

POLITICO

May 27, 2014

[Why, oh why, didn't we listen to the Eastern Europeans?](#)

by Edward Lucas

Eastern Europe is not a geographical expression. It is a collection of worries. During the Cold War, it comprised the captive nations of the Soviet empire. Some of them resented the “eastern” tag (Prague, the Czechoslovak capital, is hundreds of miles west of “Western” capitals such as Helsinki, Vienna or Athens). Some felt abandoned after the West acceded to the surrender of Eastern Europe at Yalta and did nothing to counter the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

When the Berlin Wall came down, the worries changed. How quickly would “new Europe” integrate into “old Europe”? Would democracy take root and capitalism flourish? Could the former Soviet bloc nations ever catch up with the luckier half of the continent?

Those worries about being left behind abated after the 2008 financial crisis. First, because it was clear that the “transition economies” of the “east” had weathered the storm rather well: Poland, the largest of them, was the only country in the European Union that did not experience a recession at all. And, second, because it was clear that the biggest problems were elsewhere: in Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Cyprus.

But now there are new concerns – verging from mere worries to outright fears of a new generation of abandonment by the West provoked by Russia’s land-grab in Ukraine and the Western weakness it has exposed. The old assumptions of NATO and EU solidarity, in the eyes of the countries most at risk, are being tested as never before. Some are privately wondering about new regional security relationships and arrangements to deal with the Russian threat. The existing Nordic defense cooperation, Nordefco, is gaining weight; it includes Sweden and Finland which are not NATO members. The Baltic states and Poland are eyeing it closely, and it also enjoys American and British backing. Russia by contrast regards this with deep disfavor. [A recent commentary published by RIA Novosti](#), an official Kremlin news agency, said that NATO’s ties with Sweden and Finland were part of a planned “Western military blockade of the entire western frontier of Russia.”

The new regional arrangements are controversial inside NATO, because they imply a failure of the existing system. Turkey objects fiercely to any NATO involvement with countries outside the alliance, fearing that it would set a precedent for NATO cooperation with Israel. That has jinxed

experiments such as trying to get Swedish and Finnish warplanes involved in policing the airspace of Iceland, a defenseless NATO member. Any new arrangements are best sold as a complement to NATO — but in the background, the countries involved appear to realize that they may have to be a supplement, or in the worst case even a substitute.

The countries of the region between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea have never been sanguine about Russia. Even during the Yeltsin era in the 1990s, when the Kremlin was ostensibly a friend and partner for the United States and Western Europe, these countries fretted. They worried about Russia's use of gas and oil pipelines to create patronage and apply pressure. They noted the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle tricks of Russian diplomacy. They noticed that Russian spies were numerous, active and all too effective.

Western countries tended to patronize and ignore the easterners. Russia was nothing like the threat of the Soviet Union, or so went the line in Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin and Washington. It was silly to pretend otherwise. The West thought the east Europeans — particularly the Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles and Czechs — were traumatized by their historical experience and prone to scaremongering.



That continued during much of the Putin era. Europe's territorial defense as an issue was not just a non-subject; it was a career-killer. The conventional wisdom crystallized around the idea that Russia was not and would not be a threat. Anyone who thought differently in officialdom, especially in the foreign-policy, security, intelligence and military worlds, was wise to keep silent. Even as Russia became steadily more authoritarian and hostile, the West doubled down on its Russia policy. Even as Vladimir Putin adopted a more confrontational stance, NATO and the

EU insisted that all was well and the answer to Russian snarls and sneers was yet more dialogue and integration, not confrontation or deterrence.

American policymakers failed to see that the planned missile-defense installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, though directed against a putative Iranian threat, were of vital importance as a symbol of continuing American commitment to the region. When the Obama administration cancelled those plans — clumsily and abruptly on the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 — it seemed not to realize that the “reset” of relations with Russia needed to be coupled with a big dose of reassurance to its most loyal European allies. It has been struggling to catch up ever since.

Ignoring the east Europeans was a mistake not only in a narrow tactical sense (treating allies brusquely does not encourage them to spill blood and treasure for you in future). It was also a mistake because America could have learned something from them. Western policy-makers are now reluctantly facing up to the fact that the people who knew the Russians best, those scaremongering Eastern Europeans, have been right about them all along. Russia has sent its military spending soaring — nearly doubling it in real terms in ten years. The economy, for all its corruption, bottlenecks and narrow base on natural-resources, has proved remarkably resilient. Russia has bought allies and influence in the West, and promoted economic interdependence, to the point that implementing serious sanctions is difficult.

That is a headache for the Westerners. It is a nightmare for the east Europeans — the countries for whom Russia is an immediate neighbor and, as they see it, an existential threat. Foremost among these are the Poles and the Estonians — Europe’s new über-hawks. They are among a handful of NATO countries that spend the 2 percent of GDP on defense that the alliance mandates. They have serious military capabilities — Poland has the largest army in the region, and Estonia has renowned prowess in cyber-security and intelligence.

Their analysis of the Putin regime’s intention is bleak, as articulated by figures such as Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Estonia’s president, and Radoslaw Sikorski, the foreign minister of Poland. Repression and aggression form a vicious circle. Putin distracts public opinion from the failure of his regime to deliver modern public services, decent infrastructure and sustainable growth, by adventurism abroad. He is driven by a deep sense of injustice — both about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the West’s behavior since. He senses weakness in the EU and NATO and sees the cost of exploiting it as low.

Challenging Ukraine’s territorial integrity proved surprisingly easy. The West has accepted the annexation of Crimea, despite the multiple breaches of international law and international human-rights standards involved. Religious freedoms, the rights of the Crimean Tatars, and other supposedly hallowed principles of the post-1991 European security order have been shredded — with a Western response strong on symbolism and short on substance. The lesson for the Kremlin is that the West is not prepared to accept serious economic pain, for example by cancelling defense orders with Russia (France is building two warships) or by cutting off Russian companies from international capital markets in London and New York.

This is also a chilling lesson outside Poland and Estonia. Latvians and Lithuanians in particular have similar historical memories, of annexation, deportation and repression. But their governments are far weaker than those in Tallinn and Warsaw. Latvia and Lithuania spend barely one percent of GDP on defense. Their economies are weaker than Estonia's, and so are their polities. The media in both countries is under heavy Russian pressure. Latvia's non-citizens, 280,000 Soviet-era migrants stranded when the USSR collapsed, are apathetic at best about their new home, and at worst resentful. That offers plenty of scope for Kremlin information-warfare and provocations. (Estonia's non-citizens are far smaller in number.)

Lithuania has a different problem: a resentful and alienated Polish minority, which is in alliance with the small local pro-Kremlin Russian population. Lithuanian nationalist rhetoric treats the local Polish-speakers as Polonised Lithuanians who must be won back to their national traditions and culture. Unsurprisingly, this goes down badly with many local Poles.

A further vulnerability for both Poland and Lithuania is the Kaliningrad exclave, a heavily militarized region of Russia (part of the old German East Prussia). Military planners worry that the narrow 60-mile Polish-Lithuanian border could easily be severed by a joint operation from Kaliningrad and Belarus (which is in a close military alliance with Russia). That would cut the Baltic states off from their NATO allies. Worse, it could cost Poland dearly: current NATO plans are for Poland to reinforce the Baltic states in a crisis, pending reinforcement of Poland by other NATO countries. For now at least, Poland is ready to believe that this help will come.

Move south and the picture becomes still bleaker. Czech, Slovak and Hungarian government leaders simply do not share the threat perception of their Polish and Baltic colleagues. They have no desire to increase defense spending (at or below one percent in all three countries). They do not wish to bear the economic pain of sanctions (which Poland and the Baltic states are willing to do). They see Russia primarily as a business opportunity. Murky business-political alliances with Russian involvement are a deep and troubling feature of Czech public life. Hungary is buying a new nuclear power station from Russia.

Together with Austria and Bulgaria, Hungary is also supporting a proposed Russian-backed gas pipeline called South Stream. This would reduce their dependence on unreliable transit flows across Ukraine. But it would do nothing to diversify Europe's overall dependence on Russian energy. The European Commission has flatly instructed Bulgaria that the pipeline – owned and controlled by Gazprom – breaches European rules. Bulgaria says flatly that it does not agree.

The real battlegrounds for European security are not in Ukraine. They are the EU's ability to set rules that Gazprom doesn't like, and NATO's credibility in defending its weakest members. So far, President Putin believes that he can apply enough political pressure, combined with bluff, subterfuge and saber-rattling, to undermine both. Europe's new front-line states will be the first to pay if he is right, and their options look uncomfortably limited.

Edward Lucas is the author of The New Cold War (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008). A revised and updated edition is to be published shortly.

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