For Putin, the EU Is a Bigger Threat Than NATO

The Kremlin fears the EU's ability to spur deep political change.

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A satirical float shows European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Russian President Vladimir Putin during the annual carnival parade in Mainz, Germany, on Feb. 20, 2023.

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The June European Parliament elections delivered a historic success for far-right, euroskeptic parties. Now making up nearly a quarter of the chamber, these parties are poised to exert a powerful influence on the future political trajectory of the European Union, including by aiming to roll back various aspects of integration and opposing the bloc's further enlargement.

Seen from Moscow, this result is sure to be cause for celebration. Various prominent Russian politicians hailed the rise of right-wing parties in the EU following the elections,

with former President Dmitry Medvedev calling for pro-EU leaders to be relegated "to the ash heap of history." Russia also went to great lengths to support euroskeptic parties in the run-up to the vote, including by paying far-right EU politicians to parrot Kremlin talking points as well as by launching massive online disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks on key websites. Furthermore, with Hungary now holding the rotating EU presidency, Moscow is doing all it can to help Russia-friendly Hungarian President Viktor Orban subvert a unified EU stance on Russia's war in Ukraine.

Russia's latest efforts mark a notable uptick in its attempts to undermine the EU. The Kremlin has long harbored animosity toward the bloc—but as Russia's confrontation with the West has intensified, this hostility has only grown. For Moscow, the new momentum toward widening and deepening the EU represents a unique and increasingly urgent threat to its attempts to assert its illiberal governance model, both at home and abroad.

It is the EU, not NATO, that presents the real existential threat to the Kremlin. That's because Ukraine's membership in and integration into the EU could deliver a fatal blow to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his regime by turning Ukraine into what Russia most fears: a political, economic, and sociocultural alternative to Russia itself. Although Putin's popularity among Russians remains high, the Kremlin could very well worry that Russian citizens may begin to see the benefits of EU membership across the border and desire an alternative future for their country.

That would explain why Putin began his long war against Ukraine in 2014. At that time, Ukraine was militarily neutral and was not actively seeking to join NATO. (It had previously expressed interest in membership in 2008.) But Kyiv was about to sign an association agreement with the EU that the Kremlin's interference in Ukrainian politics could not prevent.

Western commentators have largely ignored the EU-Russia relationship, instead often blaming possible NATO enlargement for catalyzing the Kremlin's aggression. Proponents of the NATO theory include academics (such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt), media figures (such as Tucker Carlson), and populist politicians (such as Britain's Nigel Farage and former U.S. President Donald Trump). Both of the latter have repeated claims along these lines in recent weeks.

Underpinning these justifications for Russia's war is the assumption that the Kremlin seriously considers—and is justified in considering—NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to Russia's physical security. Putin would certainly like to break NATO and Western unity, but it's not because he thinks Russia is militarily threatened. If he did, the Russian military would not be leaving the country's roughly 1,600-mile border with NATO members virtually undefended as it redeploys troops and weapons to Ukraine.

Even short of directly undermining regime stability within Russia, EU enlargement poses a threat to a key ideological pillar of Putin's foreign policy: his antiquated obsession with

maintaining a so-called [sphere of influence along Russia's periphery](). Russia's perceived need to control the political orientation of its neighbors could not differ any more sharply from the outlook of EU member states, which aim to amplify their own power and influence by sharing their sovereignty in a bloc. To this end, the EU has developed a complex institutional architecture to ensure an equilibrium where every state feels it has a fair say in decision-making.

Russia, by contrast, seeks to impose its will upon bordering countries and prevent them from shaping their own futures—either directly through conquest, as Russia is attempting in Ukraine, or indirectly through various coercive tactics, including weaponized corruption. Russian-led regional organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, serve largely as forums for the Kremlin to pressure neighboring countries to follow its priorities rather than pursue genuine collaboration.

Russia is right to be concerned about the EU's ability to spur deep political change. Since the end of the Cold War, EU membership has been crucial in shaping former autocratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe into thriving liberal democracies. This is no accident: The EU's [accession criteria]() require new members to have institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities—values that are antithetical to those promoted by the Russian regime.

Russia has hardened its opposition to EU enlargement over the years as it has observed the transformational effect of membership. When the three Baltic states plus others—including the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia—joined in 2004, Moscow took little notice, [regarding]() the bloc primarily through an economic lens rather than a geopolitical one.

Then in February 2022, Russia took its effort to keep Ukraine from joining the Western community one step further by launching a full-scale invasion—which, ironically, increased the [prospects]() of EU integration not only for Ukraine, but also for neighboring Moldova and Georgia. Since then, Russia has used various tactics to hinder Moldova's and Georgia's paths to accession as well, including by [subverting]() the former's pro-EU government and [supporting]() the latter's recent passage of a Russian-style "foreign agents law" to stifle democratic dissent.

Nonetheless, the EU should not shy away from enlargement. The bloc's expansion has been a uniquely effective force for fostering [prosperity](), stability, and democracy on the European continent over the decades, bringing the region ever closer to the [vision]() of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.

Furthermore, the success or failure of the next round of EU enlargement will have striking consequences for the future of international order. Russia, by aiming to prevent the EU's enlargement and impose its own control over Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, is on a campaign to reassert its imperial idea in Europe. This poses an immense challenge to the

credibility of the EU's post-imperial vision to achieve collaborative regional governance through integration—ultimately the raison d'être of the bloc. Russian success would also risk legitimizing expansionism elsewhere by emboldening other countries to follow similar imperial strategies against their neighbors.

To ensure the failure of Russia's imperialist vision, the EU must follow through on its promises to integrate new members—while becoming more resilient in the process. It would be both a strategic and an ethical failure not to support other European countries wishing to develop resilient democratic political institutions, robust civil societies, and flourishing economies. Russia should not be given a veto.
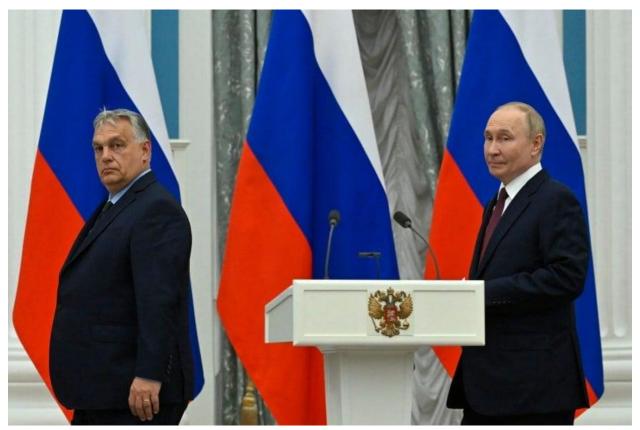

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