

# Revealed: Boris Yeltsin Privately Supported NATO Expansion in 1990's

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*Declassified files show how Russia's president, during the 1990s, repeatedly told Western counterparts he was "not against" expansion of the military alliance, Matt Kennard reports. He even devised an agreement to bring the Russian people onside.*

**Boris Yeltsin** privately stated he was not against NATO expansion in the 1990s while publicly opposing the military alliance, declassified files show.

This posture went back as far as 1993, two years into his presidency, which would last until 2000 when he appointed **Vladimir Putin** his successor.

Declassified notes from a meeting of the British cabinet in September 1993 include a statement from defence secretary Malcolm Rifkind on the "Russian attitude to the Enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation".

Rifkind said that on a visit to Poland the previous month, President Yeltsin had told his Polish counterpart Lech Wałęsa "that the Russian Government had no objection to Poland and the Czech Republic joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation".

Rifkind added that this statement "had not been agreed beforehand in Moscow" and "had surprised his Polish hosts and had disconcerted the rest of the Russian delegation".

Rifkind concluded that "it was not to be assumed that the Russian authorities as a whole would be so relaxed about the extension eastwards of a Western, albeit defensive, military alliance."

Yeltsin's acquiescence in NATO's expansion was not something shared by his prime minister, **Viktor Chernomyrdin**. In a private conversation with prime minister **John Major**

in 1996, Chernomyrdin said NATO expansion “could explode” across Europe, declassified files also show.

The proposed NATO expansion after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a hugely controversial policy in Russia. The Western military alliance had originally been set up in 1949 ostensibly as a [“defensive”](#) bloc against the [“threat”](#) posed by the Soviet Union.

Russian  
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Organisation

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THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that when on a visit to Poland in August President Yeltsin had told President Walesa that the Russian Government had no objection to Poland and the Czech Republic joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This statement, which had not been agreed beforehand in Moscow, had surprised his Polish hosts and had disconcerted the rest of the Russian delegation. It was not to be assumed that the Russian authorities as a whole would be so relaxed about the extension eastwards of a Western, albeit defensive, military alliance.

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Declassified notes from a meeting of the British cabinet on 16 September 1993. (UK National Archives)

### **‘Not against the process of enlargement’**

But as NATO’s first post-Soviet expansion was being negotiated through the 1990s, Yeltsin’s private support continued.

In December 1994, John Major and President Yeltsin had a bilateral meeting in Budapest. “This record should be handled discreetly, and is not suitable for passing on to the Americans,” the summary of the meeting read.

“Yeltsin said he had felt that he and the Prime Minister had come to an agreement...over NATO enlargement,” it added.

Yeltsin “was not against the process of enlargement, so long as it was well balanced and gradual”, it continued.

“It would be all right if, after a time, one country joined NATO, and then perhaps a year later another. But he could not agree to enlargement if it was a matter of taking in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe (comment: by implication as a block). This would affect all of Russia’s interests.”

Major said “he understood Yeltsin’s concerns”, adding, “we believe that enlargement had to be handled cautiously and without deadlines...After the division of Europe for so many years

into two blocs, everyone needed to approach this subject with great caution.”

Yeltsin “said he understood the Prime Minister’s position and was satisfied with it”.

In December 1996, Major and Yeltsin talked on the phone as plans for the announcement of the first NATO expansion got closer. “On NATO enlargement, the message was...all sorts of voiced opposition, but in the end tacit acceptance that it would happen,” a summary of Yeltsin’s position read.

## **Madrid Declaration**

These sentiments continued after Tony Blair’s Labour won the general election in May 1997. “The noises made by Yeltsin [on NATO expansion] were all positive,” read the summary of a call between new prime minister Blair and Yeltsin.

A British telegram from Washington, also from May 1997, recounted that a meeting between President Clinton and Yeltsin had “excellent atmospherics”. It added: “Yeltsin [is] in good shape. Clinton encourages him to come to Madrid, sketching out possible arrangements to ease the Russia domestic angle.”

The NATO Summit in 1997 was when the organisation put forward the [“Madrid Declaration”](#) which formally invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join the alliance. They became members in 1999.

“Yeltsin asked Clinton’s advice on whether he should come [to Madrid],” the telegram noted. “He was worried about the domestic downside (ie being accused of blessing NATO expansion). His advisors...were cautioning against attendance.”

Clinton said it would be good if Yeltsin could come. “He recognised the Russian arguments for and against. But there was scope for Yeltsin to make this another personal and political success. Madrid would not focus only on NATO expansion. The Alliance would also be adapting itself, which should be congenial to Russia.”

Yelstin listened carefully and said “he would reflect”. The UK National Security Council concluded: “Yeltsin is personally keen to go to Madrid, provided he can devise the right presentational strategy.”

## **Founding Act**

Also in 1997, the NATO/Russia [Founding Act](#) was signed, ostensibly to build up trust and habits of consultation and cooperation.

But the declassified files show that the Act, which NATO refused to make legally binding, was a public relations exercise requested by Yeltsin to help him dampen domestic opposition to NATO expansion.

One UK document noted that NATO expansion was “the catalyst for the NATO/Russia agreement, although we have been careful not to link the two issues.”

UK foreign secretary Robin Cook commented that Yeltsin continued to publicly oppose NATO expansion. However, the Russian leader was privately focusing efforts “on negotiating a

joint document with NATO that would enable him to claim that NATO had taken Russian security concerns fully into account before proceeding with enlargement.”

Cook revealed that the Russians had wanted the document to be legally binding and allow for Russia to “enjoy wide-ranging joint decision-making with NATO”. The Russians also requested that the agreement state that the Baltic states and Ukraine should be ruled off-limits for future NATO expansion.

NATO refused all these requests, but the Russians signed anyway.

Cook concluded: “I judge that the NATO/Russia agreement has considerable net political benefits to UK and NATO interests. Russian opposition to NATO’s decision, at its Madrid Summit, to invite some countries to begin accession negotiations, is likely to be considerably more muted than it might otherwise have been.”

He added: “Russia’s leaders will have a vested interest in presenting the NATO/Russia deal in a positive light, and in portraying NATO not as a threat or adversary, but as a partner, sensitive to Russian security concerns.”

### **‘Develop his domestic defence’**

The declassified documents also show the US was concerned with helping Yeltsin defend himself against domestic Russian attacks on NATO expansion.

A January 1997 message from Washington to London noted that the US government “would like to help Yeltsin develop his domestic defence of NATO enlargement”.

It added: “The underlying American objective was to reinforce Russian leaders (and particularly the younger generation) whose aim was to ‘normalise’ Russia.”

The US was focused on “finding ways to help Yeltsin minimise the domestic damage which NATO enlargement would cause by letting him claim victory on the basis of what could be negotiated with NATO in 1997”.

It added: “Yeltsin would want to be able to tell the Russian people that Russian interests had been secured”. The newly appointed US ambassador to Russia, James F. Collins “believed the West should help Yeltsin find the right formula to use domestically.”

Collins thought this “was one reason why Yeltsin liked the idea of a Five Power meeting”, which would include France, Germany, Russia, the US and the UK. “It could”, he said, “provide a good platform for Yeltsin to explain the NATO/Russia deal to his domestic constituency.”

### **Warnings of NATO expansion**

But Yeltsin’s position was not official Russian policy. Dire warnings about the dangers of NATO expansion were being communicated to the British at the time by other senior figures in the Russian government.

A private 1996 conversation between the Major and Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin gives a window into the risks NATO knew they were taking to move forward with post-Soviet expansion.

Russia's prime minister told his British counterpart that NATO expansion "could explode" across Europe in a passionate diatribe against the policy.

The Cassandra-like warning offers a remarkable account of the dangers and risk for European security and domestic reform in Russia if NATO expansion was pursued.

Russian president Vladimir Putin has [repeatedly stated](#) that NATO's eastward expansion is one of the reasons for his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which has been condemned as [illegal](#) and has involved [extensive war crimes](#).

Chernomyrdin was Russian prime minister from 1992-98, and was [seen](#) as a force for moving Moscow closer to the West and forging a friendship with the US. The Yeltsin administration was highly regarded by the British.

The conversation with Major took place in the margins of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) summit on 2 December 1996. At the time Yeltsin was recovering from illness, but Chernomyrdin said he had been talking to him "almost every day".

When Major asked Chernomyrdin what he thought of the OSCE summit, the Russian prime minister said the organisation's "importance should be increased" as it could "lay the foundations for the new architecture of European security".

He added: "It should be the pivotal organisation, rather than NATO, which had too obvious a military component to it."

## **Nuclear ramp up**

On NATO expansion Chernomyrdin conceded that Russia could not stop it but made clear "this would create a fragile situation which could explode".

He added that "even those countries which wanted to join NATO could not explain why, and where the danger to them came from. Russia might have been seen as a danger in the past. This was no longer appropriate."

But it was clear that NATO expansion was perceived as a significant threat to Russian security even by those in the Yeltsin administration prepared to acquiesce in that expansion. This meant that the scale down of nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War would also be adversely affected by expanding NATO, Chernomyrdin said.

"If Russia had to face a unified Europe alone, she would need full nuclear protection, and nuclear reductions would no longer be appropriate," he told Major.

Chernomyrdin warned that the proposed expansion would damage European security, which had been improving in the post-Soviet period.

"What would Europe and the new members gain in practice from NATO enlargement?" he asked Major. "Russia did not have a veto, but Russia was in danger of being vetoed by the rest of Europe. This would recreate volatility in Europe, just when peace and stability had been reestablished. Russia was not an enemy now but could become one."

## Damage to Russian reform

Major told Chernomyrdin: “We did not wish to do anything to unsettle Russia. The Russian leadership’s achievements of recent years were huge.”

But the Russian prime minister outlined the risks to the stability of the Yeltsin administration if new NATO members were invited in.

“The situation in Russia in those circumstances would not be controllable,” he said. “There would be a very negative reaction, as the public hostility – unifying Communists and fascists (Zhirinovksy) – to the latest decree on withdrawal from Chechnya had shown.”

Yeltsin had the previous month [ordered](#) the withdrawal of virtually all Russian forces in Chechnya. Vladimir Zhirinovksy was a Russian ultra-nationalist politician and the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.

The withdrawal from Chechnya “had produced calls for the impeachment of Yeltsin, so the reaction to NATO enlargement could easily be imagined,” Chernomyrdin added. “Russian patience should not be tested again.”

He concluded: “An extreme reaction to NATO enlargement would also damage democracy and economic reform in Russia.”

## New cooperation

NATO was at the time trying to create a new cooperation framework to soften the impact of its expansion on Russian opinion. But Chernomyrdin said Russia “was not clear about the path of cooperation, unless the functional core of NATO was changed. Russia could not rush into a partnership with NATO unless the ways of working together had been properly defined.”

At the time, NATO was pushing a new Charter with Russia.

“Russia could not be bought by a Charter – that would not convince the Russian people that NATO enlargement was not dangerous,” Chernomyrdin said.

For his part, John Major “repeated that sincere Russian fears were well understood” and conceded that “enlargement was obviously a sensitive issue, on which discussions would need to continue. Russian fears were well understood. He certainly did not brush them aside.”

But, he added, “enlargement would be an evolutionary and transparent process, moving in parallel with a better and broader security relationship with Russia.”

The final note in the document notes that “Chernomyrdin’s comments on NATO enlargement were both longer and more emotional than the above account would suggest. He was beginning to work himself up into quite a lather when lunch finally intervened.”

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