

MYTHS ABOUT NATO

1. NATO IS AN AGGRESSIVE PACT AND A THREAT TO RUSSIA

Within disinformation narratives there is often a statement that NATO is surrounding Russia and represents a threat to it.

FACTS

NATO is a defensive alliance, whose main purpose is to protect its members within the system of collective defence. The official NATO policy is that "the Alliance does not seek confrontation and presents no threat to Russia." It was Russia that, using military force, violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia in 2008 and that of Ukraine both in 2014 and 2022.

The cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Alliance was institutionalized in 1997 with the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation. On the basis of this there was even cooperation between Russia and NATO in various areas from the fight against narcotics and countering terrorism to civil protection. In 2014, in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, NATO suspended cooperation with Russia; however, it kept open a forum for political dialogue at the NATO-Russia Council as well as communication channels between military representatives of Russia and NATO. In response to Russia's actions that deteriorated the security environment in Europe, after the summit in Warsaw in 2016, four multinational NATO battlegroups were formed on the territory of the Baltic States and Poland as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence. This Presence is defensive and in compliance with international commitments. It represents a significant commitment by the Allies and is tangible evidence of the principle of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. At the summit in Madrid in 2022 the original four battlegroups were reinforced with four more, formed on the territory of Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

It is also a myth that NATO is surrounding Russia. Only 12% of Russian borders touch NATO member countries. Russia has borders with 14 countries and only six of them are members of the Alliance. As for NATO presence in other than member countries, the military presence is currently only in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iraq, and in all these cases it has the proper international legal basis. In contrast, Russia has military bases on the territory of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine without the consent of their governments and a UN mandate.

2. FOR NATO RUSSIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ENEMY

NATO critics say that Russia has always been an enemy for NATO. This myth has its origin more as a result of subjective feelings than the objective reality.

FACTS

NATO is a defensive alliance that is no threat to Russia or any other country. In the history of mutual relations there were periods when there were even justified considerations about Russia being a potential future member of NATO.

In 1990, NATO offered a dialogue to the then Soviet Union. Later it created platforms – Partnership for Peace and Euro-Atlantic Partner Council – open to Russia.

In 1997, the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security was signed, establishing the NATO-Russia Council. No other partner was offered such a vast and comprehensive relation by NATO.

The relations between Russia and NATO were undermined only after 7 new members joined NATO in 2004, when Russia started to view the Alliance as a threat getting closer to its borders. The relations were also not helped by the Russian-Georgian war and the occupation of part of Georgia's territory by the Russian Federation, the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, the attack against Ukraine, as well as Moscow's suspension of adherence to its commitments under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

At the NATO summit in Madrid in 2022, as part of the Strategic Concept of the Alliance, the Allies agreed that Russia is the most significant and the most direct threat to their security and peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic space. This was in NATO's response to Russia's aggressive military invasion of Ukraine. NATO thus deemed Russia a threat only in 2022, a change of position based solely on Russia's behaviour. And, of course, this designation is not "eternal" but the Strategic Concept states that any change in the relation depends on whether the Russian Federation stops its aggressive behaviour and fully complies with international law.

3. NATO PROMISED RUSSIA NOT TO EXPAND FURTHER

Within disinformation campaigns there is often a statement that NATO was supposed to have promised Russia after the end of the Cold War that it would not expand further to the east. Such a written agreement was never made.

FACTS

NATO has been open to new members since its foundation in 1949. NATO's open door policy itself is stated in Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The discussion in the Kremlin on 7 to 10 February 1990 and the statements by US Secretary of State James Baker and Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher together with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl on one side and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his foreign affairs minister Eduard Shevardnadze were interpreted later on by the opponents of NATO enlargement as evidence of the fact that the Alliance simply misled Russia and did not keep its word on this issue.

The critical point of the entire debate is the consent of Secretary of State Baker with Shevardnadze's request not to enlarge NATO by adding Eastern Europe countries. However, Baker argued later that all the statements presented at the negotiations in the Kremlin were solely related to the future of Germany. So in fact he was speaking about East Germany and not all the states east of it. Also Baker did not have a mandate to speak on behalf of the entire Alliance. Shevardnadze confirmed later that no assurance was given to the Soviet leadership in 1990 that NATO would not move beyond its original borders. He admits that the discussion about the enlargement of the Alliance at that time was very premature. Even the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact was still something unimaginable at that moment. The words of the Soviet minister also confirm the entire context of the political development at the beginning of the 90's because the potential end of the Warsaw Pact was only mentioned in the late spring in 1990 by the then Hungarian Prime Minister József Antal and the debate about the opportunity for some countries to join NATO started even much later.

Mikhail Gorbachev himself, in an interview in 2014, confirmed that "the topic of NATO expansion was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years."

4. SLOVAKIA SHOULD BE NEUTRAL

Proponents of neutrality think that neutrality would lead to preserving peace and enable Slovakia to avoid the negative impacts of international crises and conflicts. They also point to the historical injustice of the Munich Agreement of 1938, when the Western Allies sacrificed Czechoslovakia in favour of broader interests and that NATO Allies would also act similarly now.

FACTS

However, the basis for neutrality is that somebody would also have to guarantee it to us. At the same time, we would be left on our own in case of an attack on our territory.

The most well-known example of neutrality is Switzerland that has had military neutrality guaranteed since the times of the Treaty of Paris in 1815. However, during World War II, the Swiss territory was intruded upon several times by the fighting parties and in response to Hitler's plans it had to mobilize as many as 850,000 soldiers. Nowadays Switzerland invests considerable resources in its defence and has introduced mandatory military service (which was abolished in Slovakia in 2005).

Other favourite examples include Finland, Sweden and Austria. However, after having assessed the security situation in Europe in response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the first two of the aforementioned states asked to join NATO in 2022. Although Austria has no similar ambitions, it is not exempt from responsibility for its own defence and investments in its armed forces. Despite their status, all the three states spend billions of euros on their defence. In 2022, it was more than 6.33 billion in the case of Sweden, 3.57 billion for Finland and almost 3.38 in the case of Austria. The aforementioned Switzerland spent approximately EUR 5 billion for defence in 2022. In addition to this, Switzerland as well as Austria are encircled by NATO Member States.

The fact that neutrality does not have to mean peace has been shown to us for several years in the case of Ukraine. Its neutral status meant nothing to Russia as it first annexed Crimea in 2014 and then launched a full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Just like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which are not part of any defence alliances, also faced military aggression. Therefore, it is not true that neutrality or better said, not belonging to any military alliance, would guarantee peace or avoidance of conflicts and crises.

NATO membership also provides us with a protective alliance umbrella. If any party decides to attack Slovakia, we have 30 Allies that would stand up for us.

Having said this means that neutrality is a principle that is not relevant for Slovakia in the current security environment.

5. SLOVAKIA SENDS 2% OF ITS GDP TO THE NATO BUDGET

In relation to NATO, there is often disinformation about the 2% of Slovakia's GDP that is sent to the NATO budget.

FACTS

This statement is not true. Slovakia like other Member States committed to achieve investments in defence in the amount of 2 % of GDP. However, this means investments in its own armed forces and not to the NATO budget. In fact, there is not anything like an “allied armed forces” or “NATO defence budget”.

NATO has three budgets (the civil budget, the military budget and the NATO Security Investments Program) that are designed for the “operation” of the Alliance and capital investments, but their total amount is only a fraction compared to the sum of total defence expenditures of individual Member States.

The importance of additional investments in the defence of the Slovak Republic has been fully shown to us after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, after which the Allies started increasing the growth rate of their defence investments. Stronger armed forces of the Slovak Republic also means a strengthened NATO, with which the Allies are able to effectively provide for the fundamental principle of the North Atlantic Alliance, which is the collective defence of all member States.