This was clearly a sign that if something went wrong they could say that a rogue force led by junior officers undertook the action on its own. The first thing the battalion did on arriving at the airport was to establish satellite communications with Moscow, and the first message that came from Moscow was a promotion in rank for General Zavarzin by Yeltsin.<sup>20</sup> This puts to rest the question of whether Yeltsin knew about the operation. He knew, and he let it go forward. The plan "envisioned Russian occupation of the Northern and industrial sectors of Kosovo populated primarily by the Serbs."<sup>21</sup>

The large force would have created a Russian zone in Kosovo defying NATO to confront Russian troops. The calculation must have been that NATO, divided over the escalation of the conflict, would have avoided a confrontation, especially since the pay-off was relatively cheap—a Russian zone in Kosovo. Having a Russian zone would have enabled the Serbs to retain a foothold in Kosovo, and any trouble in that province would have been to their advantage. It would have been grinding down NATO resolve to remain there under conditions of low-inten-

sity warfare. From the Serbs' point of view, the Russians simply replaced them in Kosovo, and NATO could not touch them. It was safe to abandon Kosovo because the Russian presence would keep it safe for Serbia.

If the plan had worked, Russia would have triumphed in a near-confrontation with NATO, having rescued Serbia from a humiliating defeat, established a foothold in the Balkans, and reaffirmed its role as a world power. In terms of foreign policy, Yeltsin would have signaled to the West that Russia could not be bullied or given orders.

Why then was the mission that had promised so many benefits aborted?

### **Mission Aborted**

The General Staff's plan was abandoned in midstream. The "Pristina heroes" became an abandoned battalion without water, food, or political support. Usually in Western sources the reason given is that Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria declined a Russian request for air space to fly over their territories. This was not the reason for the lack of flights. Had the decision been made in Moscow to defy NATO, it certainly would have meant readiness to defy Hungary or Romania. Let them dare to shoot down a Russian military aircraft. No. The reinforcements never came because someone at the very top pulled the plug when the operation was already unfolding. Who?

The answer to this question must be sought in Russian domestic politics. In the Russian political context, the standard-bearer of Slavic and Orthodox identity is the Communist Party. By embracing a nationalist cause, President Yeltsin would have acted in the interests of his political opponents. He would have had to support the troops as heroes and saviors of brother Slavs. It would have been an inappropriate moment to ban the Communist Party. In terms of domestic Russian politics, the General Staff plan worked against Yeltsin. There are signs that he understood early on that the nationalist hysteria ran counter to his interests.

Yeltsin let the General Staff go ahead, thus benefiting from anti-NATO sentiment by posing as a leader who could stand up to NATO as long as there were no perils to his power. It is also plausible that Yeltsin let himself be persuaded that seizing a piece of Kosovo would play well domestically and chose to support the move in its initial phase. If things had gone well, he could have emerged as a leader who had stood up to NATO aggression and restored great power status to Russia. If things went badly, that would have created new opportunities.

If British and Russian troops had clashed over the airport, Yeltsin could have immediately declared a state of emergency and blamed the General Staff and the Communists for bringing the world to the brink of world war three. He could have purged the General Staff of undesirable elements and banned the Communist Party, posing as the savior of Serbia, the savior of peace, and of Russia's honor. If Yeltsin had achieved all of those goals, he would have fulfilled his political agenda for 1999. As it is, he still has not come up with a credible strategy to ban the opposition, usurp the nationalist mantle, or guarantee the favorable outcome of the elections. In other words, the successful playing out of the brink-of-war scenario would have delivered to Yeltsin everything he needed and has yet to achieve.

It was clear to attentive observers that the appointment of Chernomyrdin as a special envoy was a sign that Yeltsin was seeking an accommodation with the West. It was a sign that he feared the political consequences of standing up to NATO policy, which could strengthen the General Staff in national foreign policy and strengthen anti-Western “patriotic” (Communist) forces. Chernomyrdin consented to most of the conditions of NATO, having earned scorn for himself and Yeltsin in Russia among the General Staff and the Communist-nationalist opposition.

### **The Fallout**

The agreements in Helsinki and Cologne seemed to quiet the situation. Yeltsin was shaking hands with the Western leaders once again at the officially renamed G-8 meeting, and a Russian contingent was incorporated into the NATO force. The Russians did not get a separate sector, and NATO prevailed in all of its major objectives. Yet in terms of Russian domestic politics, the Kosovo crisis has left some long-lasting scars.

After the “heroes of Pristina” were essentially abandoned, after the Russian sector in Kosovo failed to materialize and NATO emerged triumphant, the soldiers felt betrayed once again. According to the well-known perception of the events of 1991 in Russia, the then State Extraordinary Committee betrayed the army by first giving orders to intervene in the political struggle and then abandoning it to reap the scorn of Muscovites.

Likewise in 1993, Yeltsin forced the generals to shoot at the parliament and betrayed them afterward. Pristina will be remembered among the Russian military as the third betrayal of the military. Their scorn for Yeltsin has strengthened considerably. Their reasoning is that Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin have deprived Russia of what could have been a major victory. That the Kremlin betrayed the soldiers once again is perhaps the most important consequence of the incident for Yeltsin. His bad relations with the army worsened as a result. Perhaps that is why he is seeking to rely on the Federal Security Service to stay in power in the aftermath of the Kosovo debacle.

When the storm was over, many observers began asking what Russia had gained as a result of the march to Pristina. A right to station three thousand men under NATO command, at a cost of \$60 million a year was not generating much enthusiasm. Titov argued that Russia was too poor and could not afford such expenses. “Russia cannot afford to pay its own veterans, pensioners and teachers. Why should it spend that money on Serbia?”<sup>22</sup>

One of the analysts described the Pristina dash as adventurism of the generals:

Just doing it without any kind of an international mandate, not providing for themselves even a trivial . . . pretext, not thinking about the consequences, setting up the soldiers as targets of the guerrillas, the Generals seized a piece of territory and demanded the president guarantee to them the right to dispose of that piece without any control.<sup>23</sup>

That author concluded that “This thoughtless and reckless move by the generals is going to have long-lasting and damaging consequences for Russia.”

Critics became more numerous after the crisis passed. Konstantin Borovoy a

Duma member, chair of the party of economic freedom, and a well-known entrepreneur—suggested that the entire Russian policy in the Kosovo crisis was a result of an ill-conceived plan to enhance the Russian role in the world. Borovoy claims that well before the NATO war on Serbia, the Russian General Staff began delivering arms to Serbia “almost out in the open,” violating the UN embargo. The General Staff was also preparing an official agreement on delivery of arms in the case of “NATO aggression.” Russian instructors were sent to Serbia, and the General Staff began to develop contingency plans. In other words, the dash to Pristina was only the tip of an iceberg, part of a longer and larger relationship aimed at undermining NATO. Borovoy sees all of this as the doing of Primakov and his Communist friends, part of a larger plan to build an anti-NATO coalition of states, which backfired and led to the opposite result: The role of NATO was enhanced and that of Russia diminished.<sup>24</sup>

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***“Critics openly accuse Yeltsin’s regime of having betrayed Serbia and of having betrayed Russian national interests.”***

What concerned most moderate Russian observers in the wake of the crisis was that the dash to Pristina put Russia in the position of having to choose “whether to proceed with the rest of the world or support a Balkan dictator from whom his own people are turning away.” One writer explained the Russian dilemma:

The problem is not only that the generals have put the chief of diplomacy of their own country in an idiotic situation, because he knew nothing of their plans. Much more serious is that the West and Russia found themselves on the brink of a confrontation, as NATO acknowledged that it had considered forcible counteraction to the Russian blitzkrieg.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, that article continued, Russians had to be grateful to NATO soldiers, who had not left the Russian troops alone with the Kosovar liberation army. The implication was that if NATO wanted to create trouble for the Russians it could have done so, but it did not. Instead, it showed genuine good will, despite Russia’s unilateral action.

In the wake of the Kosovo war, Russia officially views NATO not as a partner but as potentially a hostile power. Any new differences can easily escalate to a dangerous level of confrontation. The summer military exercises—with long-range aircraft moving across the Arctic toward the United States—demonstrated the persistence of the General Staff’s Soviet thinking. NATO and the United States are considered potential adversaries.

The military establishment views Yeltsin as a person who let them proceed toward a military victory and then betrayed them in midstream. Critics openly accuse Yeltsin’s regime of having betrayed Serbia and of having betrayed Russian national interests by obediently fulfilling NATO demands in order to obtain

money from the IMF. Discussing the “lessons of the war” in a nationalist paper, one analyst wrote that Russia simply sold out for money. Yeltsin’s policy was nothing short of appeasement of NATO. Russia’s role was to push through NATO interests among Russia’s former allies. The author argued that the war was a rehearsal for a strike against Russia and that

no amount of treason, and subservience before America would suffice for Russia to buy its own security. One day an air armada of NATO planes will thrust itself into our sky.<sup>27</sup>

The only weapon that could work against superior NATO forces, the author said, would be terrorism, explosions in cafes, and dead bodies of Americans on their own territory.

The Kosovo war has stimulated debate in Russia on national priorities, military capabilities, and possible responses to Western challenge. Russia had to acknowledge that its military capabilities were much reduced and that its economy did not allow for a quick and effective military restructuring in response to new perceptions of the national interest after Kosovo. As one observer noted:

the August 1998 default made plans for a military build-up unrealistic. In the middle of last year it became clear that the rock bottom point has not been reached yet, economic growth is a thing of the distant future, there are no means for the reform (better to say regulated contraction) of defense industries, [and] any serious increase of military spending is pushed away by several years.<sup>28</sup>

The only thing for Russia to do, the article concluded, is to realize that its priority was not in concentrating on nuclear weapons but on building an effective, highly modern, small army.

### Conclusion

I now want to make some observations on Russian domestic politics. The nationalists and the Communists have managed, for the first time since 1991, to mobilize public opinion favorable to their point of view, thus effectively altering the national agenda from issues of poverty, corruption, and economic crisis to national dignity, Western imperialism, and external threat to Russia. This undoubtedly is their great achievement. Nationalist forces have seen that nationalist, anti-Western hysteria could be a powerful vehicle for mass mobilization, and they are likely to remember to use that tool again. Although their gains are temporary and the national agenda has begun to refocus on domestic economic concerns, a major shift has occurred. It is not possible in the current Russian political climate to advocate Russia’s entry into NATO. Such a stance, possible in 1996, now is suicidal for a Russian politician.

Western critics of NATO expansion could argue that NATO expansion was wrong because it alienated Russia, isolated the democrats, and strengthened the nationalists and the Communists.<sup>29</sup> In fact, such reasoning blames the wrong party. The policies of President Yeltsin have more to do with the outcome of debate in Russia on NATO expansion than NATO expansion itself.

Yeltsin’s policy consistently has been one step forward, two steps backward,

as he tried to maneuver between a pro-Western course of reform and hard-line neo-communism. He chose to distance himself from NATO and yet to conclude Partnership for Peace; to embrace nationalist rhetoric in 1997 and yet come to a deal over inclusion of three new NATO members. Cooperation with NATO always went hand in hand with appeasement of Communists and nationalists. By this strategy Yeltsin sought to keep the nationalists at bay and at the same time to keep in the good graces of his Western partners.

For a while, he was successful. Clinton's administration has regarded his team in power as indispensable, as a best defense against possible Communist resurgence. However, by putting on the nationalist mantle himself, by refusing to explain that partnership with NATO was in Russia's national interests, and by trying too hard to placate the General Staff, Yeltsin became their hostage without realizing it. Just as in economic reform he had become the hostage of corrupt tycoons, manipulators, and intriguers, in foreign policy Yeltsin became a hostage of the General Staff and the Communist-nationalist opposition.

Yeltsin tried to please everybody. He tried to please the nationalists by calling NATO's action in Kosovo an aggression, but to keep his distance from their aims by saying that Russia would not be dragged into war. He first let the General Staff stage the Pristina dash, and then pulled the plug when the operation was in motion. He tried to score points as a nationalist but to keep the situation under control. He may have been trying to create a situation that could be used to ban the Communist Party as the party guilty of bringing Russia to the brink of war.

Yeltsin was maneuvering between contradictory policies. He said as much himself in July 1999—that Russia would not quarrel with NATO too much, but would not be too friendly either. So successful with his maneuvers in the past, Yeltsin this time, it seems, has reaped a failure that may ruin him or his hold on power. The army now hates Yeltsin with an intensity that can be compared only to 1993. Many generals regard his deal on Kosovo as a "Balkan Munich."

Second, the Russian political establishment is likely to be more assertive in the months to come. That the West and NATO imposed a political settlement on Yugoslavia and Russia will be remembered. In any future problem the Russian General Staff and Russian nationalist forces would demand a tough stand against NATO.

Third, zealots such as Dugin and the newspaper *Zavtra* are not as dangerous as the rise of a so-called moderate nationalist leadership as an alternative to the return of the Communists. Yeltsin's regime may be replaced not by a Ziuganov, but by forces led by Primakov, Luzhkov, and Lebed, all of whom advocate a tough response to NATO. These people are for a market economy but also have threatened Latvia (Luzhkov), advocated military assistance to Serbia (Lebed), and tried to build an anti-NATO alliance (Primakov).

Fourth, dreams of the early 1990s that Russia will be quickly integrated into the Western democratic club of nations must be cast aside as premature. Russia has not found itself yet. It is not ready to join the West. The legacy of the Soviet past has turned out to be too strong. The old mental stereotypes still guide the vision of most of her politicians. Russia still is in the grip of its past.



## NOTES

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