

Letter to the Editor

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Dear Professor Mackie:

I have read with great interest the article by Geoffrey Roberts entitled “‘Now or Never’: The Immediate Origins of Putin’s Preventative War on Ukraine,” which was published in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* (vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 3-27). Professor Roberts is certainly correct to analyze the motivation of Russian President Vladimir Putin based explicitly on the attitudes he has expressed in public presentations. While such statements may be “taken with a grain of salt,” they are nevertheless indicative of his mindset. Thus, Roberts concludes:

At the heart of Putin’s preventative war thinking was an imagined future in which Russia would confront an existential threat. The longer the war was delayed, he argued in February 2022, the greater the danger and the more costly a future conflict between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. *Better to go to war now, before NATO’s Ukrainian bridgehead on Russia’s borders became an imminent rather than a potential existential threat* – a statement that he repeated during the course of the war. (emphasis added)

As important as this approach surely is, equally important are the timing of such statements and – surprisingly – what has been left unsaid.

Contrary to voluminous opinions expressed over many years by a variety of commentators, we would contend that Putin's focus on NATO as a justification for his actions is remarkably recent. We are well aware of the provocative statements made at the 2007 *Munich Security Conference* in this regard. But the fact of the matter is this – except for an aside in his 2001 *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly*, Putin never broached the subject of NATO in any of his seven *State of the Union* speeches prior to Munich. Moreover, the subject was not brought up by Dmitry Medvedev during his four years as Russia's president. Nor did Putin, once he returned to the presidency, mention NATO in any *Federal Assembly Address until 2018* – four years after he had annexed Crimea and had begun military operations in the Donbas region.

In support of our claim, we submit the following additional data points:

◆ It is true that Russia's Foreign Policy Conceptual Design issued in 2000 does mention NATO very blandly in a short section of the document (178 words out of 4418), stating that

Russia maintains its negative opinion about NATO expansion, in particular about plans to admit Ukraine and Georgia to membership in the alliance, as well as [placing] NATO military infrastructure in the proximity of Russia's borders, which violates the principle of equal security and leads to new dividing lines in Europe.

This document also states that “on a broad range of parameters NATO's political and military policies do not coincide with the security interests of the Russian Federation, and on occasion are directly opposed to them.”

◆ Even more subdued were the revised foreign policy statements issued in 2008 (150 words out of 8306) and 2013 (150 words out of 8276).

◆ During his first term in office Putin did broach this subject in a few interviews with foreign journalists and in a joint press conference with Norway's Prime Minister. Nevertheless, prior to Munich, the Russian president had never made such vociferous denunciations of NATO in his public statements.

◆ It was only in the 2016 *revision to Russia's Foreign Policy Conceptual Design* that one finds a direct statement in opposition to NATO expansion. Indeed, it was

only after his 2018 Federal Assembly Address that NATO became a salient topic in Putin's public statements.

◆ *Decree No. 400 "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation,"* issued 2 July 2021, which is forty-four pages in length, makes no mention of NATO at all.

◆ Moreover, the latest Foreign Policy Conceptual Design, *issued on 31 March 2023*, barely mentions the "unfriendly European states, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the European Union, and the Council of Europe" and their "threat to the security, territorial integrity, sovereignty, traditional spiritual and moral values, and the socio-economic development of Russia" – fewer than fifty words in total within a 9000-word treatise, buried in Paragraph 59 on page 37 of this 42-page document.

The position taken by Professor Roberts is largely consistent with that taken by Colonel Douglas Macgregor in December 2022 in *The American Conservative* – one that reverberates in the "America First" rhetoric of several Republican members of the United States Congress. In the words of Gilbert Doctorow, Macgregor's diatribe continues the latter's "cheerleading of Russian forces with daily predictions of a rout of the Ukrainian army." He, along with former Marine officer Scott Ritter, are "both talking nonsense, and [they] bring their fake news to very large Western audiences."

But the notion of NATO's significance in Putin's rationale for war is not confined to conservatives. For instance, political scientist William Taubman, *writing recently in The Boston Globe*, has stated:

As for the United States, it has indeed threatened Russian interests on multiple occasions since the USSR collapsed, especially by pushing NATO expansion all the way to Ukraine.

If NATO enlargement was not, in fact, the impetus to war that many observers cite, what then might that motivation be? We submit the following:

A) Russia's demographic crisis – particularly its declining Slavic component – is a problem that has consumed Putin since his very first days in office.

B) Control of the Black Sea littoral.

Russia's Demographic Crisis

In an *Opinion piece* we published just two weeks into the war (6 March 2022), we proposed that Putin's real goal was "Building an Aryan Nation." Concern with the status of ethnic Russians among conservative circles in Soviet and post-Soviet society has existed for at least two generations. Russian women were having fewer babies, while members of the non-Slavic "nationalities" in Soviet society were producing many more. Indeed, with a generally declining birth rate among the European portion of society and a generally increasing birth rate among the Asians, it is likely that by 2040 or 2050 the country will have become a Muslim-majority nation – much to the consternation of Russia's ultra-nationalist faction.

The issue was exacerbated by the dissolution of the USSR, which resulted in a huge diaspora of Russian speakers living in newly independent countries – an issue we address below.

The Slavic component as a percentage of the total population in the USSR declined sharply during the last years of the Gorbachev era, a trend that accelerated in the 1990s as part of a precipitous decrease in the overall population of the newly independent Russian Federation. Together with Andrei Kozyrev, Boris Yeltsin instituted actions intended to reverse the trend – but was unable to do so. This problem was seen as a crisis by Vladimir Putin when he assumed the presidency of the Russian Federation on the eve of the new millennium – and the concern continues to this day.

Spurred on by the conservative and ultra-nationalist segments of Russian society, Putin carried out various policy decisions intended to rectify this downward spiral. Some of these policies were purely domestic, aimed for instance at increasing the birth rate among Russian women. Many others, however, involved Russian nationals and persons in the "Russian World" living in the near abroad and beyond—so-called *compatriots* (*сограждане*) and *fellow countrymen* (*соотечественники*).

Emphasis on this transnational audience, including specific actions appealing to it, began hesitantly during the Yeltsin years but gained ever greater importance once Putin assumed the Russian presidency. Such elements support three strategic goals:

- ◆ Reversing projections of a dramatic decrease in Russia’s overall population through the first half of the 21st century, something Putin believes to be an existential dilemma for the nation;
- ◆ On the domestic political scene, appealing to conservative and ultra-nationalist segments of the population, including members of the LDPR, the CPRF, and the essentially defunct, but nevertheless influential, CRC; and
- ◆ On the international front, advancing Russia’s insistence on its own “sphere of influence,” similar to the Monroe Doctrine in United States history, encompassing most of the former Soviet republics and projecting that influence on the former Warsaw Pact nations in East-Central Europe.

Russia’s fertility rate had fallen to just 1.25 in the year 2000 when Putin took office. (It is important to keep in mind that demographers generally consider that the “replacement” fertility rate, independent of any net gains through inward migration, is 2.1 babies per woman.) As a consequence, from 1992 to 2009 the population fell by nearly 7 million. During that period there were approximately three deaths for every two births. A deeper long-term obstacle was the fact that very few children were born during the crisis years of the 1990s, portending a continued crisis for the future.

Putin emphasised this demographic problem in each *Presidential Address* during his first two terms – particularly in 2006 when fully 25 percent of his hour-long speech was devoted to the issue. He was particularly concerned by the combined impacts of a declining birth rate and an aging population: as in many advanced countries (particularly China), the looming fiscal crisis of supporting retirees weighed upon his mind. One perhaps unanticipated consequence was the politically unpopular 2018 decision to raise the retirement age in the country by five years. Whatever else is true, such a decision instantaneously increased the number of working-age individuals in the country.

The situation did improve significantly over time, as Putin instituted substantial financial incentives designed to encourage more women to have more children, but recently has become dramatically worse. According to *official figures released by Rosstat*, in 2020 Russia’s total population decreased by more than one-half-million, the steepest decline in fifteen years. Moreover, the fertility rate, which had already dropped back to 1.50 in 2020, is now expected in 2023 to plummet to the 2000 level—or even lower—due

to the combined impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Since February 2022, the death or departure of so many young males has only worsened the existing trend.

The second policy vector – convincing Russian speakers now living in the *near abroad* to return home – has been a dismal failure. As a domestic political issue, the diaspora was an essential component of CRC rhetoric in the early nineties, one emphasised also by Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the CPRF, during the 1993 Duma campaign. Zyuganov attempted to expand the Party's popularity during the upcoming elections by advocating a mixed private/public sector response to social *safety net* issues such as housing and medical care, along with a direct appeal to conservative elements in Russian society. *"You cannot talk about the country's revival," he said, "when the values established throughout its history and its national icons are being trampled on."* For its part, the ultra-nationalist CRC emerged as the first movement seeking to defend Russians abroad.

Putin eagerly advanced this issue. In his 2001 address to the Federal Assembly, he stated:

There is one more problem that I am simply obligated to mention from this podium – that is defending the rights and interests of Russian Federation citizens (and) our fellow countrymen in other countries.

In 2004, Putin mentioned as one of the nation's most important foreign policy issues the "effective defence of the rights of our fellow countrymen in other countries." But it was his statement in 2005 that generated significant commentary around the globe:

Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the most significant geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.

One tactic in this aspect of Russian foreign policy – begun under Yeltsin but accelerated significantly under Putin – was the issuance of Russian passports to members of the diaspora living in the near abroad. By the time Russian troops moved into the contested Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, *fully 80 percent of residents* there had received passports, which allowed for the pretext that Russia was merely defending the interests of its citizens there. A similar policy was followed in the Donbas and Crimea.

As recently as *October 2021, in a decree ostensibly concerning civil order and crime prevention*, Putin announced plans to return a half million “fellow countrymen” to their homeland before 2030, pay their relocation expenses, and reimburse the oblasts and republics where they might move for the attendant expenses incurred. One would be hard-pressed to explain how, exactly, repatriating 500,000 ethnic Slavs might contribute to “civil order and crime prevention” – particularly since such people always had the ability to return to Russia had they chosen to do so. In all likelihood, the goal was to hide these initiatives from public scrutiny.

Having spent two decades beckoning Russian *fellow countrymen* to return to their homeland and attempting to get Russian women to bear more children – neither with much success – Putin was increasingly frustrated by this intractable problem. Cryptically, and with only a slight dose of sarcasm, we noted, “Bribing women and expatriates didn’t work, so why not start a war.”

Control of the Black Sea Littoral

At the time when Russia’s *little green men* completed the takeover and annexation of Crimea, coming as it did quite unexpectedly on the heels of the Sochi Olympics, many observers in the West seemed to believe the action was merely opportunistic – one taken “on the spur of the moment” with little or no advance planning. The reality, however, is quite different.

After the Soviet Union was dissolved in December 1991 and Ukraine became an independent country, one of the most important issues to arise was the status of the Soviet naval base at Sevastopol and, more significantly, the overall status of the Black Sea basin – with its untapped oil and gas reserves—including the Sea of Azov. The Yeltsin

administration had not paid much attention to naval issues, but that situation changed as soon as Vladimir Putin became President of Russia. Even though an agreement between the two countries had been reached during the 1990s that would allow Russia to control the naval enclave at Sevastopol for several decades, this agreement was not sufficient to deter Putin, who in 2001 *declared the entire Black Sea area vital to his country's security interests.*

The first concrete action in this regard – one that shows, in retrospect, great foresight on the part of Putin – *occurred in 2003, when Russia took control of and began naval construction projects on Tuzla Island, a tiny piece of land within the Kerch Strait.* This diplomatic crisis between the newly independent nations – while completely unnoticed in the West outside of military circles – clearly posed a challenge to Ukraine's sovereignty since it threatened to abrogate the country's right of free passage from the Sea of Azov into the Black Sea. Significantly, it became a focal point of the *foreign policy differences between Viktor Yanukovich and Viktor Yushchenko during the 2004 campaign for the presidency in Ukraine.*

In late 2015, when Putin decided to build a bridge over the Kerch Strait in order to supply the recently annexed Crimean Peninsula – having failed to secure a land route through eastern Ukraine – Russian control of Tuzla Island was a pivotal element, as the two spans of the bridge are anchored there.

Putin's fixation on Crimea and the Black Sea can be seen as a crucial element in addressing the three major concerns identified above: the precipitous decline in Russia's overall population, with particular emphasis on its Slavic component; satisfying the increasingly nationalistic stance of Russia's elites; and strengthening the country's sway within what he perceives as its rightful sphere of influence. In this context, deterring NATO is at best a secondary – and relatively recent – concern, based as it is on *Putin's apparent belief that the West is somehow trying to dismember the Russian Federation.*

Conclusion

Deciding on war, Vladimir Putin declared that there were two major concerns prompting him to embark upon a “special military operation” in Ukraine – denazification of the country and halting the expansion of NATO. Absolutely no one gave credence to

the first of these justifications. Further, it is our contention that the latter rationale is equally fatuous.

Rather, Russia's domination of the Black Sea and its demographic crisis are, in our view, the actual unspoken sources of the decision to embark upon the current campaign.

Had the war gone according to plan, the population of the Russian Federation would have quickly expanded by approximately 44 million, almost exclusively whites of Slavic blood, to say nothing of the nine million Belarusians who had effectively been added via consolidation of the Unity State. Nevertheless, despite Russia's inability to conquer Ukraine, *it is currently estimated that more than five million Russian-speaking Ukrainians, including several hundred thousand children, are now in Russia – many of their own accord in order to avoid the risks inherent in staying where they had lived, but a large number who were forced to leave their homeland via so-called *filtration camps* or who were simply *kidnapped*.*