CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

NATO, Russia & Ukraine

International Organizations & International Relations

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

In February of 2022, the Russian Federation, led by its authoritarian president Vladimir Putin, launched a significant invasion of neighboring Ukraine. Putin justified this in part by claiming that Ukraine's desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, threatened Russian security. So what is NATO, and why would Russia see it as a potential threat?

> "If Ukraine was to join NATO it would serve as a direct threat to the security of Russia."-- Vladimir Putin, February 21, 2022

Established in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is an alliance that was first established to include the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations. It was created to guarantee the security of Western Europe against increasing threats from the Russian-dominated Soviet Union in the years after World War II. The alliance formed a collective defense. If any member nation was attacked militarily, the other nations would fight alongside it. In response, the Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact. Made up of communist satellite nations of the Soviet Union, it was an alliance in name only; the Soviet Union already controlled the states of Eastern Europe and used the Warsaw Pact to suppress anti-Soviet dissent in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO began to expand into Eastern Europe (Eastern Europe was considered the old Russian-Soviet sphere of influence). NATO opened membership to many of the former nations of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and 2000s. During this time, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, and Croatia became members. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians still have long-standing ethnic, political, and social relationships with those nations. As such, Vladimir Putin views the eastern expansion of NATO as a sign of disrespect and disregard for Russian history, territorial ambitions, and a threat to Russia's national security.

As NATO continues to grow eastward, multiple Russian leaders have tried unsuccessfully to negotiate and prevent this growth. As the largest former satellite nation of the Soviet Union, Ukraine also shares a border with Russia. This makes Ukraine uniquely significant as membership in NATO would allow the alliance to reach Putin's backyard unchecked. The addition of Ukraine to NATO could be seen as an end to Russia's status as the superpower of Eastern Europe. Since becoming independent, Ukraine has made a concerted effort to move towards democracy. In 2008, President George W. Bush expressed interest in adding Ukraine to NATO, but two member nations rejected the idea. Since then, talk has continued, but no action has been formally taken. Putin has demanded that NATO never consider Ukraine for membership. The alliance's refusal to permanently prevent Ukraine from joining has been used by Putin as justification to invade the sovereign nation in an effort to overthrow the government and restore Ukraine as a territory of Russia.

> **To Think and To Do:** Based on what you have read, how do alliances shape international relations? Explain.

LEARN MORE:

- The Roots of the Cold War, from The National World War Two Museum
- The History of Russia and Ukraine, from National Geographic
- Russia's Global Ambitions, from The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace