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UKRAINE - RUSSIA: NATO membership, human rights and peace (By Dr Aaron Rhodes)

NATO membership, human rights and peace

By Aaron Rhodes, for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (23.02.2022) – As Russian “peace-keeping” troops – which Eastern Europeans sometimes call “piece-keepers” – roll westward to “protect” breakaway provinces on sovereign

Ukrainian territory, many blame the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In a speech on 21 February explaining his actions, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that “the United States and NATO have begun the shameless development of the territory of Ukraine as a theater of military operations.” But Western critics as well have often claimed that NATO’s “eastward expansion” since 1989 has been imperialistic, arrogant, or at the least insufficiently prudent, and some claim NATO expansion, seen as an organized strategy of domination, has been responsible for negative tendencies in the political development of the Russian Federation.

Both Russian and Western critics of NATO’s membership growth have routinely denied any role or agency to the citizens of the states that have *chosen* this path, and their reasons for doing so; both arm-chair geopolitical experts of the West and authoritarian statisticians of the East have either willfully ignored, or misunderstood the political dynamic behind the attraction of NATO membership for the citizens of formerly Soviet-bloc societies. And if NATO membership is understood to confer security against foreign attack, its implications for internal, national political development, and the protection of human rights, are generally overlooked.

Indeed, the political, as opposed to security aspects of NATO membership are why so many citizens of transitional states in Eastern Europe have sought membership for their countries. The voices from Ukraine’s vibrant civil society favoring NATO membership no doubt care about protecting their homeland’s freedom and sovereignty; joining NATO would have almost certainly deterred the progressive dismemberment of Ukraine

that is occurring today.

Yet as paramount as these benefits may be, what further attracts democratic civil society to NATO is that signatories to the [North Atlantic Treaty](#) of 1949 commit themselves to civilian and democratic control of their militaries, and to public transparency as regards defense allocations, planning and management. As more states asked to be considered for NATO membership during the 1990s, they were assisted to meet broader, democracy-oriented criteria in the framework of the Partnership for Peace. United States law demanded that all seeking assistance to meet NATO criteria be evaluated with regard to how their human rights practices conformed to the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Helsinki Final Act. The [Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#), an independent, bi-partisan monitoring and analysis institution in the United States Congress, was charged with evaluating candidate countries. The Commission [looked](#) at “adherence to the rule of law and to the values, principles, and political commitments set forth in the Helsinki Final Act” and its Follow-up Documents, and other international human rights standards.

The commitment to human rights principles by NATO members has been rightly questioned in a number of cases, in particular as regards Turkey, where “[rule-of-law architecture has been steadily dismantled and its economy is suffering from incongruous policies and years of cronyism.](#)” But NATO is an alliance, not a formation mirroring the moral heterogeneity of the world. Its members generally share fundamental, civilizational principles. Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that

The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.

Of course, these words resonate with all people concerned about their own political freedom, peace with neighbors, and the relation between these two. They affirm that free societies tend not to make war with others. Indeed, for a “military” treaty, the language is *philosophical*: when the Treaty refers to improving “understanding of the principles upon which free institutions are founded,” it obliquely speaks of the role of independent actors in cultivating moral knowledge and reason. Democracies cannot be complacent; they must continually nourish their politics and institutions with honest dialogue about founding principles.

In many cases, pro-democracy and human rights campaigners have thus seen NATO membership not in strategic terms, as a defense against invasion, but as a way of ensuring that undemocratic and militarist forces within their own societies would be permanently locked out.

Today, with the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the edge of war largely over the question of NATO membership, the moral heart of the Treaty ought to be studied by all. Russia has nothing to fear from NATO membership because it would keep the Ukrainian military under democratic control; it would keep the military and its NATO cooperation transparent, consistent with

the Treaty. It would bind Ukrainian policy to the principle of non-aggression.

The Russian people, too, need NATO's security guarantees, given a rising China bent on global hegemony. Even more relevant, given ongoing events, are safeguards against military adventurism. Russian foreign policy today is evidently driven by the decisions of one person commanding a clique of submissive functionaries; there is no substantive Rule of Law, democratic oversight or accountability. Nothing could be more important to the human security of the Russian people today than free institutions and civilian control of its dangerous military power.

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