

THE NEXT THREAT TO NATO

The Baltics are knocking at NATO's door. Don't let them in

BY JEFFREY TAYLER

Illustrations by Seymour Chwast

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P ledging to erase the "false lines that have divided Europe for too long," President George W. Bush, in a speech given in Warsaw last June, urged the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to extend invitations for a new round of expansion during its forthcoming Prague summit, in November of 2002. If that happens, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are likely to be among the next invitees, and may in fact be the only ones. The notion of creating an undivided Europe is an inspiring one, dating from the beginning of the Cold War; but by bringing into NATO countries that were once Soviet republics, the alliance would cross a line and create unprecedented long-term threats to its security.

To gather material for this article I recently began a trip to the Baltic states in Narva, a placid northeastern Estonian town bathed in sea breezes. Though small (its population is just over 72,000), Narva occupies a large place in Russian history. It was here, in 1700, that Russia launched its final campaign in a centuries-long quest to become a European power—attacking the Swedes, who were then in control of much of the Baltic coast. The battle ended in defeat for the Russians, but the war did not: by 1721 Russia had conquered the Baltic territories as far southwest as Riga (the capital of present-day Latvia) and had built a new capital, Saint Petersburg, on the Gulf of Finland. Later in that century Russia, through a partition agreement with Austria and Prussia, gained control of the rest of the Baltics, and would retain it (except for the period between the two world wars) until the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991.

The Baltic countries have been clamoring at NATO's door since they achieved independence, also in 1991. They have found receptive ears for their demands on both sides of the Atlantic, and this is natural: ever since the Knights of the Sword and the Teutonic Order converted most of the



Balts to Catholicism, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Baltics have culturally belonged to the West. The Baltic peoples purport to share the West's values, cited as "democracy, human rights and the rule of law" on the NATO Web site. "Values"—or at least those to which NATO refers—are no longer merely fodder for the rumination of philosophers or embassy cultural attachés; they have become *casus belli*, as NATO operations in Bosnia and Yugoslavia have shown, and the protection of them warrants sustained aerial bombardment, military occupation, and the establishment of de facto protectorates over non-Western peoples.

Since September 11 the proposed expansion of NATO has attracted new publicity, even urgency. NATO itself has returned to prominence, by invoking for the first time Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "an armed attack against one or more [NATO members] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." The alliance has welcomed offers of extensive cooperation from Russia in the fight against terrorism, but the possibility that NATO might encroach on former Soviet soil has provoked the Kremlin to warn of renewed tensions with the West and has disturbed the Russian public. Since its war against Yugoslavia, NATO has come for Russians to stand more than ever for Western aggression and interference in what Russia still regards as its spheres of influence (as evidenced by violent demonstrations in 1999 at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, protesting NATO's war over Kosovo).

While making unprecedented moves to help the United States and its allies do battle in Afghanistan, Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, has continued to resist the expansion of NATO into the territories of the former Soviet Union, which Russia calls its Near Abroad—a designation reflecting geographic proximity, shared history, and Moscow's presumed right to

hegemony. During a visit to Brussels early last October, Putin stressed that although he favored a "widening and deepening" of relations between NATO and Moscow, he would not cease opposing the alliance's eastward expansion unless NATO evolved from a military to a "political" organization. This is improbable, given that for the first time in NATO's history a member state has come under attack.

Nevertheless, Putin's remarks bespeak how seriously Russia views NATO's encroachment on its Near Abroad. Moreover, his words may presage developments about which NATO planners would rather not think. If NATO expands to include the Baltic states, it risks acquiring a flash point for tension with Russia that could compromise, if not destroy, the alliance, just as the alliance is beginning to exercise its role as the bulwark of the West—a role that, this time at least, it has needed Russian assistance to perform. Although NATO's mission has been broadened since the end of the Cold War to encompass peacekeeping, the resolution of ethnic disputes, and even the promotion of economic progress, its primary goal is still, as the North Atlantic Treaty states, the defense of "the freedom, common heritage and civilization" of NATO members, and the promotion of "stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area." Put simply, any country that joins NATO must enhance the security of other member countries. If NATO confuses primary with secondary goals (as it did in Yugoslavia, where "values" motivated a military action that led to the deaths and displacement of thousands of Kosovar Albanians, an open-ended deployment of troops, and, eventually, the spread of Kosovo's ethnic conflict to Macedonia), it risks at best disunity, and at worst unwanted war.

NATO was founded in 1949 to defend against a Soviet attack on Western Europe. Although the Soviet Union exists no more, Russia retains 5,800 nuclear weapons; a chemical and biological arsenal; a military with at least 1.2 million soldiers that it has shown no hesitation about using, even against its own citizens (as the war in Chechnya illustrates); and a leadership that has made the restoration of great-power status a priority. The Kremlin continues to exert hegemony in the Near Abroad. It supports the pro-Russian Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko and stations troops in Belarus; manipulates gas and oil supplies to Ukraine, Georgia, and other former republics, to ensure pro-Russian policies; and promotes common security and economic zones among members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which it dominates. As regards the Baltics, Russia has taken a subtle and clever approach: Russian borders with Estonia and Latvia have been demarcated, but the Kremlin, on "technical grounds," has refused to sign agreements that would enshrine them in law. (Recognized borders are a prerequisite for membership in NATO.) And in marked contrast to his predecessor, Putin has affirmed Russia's ties with *sootchestvenniki* (compatriots) in the Near Abroad, stressing

that although ethnic Russians may be scattered among fifteen formerly Soviet republics, they make up a "unified people." These factors have prompted the Baltics to pursue NATO membership with understandable urgency.

What would membership of the Baltics mean for NATO? With a combined population of less than eight million and a location in a remote corner of Europe, the Baltics would offer minimal gains if they were to join the alliance, while posing unsettling strategic risks for Russia. Narva is only eighty-five miles from downtown Saint Petersburg—a distance that a tactical nuclear missile could traverse in mere minutes. The southernmost Baltic state, Lithuania, borders both on the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad (where the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet is located and where nuclear weapons may be stationed) and on Poland, a NATO member since 1999, when the alliance had its first round of expansion after the end of the Cold War. Were the Baltics' borders with Russia to become NATO's frontier with Russia, NATO would abut all of Kaliningrad's land borders and could therefore cut the area off at will. This and the potential proximity of NATO nuclear weapons to Russia's second largest city could, in a crisis, necessitate a hair-trigger state of alert on the Russian side.

(With respect to nuclear weapons, Russian military planners would no doubt derive little solace from future incarnations of the Founding Act, signed by NATO and Russia in 1997, which established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, and in which NATO declared it had "no intention, no plan, and no reason" to station nuclear weapons on the soil of any future members. The act gave Russia a consultative role ("a voice ... not a veto," as President Clinton put it) in the council, and the Clinton Administration, much to Boris Yeltsin's embarrassment and political detriment, insisted publicly that the agreement was not legally binding. In any case, the council proved useless when conflict arose: Russia froze relations with NATO for the duration of the war against Yugoslavia.)

The demographic legacy of Soviet rule presents compelling additional reasons for NATO not to invite Estonia and Latvia (though it is not an issue in Lithuania, where ethnic-Russian immigration was minimal after World War II). During the 1950s the Soviet government began building electricity plants and exploiting oil-shale deposits in north-eastern Estonia, and ethnic Russians seeking work flooded into the region. The Kremlin also made it a practice to settle retired military and KGB officers in Narva and elsewhere in the Baltics, thereby installing cadres of loyalists among peoples known for their hatred of and resistance to Soviet rule. (The Soviets fought native guerrilla insurgents in all three Baltic republics well into the 1950s.) Despite a post-Soviet exodus of some 16,000 Russians, mainly to Russia, Narva remains 95 percent Russian. (Here and below "Russian" means ethnic Russian, or Russian-speaking. Many of the "Russians" in the Baltics and elsewhere are Ukrainians or Belarusians whose first language is Russian.)

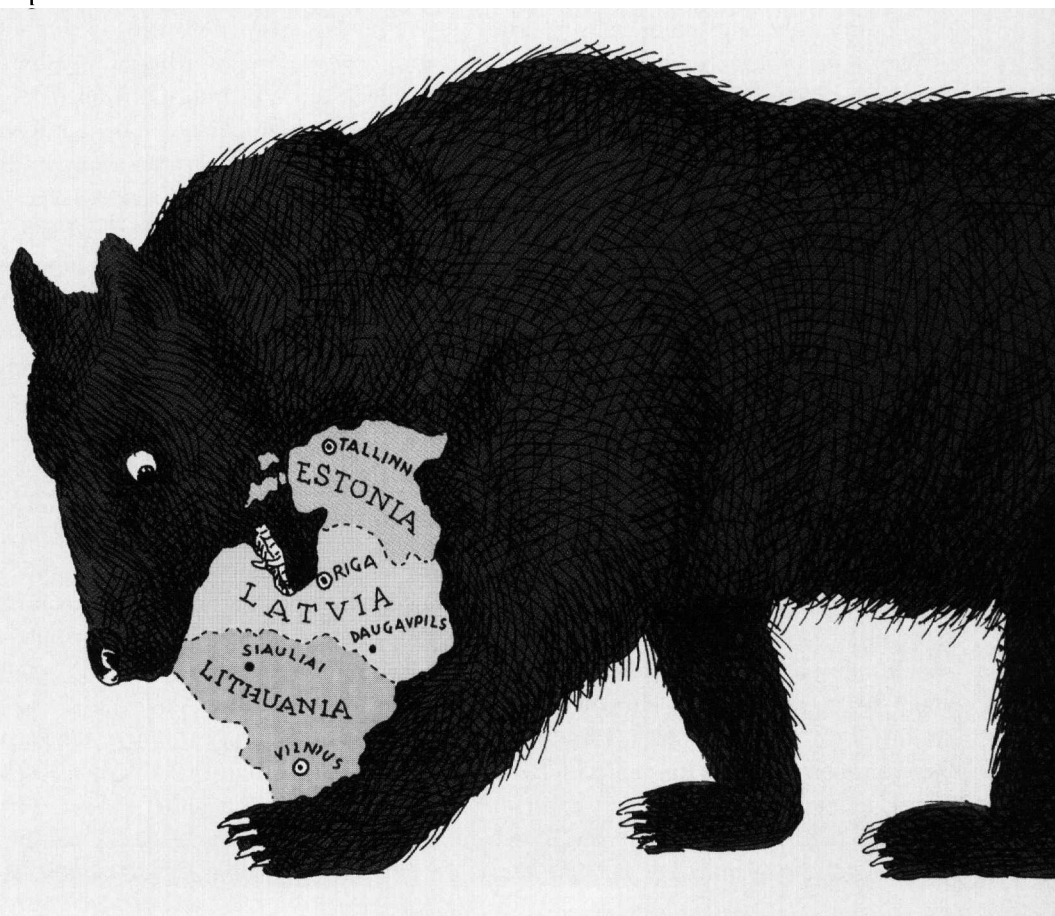
In Estonia 32 percent of the population is Russian, in Latvia 36 percent. Before the Soviet occupation eight percent of the population in Estonia and 10 percent in Latvia was Russian.

At independence Lithuania averted problems with its Russian minority (eight percent) by offering citizenship to all those resident on its soil. In Estonia and Latvia, however, the Balts have taken a policy tack reflecting the perceived threat posed by their more sizable Russian minorities. Since 1991, in order to encourage Russians to emigrate, the governments of these two states have effectively denied naturalization to the majority of them. Anyone who was a citizen before 1940 had a right to citizenship following independence, but those who arrived later (Russians, for the most part) were left without citizenship in their country of residence. (Russians born there since 1992 may naturalize.) To qualify for naturalization people who arrived after the war are obliged to pass an examination in the relevant local language, history, and constitution—but few Russians living in the non-Russian Soviet republics became fluent in the local languages. To pass the exam they must study for several years—a burdensome task for working adults, and an impossibility for many others, especially the elderly, who often possess neither the skills nor the drive to learn a foreign language.

As a result of these policies, some 200,000 Russian residents of Estonia have been without Estonian citizenship since independence. Another 70,000 are permanent residents but carry Russian passports. Of the latter, 17,000 are retired officers of the Soviet Army and the KGB, a matter of concern to the Estonian security agencies that are keeping track of them.

In Latvia the situation is similar. Some 550,000 residents of Latvia (almost all Russians) carry a *nepilsona pase* ("alien's passport"); another 17,000 are permanent residents holding Russian passports; and an undetermined number are former military or KGB officers. All in all, they form a sullen lot, and I sensed the same suspicion, frustration, and anger among Russians in the Baltics that I have seen in repressed peoples elsewhere in Eastern Europe—including in Kosovo under Yugoslav rule, and in ethnic Hungarian parts of Transylvania during the Ceausescu era.

Baltic politicians dismiss talk of discrimination against their Russian minorities, but discrimination is evident to casual visitors and residents alike. In Latvia and Estonia—even in Narva and in cities like Tallinn and Riga, which are nearly half Russian—one rarely sees signs in Russian. In regions of Estonia where Russians make up half or more of the population, Russian enjoys the status of a second official language—but only fifteen minutes a day of state television is broadcast in it. In Latvia 75 percent of television broadcasting must be in Latvian. This leaves most Baltic Russians to view the world through the Russian radio and television stations available in all three countries—a counterproductive and potentially dangerous state of affairs for Baltic governments. Russians complained to me that when they do exercise their rights to broadcast or publish in their own language, they often face harassment from the tax authorities and other regulatory bodies. The situation is especially acute in Latvia, where Russians must by law change even their names to conform with Latvian grammar and spelling traditions (turning "Ivan" into "Ivans," for example)—a humiliating and depersonalizing imposition. Professions from street sweeper to politician are assigned mandatory levels of linguistic proficiency which practitioners must attain and maintain, and a national language inspectorate monitors the mastery and use of Latvian by Russian residents on the job. The "illegal" use of Russian attracts fines, and may also result in closure of businesses or in surprise visits by the tax authorities.



All of this has incited animus among Baltic Russians toward their governments, and has indirectly, by engendering despair, led to high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse. (Almost a tenth of Narva's Russians—nearly a tenth of the city's population overall—are registered drug addicts.) Young Russians contend that they live under an "ethnocracy, not a democracy"; they have taken to referring to themselves as *inoplanetyane* ("extraterrestrials"); they complain that Balts will not hire them for jobs for which they are qualified; they feel spurned in the lands of their birth. Many would like to move to Russia but have no relations or contacts there. In the early 1990s tension was so acute in Narva that Russians even raised the notion of secession. Recent assaults by Estonians on Russian-speakers in northeastern Estonia have prompted Russians to circulate a petition demanding that Russian peacekeeping forces be stationed on Estonian soil. None of this bodes well for NATO membership, qualification for which is predicated to a great extent on internal stability, democracy, and a respect for human rights.

As I traveled around the Baltics, Russians repeatedly told me of their hope that the Baltic countries would join the European Union (in which their membership has been mooted for 2004) and forgo participation in NATO, which they view as an "enemy" organization—in part because of the Soviet-era propaganda with which they were brought up, and in part because of lingering anger at NATO's war in Yugoslavia. They banked on the EU's not tolerating abuses of minority rights and predicted that Baltic governments would be encouraged by membership in NATO to repress Russians or regard them as potential fifth columnists. Balts, for their part, referred to NATO membership as a matter of national survival while deriding the EU as a meddling promoter of onerous Western European standards. Public-opinion polls in all three countries reflect this ethnically skewed spread of support and opposition.

For a defense alliance serious questions arise from the Baltic states' treatment of their Russian minorities. If hostilities between NATO and Russia arose, to whom would Baltic Russians without citizenship turn if they felt threatened or oppressed? Could Russia exploit them to provoke dissent within NATO? How could states that deny them citizenship deserve their loyalty? On whose side would they fight? To the thousands of residents holding Russian passports in the Baltics, the answer to the last question is obvious.

Just as the Baltics are not relying on benign Russian intentions to safeguard their sovereignty, Western leaders should not ignore strategic risks and base their decisions about NATO expansion on Moscow's current anti-terrorist good will toward the alliance. This good will is currently being professed by the Kremlin as fervently as it is being denied by the Russian public, but it will probably dissipate as conflicts of interest re-emerge between Russia and members of the alliance. For example, tension could arise

over Taiwan, which the United States has a commitment to defend. Moscow was edging toward a strategic alliance with Beijing before September 11 (and may do so again, if relations with the West spoil), and China has taken an increasingly aggressive stance on unification. The presence of large populations of disgruntled Russian aliens in Estonia and Latvia, thousands of whom have military training and owe allegiance to Russia, on land that Moscow has traditionally regarded as its "window on the West" (and that formed part of Russia for nearly three centuries), may present nationalist Russian politicians with tempting opportunities for exploitation. Recall Hitler's use of the Germans in the Czechoslovak Sudetenland as a pretext for occupation prior to World War II. All these factors, plus Estonia's proximity to Saint Petersburg and the lack of signed border agreements with Russia, should preclude Estonia and Latvia from joining NATO. The isolation of the Kaliningrad exclave that would result from admitting Lithuania should preclude that country's entry into the alliance as well.

Arguments that Russia is weak and should therefore not figure in NATO's plans for expansion do not stand: Russia is still a nuclear power. Its potential as a spoiler, if not a destroyer, of international equilibrium should concern Western politicians. Humiliation stemming from NATO expansion into its Near Abroad may one day leave the Kremlin prey to nationalist sentiments among its public. Even diplomatically, admitting the Baltics into NATO makes no sense: NATO's expansion onto formerly Soviet soil now would leave little incentive for Moscow to cooperate with the West later. Furthermore, admitting the Baltic states may well "Finlandize" the alliance—that is, prompt the adoption of conciliatory policies toward Russia. Baltic members of NATO, eager to avoid unrest among large segments of their populations and disinclined to irritate their gigantic neighbor, might stymie decisive action by NATO toward Russia. Dissent racked a relatively homogenous NATO over intervention in Kosovo. What sort of accord could be reached if the security interests of the Baltics, both internal and external, had to be accommodated in a confrontation with Russia?

NATO planners must consider a future in which the anti-terrorist alliance between Russia and the West dissipates, and Moscow resumes policies contrary to Western interests. While encouraging Baltic accession to the EU, and the development of an EU military force compatible with NATO objectives, NATO should eschew expansion motivated by values and other secondary goals, and concentrate on its primary task—maintaining and defending the security of its current members. To be effective and cohesive as a military alliance, NATO must avoid being turned into a club that any country with a grudge against Russia may join—including countries with grudges as valid as those of the Baltics. Each new member should enhance the security of the present members—that should be the chief criterion for admission. The Baltics fail that test. ▀