

**Discourse on NATO In Russia**

**During the Kosovo War.**

**By**

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

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In contemporary Russia views on NATO define one's political philosophy and one's view of Russia vis-à-vis the West generally. These attitudes are inseparably intertwined with the domestic Russian politics and struggle for power. According to conventional wisdom today Russia views NATO with hostility.

Irreparable damage has been done to Russian perception of NATO through the three policies NATO had undertaken in 1999,

1. Expansion of NATO by way of including the three new members;
2. Modernization of American high-tech weaponry and most importantly
3. The bombing campaign in Serbia.

No doubt these policies have subjected Russian perceptions to severe strain and may in fact have contributed to the anti-American hysteria prevalent in Russia during the bombing campaign. However, this approach to NATO-Russia relations focuses on what the West has done and by implication on what the West has done wrong that ended up in alienating the benevolent Russians. This approach necessarily would lead its proponents to searching what the West should do right to compensate for the anti-Russian mistakes of the past year.

By far a more productive approach to explaining the Russian-NATO stormy relations over the past year is to view them in the context of Russian domestic politics. The key assumption here is that whatever Russian actors did vis-à-vis the West and NATO was a reflection of Russian domestic priorities.

Furthermore President Yeltsyn has changed his tune in regard to NATO at least three times likewise in response to his political struggles over 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\* summit. The purpose

therefore is to untangle this web of contradictory policies and statements and to explain the meaning of the domestic context of Russian policy to NATO.

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

When the ruble collapsed in August 1998, with it collapsed the faith in the Western style economic reform among the Russian general public. This simple fact has not quite yet been appreciated in the US. The August debacle has wiped out the confidence among the emerging middle classes that life were getting better. It hurt most the very classes, which had believed that pro-western Russian reform would eventually lead Russia to prosperity and democracy. The ruble collapse had discredited the government of Kirienko and with it the entire group of the so-called young reformers Gaidar, Nemtsov, and Chubais, whom Larry Summers had called the dream team of reformers.

17 August 1998 has marked the passing of an era, an era of belief among the Russian middle class that market reform, democracy and prosperity were a part of the same deal. Among the people in their thirties, engaged in a variety of business ventures the West, the USA, NATO and market economy were positive notions. They did not fear NATO and they welcomed the 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 clearly the up and coming political force that most definitely was instrumental in voting for Yeltsyn in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

Already in the run-up to the August disaster liberal politicians like Grigorii Yavlinsky and his Yabloko party, the steadfast democratic critics of the Yeltsyn 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 were left unnoticed both in Russia and in the West. Western banks were enthusiastic about Russian high yield GKO market. Clinton's administration was happy with Yeltsyn 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 bills. Reformers were discredited and with them the pro-Western course in economy. Conditions were ripe for the forces to emerge who had been known for reserved if not outright hostile policy in regard to the NATO.

Yevgenii Primakov's appointment was a reflection of this new climate in the country. Primakov had a reputation of a tough foreign minister that stood up for Russia's perceived rights as a superpower. He had earned himself the applause of the

Communists and the nationalist-democrats like mayor of Moscow Yurii Luzhkov on numerous occasions. The appointment of Primakov was an admission by Yeltsyn that the pro-western course was discredited. The question was only to what extent the anti-western course would prevail, and how far Russia would go along this path.

Primakov turned out to be a virtuoso of compromise. He did not make any rough moves. He kept the Communists and the Nationalists and the Democrats content by simply holding on tight and preventing the economy from spiraling downwards. 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 IMF had already created an atmosphere that the West was controlling Russian economy with unceasing demands. The West was offering loans and then imposing controls. As a result, Russia was reduced to dependence on Western loans and investments, which were not forthcoming.

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

1996 -1998. In order to move forward, Russia needed to clip the influence of the oligarchs and that was Primakov's priority.

He made his move in January 1999 and it looked for the moment that Berezovskys and Chubais and Potanins were in jeopardy. Investigations were open against major companies. Banks were allowed to go insolvent. Public debate was launched on the plausibility of admitting Western banks into Russian domestic market. For the first time in Russian history the Prosecutor General asked the Kremlin to account for state revenue. Domestic concerns, and fight against corruption dominated the national agenda in January and February 1999. Mere three weeks later all 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 Yeltsyn.

**NATO Moves:**

Primakov and Skuratov's attempt at genuine reform of the corrupt system did not find encouragement in Washington. From the very beginning he was not a friend. Chubais's friends and admirers in Washington kept on downgrading him as a neo-Communist, former KGB official whose departure would be welcome and the return of the so-called democrats i.e. Chubais's clan was desirable. Exactly at the time when Primakov and Prosecutor General Yurii Skuratov were launching investigations into abuse,

theft and financial improprieties of the most powerful men in Russia, when they questioned financial dealing of the Kremlin, the NATO decided to force Serbian President Milosevic comply.

The fact is the US did not show support to Primakov and revealed two prongs of its new NATO doctrine signaling to the Russians that their reaction was not very important or relevant. The US would pursue its NATO policy and the Russians would just have to live with it. That was the message to Russian in March 1999.

The first irritant to the Russian hawks was of course the bombing of Iraq at the end of 1998 during the impeachment of President Clinton. It made the Russian General Staff furious. Russia's ally was bombed and Russia was not even notified in advance. Her reaction was irrelevant and Yeltsyn's regime was helpless. This inaction at the turn of the year contributed to the rise of the mood to resist NATO and US next time. Some Western analysts believe that Milosevic calculated his moves taking into account this mood in Moscow. His intransigence increased pushing NATO leaders to a forcible solution.

The three prongs of NATO policy before the Kosovo war were: inclusion of the three new members into the alliance; modernization of the Pentagon's nuclear forces; and expansion of NATO role in the world in the new doctrine. All this was being

discussed with many fanfares in preparation for the Fiftieth anniversary of NATO.

Timing is everything in politics. The timing of these initiatives was bad for Russian domestic politics. The public opinion was already relatively anti-Western as a result of the failure of Western prescribed policies. President Clinton's reputation was tarnished by the impeachment proceedings. His friend Boris 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 the Russians perceived as adding insult to injury.

The three countries in the popular mind used to be Russia's allies. They used to belong to the Warsaw pact. In the popular conscience, the Red army had liberated the three countries from the 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 also remained and expanded at the expense of Russia's allies. This reasoning appealed to many.

The traditional liberal argument that the countries of central Europe were free to join any alliance, and that they were sovereign nations and that Russia had no right dictating its neighbors which alliances to join, this argument was not

very popular. It still hurt national pride that these countries chose to exercise their sovereignty by joining NATO rather than seek alliance with Russia for example. This choice by Poland and Hungary immediately generated arguments that these two countries had been anti-Russian throughout their history. The choice of the Czech republic generated a sense of frustration and betrayal. They too, those whom we had liberated from the Nazis. Few remembered Soviet occupation of 1968 on that occasion.

The admission of the three central European states into NATO even though it had been known to take place and even though the Russians had long ago made peace with this decision, still generated a sense of injured isolation. Russia was alone in Europe. Russia was 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.

Equally ill timed were the debates in the US Congress on the modernization of US forces. 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? As in the past, any attempt to verbalize a calm response to these questions generated vehement denunciation. Arguments that the US 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 US kept on arming when Russia could no longer afford it. A few months later this crystallized in a decision to modernize Russian nuclear forces no matter what the cost.

The third prong in NATO's strategy was that NATO had a right to intervene military beyond the strictly confined area of North Atlantic and the Mediterranean basin for peacekeeping operations. This rather innocuous policy statement was perceived as usurpation of the right to intervene anywhere in the world. The Russian military observers clearly read into this policy change intent by NATO and the US to intervene military anywhere in the world including Russia. Military action in support of humanitarian objectives was a cover-up of an aggression, argued Russian analysts.<sup>1</sup> The NATO and US were striving to acquire world hegemony. This in turn generated a strong impetus to hold on to those international organizations where Russia still had a voice such as the UN.

Not so much the substance of the new NATO policies as the style, the pompous omnipotence, and the demonstration of disregard to Russia's views and the fanfare of the fiftieth NATO anniversary tended to alienate Russia. Almost all 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 had. The war over Kosovo crystallized the tendencies that had already been in the making anyway. It speeded up the unfolding of attitudes and feelings that had been there already. The war made it painfully clear that Russia was no longer the Great Power, and that the West pursued its policy 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, not paid attention to. This was the main source of anti-Americanism. This was the main source of a hysteria that had seized the Russian media.

#### **The Russian Objections:**

What was most striking in the spring of 1999 was the unanimity with which Russians from various walks of life and

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<sup>1</sup> Valentin Romanov, "NATO obkatyvaet novuiu strategiiu." Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie no. 25 2-8

political parties condemned NATO bombing. Opponents of NATO launched several Russian web sites where a vigorous debate raged on the merits of NATO actions and the Russian possible response. Many authors pointed out that the historical record since 1992 did not look favorable to NATO. Russia withdrew from the countries of Eastern Europe, has disbanded the Warsaw pact, has limited its forces, and the NIS have abandoned nuclear weapons, whereas NATO expanded to the East, created new arms programs and violated the sovereignty of a European state.<sup>2</sup>

Russian critics and experts wrote article after article arguing that the entire system of international relations was based on the UN and its authority. Launching the military action without UN sanction, NATO was undermining the very foundation of the world order. Moreover, most international agreements signed in building the world order stipulated the condemnation of a use of force or a threat of a use of force against a sovereign state. Therefore NATO's action could be qualified as an aggression.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly unacceptable for Russia was the principle that NATO could unilaterally decide to use force for whatever reason against any country where human rights were ostensibly violated. Why then not bomb Northern Ireland or Russia itself? Russia's

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<sup>2</sup> "Pochemu eti sobytiia kasaiutsia nas," Russian Young Initiative Group in [www.sinor.ru](http://www.sinor.ru)

national interests as a European power were at stake. They would then start talking about human rights and loss of human life in senseless bombing and the suffering of the civilians. Any attempt to remind them that the bombing started in order to stop human suffering inflicted upon civilians by Serb security forces would trigger a quick response to the effect that Serb security forces were fighting against the separatists and terrorists and the refugees were running away from NATO bombing. Boris Fedorov, the democrats and a reformer, former Minister of Finance was just as adamant. His objections were quite sound at first sight. By bombing Serbia NATO acted unilaterally without decision of the UN Security Council. Therefore he reasoned the NATO acted in violation of the International law.

#### **Information Gap.**

A great discovery for a Western observer was that the Russian media which was supposedly free and fair was completely and totally one-sided in its coverage of Kosovo events. It essentially reproduced Serbian propaganda lines and footage. Refugees were fleeing American bombing. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were the result of NATO bombing. This was repeated day after day. No wonder common people condemned NATO bombing.

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<sup>3</sup> Valentin Romanov, "V stremlenii uiti ot kontroliia OON," Nezavisimaia Gazeta (Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie No. 26 9-15 iulia 1999 p.4

This was an example of the Soviet era manipulation of the media. The difference with the Soviet times was that then people were in the habit of disbelieving official propaganda. Now loads of propaganda lies were perceived as true coverage. Meeting academicians, professors, informed people in April 1999, who I thought had to know what the real situation was, I was astonished to find out that they, for the most part, believed official media coverage and hence condemned NATO. To the question about ethnic cleansing they usually answered that Milosevic was a criminal and that they objected to inhumane bombing of NATO rather than to Milosevic's hold on Kosovo. Lack of explanation as to the rationale of NATO action united for a brief time all them in opposition to NATO. A prominent columnist, editor-in- chief of Nezavisimaya Gazeta Vitalii Tretiakov scolded in his 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" Milosevic become democratic and adhere to the human rights.

Tretiakov went on to argue that it was morally wrong for Europe to agree to American dictates and to condone killing of innocent Serbs for the sake of enforcing human rights.<sup>4</sup> Tretiakov's

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<sup>4</sup> Vitalii Tretiakov, "Eta stareiushchaia khazha i kokotka Evropa," Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Moscow 15 April 1999)

editorials, always highly regarded in Russian political discourse, are an indication that the centrist Russian opinion was shocked by the unanimity of Europe and the US. He couched his criticism by claiming a moral high ground. He blamed the West of not living up to 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 the Russian defenders of NATO's action had a valid point.

Most definitely the anti-American hysteria was manipulated by those political forces that strove 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 of NATO defending the Muslims. NATO somehow always defended the enemies of Russia was the implication of this reasoning.

President Yeltsyn had to play along with the nationalist hysteria. He had to admit that NATO action was wrong. He used strong epithets and even had to say that Russia would not get involved militarily. The fact 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 when he had to explain why not. In other words, domestic politics was driving the response to the NATO action.

General Boris Gromov who has a reputation of a tough "patriot" a hero of Communist resistance to Yeltsyn in 1993 voiced the opinion echoing that of Yeltsyn and of 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>5</sup> However went on Gromov, 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 Yeltsyn's: tough rhetoric and no action.

General Lebed was willing to go much farther. He proposed at 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 Russia in the role of a fighter would consolidate its dignity and unify the nation. This option in other terms implied confrontation with the West for the sake of domestic spiritual revival and a claim to Great Power status abroad.

The Communist faction at the Duma took up the cause of brother Slavs, Christians as its own. Fiery speeches were made about the unity of the Slavic and Christian peoples. The CP leader Gennadii Ziuganov went to meet Milosevic and prepared a clever move, a vote in the Serbian parliament to the effect that

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<sup>5</sup> Moskovskie Novosti 27 April-3 May 1999)

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. The chair of the Duma Security Committee, a staunch nationalist and anti-Semite Viktor Iliukhin proposed that Russia abandon the sanctions regime against Yugoslavia and provide it with military assistance including sophisticated air defense systems capable of shooting down American aircraft.<sup>6</sup> A Communist paper wrote with enthusiasm in an article "Clinton's Gang Should Face Trial"

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>7</sup>

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

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<sup>6</sup> Viktor Iliukhin: Russia Must Re-examine Its International Agreements. Pravda, in [www.pravda.ru](http://www.pravda.ru) June 1999

<sup>7</sup> "Bandu Klintona Pod Sud," Sovetskaya Rossiia," 26 iunia 1999 p.3.

The Communists managed to put Yeltsyn on the defensive. He could not comfortably explain why Russia was inactive when its "brothers" were being systematically bombed into the ground. The only explanation that came to mind was Russia's weakness, which the opposition claimed was the result of Yeltsyn's pro-Western policy. The salvation for Russia, so the argument went was not to seek favors from the West, not to kowtow to the 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 him Serbia was a hero 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 defiantly stand up for its Orthodoxy, Identity, and Integrity. Fighting the Muslims it was fighting a proxy of the real enemy,

the USA.<sup>8</sup> For people like Dugin fighting the West for Serbia was Russia's destiny. It was its way to 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 site 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 [i.e. World War II] on the side of the enemy is the Jew Allbright in the role of a Himmler of the Serbian Holocaust." What needed to be done upon victory argued the author of that article was to deport from Russia all those who are collaborationists of the West.<sup>9</sup>

Some hotheads went even farther, especially in an uncensored Internet discussion. They argued that Russia should lead the world in a noble fight against American dictatorship in the world. It should unite Belarus, Yugoslavia, Iraq, China and other countries in a worldwide movement against the United States, even if that would lead to World War Three. Better now than later while Russia still had credible nuclear forces. Traitor Yeltsyn had to be impeached and dismissed and Primakov

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Dugin, "Era Serbii," p.3-

<sup>9</sup> Vadim Shtepa, "Zapad proidiot so Vtorym Tysiacheleyem," Novaya Pobeda, April 1999. (Moscow)

take over his place as acting President.<sup>10</sup> This agenda so eloquently expressed made it clear that a nationalist hysteria if left unchecked could sweep Yeltsyn from power.

### **The Voices of Reason.**

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

After the initial wave of anti-Americanism, NTV a major independent TV network, in fact 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 of this policy shift was profound and not noticed in the West. For the Russian public, the images of ethnic wars were all too familiar conjuring memories of Chechnia war, Abkhazia war, Transdnestr war and Nagorno-Karabakh. The stories of atrocities generated a feeling of deja vu and non-involvement. Russia had tried to handle ethnic conflicts several times in recent years and each time reaped only losses.

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<sup>10</sup> Albert Timashev, "Rossiia Posledniia nadezhda," 7-10 april 1999 [www.sinor.ru](http://www.sinor.ru).

This response was voiced well by the Governor of the Samara province Konstantin Titov, who argued that an ethnic conflict between Albanian Kosovars who were Muslim and Serbs who were Christian Orthodox incited some hotheaded 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>11</sup>

Other authors also picked up this line of reasoning that Russia's national interests were poorly served by embracing the cause of Milosevic 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 which had begun ten years earlier. Milosevic was the major culprit of this disintegration as he had consistently opted for forcible solutions in inter-ethnic relations with the same kind of outcome. An autonomous republic would break away and declare independence. For the 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

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<sup>11</sup> "Pochemu Ia protiv." *Izvestiia* 30 June 1999.

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 Rumanian minority were non-Slavs but Christian Orthodox. Why would Russia choose to support just one group over all others? How would that serve the cause of peace and its 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>12</sup>

Refuting the nationalists' arguments one by one, the author argued that the entire world knew from the very beginning that NATO's action was not an aggression, because NATO did not have any war aims other than the establishment of peace. NATO was not destroying Yugoslavia, Molosevic did by his ruthless rule and ethnic cleansing. Russia's national interest was poorly served by opposing the international community once again.

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<sup>12</sup> Aleksey Surkov, "Piat' urokov Kosovskogo krizisa," Nezavisimaya Gazeta 29 June 1999.

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>13</sup>

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

Andrey Kozyrev, former Foreign Minister and an architect of a partnership with the Western powers, explained that the anti-Americanism was 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>14</sup>

#### **Rank and File:**

It is also worthy of note that the anti-western hysteria was played out primarily in the media. The majority of the Russian people showed remarkable indifference to the anti-western sentiment. They had more prosaic concerns on their mind. Opinion polls demonstrated that most Russians condemned NATO

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<sup>13</sup> Aleksey Surkov, "Piat' urokov Kosovskogo krizisa," Nezavisimaya Gazeta 29 June 1999

<sup>14</sup> "What Now? Moderate Russian Politicians Worry About the Internal Consequences of Kosovo." Russia Today June 14, 1999 (www.russiatoday.com)

bombing by a large margin, but when asked if Russia should send troops to help Slavic brothers, the vast majority opposed such an option. Russian public supported the Serbs as long as it did not cost them anything.

Anti-American hysteria was rather weak. 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 welcome unchanged from previous time. American films were just as popular as before and "made in USA" remained the sign of the most sought for commodity. The nationalists and the Communists managed to create a situation canceling cooperation with NATO but by the beginning of May, they fell 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 the NATO over Serbia and Kosovo? Who in the Russian political landscape would have lost the most had it happened? At first sight the answer to these questions is obvious: the Communist and nationalists of various stripes would have benefited and Yeltsyn 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 a national emergency, which could have been used as a pretext to ban the Communist party, thus effectively canceling elections in 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 new situation Yeltsyn would have been unable to back out of? Was Yeltsyn involved in this or was it a fait accompli presented to him? Konstantin Titov, the governor of the Samara province, and one of the leaders of "Voice of Russia" electoral bloc expressed the views of many when he wrote

Up to this very day its 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>15</sup>

Much has been and much will be written about the dash of Russian paratroopers to Pristina airport. For the purposes of this discussion, i.e. Russia's relations with NATO, it is crucial to interpret the meaning of this incident for the domestic Russian politics. Let us start out with the assumption that Russian paratroopers stationed in Bosnia would not have dared to march to Pristina on their own. They had orders from

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<sup>15</sup> Konstantin Titov, "Pochemu Ia protiv." Izvestiia 30 June 1999.

very high authority. Did this authority involve the commander in chief? That is the question?

**The General Staff Plan:**

The General Staff worked out a plan of a military seizure of a part of Kosovo thus creating facts on the ground, facts NATO had to live with or face a military confrontation with the Russian troops. In an intriguing interview to a Russian newspaper General Leonid Ivashov one of the key planners of this 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 come across 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 presenting the entry of NATO troops as victory whereby the role of the Russians was to deliver Milosevic. Ivashov continued: "They lied to us. They treated us as a fifth rate power." According to Ivashov, it was President Yeltsyn who after extensive reports by the Minister of Defense

Sergeev and Foreign Affairs Minister Ivanov gave the orders to launch the operation. Either Ivanov lied that he knew nothing about the operation or, which is more likely, this "lack of knowledge" was a posture adopted in order to gain time for the unfolding of the operation.

As to its 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 as to whether it was the refusal of Hungary to grant air space, Ivashov answered: "Requests which we did in this regard, this is the plan "B". I repeat: everything was calculated. And international law was on our side."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the plan was that a small contingent from Bosnia would seize the airport and military aircraft would bring a much more sizable force to be reckoned with. This is definitely in the style of the Russian General Staff. The seizure of Kabul in 1979 followed the same script.

One hundred seventy one soldiers and officers in fifty-five vehicles made the 650 kilometers drive in ten hours. This suggests that there were only three men per vehicle. Obviously the plan was based on a speedy arrival of men to fill in the vehicles and seize a large area under Russian control. According

to the soldiers and officers of the battalion, they were certain that the purpose of the move was to make the arrival of reinforcements possible. As one of them 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>17</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 deniability could be assured that a rogue force led by junior officers undertook the action on its own. The first thing the battalion did upon arriving in the airport was to establish satellite communications with Moscow and the first message that came from Moscow was a promotion in the rank for General Zavarzin by Yeltsyn.<sup>18</sup> This puts to rest the question as to whether Yeltsyn 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>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> General-Colonel Leonid Ivashov "Segodnia nash pervyi samolet siadet v Kosovo." Kopsomolskaia Pravda 26 iunია 1999. P.5

<sup>17</sup> Khronika Zabytogo Bataliona, " Komsomolskaya Pravda 6 iulia 1999 p.9

<sup>18</sup> Khronika Zabytogo Bataliona, " Komsomolskaya Pravda 6 iulia 1999 p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Igor Korotchenko, "Kompromis mezhdu NATO I Rossiyei naiden." Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenia No., 24 25 iunია - 1 iulia 1999 p. 2.

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 as it were, over escalation of the conflict, would have ducked and 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 in the conditions of low intensity warfare. From the Serbs' point of view, the Russians simply replaced them there and NATO could not touch them. It was safe to abandon Kosovo since the Russian presence would keep it safe for Serbia.

If this plan had worked, Russia would have come out triumphant from a near confrontation with NATO having rescued Serbia from a humiliating defeat and having established a foothold on the Balkans and a role of a world power. In terms of foreign policy, with this move Yeltsyn would have signaled to the West that Russia could not be bullied or given orders. Why was then the mission that had promised so many benefits aborted?

#### **Mission Aborted:**

The General Staff plan was abandoned in midstream. The battalion of "Pristina heroes" became an abandoned battalion

without water, food or political support. Usually in Western sources the reason given is that Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria declined Russian request for air space to fly over their territories. Hardly this was the true reason for the lack of flights. Had the decision been made in Moscow to defy NATO, this certainly would have meant readiness to defy Hungary or Rumania. Let them dare shoot down a Russian military aircraft. The reinforcements never came because some one 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. Embracing a nationalist cause, President Yeltsyn would have acted in the interests of his political opponents. Yeltsyn would have had to support the troops as heroes and saviors of Slavic brothers. It would have been an inappropriate moment to ban a Communist party. In terms of domestic Russian politics the General Staff plan worked against Yeltsyn. There are signs that he understood early on that the nationalist hysteria ran counter to his interests.

Yeltsyn let the General Staff go ahead thus benefiting from the anti-NATO sentiment by posing as a leader who could stand up to NATO as long as there were no perils for his power. It is also plausible that Yeltsyn let himself be persuaded that a

seizure of a piece of Kosovo would play well domestically and he chose to support the move in its initial phase. If things went well he could have emerged as a leader who had stood up to NATO aggression and restored the Great Power status to Russia, and if things went bad... well that would have created new opportunities.

If the British and the Russian troops had clashed over the airport, Yeltsyn could have immediately declared a state of emergency, 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 Yeltsyn had achieved all the above goals he would have fulfilled his political agenda for 1999. As it is now, he still has not come up with a credible plan how to ban the opposition, usurp the nationalist mantle or guarantee the favorable outcome of elections. In other words, the successful implementation of on the brink-of-war scenario would have delivered to Yeltsyn 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 Yeltsyn was seeking an accommodation with the West. It was a sign that he feared the political consequences of a stand up to NATO policy which could bring about the strengthening of the input of the

General Staff into national foreign policy and the strengthening of the anti-Western "patriotic" i.e. Communist forces.

Chernomyrdin consented to practically all the conditions of NATO having earned scorn for himself and Yeltsyn in Russia among the General Staff and the Communist-Nationalist opposition.

### **The Fallout:**

The agreements in Helsinki and Cologne seem to have quieted the situation. Yeltsyn was shaking hands with the Western leaders once again at the officially renamed G8 meeting. 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 to their fate, after the Russian sector in Kosovo never materialized and NATO emerged triumphant, the soldiers felt betrayed once again. According to the well-known perception of 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 the Muscovites.

Likewise in 1993, Yeltsyn forced the Generals to shoot at the parliament and betrayed them afterwards. Pristina will be remembered among the Russian military as the third betrayal of

the military. Their scorn for Yeltsyn has strengthened considerably. Their reasoning is that Yeltsyn and Chernomyrdin have deprived Russia of what could have been a major victory. The Kremlin betrayed the soldiers once again -- that is perhaps the most important consequence of the incident for Yeltsyn. His bad relations with the army got worse as a result. Perhaps that is why he is seeking to rely on the FSB and the security services to stay in power in the aftermath of the Kosovo debacle.

When the storm was over, many observers began asking what exactly Russia gained as a result of the march to Pristina. A right to station three thousand men under NATO command and at the cost of sixty million dollars a year was not generating much enthusiasm. Konstantin Titov, the governor of the Samara province 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>20</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 the trivial or provocative but still a pretext, not thinking about the consequences, setting up the soldiers as targets of the guerrillas, the Generals seized a piece of

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<sup>20</sup> Konstantin Titov, "Pochemu Ia protiv." Izvestiia 30 June 1999.

territory and demanded of the president to guarantee to them the right to dispose of that piece without any control.

The author concluded that "This thoughtless and reckless move by the generals is going to have long-lasting and damaging consequences for Russia."<sup>21</sup>

The voices of critics were getting more numerous after the crisis has passed. Konstantin Borovoy, the Duma member and the chair of the party of Economic Freedom, a well-known entrepreneur suggested that the entire Russian policy in the Kosovo crisis was a result of the ill-conceived plan to enhance Russian role in the world. Borovoy claims that well before NATO war on Serbia "almost out in the open" violating the UN embargo, the Russian General Staff began delivering arms to Serbia. It was also preparing an official agreement on delivery of arms in the case of "NATO aggression". Russian instructors were sent to Serbia and General Staff began to develop contingency plans. In other words, the dash to Pristina was only a tip of an iceberg of a much longer and larger relationship aimed at undermining NATO. All this Borovoy sees as a policy of Primakov and his Communist friends. It was a part of a larger plan to build an anti-NATO coalition of states. This plan has completely

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<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Abarinov: "Trusost Zapada I novye polchshcha varvarov," Polit.ru informatsionno politicheskii kana (an internet journal) [WWW.Polit.ru](http://WWW.Polit.ru) (18 august 1999)

backfired and has led to the opposite result. The role of NATO was enhanced and that of Russia diminished.<sup>22</sup>

What concerned most Russian moderate observers in the wake of the crisis was that the dash to Pristina put Russia in an unenviable 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." The author explained the Russian dilemma:

The problem is not only in 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>23</sup>

Moreover the author continued, Russians had to be grateful to NATO soldiers who had not left Russian contingent one on one with the Kosovar liberation army. The implication of this reasoning was that if NATO wanted to create trouble for the Russians it could have done so but it did not showing a genuine good will, despite Russian unilateral actions.

In the wake of the Kosovo war, Russia views NATO officially not as a partners any more but as potentially a hostile power. Any new difference over policy can easily escalate to a dangerous level of confrontation. The summer military exercises

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<sup>22</sup> Konstantin Borovoy, "Mirotvorcheskaya operatsiya protiv NATO." Nezavisimaya Gazeta 1 July 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Gennadii Sysoev, "Tainyi aerodrom v Pristine," Kommersant 3 July 1999

with the long-range aircraft moving across the Arctic towards the United States have demonstrated persistence of the General Staff's Soviet thinking. NATO and the US are referred to as potential advisories, not partners any more.<sup>24</sup>

The military establishment views Yeltsyn once again as a person who first let them proceed to a winnable military victory and then betrayed them in mid-stream. Critics openly accuse Yeltsyn's regime of having betrayed Serbia, and having betrayed Russian national interests by obediently fulfilling NATO demands for the money of the IMF. Discussing the "Lessons of the war" in a nationalist paper, one analyst wrote that Russia simply sold out for money. Yeltsyn's policy was nothing short of appeasement of NATO. Russia's role was to push through NATO interests among Russia's former allies. The true lesson of the war argued the author was that it was a rehearsal of a strike against Russia and that

no amount of treason, and sub-servience in front of 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>25</sup>

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

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<sup>24</sup> Rarii Zubkov, "Est' li u Rossii veroiatnyi protivnik?" Nezavisimoe Voennoe obozrenie No. 26 9-15 iulia 1999. P.1.

<sup>25</sup> Vladislav Shurygin, "Uroki Voiny," Zavtra no. 26 July 1999.

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 its economy did not allow for a quick and effective military restructuring in response to the new perceptions of national interest in the wake of the Kosovo war. As one observer noted:

... the August 1998 default made plans of 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 the thing of far away future, there are no means for the reform (better to say regulated contraction) of defense industries, any serious increase of military spending is pushed away by several years."<sup>26</sup>

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

### **Conclusion:**

Discourse on NATO allows to make some observations on the 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 tasted what a powerful vehicle for mass mobilization a nationalist anti-western hysteria could be and they are likely to remember to use this tool again. Even though their gains are temporary and the national agenda has begun to refocus on domestic economic concerns, still, a major shift has occurred. It is no longer 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.

Critics of NATO expansion in the West would use this as an argument that NATO expansion was wrong by alienating Russia, isolating the Democrats and strengthening the Nationalists and the Communists.<sup>27</sup> In fact, this reasoning blames the wrong party. The policies of President Yeltsyn have more to do with such an outcome of debate on NATO expansion in Russia than with NATO expansion itself.

Yeltsyn's policy has consistently been that of one step forward two steps backward. He has been trying to maneuver between pro-Western course and reform and hard-line neo-Communism all along. That was his chosen modus operandi. He had chosen to distance himself from NATO and yet to conclude Partnership for Peace, to embrace nationalist rhetoric in 1997

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<sup>26</sup> Sergey Sokut, "Balkanskii stimul," *Osobaya Papka* No. 2 June 1999 p.11.

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 Yeltsyn sought to keep nationalists at bay and to keep good graces with Western partners at the same time.

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 embracing nationalist mantle himself, by refusing to explain that partnership with NATO was in Russia's national interests, by trying too hard to placate the General Staff Yeltsyn became their hostage without realizing himself that that was what had happened. Just as in economic reform he had become the hostage of corrupt tycoons, manipulators and intriguers, in foreign policy vis-à-vis NATO Yeltsyn became a hostage of the General Staff and the Communist-Nationalist opposition.

To be fair to Yeltsyn, he tried hard during the Kosovo war as well to continue his please everybody tactics. He tried to please the nationalists by calling NATO's action an aggression, and tried 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 a point as a

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<sup>27</sup> "Showdown in Pristina," The Nation 5 July 1999.

nationalist and to keep the situation under control. He may have been trying to create a situation, which could be used to ban the Communist party as those guilty of bringing Russia to the brink of war.

Most definitely Yeltsyn was maneuvering between contradictory policies which he himself so eloquently expressed 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, Yeltsyn this time, it seems, has reaped a failure that may still ruin him or his hold on power. As we have seen, the army hates Yeltsyn now with an intensity that can only be compared to 1993. Many Generals regard his deal on Kosovo a "Balkan Munich".

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

Third: Most dangerous are not the zealots like Dugin and folks from the newspaper Zavtra, but the rise of a so-called moderate nationalist leadership, as an alternative to the return of the Communists. Yeltsyn's regime may be replaced not by a Ziuganov, but by forces led by Primakov, Luzhkov and Lebed, who

all are on record of advocating 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 need to 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.