

Why NATO's 10 New Eastern European Applicants Respect American Freedoms

Ellen Bork on How the Cold War Kept These Nations From Joining Western Europe's at 'The End of History'

An event of tremendous importance to America took place recently at a low-key gathering at Riga, Latvia. On July 5 and 6, 10 countries — Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, and Slovakia gathered to continue their quest to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

One after the other, presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers from former Soviet bloc countries rose to express their desire to shoulder the burdens and share the benefits of NATO membership. The event continued NATO's transition from a collective security organization dedicated to repelling the Soviet Union to an alliance capable of absorbing new members and embracing new missions. Just as important, at a time when Europe's loudest voices seem hostile to America, these leaders did not hesitate to align themselves with America.

By any measure, this second round of NATO enlargement will transform the alliance. These NATO hopefuls, along with 1999's entrants — Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic — have an enthusiasm for the alliance some longstanding members lack. "Older allies are staring at their belly buttons.

They're occupied with building Europe," says one NATO official about the ambitious plans for enlarging the European Union. "NATO isn't a young and sexy issue anymore. Building the E.U. and a European defense capability are," says the official, referring to Europe's effort to put together a military force separate from the Atlantic alliance.

NATO hopefuls are putting their money where their mouths are, committing to serious defense expenditures for the next several years while Germany, NATO's largest economy except America, recently cut defense spending. True, the aspiring members are starting from a lower base, but they are also poorer and smaller countries, with many other claims on their resources. Their political will — if sustained — would make a meaningful contribution to the alliance's capabilities. At the same time, they recognize that they can contribute effectively by developing niche capabilities such as sea diving and mine clearance units.

These countries, however, will make much more important contributions than such specialized operations, useful as these may be. They offer a vital infusion of idealism, honed over decades of repression. They are grateful to America for defeating the Soviet Union and parting the Iron Cur-

tain. New and aspiring NATO members "know how difficult it is to fight for freedom," says Bronislaw Geremek, a Pole who has been both a dissident and a foreign minister. "Politics means for our countries also an attachment to fundamental values. Americans understand this." This affinity with America gives the alliance's newest members an opportunity to shape the alliance just as it is embarking on a historic transformation from its Cold War orientation to the new world of terrorism and other threats that extend beyond Europe. "The U.S. can be sure to have in this alliance large and deep support for ... a global alliance," says Mr. Geremek.

Such attitudes show how misleading it has been during recent transatlantic tensions over the war on terror to speak of "Europe" in monolithic terms. Even as they seek to join NATO and the E.U., central and eastern Europeans know they are still set apart from their western cousins. The "end of history" — the name Francis Fukayama has given the evolved condition that the West is supposed to have reached in which threats have disappeared — is late arriving in many parts of the continent. "There is still a part of Europe that is stuck in 'history' and loves the U.S.," says Gary Schmitt of the Project for the New American Century.

The solidarity of younger NATO members with America may change the terms of debate over other transatlantic issues as well. They may, for example, be sympathetic to the American position on the International Criminal Court. A Latvian diplomat says he asks his fellow Europeans if something terrible happens in his region, "Who do you think is going to come over here to take care of it? Some judges with wigs and long black robes" from the Hague? "No, it's going to be Americans with dusty boots."

And then there is Israel, currently the object of the wrath of post-historical Europe. Israel sent observers to Riga, and is developing close diplomatic ties with several of the aspiring NATO countries. These countries know that redressing their treatment of Jews during World War II is crucial to their admission to the alliance. Their meeting was scheduled to coincide with Latvia's Holocaust Remembrance Day, which falls on the anniversary of a Nazi massacre of Jews in a Riga synagogue on July 4, 1941.

The 10 NATO hopefuls who gathered in Riga know they have hurdles to clear before joining the alliance. The best guess among alliance experts is that seven of the 10 will receive the coveted invitations. Those who are not invited will be encour-

aged to continue their efforts. Those who get in will still have up to two years of work to do while their membership is approved by alliance legislatures — including the Senate. Beyond that, there is still more work to do; the focus of the democratic alliance will move beyond Central and Eastern Europe, to areas like the Caucasus and Central Asia, which pose much greater challenges.

For now, though, there is work to be done and progress to be made. Bridging the gap between America and Europe will be one of the benefits. As the Riga meeting concluded, a reporter from France's left-leaning *Le Monde* inquired about any qualms the assembled representatives of the 10 NATO hopefuls had about joining an organization that was becoming "more and more an American-led political alliance." The Latvian prime minister — who has not yet spent as much time with the NATO press corps as he hopes to one day — hesitated, perhaps puzzled, before answering. But then he spoke of a new balance within an expanded alliance and noted America's support for democratic values and human rights. "This," he said, "is a good thing."

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