

Romania's bid to join NATO in the first wave of enlargement: A preliminary assessment based on U.S. documents

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Abstract

Recent declassified documents from the Clinton library and the Department of State reveal how U.S. policymakers sought to preserve the confidence in NATO's promise of a gradual enlargement after the Cold War, while restricting the first round to a small group of the three strongest candidates, in order to make the process more acceptable to Moscow. Despite meeting the criteria for membership, the Baltics could not immediately join the Alliance because of Russia's opposition. A credible open door policy was therefore essential for avoiding the impression of a Russian veto over NATO decisions. The U.S. approach was to keep for later accession other promising candidates along with the Baltics, aiming to provide an assurance that the first round of enlargement would not also be the last. Short of having the credentials to qualify as a strong candidate, Romania was left in NATO's

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waiting room, despite the massive diplomatic efforts of the new government resulted from the 1996 elections.

“A country that was on no one’s NATO radar screen only a year ago, now finds itself at the center of the NATO storm, and is loving every minute of it, à la Brătianu at Versailles”.¹ With just a few days ahead of the Madrid summit of July 1997, the U.S. ambassador to Bucharest, Alfred H. Moses, was trying to capture, in his cable to Washington, Romania’s final push to be accepted for NATO membership in the first tranche of enlargement.² One month prior to the Madrid summit, the Clinton administration had already made public its decision to limit the initial round of NATO expansion to just three new members, the most qualified applicants, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.³ However, relying on some European support, notably from the French leader Jacques Chirac, the Romanian officials embarked on an effort to reverse the U.S. decision, creating a turmoil in the Atlantic Alliance. The U.S. position ultimately prevailed and Romania saw itself outside NATO for the next years.

The failure to join NATO at Madrid sparked a wave of disillusion in all corners of Romanian society, especially considering the massive amount of hope following the democratic change of government in November 1996. However, did

¹ Reference to the efforts of Prime-Minister Ionel Brătianu to secure the recognition of Romania’s new borders after WWI at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.

² U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 4204, “President Constantinescu’s meeting with Chancellor Kohl”, July 3, 1997, Clinton Digital Library (CDL), *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

³ John F. Harris, William Drozdiak, “Clinton limits initial expansion of NATO to three”, *Washington Post*, June 13, 1997.

Romania have a realistic chance to be included in the first wave of NATO enlargement? After all, as Ambassador Moses noted, Romania had less than a year to change perceptions among NATO allies and be considered as a serious contender for admission to the Alliance.

This paper will not attempt to assess Romania's readiness to join NATO in 1997, but will examine the U.S. decision in favor of a restricted first tranche of enlargement, based on newly declassified documents from the Clinton presidency on NATO expansion, especially memoranda of conversation (*memcons*). Notwithstanding the rationale behind it, the U.S. decision did have significant repercussions for Romania's immediate political evolution.

Without a clear perspective of achieving a greater goal such as Euro-Atlantic integration, coupled with the hardships of economic restructuring, the public's trust in democracy and government continued to decrease, fueling domestic political instability, slowing down reforms, and making more radical alternatives acceptable. In a period of three years after the Madrid decision, Romania underwent several episodes of acute internal unrest, culminating with another Mineriad in January 1999, and with one third of the population voting for the nationalist-populist Vadim Tudor in the presidential elections of 2000.

NATO expansion – between academic debates and policy options

NATO expansion represents one of the most controversial aspects of post-Cold War European history.⁴ Its motives and consequences became a subject of

⁴ James Goldgeier, Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Evaluating NATO enlargement: scholarly debates, policy implications, and roads not taken", *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 291-321. For a recent comprehensive collection of studies on NATO enlargement, from policymakers and

fierce academic debate and examination especially after Russian officials started denouncing Western decisions to expand the Atlantic Alliance as a root cause of tensions in mutual relations. Has the West failed to deliver the promise of building an inclusive new pan-European security system? Was the decision to enlarge NATO a symptom of America's post-Cold War hegemony? Is it correct to assess that the West took advantage of Russia's weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The questions of NATO expansion and redefinition of post-Cold War European security were widely debated in the 1990s.⁵ One of the most prominent critics was the architect of Cold War containment, George F. Kennan, who argued that NATO expansion would have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy, would inflame militaristic and anti-Western tendencies in Russian opinion and would bring up a new era of Cold War atmosphere to East-West relations.⁶ Other former high-ranking U.S. officials, such as Zbigniew

scholars alike, see Daniel S. Hamilton, Kristina Spohr (eds.), *Open door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic security after the Cold War*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

⁵ See Ronald D. Asmus, Richard L. Kugler, F. Stephen Larrabee, "Building a new NATO", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1993, pp. 28-40; Charles L. Glaser, "Why NATO is still best: future security arrangements for Europe", *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1993, pp. 5-50; Gunther Hellmann, Reinhard Wolf, "Neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and the future of NATO", *Security Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1993, pp. 3-43; John J. Mearsheimer, "The false promise of international institutions", *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994-1995, pp. 5-49; Michael E. Brown, "The flawed logic of NATO expansion", *Survival*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1995, pp. 34-52; Michael MccGwire, "NATO expansion: 'a policy error of historic importance'", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, pp. 23-42; John Lewis Gaddis, "History, grand strategy, and NATO enlargement", *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1998, pp. 145-151.

⁶ George F. Kennan, "A fateful error", *New York Times*, February 5, 1997.

Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, saw enlargement as a tool of avoiding disintegration of the Atlantic Alliance.⁷

Based on solid declassified historical evidence, a new scholarship has emerged in the last decade. One of the most disputed topics is an alleged Western assurance made to Soviet leaders not to expand NATO eastward in the context of negotiations for the reunification of Germany. The controversy first arose in the mid-1990s and is nowadays constantly raised by Vladimir Putin and leading Russian officials in order to validate Kremlin's actions and its military posture as reactions to NATO's deception.⁸

However, critics of this narrative, including many former U.S. policymakers, deny the existence of any such Western commitment and argue that the topic of NATO expansion beyond Germany never came up during the discussions on reunification, as Gorbachev himself recently acknowledged.⁹ The "no-eastward" pledge should therefore be viewed only in the context of the German reunification, which meant refraining from moving NATO infrastructure

⁷ Henry Kissinger, "Expand NATO now", *Washington Post*, December 19, 1994; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "NATO – expand or die", *New York Times*, December 28, 1994.

⁸ The controversy also resurfaced before the Madrid summit of 1997. See Michael R. Gordon, "The anatomy of a misunderstanding", *New York Times*, May 25, 1997. For Putin's allegations, see "Speech and the following discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; "Direct line with Vladimir Putin", April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>; "Interview to German newspaper *Bild*", part 1, January 11, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154>.

⁹ See Philip Zelikow, "NATO expansion wasn't ruled out", *International Herald Tribune*, August 10, 1995; George Bush, Brent Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, New York, Vintage Books, 1999, pp. 236-242. For Gorbachev's views, see *New Russia*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2017, pp. 284-288.

into the former GDR territory, an aspect that was actually codified in the “Two plus Four Agreement” of September 1990.¹⁰

While extending NATO membership to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries might not have been an issue of serious thought during the first half of 1990, other authors argue that the Soviet leadership was led to believe that such an evolution would not happen.¹¹ Moreover, in order to allay concerns about German reunification within NATO, Gorbachev received numerous assurances from Western leaders that Soviet interests would be protected by including the USSR in a comprehensive new European security system.

Gorbachev himself argued that NATO’s enlargement had violated the spirit of the statements and assurances made in 1990”, despite the absence of a

¹⁰ See Mark Kramer, “The myth of a no-NATO-enlargement pledge to Russia”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2009, pp. 39-61; Kristina Spohr, “Precluded or precedent-setting? The ‘NATO enlargement question’ in the triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow diplomacy of 1990–1991”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2012, pp. 4-54. On German reunification, see Frédéric Bozo, *Mitterrand, the end of the Cold War, and German unification*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2009; Alexander von Plato, *The end of the Cold War? Bush, Kohl, Gorbachev, and the reunification of Germany*, translated by Edith Burley, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Also see Part II in Daniel S. Hamilton, Kristina Spohr (eds.), *Exiting the Cold War, entering a new world*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2019.

¹¹ See the collection of documents by Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, “NATO expansion: what Gorbachev heard”, *National Security Archive (NSA) Briefing Book #613*, December 12, 2017. U.S. scholar Mary Elise Sarotte goes even further and emphasizes how new declassified evidence demonstrates that “the question of NATO expansion arose early in 1990 and entailed discussions of expansion not only to East Germany but also to Eastern Europe”. See Mary E. Sarotte, “Not one inch eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the origin of Russian resentment toward NATO enlargement in February 1990”, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2010, pp. 119-140; Mary E. Sarotte, “A broken promise? What the West really told Moscow about NATO expansion”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2014, pp. 90-97. Also see the exchange between Mark Kramer and Mary E. Sarotte, “No such promise”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 6, 2014, pp. 208-209.

formal deal.¹² While the Soviets expected the crafting of a mutual acceptable new European order after the end of the Cold War, the result was a NATO-centric security framework which ensured the continued U.S. preeminence in Europe.¹³ As one author argues: “the United States did not formally commit to forgo NATO expansion, but its efforts throughout 1990 to engage the Soviet Union implied the existence of a non-expansion deal”, which constitutes part of the “spirit” of the 1990 debates.¹⁴

At the same time, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union created a new geopolitical reality and a security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe. The first ones to start agitating for closer relations with NATO were the Eastern Europeans themselves, with the strongest voices coming especially from the countries later known as the Visegrad Group (Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia).¹⁵ Their calls for membership began to intensify

¹² Mikhail Gorbachev, *New Russia...*, p. 287.

¹³ For more comprehensive overviews, see Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: the struggle to create post-Cold War Europe*, rev. ed., Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2014; Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the world seemed new: George H. W. Bush and the end of the Cold War*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2017; William H. Hill, *No place for Russia: European security institutions since 1989*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018; Timothy Sayle, *Enduring alliance: a history of NATO and the postwar global order*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2019, chapter 10; Kristina Spohr, *Post wall, post square: rebuilding the world after 1989*, New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2020. Also see Marie-Pierre Rey, “Europe is our common home: a study of Gorbachev’s diplomatic concept”, *Cold War History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2004, pp. 33–65.

¹⁴ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or no deal? The end of the Cold War and the U.S. offer to limit NATO expansion”, *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2016, pp. 7–44. For critiques of his approach, see Correspondence with Richard W. Maass, “NATO non-expansion and German reunification”, *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2016/2017, pp. 197–200 and Correspondence with Mark Kramer, “NATO enlargement – was there a promise?”, *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2017, pp. 186–192.

¹⁵ Mary E. Sarotte, “The convincing call from Central Europe: let us into NATO”, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 March 2019.

soon thereafter, recognizing U.S. security guarantees as beneficial to the democratic and economic development of their countries, but also fearing the resurgence of Russian power. "Rejoining the West had been an important leitmotif of the revolutions of 1989", as one author has underscored.¹⁶

Speculation about the role of NATO in Central and Eastern Europe also began early in the first months of 1990 among top policymakers in Washington. Based on previous success, they saw NATO expansion as an opportunity to prevent instability and to consolidate democracy and free markets.¹⁷ Moreover, after securing the German reunification, U.S. and German officials began to take actions to prevent other alternative European structures to emerge as competitors to NATO and to maintain the Atlantic Alliance as the central pillar of a new European security architecture, under American leadership.¹⁸

The Persian Gulf War shifted foreign policy priorities in Washington. However, debates around the future of NATO and the new European security system continued. The Bush administration started to slowly open up NATO and to offer CEE countries a perspective of closer association. By the Rome summit of November 1991, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was developed

¹⁶ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's door: how the Alliance remade itself for a new era*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 11.

¹⁷ Paul van Hooft, "Land rush: American grand strategy, NATO enlargement, and European fragmentation", *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 530-553.

¹⁸ Mary E. Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. preeminence the 1990 deals to 'bribe the Soviets out' and move NATO in", *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2010, pp. 110-137. Also see Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry "The unraveling of the Cold War settlement", *Survival*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2009, pp. 39-62; Mary E. Sarotte, "In victory, magnanimity: US foreign policy, 1989-1991, and the legacy of prefabricated multilateralism", *International Politics*, vol. 48, no. 4-5, 2011, pp. 482-495; Vojtech Mastny, "Eastern Europe and the early prospects for EC/EU and NATO membership", *Cold War History*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 203-221.

as a framework for institutional dialogue with the CEE countries.¹⁹ By the end of its term, there was already a large consensus inside the Bush administration around the necessity of opening the Alliance's door.²⁰

Critics of NATO enlargement argue that it created a new dividing line between Russia and the West in post-Cold War Europe by increasing the security dilemma.²¹ However, there is no substantive evidence to argue that if the U.S. had decided not to extend its influence into Eastern Europe, Russia would have reciprocated restraint.²² The Russian rhetoric attempts to legitimize its actions in Georgia or Ukraine as pushbacks for Western decisions to expand its influence further towards Russia's borders.²³ Nothing, however, justifies aggression.

Moreover, Euro-Atlantic integration was the leading foreign policy goal for most CEE countries. Rejecting their calls would have meant a disregard for the Western principle of freely choosing one's alliance, enshrined in the Helsinki Final

¹⁹ Stephan Kieninger, "Opening NATO and engaging Russia: NATO's two tracks and the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council", in D. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door...*, pp. 57-69.

²⁰ Liviu Horowitz, "The George H.W. Bush administration's policies vis-à-vis Central Europe: from cautious encouragement to cracking open NATO's door", *Ibidem*, pp. 71-92. Joshua Shiffrin goes further than Horowitz and argues that Washington policymakers were even taking active steps to enact the policy of NATO expansion. See Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO enlargement, and suppressing the Soviet and Western European alternatives, 1990-1992", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 6-7, 2020, pp. 816-846.

²¹ For a recent perspective, see Rajan Menon, William Ruger, "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment", *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 371-400.

²² Andrey A. Sushentsov, William C. Wohlforth, "The tragedy of US-Russian relations: NATO centrality and the revisionists' spiral", *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 427-450.

²³ The most prominent advocate of this view is political scientist and offensive realist John J. Mearsheimer. See "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2014, pp. 77-89. Some authors argue that Putin's regime actually understands that geographic enlargement made NATO weaker and magnifies its negative reactions only for domestic political interests. See, Kimberly Marten, "NATO enlargement: evaluating its consequences in Russia", *International Politics*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2020, pp. 401-426.

Act of 1975, and a *de facto* continuation of Europe's division along former Cold War lines.²⁴ "NATO enlargement was driven by demand, not supply", as one author highlights.²⁵

NATO expansion – whether, how, when, and who

Soon after taking office, policymakers inside the Clinton administration started to build upon the work of their predecessors.²⁶ Facing mounting pressures from the Eastern European leaders, U.S. officials debated whether, how, and when to enlarge NATO.²⁷ The first strategic document defining the U.S. policy towards Central and Eastern Europe identified "economic and political challenges associated with domestic reform" as "chief threats" to security and stability in the region. Moreover, any perception of a security vulnerability could have undermined "democrats and reformers while strengthening the position of demagogues and conservative nationalists". American leadership was needed to ensure the vacuum was filled with "values, economic practices and systems of governance compatible with, not hostile to, fundamental Western interests". The stakes were high: "building a post-Cold War Europe characterized by stability and

²⁴ Michael Rühle, "NATO enlargement and Russia: myths and realities", *NATO Review*, July 1, 2014.

²⁵ Kirk Bennett, "What Gorbachev did not hear", *The American Interest*, March 12, 2018.

²⁶ Stephen J. Flanagan, "NATO from liaison to enlargement: A perspective from the State Department and the National Security Council 1990–1999", in D. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door...*, pp. 93-114.

²⁷ Mary E. Sarotte, "How to enlarge NATO? The debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95", *International Security*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2019, pp. 7-41.

prosperity” through “consolidation of a market-oriented, democratic zone, in the center of Europe and the extension of Western values and institutions eastward”.²⁸

The implications for Russia were a strong factor in designing the strategy. Clinton and his aides were preoccupied with the instability in Russia, especially after a constitutional crisis in the autumn of 1993 that threatened Boris Yeltsin’s position. Clinton was committed to engaging Russia and supporting Yeltsin’s reformist faction inside the Russian government.²⁹

After declaring in Warsaw over a few drinks that an eventual Polish membership in NATO was not contrary to Russia’s interest, Yeltsin immediately started to backtrack and, in a letter to Clinton, he argued for a “truly pan-European security system”. He warned that NATO expansion would be perceived in Russia “as a sort of neo-isolation of our country” and raised for the first time the issue about the “spirit” of the “Two plus Four Agreement”, which precluded “the option of expanding the NATO zone into the East”.³⁰

While Russia was asserting its position, the Clinton administration had no consensus on the pace of NATO enlargement. Anthony Lake and his team at the National Security Council favored an explicit commitment, but there were enough proponents of incremental steps, especially at the Pentagon, out of concern of

²⁸ Presidential Review Directive/NSC – 36, “U.S. policy toward Central and Eastern Europe”, July 5, 1993, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning Presidential Review Directive 36 (PRD 36)*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16201>.

²⁹ See a collection of selective documents, Svetlana Savranskaya, Mary Sarotte, “The Clinton-Yeltsin relationship in their own words”, *NSA Briefing Book #640*, October 2, 2018.

³⁰ Department of State (State) cable 309943, “Retranslation of Yeltsin letter on NATO expansion”, October 9, 1993, doc. 4 in S. Savranskaya, T. Blanton, “NATO expansion: what Yeltsin heard”, *NSA Briefing Book #621*, March 16, 2018; Also see Roger Cohen, “Yeltsin opposes expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe”, *New York Times*, October 2, 1993.

damaging relations with Russia and of eroding the position of democratic forces within the Russian government.³¹ The resources needed to extend security guarantees to new countries with poor military capacities and infrastructure were also a factor to be considered.

The resulting compromise was the Partnership for Peace (PfP), an instrument enabling practical bilateral cooperation with non-NATO countries on a wide-range of activities, including joint exercises and military reform, tailored to every partner's ambition. PfP was not excluding future membership, and was designed more as a tool to ease pressures and delay a definitive decision. When Secretary of State Warren Christopher presented the idea of PfP to Yeltsin, the Russian leader was delighted and compared it with "the stroke of a genius". "There could be no recommendation to ignore or exclude Russia from full participation in the future security of Europe", Christopher argued to Yeltsin.³²

It is not clear what Yeltsin understood from Christopher's message, but apparently, after the meeting, he concluded that NATO expansion was abandoned. Although Christopher claims that his message pointed out that PfP will lead to gradual expansion of NATO, and "alcohol fumes" might have impeded Yeltsin from understanding this essential aspect, other authors argue that the Secretary of State lead the Russian President and Foreign Minister Kozyrev to believe that PfP was an "alternative to NATO expansion, rather than a precursor

³¹ Jenonne Walker, "Enlarging NATO: The initial Clinton years", in D. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door...*, pp. 263-276.

³² SECTO cable 17027 from USDEL Secretary in Ukraine, "Secretary Christopher's meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/93, Moscow", October 25, 1993, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

to it".³³ Nevertheless, Christopher's position was clear. In a meeting between Clinton and the Italian Prime Minister, Christopher insisted "the Alliance must thrust eastward" and that "we must manage NATO expansion in a way that does not isolate Russia".³⁴

The PfP was launched at the Brussels NATO summit, in early January 1994. In the communiqué, Allied leaders welcomed NATO's eastward expansion, "as part of an evolutionary process, taking into account political and security developments in the whole of Europe".³⁵ The PfP was therefore a first step in a broader process that in the long-term was going to lead to NATO expansion. The phraseology was deliberately left ambiguous so that both the adherents and the opponents of a clear commitment to enlargement could interpret it according to their own views.

Most of the CEE countries were disappointed with the results of the NATO summit because they saw PfP as a "second-class waiting room" for membership. Clinton and his aides were nonetheless devoted to continue the process. After the summit, he went to Prague to meet the leaders of the Visegrad countries and assured them "the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members

³³ See S. Savranskaya, T. Blanton, "NATO expansion: what Yeltsin heard", *National Security Archive Briefing Book* #621, March 16, 2018. Also, see James Goldgeier, "Promises made, promises broken? What Yeltsin was told about NATO in 1993 and why it matter", *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016.

³⁴ Memcon, "Meeting with Prime Minister Carlo Ciampi of Italy", Oval Office, September 17, 1993, 11:15 am - 12:15 pm, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57563>.

³⁵ "Partnership for Peace: Invitation Document", Press Release M-1(1994) 002, Brussels, January 11, 1994, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_24468.htm.

but when and how”.³⁶ Clinton conferred with the Czech President Vaclav Havel that PfP establishes “a track that will lead to NATO membership” and it would “not draw another line dividing Europe a few hundred miles east”.³⁷

Similarly, in his one-on-one meeting with Yeltsin at the Kremlin, Clinton presented the merits of the PfP as achieving “something that has never been done since the rise of the nation state itself – a Europe truly integrated and not divided”.³⁸ “Talk of PfP as a possible cloak for NATO expansion causes difficulties” for Russia, cautioned Kozyrev. “Russia was a great power and wanted to be treated differently from countries like Bulgaria or Romania”, added the Russian Foreign Minister.³⁹ “Russia has to be the first country to join NATO”, “then the others from Central and Eastern Europe can come in”, was Yeltsin’s wishful thinking about the future of NATO and European security.⁴⁰

On the other hand, the CEE leaders were not satisfied with holding room status. Polish President Lech Walesa was the most flamboyant. “The West should use the window of opportunity it has to expand its security bulwark eastward”, he

³⁶ “The President’s News Conference with Visegrad Leaders in Prague”, January 12, 1994, *Public Papers of the President of the United States: William J. Clinton: 1994*, Book 1, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995, p. 40.

³⁷ Memcon, “The President’s meeting with Czech leaders”, Prague Castle, January 11, 1994, doc. 11 in S. Savranskaya, T. Blanton, “NATO expansion: what Yeltsin heard”, *NSA Briefing Book #621*, March 16, 2018.

³⁸ Memcon, “One-on-One Meeting with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia”, The Kremlin, January 13, 1994, , CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning President Clinton’s Trip to Europe in January 1994*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/58577>.

³⁹ SECTO cable 10019 from USDEL Secretary, “Secretary Christopher’s January 13 meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev”, January 16, 1994, Department of State, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), doc. no. C06548784, case no. M-2017-11651.

⁴⁰ U.S. Embassy Moscow cable 1457, “President’s dinner with President Yeltsin – January 14, 1994”, January 20, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C06694488, case no. F-2017-13804.

thought. "It is only a matter of time before Russia recovers from its current chaos and reverts to historical type, dominating and occupying neighboring countries", added Walesa.⁴¹

It soon became apparent that the U.S. policy of preserving an inclusive partnership with Yeltsin's Russia while also securing the Western aspirations of the Central and East Europeans was not sustainable. Russia wanted to be America's equal and to establish a condominium to ensure world peace, a status that instead would have eroded the security of the CEE countries, who feared a resurgence of Russian imperialism and a return of great power politics based on spheres of influence. It was an implicit but sober realization that a new NATO-centric European security system was emerging, with no place for Russia in it. Soon, Yeltsin and the Kremlin elite started an active pushback on the idea of NATO expansion, particularly in the context of Yeltsin's quest for domestic legitimacy, the Russian leader seeking to be perceived as a defender of the national interest against the Western "neo-containment".⁴²

Clinton was still determined to accommodate Russia as much as possible without giving it a veto over NATO expansion. During their Washington summit of September 1994, Clinton told Yeltsin "there was no timetable for NATO expansion". Therefore, "the Russians came away with the impression that expansion was at least a few years away, probably not before 2000".⁴³

⁴¹ U.S. Embassy Warsaw cable 5044, "A glass half full in Warsaw", April 11, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C06697081, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁴² Sergey Radchenko, "Nothing but humiliation for Russia: Moscow and NATO's eastern enlargement, 1993-1995", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 6-7, 2020, pp. 769-815.

⁴³ State cable 266647, "Official-Informal no. 62", October 1, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C06546022, case no. M-2017-11537.

The year 1994 also witnessed a major shift in the American political landscape. Running on a platform that also endorsed NATO enlargement, the Republicans managed to get control of both Houses of Congress. This new political development increased the pressure on Clinton to discard the “phased approach” and to move decisively towards “full expansion”, meaning Article 5 guarantees for new members.⁴⁴

The NSC thinking was to keep as a long-term objective the development of “an integrated and inclusive security system for Europe, including but going beyond NATO expansion”, while in the medium term to proceed with NATO expansion “including the more advanced CEEs, with the prospect of further expansion to those not admitted in the first tranche”. In parallel, an institutionalized relationship between NATO and Russia had to be established.⁴⁵ On December 1, 1994, NATO ministers finally moved on to the “how” question of enlargement and decided to commission a study detailing the principles to guide the process and the implications of membership.⁴⁶

The Russian reaction was furious. Foreign Minister Kozyrev unexpectedly refused to sign the Individual Partnership Programme within the PfP although he went to Brussels for this purpose.⁴⁷ Furthermore, a few days after the NAC meeting, at the CSCE summit in Budapest, Yeltsin warned about Europe plunging

⁴⁴ Mary E. Sarotte, “How to enlarge NATO?...”, *passim*.

⁴⁵ Memorandum for Anthony Lake from Alexander Vershbow, October 4, 1994, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57563>.

⁴⁶ See “Final Communiqué of North Atlantic Council Ministerial meeting”, Brussels, December 1, 1994, para. 6, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c941201a.htm>.

⁴⁷ Andrei Zagorski, “Russia and NATO in the 1990s” in D. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door...*, p. 475.

into a “cold peace” because of NATO expansion.⁴⁸ Yeltsin was particularly worried about the potential domestic political fallout especially because he was expecting a tough presidential election in 1996.⁴⁹ Trying to explain Yeltsin’s outburst, his foreign policy advisor admitted that “we had the feeling the matter of NATO expansion had been stopped” and that “a revival of the old Red Army spirit” was possible in the military if NATO proceeded forward with expansion plans.⁵⁰

Shortly after the Budapest fiasco, Vice President Gore was sent to Moscow to clear up any misunderstanding. His message to Yeltsin was that “1995 will be a year of studies and consultations”.⁵¹ The Americans were however already moving to the “when” aspect of the NATO expansion decision.

By the summer of 1995, Yeltsin was probably fully realizing that he would not be able to impede NATO expansion: “I see nothing but humiliation for Russia”, was one of Yeltsin’s candid remarks.⁵² While the Russian President was still pleading for a “new model of security in Europe”, without NATO as a central factor, Clinton promised a “gradual, careful, transparent, non-discriminatory” process, “not directed against any state”. Yeltsin had to settle with just a promise

⁴⁸ Dean E. Murphy, “Broader NATO may bring ‘Cold Peace’ Yeltsin warns”, *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1994.

⁴⁹ Just before the NAC meeting, Yeltsin sent a letter to Clinton in which he conveyed that starting the negotiations on NATO expansion “in the middle of next year” will be interpreted as “the beginning of a new split of Europe”. The letter was dated November 29, 1994. See State cable 324883, “Official-Informal no. 248”, December 6, 1994, doc. 3 in S. Savranskaya, M. Sarotte, “The Clinton-Yeltsin relationship in their own words”, *NSA Briefing Book #640*, October 2, 2018.

⁵⁰ U.S. Embassy Moscow cable 36374, “December 15 Talbott-Ryurikov meeting on NATO, Chechnya”, December 16, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C06694734, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁵¹ State cable 37089, “December 21 NAC: Guidance for discussion of the Vice President’s visit to Russia”, December 21, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C05314191, case no. F-2012-25789.

⁵² Memcon, “Summary report on One-on-One meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin”, The Kremlin, May 10, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C18148079, case no. M-2017-11528.

from Clinton not to admit new members before the Russian presidential elections of June 1996.⁵³

The “Study on NATO enlargement” was finally published in early September 1995. Aspirant countries now had a guiding book with criteria to fill if they wanted to join the Alliance. Yeltsin continued to complain, criticizing the study and asserting that NATO expansion is “pushing Russia towards the periphery of Europe”.⁵⁴ “Russia will rise again”, predicted Yeltsin, expressing his discontent about what he perceived as an unfair treatment by the U.S.⁵⁵

After the Russian elections, the U.S. officials accelerated again the discussions on the future of NATO and relations with Russia. The intention was to parallel the expansion process with the establishment of an institutional framework for NATO-Russia consultations and with confidence and security building measures, including the adaptation of the CFE Treaty.⁵⁶

Furthermore, with just a few weeks ahead of his own electoral test, Clinton decided to put an end to the “when” issue and declared “America’s goal” for NATO to have by 1999, on its 50th anniversary, the first “group of countries” as “full-fledge” members.⁵⁷ There was only one question remaining: who will be part

⁵³ Memcon, “The Presidential One-on-One”, The Kremlin, May 9, 1995, 6 p.m., FOIA, doc. no. C06697100, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁵⁴ See Yeltsin’s letter to Clinton, January 26, 1996, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101238>.

⁵⁵ U.S. Embassy Moscow cable 10123, April 12, 1996, “Yeltsin-Talbott meeting”, FOIA, doc. no. C06697702, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁵⁶ For more elements, see Alexander Vershbow, “Present at the transformation: an insider’s reflection on NATO enlargement, NATO-Russia relations, and where we go from here”, in D. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door...*, pp. 432-437.

⁵⁷ “Remarks to the community in Detroit”, October 22, 1996, *Public Papers: William J. Clinton: 1996*, Book 2, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997, p. 1985.

of the first wave of NATO's post-Cold War enlargement? The answer was going to be revealed at the next NATO summit, scheduled for Madrid, in early July 1997.

Romania and the competition for NATO membership

Ever since the idea of NATO expansion was first outlined, the general understanding was that the process should unfold in several rounds or tranches. The 1995 Study stipulated that "enlargement will occur through a gradual, deliberate, and transparent process" and it "will be decided on a case-by-case basis", with some nations attaining membership before others.⁵⁸ This provision immediately started an unofficial competition among former communist countries to receive an invitation for joining the Alliance in the first tranche of enlargement. There was a strong sentiment that missing the first round would bring only uncertainties. Nobody knew how the political situation in Europe and Russia would develop and if a second wave would ever happen.

The Visegrad group of countries from Central Europe stood out as natural favorites for admission in the first tranche. In mid-1993, while arguing that NATO should eventually admit all the former Warsaw Pact states of Central and Eastern Europe, Secretary General Manfred Wörner recognized "the timing would vary – e.g. Visegrad states first, Bulgaria and Romania much later".⁵⁹ President Clinton's decision to arrange for a summit only with the Visegrad countries leaders after launching the PfP in early January 1994 also illustrated clearly their leading

⁵⁸ See paragraph 7 of the "Study on NATO enlargement", September 3, 1995, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm.

⁵⁹ State cable 271405, "Woerner on expanding NATO membership", September 3, 1993, FOIA, doc. no. C06555192, case no. M-2017-12017.

position on the list of potential future NATO members. “Hungary and other Visegrad countries will likely be among the first”, was the assurance to the Hungarian Foreign Minister coming from Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the man in charge of Clinton’s NATO policy.⁶⁰

The leading position of the Visegrad countries was based on the much better situation they have inherited from the communist regimes which allowed them to lead the way in terms of economic reform and democratization. Furthermore, they also articulated the most resolute messages in favor of joining NATO and of a strong U.S presence in Europe. Recovering from the harshest dictatorship of the Soviet bloc, post-communist Romania was unable to keep up the pace and lagged behind its former allies. Furthermore, Romania’s relation with the West was marked by hesitations and a negative perception of its domestic politics, especially in the context of two violent Mineriads, in June 1990 and September 1991.⁶¹

While the West was expecting more decisive steps towards democratic and economic reforms, the progress in Romania was very slow.⁶² Instead of acknowledging their shortcomings, the officials in Bucharest were accusing the West of a “discriminatory treatment” of Romania, based on a “tacit agreement” to pull out from the zone of Soviet interest only Poland, Hungary and

⁶⁰ State cable 276618, “UNGA bilateral: Deputy Secretary Talbott’s meeting with Hungarian Foreign Minister Kovacs”, October 12, 1994, FOIA, doc. no. C06694730, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁶¹ Iulian Toader, “The United States, Romania, and the new transatlantic security framework at the end of the Cold War (1990-1991)”, *RJHIS*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, pp. 89-101.

⁶² See Robert L. Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 245-253.

Czechoslovakia.⁶³ However, while the Visegrad countries were sending clear and strong messages in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration, the Romanians were flirting with ideas of larger European security arrangements at a time when the Americans were already acting to prevent the emergence of competitors for NATO.⁶⁴

The Romanian government started looking seriously at NATO as an instrument towards Western integration only by 1992, and especially after the presidential and parliamentary elections, which brought an increased stability in domestic politics. Facing severe crises and instability around its borders, in Moldova or Yugoslavia, and with most of its former Warsaw Pact allies lobbying aggressively for NATO membership, Romania was at risk of remaining in a grey area of Europe, with low perspectives of economic development. The Romanian officials were therefore determined to regain lost ground, since the answer to the “who” question of NATO expansion had not yet been formulated. Therefore, Romania was the first among its peers to join the PfP in January 1994.⁶⁵ Even if the Visegrad countries, better positioned for membership, were disappointed by the U.S. decision to delay NATO expansion, Romania saw the PfP as an opportunity to meet membership criteria.

Romania’s negative image abroad was however a strong impediment for developing the same level of relations with the United States as the other Central and Eastern European countries. Five years after the Revolution of December 1989,

⁶³ See Ion Iliescu, *Fragmente de viață și istorie trăită*, Bucharest, Litera, 2011, p. 170; Adrian Năstase, *Romanian-American partnership: my contribution*, Bucharest, Monitorul Oficial, 2013, pp. 24-27 and 32.

⁶⁴ Mihail Dobre, *România la sfârșitul Războiului Rece*, Bucharest, Ed. Enciclopedică, 2011, pp. 239-255.

⁶⁵ “Romania joins in NATO plan, first in East Europe to do so”, *New York Times*, January 27, 1994, p. A8.

President Ion Iliescu was still awaiting to be received at the White House by a sitting U.S. President. The Romanian ambassador to Washington did not hesitate to communicate Iliescu's frustration of being "snubbed" by the U.S., while his political opponents and the leaders of "lesser" neighboring countries, such as President Snegur of Moldova, "were welcomed with open arms".⁶⁶ Especially problematic for Romania's image abroad was Iliescu's decision to form a governing coalition with three extremist parties. Even if his followers would point to political pragmatism and the necessity of having a stable government in face of the opposition's intransigence in refusing to govern with Iliescu's party, the arguments were not persuasive for the U.S. officials.⁶⁷

In Washington, relations with neighbors and improving the situation of the ethnic Hungarian minority were considered essential aspects for maintaining chances of joining NATO. As other countries of the region, "Romania would need to choose whether to come to terms with its history and move ahead, or else be dominated by it", was the main U.S. message.⁶⁸ Even if the U.S. officials were praising Romania as the best participant in the PfP, the Romanian leaders were concerned about efforts in the U.S. Congress to "create artificial divisions in Central Europe between Romania and other countries on the matter of NATO expansion". If the Visegrad states alone were admitted to NATO, the Romanian

⁶⁶ U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 788, "Ambassador's meeting with Ambassador Botez – six markers for better relations", February 1, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C05485698, case no. F-2013-02859.

⁶⁷ U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 2062, "Assistant Secretary Holbrooke's February 23 meeting with Chamber of Deputies President Nastase", February 27, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C05635500, case no. F-2014-11907.

⁶⁸ U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 2218, "EUR Assistant Secretary A/S Holbrooke's meeting with President Iliescu", March 27, 1995, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

Defense Minister argued, “events in Central Europe would get out of control”.⁶⁹ The Romanian leaders were concerned about potential spillovers in domestic politics of a situation in which Hungary would become a NATO member but Romania would be turned down, especially considering the fragile balance of the inter-ethnic relations in Transylvania.

Iliescu finally managed to get a working visit to Washington in September 1995, after he attended the annual UN General Assembly session in New York. This time, Romania was coming to the White House with a firm and clear message in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration. Iliescu reported to Clinton the existence of a national consensus in support of Romania’s NATO membership. At the same time, Iliescu did not miss the chance to dramatize again the prospect of decoupling Romania from Poland and Hungary. “We all must go together”, insisted Iliescu.⁷⁰ For the American side, progress on inter-ethnic relations continued to be an issue of top priority.⁷¹

Romania was now determined to put all its energy on getting America’s recognition.⁷² However, despite some progress and positive steps such as concluding the bilateral treaty with Hungary, the image abroad of Iliescu’s government was still negative. Romania’s “political-economic situation argued

⁶⁹ State cable 156114, “A/S Holbrooke’s June 20 meeting with Romanian Defense Minister Tinca”, June 28, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C05485684, case no. F-2013-02859.

⁷⁰ State cable 234298, “Memcon: President Clinton’s meeting with President Iliescu on September 26”, October 3, 1995, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

⁷¹ Draft State cable, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s September 29 meeting with Romanian President Iliescu”, September 30, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C06699227, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁷² State cable 30782, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s February 1 meeting with new Romanian ambassador”, February 15, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06697787, case no. F-2017-13804.

against” its early accession to NATO, was the Western predominant opinion.⁷³ “We cannot say we are committed to Romania being in the first tranche”, was the U.S. message conveyed by Talbott to Foreign Minister Melescanu.⁷⁴

Romania found itself in a better situation after the elections of November 1996 which brought to power the opposition led by Emil Constantinescu. The new government formed around the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR) set out attaining NATO membership at the Madrid summit as its top priority, and moved quickly to change Romania’s image abroad. The government was determined to take decisive actions to show its commitment to reforms after years of stagnation and was putting forward messages that were illustrating the Romanian society’s overwhelming support for NATO membership and Romania’s advancement towards democracy after the first post-communist peaceful transition of power.⁷⁵

Even if the time was short until the Madrid summit, Constantinescu and the CDR government started immediately an extensive international lobby campaign in the attempt to attain Romania’s admittance in the first tranche of NATO enlargement. Romania was not alone in the process. Even before the CDR’s electoral victory, Romania was relying on a strong support from Paris.⁷⁶ “It would be unjust and dangerous not to include Romania in the first round”, was the

⁷³ State cable 225191, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s October 2 meeting with Italian Defense Minister Andreatta”, October 29, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698723, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁷⁴ State cable 225167, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s meeting with Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Melescanu”, October 29, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698698, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁷⁵ State cable 255193, “NACC Ministerial December 11, 1996, Brussels: Meeting with Baltic/CEE ministers”, December 14, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06549805, case no. M-2017-11708.

⁷⁶ U.S. Embassy Paris cable 20001, “Official-informal”, September 6, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06549749, case no. M-2017-11705.

message of the French President Jacques Chirac for the Americans.⁷⁷ British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind was also acknowledging that “keeping Romania out of the first accession group on political grounds” was “now more difficult than before elections”. While Rifkind was leaning against Romania’s accession in the first wave of enlargement, it was “hard to work out a reason why to keep Romania out”.⁷⁸

The queue for NATO membership was quite long, which complicated the decision on who should be admitted in the first tranche. As the other Visegrad countries, Slovakia was also for a long time at the forefront of the queue. Slovakia was however gradually marginalized after the nationalist-populist government of Vladimir Mečiar slipped into corruption and authoritarianism.⁷⁹

Bulgaria was another former Warsaw Pact member that became distanced from the objective of NATO integration when a new Socialist government decided to be more attentive to Russian concerns.⁸⁰ With less than a year until the Madrid summit, Bulgaria was still examining if NATO membership was in its national interest.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Memcon, “Talbot-Chirac meeting in Paris”, January 14, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06702762, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁷⁸ U.S. Embassy London cable 00657, “Deputy Secretary’s 1/13 meetings with Foreign Secretary Rifkind and Foreign Office officials”, January 17 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06551532, case no. M-2017-11846.

⁷⁹ State cable 194901, “Acting Secretary Talbot’s meeting with Slovak Parliament Chairman Ivan Gasparovic”, September 19, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698252, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁸⁰ State cable 047507, “Bulgarian FonMin Pirinski affirms commitment to reforms”, February 25, 1995, FOIA, doc. no. C17798556, case no. F-2007-03885.

⁸¹ State cable 210916, “FM Pirinski’s meeting with Acting Secretary Talbot”, October 9, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698810, case no. F-2017-13804.

If the chances of Slovakia and Bulgaria to be admitted in the first tranche were absent because of domestic reasons, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) were candidates with a strong background of political and economic reforms, but still with no prospects of being invited to join the Alliance at Madrid, this time because of geopolitical reasons. Following the example of the Visegrad format, the Baltics maintained a close coordination among themselves in order to be more persuasive when presenting their case for NATO membership. However, their status as former subjects of the USSR and their geographical proximity to Russia made it difficult for them to be admitted in the first tranche. The Clinton administration had no appetite for increasing Russian antagonism towards NATO enlargement. The Baltics were in fact aware of this challenge, as the Lithuanian President put it: “there is less concern about when we join NATO. But we wish to know that we will get there eventually”.⁸²

In addition to Romania, just one other candidate had genuine chances of being admitted to NATO in the first tranche. Slovenia was the first republic to split from Yugoslavia and was making the greatest progress among the Balkan countries.⁸³ While the “Visegrad three” (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic) countries stood out as clear favorites, the NATO decision at Madrid was going to revolve around the question of whether to extend invitations for membership to five states rather than three, by including both Slovenia and Romania.

⁸² State cable 136326, “Meetings with Presidents Meri of Estonia, Ulmanis of Latvia, and Brazauskas of Lithuania”, July 1, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698302, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁸³ State cable 205015, “Conversation between the Deputy Secretary and Slovenian Foreign Minister Kracun”, October 1, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698772, case no. F-2017-13804.

During the first six months of 1997, both Slovenia and Romania undertook a massive diplomatic campaign for receiving invitations to join NATO at the Madrid summit. Romania's efforts were focused especially on convincing the U.S. on the merits of joining the Alliance in the first tranche, the Americans being the main proponents of a limited first round of enlargement. At the beginning of 1997, while the question of adding Slovenia in the first tranche was still open for Washington, the prospects of including Romania were rather skeptical.⁸⁴

Romania put forward arguments such as the nation's overwhelming support for NATO membership, the new government's commitment to reforms, the size of the military or the geopolitical significance of its location in Europe. Romania was also relying on the strong French support. Jacques Chirac did not miss any opportunity to tout his support for Romania's NATO accession. Despite French pressures, the Americans still "questioned whether Romania was up to the level of other candidates" for NATO membership.⁸⁵

The U.S. officials were suspecting that the price of Chirac's endorsement was America's substitution for France as Romania's preferred Western partner.⁸⁶ The Romanian government was however already starting to shift its foreign policy on securing a special partnership with the U.S. During his visit to Washington in April 1997, Foreign Minister Adrian Severin expressed to Secretary of State Albright Romania's desire to build a special relationship with America. Romania

⁸⁴ State cable 21367, "UK Political Director Greenstock's consultations with Deputy Secretary Talbott on NATO-Russia", February 5, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06702980, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁸⁵ U.S. Embassy Paris cable 3878, "Secretary's meeting with French President Jacques Chirac, February 17, 1997", February 19, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06549850, case no. M-2017-11714.

⁸⁶ U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 1247, "Chirac visit", February 27, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

was ready to bring its share in providing a pillar of stability in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.⁸⁷

A credible open door policy

When evaluating the readiness to join the Alliance, the U.S. was putting the highest price on the level of political and economic reforms as a guarantee of the ability to meet the demands of membership and of ensuring the success of the enlargement process. Unambiguous success was critical to maintaining the Alliance's integrity and ensuring the continuation of the enlargement process.⁸⁸ Success meant that NATO would be economically prepared to absorb an expanded membership, that the new members would be able to fulfill their military obligations from an economic point of view, and that no political objections would be met, since the NATO enlargement had to be approved by a 2/3 majority in the U.S. Senate.

However, there were candidates who had to wait for the next rounds of enlargement, despite meeting the accession criteria. The Baltics were leaders in reforms and the Americans were therefore sensible not to let them feel excluded from the process of NATO integration. Clinton and his aides were strongly committed to keep the NATO door open for the Baltics.⁸⁹ However, if the Baltics met the criteria and were not admitted in the first round, the peril was to

⁸⁷ State cable 97074, "The Secretary's meeting with Romanian Foreign Minister Severin", May 23, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06703158, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁸⁸ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's door...*, p. 216.

⁸⁹ State cable 77946, "The Deputy Secretary's meeting with Estonian Foreign Minister Kallas, March 25", April 16, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06697970, case no. F-2017-13804.

undermine the credibility of the enlargement process by giving the impression of a Russian veto over NATO decisions.

Because it could not invite in the first round all candidates who met the criteria, the most important aspect for the U.S. was to preserve the credibility of the open door policy. The candidate countries had to trust the U.S. verbal commitments that the first new members to join the Alliance would not be the last. In the process of deciding which aspirant countries would be admitted at Madrid, the U.S. officials paid special consideration on how NATO could make good on its assurances that the door will be left open for new membership.⁹⁰

During consultations on the course of several months, the emerging predominant view among officials from the Clinton administration was that keeping the first wave limited to the truly strongest candidates would be in fact the best approach to ensure success and thus guarantee the credibility of the enlargement process. Ronald Asmus has best described the U.S. dilemma:

“A country like Estonia was much further along in terms of reform than Romania and, arguably, at about the same level as Slovenia. Bringing in Romania but excluding Estonia ran the risk of making a mockery of the principle of performance or our insistence that Russia did not have a veto over Alliance decisions”.⁹¹

If NATO gave the impression that it was naming at Madrid every conceivable candidate, the anxiety among those states not included in the first group would have increased, inducing the perception that the door had just closed

⁹⁰ U.S. Mission NATO cable 615, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s meeting with NATO SYG Solana”, January 24, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06697945, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁹¹ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO’s door...*, p. 216.

“in their faces”.⁹² However, if aspirants with real prospects of joining NATO and with high stakes for other European allies, such as Slovenia and Romania, were kept in the waiting room, it would have maximized allied support for a strong open door package.⁹³ As a result, all the other candidates, especially the Baltics, would have been reassured that NATO’s door remained open and the first tranche of enlargement would be followed by a second one at some point in time.

“Our first concern is that the first [wave] shall not be last”, Clinton emphasized in a conversation with British Prime Minister Tony Blair. “If there are five, no one will believe in a second round”, was the predominant feeling among U.S. officials.⁹⁴ From the American point of view, Romania did not yet have “enough of a track record” to be sure that it “could fulfill the essential obligations of Alliance membership”. If Romania was admitted but it was seen as marginal in terms of its qualifications, “other candidates will not believe there will be a second wave”, Clinton pointed out to Chirac. The dilemma was “whether the other candidates would be more convinced if Romania was accepted that there would not be a second round, even though they are as qualified as Romania”.⁹⁵

The French President was not buying the American arguments. “Everyone knows there will be a continuing process of enlargement, whether or not Romania is in the first group”, he argued. Chirac considered important to signal the Western

⁹² State cable 225173, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s October 1 meeting with Hungarian Foreign Minister Kovacs”, October 29, 1996, FOIA, doc. no. C06698715, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁹³ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO’s door...*, p. 218.

⁹⁴ State cable 113437, “Memorandum of Conversation – Luncheon meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, May 29, 1997”, June 17, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06547583, case no. M-2017-11597.

⁹⁵ Memcon, “President’s Meeting with French President Jacques Chirac”, Elysee Palace, May 27, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning Memcons and Telcons with French President Jacques Chirac*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100539>.

support for the new government's commitment to democratic and economic reforms, and to reward Romania's efforts to settle its historic differences with neighbors.⁹⁶ Romania's geographic position to enforce NATO's southern flank was also important.

Because of the passion which the whole society invested in the quest for NATO membership, the French were very concerned that leaving Romania out of the Alliance would weaken the government's position and would induce a "psychological trauma" in the country, with real political consequences. The French were particularly concerned about a potential reinforcement of the nationalist movement if Romania would be left behind, while Hungary would join.⁹⁷ In other words, if Romania would fail to receive an invitation for NATO membership in the first wave, there was a risk of derailing from the path towards democracy, an argument that was also advanced by Slovenia.⁹⁸

The British diplomacy was also attentive to such implications. Shortly after Constantinescu's presidential victory in November 1996, the UK Embassy to Bucharest was stressing that Romania's ability to "preserve with the reforms needed to lock itself into the European democratic family" was going to be influenced by the Western policy on EU and NATO enlargement: "Romania may

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ Memcon Samuel Berger, Assistant to President for National Security Affairs – Jean-David Levitte, Diplomatic Adviser to French President Chirac, The White House, January 24, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06704394, case no. F-2017-13804.

⁹⁸ State cable 87601, "Conversation between Acting Secretary Talbott and Slovenian Prime Minister Drnovsek", May 9, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06702944, case no. F-2017-13804.

not be a front-runner for early membership, but a policy which simply consigns it to also-ran status risks reversing the democratic strides it has just taken".⁹⁹

However, the Americans were unwilling to consider precisely this kind of negative argument when evaluating a candidate's readiness to join the Alliance. The Americans did not want to "jettison the performance principle to meet the short-term political needs of a specific government". Furthermore, "if a country's argument for getting into NATO was that it would self-destruct if it did not, that was a reason not to invite it", with the Slovak negative example still on everyone's mind.¹⁰⁰ NATO was not a "charity organization", and Romania needed a longer track record of reforms, not threats "to commit national suicide if not immediately admitted". It was not clear yet whether Romania was "permanently established as a democracy with an open economy".¹⁰¹ As Madeleine Albright explained to Foreign Minister Severin, NATO membership was not a "gift" for good behavior, but an illustration of a strong commitment to fulfill military obligations.¹⁰²

The Madrid compromise

The U.S. presented its decision in favor of a small group approach at the end of May 1997, during the Sintra NATO ministerial, in Portugal. The best way to serve the Alliance's interests was to start the enlargement process with the strongest candidates, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright emphasized during

⁹⁹ UK Embassy Bucharest telegram 312, "Romanian presidential elections", November 18, 1996, The National Archives, Kew, *UK/Romanian relations: internal situation; part 3*, Reference: PREM 19/6228.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's door...*, p. 216.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Embassy Ankara cable 5245, "DepSec Talbot's breakfast meeting with MFAU/S Oymen", June 3, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06703165, case no. F-2017-13804.

¹⁰² State cable 97074, "The Secretary's meeting with Romanian Foreign Minister Severin", May 23, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06703158, case no. F-2017-13804.

the meeting. Allies had to be convinced that new members were irreversibly committed to the values NATO was pledging to defend.¹⁰³

Even if the U.S. did not name any favorite, it was evident that the small group approach favored only the accession of the “Visegrad three”. The U.S. was however the only proponent of this approach, with public support only from Iceland and background sympathy from the UK. At the same time, the U.S. was the backbone of the Atlantic Alliance and its decision carried the heaviest weight. Most of the other European allies were adopting a wait-and-see approach.

While the French continued to lobby for Romania, Slovenia was also relying on a strong support from Italy. Because Slovenia had more chances and a better image than Romania, the Italians were trying to convince the Americans not to link the two candidates.¹⁰⁴ However, such an approach was not sustainable from the U.S. point of view. Supporting four countries was likely to be an untenable compromise position and would have increased the pressure to admit five.¹⁰⁵ German Chancellor Kohl’s position was perceived as essential for developing the final allied decision at Madrid on the number of new NATO members. Germany was however publicly evasive and cautious not to induce a strain in relations with France.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO’s door...*, p. 219.

¹⁰⁴ Draft State cable, “Deputy Secretary Talbott’s meeting with Italian Ambassador Salleo, 5/22”, May 23, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06703291, case no. F-2017-13804.

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO’s door...*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Embassy Bonn cable 7047, “Chancellor Kohl and Romania’s NATO candidacy”, June 12, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

Wishing to undermine eventual French and Italian pressures on the other Europeans, on June 12 the Clinton administration publicly announced its decision to support only Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic for NATO membership in the first wave of enlargement. The U.S. was straightforward about the central factor for limiting the number of new members to three: “a smaller group of strongest among several promising candidates increased the credibility of NATO’s promise that there would be subsequent accessions”.¹⁰⁷ Slovenia and Romania were not as far along as the other three.

Accepting that it could not be admitted to NATO in the first tranche, Romania wanted instead “a special strategic partnership with the U.S.” Furthermore, Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea raised the possibility to mention Romania “specifically as a prime candidate for the second round of enlargement” and to announce a date for the event during the Madrid summit. Neither proposal was feasible, but the Americans agreed to look into the idea of a bilateral strategic partnership.¹⁰⁸

French President Chirac supplemented the Romanian efforts by advocating for an allied specific commitment to admit Slovenia and Romania in 1999. When talking with the Americans, Chirac was still trying to emphasize the potential negative implications and destabilizing effects for Romanian democracy if the perception created was one of abandonment of Romania by the West in a grey area

¹⁰⁷ State cable 111475, “NATO enlargement – US decision on new members”, June 13, 1997, *Ibidem*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

¹⁰⁸ State cable 133663, “Romanian Prime Minister’s meeting with the Secretary, Deputy Secretary”, July 17, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06702902, case no. F-2017-13804.

of Europe.¹⁰⁹ These were however irritating arguments for the Americans. Romania's qualification had to be demonstrated through a solid track record of reforms. Poland had a track record of seven years, whereas Romania's was merely seven months.

Clinton emphasized again the need to preserve a credible open door policy, an issue that was also connected with the future of NATO-Russia relations. From the U.S. perspective, a decision to take in five new members at once would have immediately created pressure to admit the Baltics, "since there would be no one else ready for the second", creating problems in relations with Russia. "We need to have at least two good candidates for the next time", Clinton insisted.¹¹⁰ Starting the process with just three new members ensured the credibility of the open door for further tranches, but also gave the Russians "some time to digest NATO enlargement and to implement the NATO-Russia Founding Act".¹¹¹

If the Americans were rejecting any specific commitment at Madrid for Romania's membership in the next round, relying also on the French support, the Romanians looked to Germany to flip the balance in their favor. At the beginning of July 1997, Constantinescu went to meet Chancellor Kohl to argue for a specific reference to Romania in the Madrid communiqué. Without such a face saver, "Romania will be in the same position as Bulgaria, and I will have failed as a

¹⁰⁹ Memcon, "The President's Meeting with French President Jacques Chirac", Brown Palace Hotel, Denver, Colorado, June 20, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning Memcons and Telcons with French President Jacques Chirac*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100539>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹¹ Draft State cable, "Deputy Secretary Talbott's meeting with Spanish Ambassador on Madrid summit, NATO issues", June 26, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06703380, case no. F-2017-13804.

leader”, Constantinescu complained. A strong open door declaration without specific reference to Romania was “meaningless”.¹¹²

Kohl telephoned Clinton and argued for a “message of opening up a perspective for Romania and Slovenia”, to “address the concerns of their people”, but the Chancellor’s position was rather non-committal. Instead of creating two tiers of NATO aspirants by mentioning specifically Slovenia and Romania in the Madrid communiqué, the Americans wanted to signal to all candidates that staying on the path of reforms and keeping democracies going were the only manner to secure future membership. The only commitment was to review again the enlargement process in 1999, connected with the expression of interest in building NATO’s southern flank.¹¹³

Chirac went to Madrid determined to confront the Americans and to act as the spokesperson for the European pillar of the Alliance. The French continued to insist on enlarging the number of new members to five, with the compromise position being to put Romania in front of the queue for the next tranche. Clinton emphasized instead that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had a track record of reform “long enough to give us the confidence that they are irreversible”.¹¹⁴ Citing the Slovak example, Clinton asked rhetorically what would happen, if in Romania, anti-democratic extremists and nationalists returned to

¹¹² U.S. Embassy Bucharest cable 4204, “President Constantinescu’s meeting with Chancellor Kohl”, July 3, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

¹¹³ Telephone conversation (Telcon) Clinton – Kohl, July 3, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning German Chancellor Helmut Kohl*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57651>.

¹¹⁴ Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO’s door...*, p. 242.

power in the future.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, a smaller group approach was easier to integrate, was keeping down the costs of enlargement and was creating momentum for future rounds.

Kohl and Blair supported the U.S. arguments. There was consensus in the Alliance for taking in three new members, but no consensus on five. However, Chirac did not buy the argument on costs and insisted on a NATO commitment to admit Romania and Slovenia at the next summit in 1999. Clinton raised again the negative impact of such compromise on the Baltics, an issue of concern also for the Northern allies. After some heated exchanges, the final compromise was to specifically name Romania and Slovenia in the communiqué, but also the Baltic states, recognizing their progress as “aspiring members” in the context of a commitment to review the enlargement process in 1999.¹¹⁶ It was a compromise closer to the U.S. position, one that Chirac finally accepted even if he grudged about it.

Immediately after the Madrid summit, Clinton flew to Warsaw, Bucharest, and Copenhagen. Despite the intense disappointment about the Madrid decision, Clinton was received by the Romanian public with overwhelming enthusiasm, illustrating the magnitude of support for the West and the U.S. in particular. “Stay on the course, stay on the course, the future is yours”, was Clinton’s catchphrase which electrified the tens of thousands of people gathered in the University square where 7 years before many had died so that Romania would become again a free

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 244.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 245-248. Also see “Madrid Declaration on Euro-Atlantic Security and Cooperation”, July 8, 1997, para. 8, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1997/p97-081e.htm>.

nation. That was precisely what Constantinescu emphasized to Clinton. In the end, NATO membership was a “matter of dignity”, of recognition that the people of Romania have succeeded in their “great efforts”, after a “bloody revolution”.¹¹⁷

The Madrid disappointment was however hard to digest for the Romanian society in the medium-term. The costs of reform had tremendous social burdens. A succession of internal political and social crises discredited Constantinescu and his government. After the elections of 2000, Iliescu returned to power, but the 1/3 of the votes received by the nationalist-populist Vadim Tudor raised eyebrows in all corners of Europe.

Chirac was not far from the truth when he expressed serious concerns about Romania’s return to a nationalistic past if NATO rejected her membership aspirations. It remains a matter of further research if the decision not to admit Romania in the first tranche had any significant impact on its short-term political evolution shrouded in crises. However, the Romanian people repudiated after all their own Mečiar, which illustrated that Romania was becoming more politically mature. It has passed a test that America considered crucial and, in a different context marked by 9/11, Romania was finally invited to join NATO in 2002, during a second tranche of enlargement.

Conclusions

Even if the U.S. officials had put forward several arguments for limiting the first tranche of NATO enlargement to just three countries, a closer examination of

¹¹⁷ Memcon, “Meeting with Emil Constantinescu, President of Romania”, Cotroceni Palace, Bucharest, July 11, 1997, FOIA, doc. no. C06704369, case no. F-2017-13804.

all the nuances from the high-level conversations among the Western leaders shows that maintaining the credibility of the open door policy was the most important factor. Keeping Slovenia and Romania in the waiting room, two candidates with strong advocates and real perspectives for NATO membership, was important in order to ensure confidence in enlargement as a continuous and steady process, especially for the Baltics, who met the criteria but were unable to immediately join the Alliance because of Russia's opposition. The Americans were seeking to avoid as much as possible an increase of Russian antagonism, without giving Moscow a formal veto.

Ever since the beginning, the success of NATO enlargement was in great extent dependent on Russia's acquiescence to it. The U.S. officials sought therefore to avoid an increased Russian antagonism to the enlargement process by following a dual track approach. One track was to redefine the relations between NATO and Russia in a more cooperative manner. U.S. officials sought to create an institutionalized framework for NATO-Russia consultations, which eventually was established through the so-called "Founding Act", a document to which Yeltsin subscribed, but in a reluctant manner because it actually represented a replacement for leaving Russia at the periphery of the new NATO-centric European security system.

The other track was to make enlargement more acceptable to Moscow by unfolding the process in a gradual and transparent manner. However, gradualism entailed that some nations would attain NATO membership before others. While some aspirants would get in first, others would have to wait for the next rounds. Because of Russian animosity, the Baltics had the lowest perspectives of joining the

Alliance in the first tranche, even if they were as qualified as the other candidates. However, while adjourning NATO membership for the Baltics had the advantage of mitigating Russian antagonism, it was at the same time creating the perception of a Russian veto over NATO decisions. The Baltics were putting strong pressure on the American NATO policy by publicly expressing concerns that their security might be sacrificed for the sake of NATO-Russia accommodation.¹¹⁸ Such a perception had the potential of undermining the basis of the post-Cold War security system that America was struggling to build, one in which Russia could not impair the right of European countries to freely choose their own alliances.

The solution to alleviate Baltic concerns, while also avoiding the perception of a Russian veto over NATO decision, was a credible open door policy. NATO had to inspire confidence in the continuation of the enlargement process. The U.S. approach was to start with a smaller group of the strongest candidates, while maximizing support for a succession of enlargement waves.

In order to defend its approach of starting with the smallest number of candidates possible, the U.S. chose to put an emphasis on favorable criteria such as the easier capacity to integrate a small group of new members, the lower costs, the viability of obtaining domestic political support for NATO enlargement and, above all, the individual qualifications. NATO was a military alliance, not a charity or a political club, the Americans often argued. To be admitted in the first wave, candidates had to offer the most credible guarantees of their ability to fully and

¹¹⁸ State cable 110550, "Memcon of DepSec Talbott's meeting with Estonian President Lennart Meri and Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis, May 28, The Hague", June 12, 1997, CDL, *Declassified Documents concerning NATO Expansion*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/100538>.

irreversibly meet the demands of membership. Other arguments more favorable to a larger expansion of NATO were instead discarded.

From the U.S. perspective, starting with a smaller group was beneficial because was creating momentum for future rounds of enlargement by having the promising candidates in the waiting room and, as a result, increasing the credibility of NATO's assurance that there would be subsequent accessions and the first round would not also be the last. Both Slovenia and Romania were short of having enough credentials for qualifying as prime candidates leaving them no other option than to contribute to preserving a credible open door policy with their status of "promising" candidates.