Summary: The consensus behind the enlargement of the European Union and NATO is crumbling. The strategic paradigm that guided enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe since the mid 1990s no longer fits today’s circumstances. Absent a new narrative and a revised strategy, the historic window for enlarging core Western institutions to new democracies is likely to close. To some degree, the West is of course a victim of its own success. The EU and NATO are also struggling with “enlargement fatigue.”

But it would be wrong to attribute the demise of enlargement consensus to these factors. The reasons for the current malaise run deeper and require a change in policy. If enlargement is not to die, we need a new narrative for why enlargement still matters and a new strategy modified to fit today’s political and strategic realities.

In our next issue of On Wider Europe, Ivan Krastev will respond with his views on “Is Enlargement Dead?”

Is Enlargement Dead?

by Ronald D. Asmus*

The consensus behind the enlargement of the European Union and NATO is crumbling. The strategic paradigm that has guided the West’s enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe since the mid 1990s no longer fits today’s strategic circumstances. Absent a new narrative for further enlargement and a revised strategy for accomplishing it, the historic window for extending core Western institutions to new democracies as part of building a Europe that is unified, free, and at peace is likely to close.

Today in the West there is still a consensus that most if not all of the countries in the western Balkans should eventually join the EU and NATO if they wish, provided they meet the standards required. Iceland is also considering joining the EU, and it is unlikely to be a controversial candidate. Nor would Swedish or Finnish candidacy for NATO meet with opposition if either country chose that option. But there the consensus ends.

Prospects for Turkey’s EU candidacy are declining in the face of public skepticism in Europe and waning reform momentum at home. Behind closed doors, Brussels officials worry that Turkey’s EU outlook could die via a hundred mini-cuts that would sap its strength, or a sudden crisis that would become the political equivalent of a heart attack. In private, some Turkish politicians say they have already abandoned the goal.

Of course Turkey’s candidacy precedes the collapse of communism and the enlargement of the 1990s, and has long been seen as on a separate track. Nevertheless, if Turkey’s EU candidacy does collapse, it becomes harder to imagine enlargement to other countries in the EU’s Eastern Partnership that do not even have a membership perspective today. For several years now, some analysts have suggested that the EU should replace NATO as the leading institution in future enlargement efforts. That argument was based on the assumption that the EU today is finally strong enough to assume such a role and that EU-led Western integration would be less offensive to Moscow. However, it is far from clear that the EU is either willing or able to play that role. While the integrative potential of the EU is considerable, bringing that power to bear has been difficult given the internal divisions in the EU. The current economic and monetary troubles in the EU only underscore Brussels’ weakness rather than its strength. And the global economic downturn has only reinforced a tendency to look inward rather than outward.

Prospects for NATO enlargement also are not bright. In April 2008, in Bucharest, the Alliance made its strongest-ever political commitment to the eventual enlargement of NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia. But that paper commitment masks deep divisions. The enlargement issue has become a kind of
third rail in alliance politics that most countries don’t want to touch. Although the Obama administration has affirmed its principled support for enlargement, the issue of democratic enlargement in Europe no longer enjoys the centrality it once had in U.S. policy. In addition, Berlin and other key European allies currently seem quite comfortable with the status quo. Absent U.S. leadership and a new consensus that bridges these divides, it is hard to imagine another push for embracing new democracies to the east of the current borders of the EU and NATO.

Even the aspirations of candidate countries are less certain. In Ukraine, President Viktor Yanukovych has clearly taken his country’s candidacy for NATO off the table. Moldova also seeks neutrality along with EU membership. The prospect of Belarus ever wanting to align itself with the West is remote. In the Southern Caucasus, Georgia still enjoys overwhelming domestic support for joining NATO, but the 2008 Russia-Georgia War set back its chances for eventual membership. Azerbaijan, having witnessed Moscow’s efforts to thwart Georgia’s NATO ambitions, has become more circumspect in pursuing its strategic cooperation with the West. Armenia has always sought a balanced or “multi-vector” policy, given its close ties with Moscow. Apart from Georgia, there is no country today outside the Balkans seriously knocking on NATO’s door.

So what happened? Less than a decade ago, enlargement was the most successful project of the transatlantic community. To some degree, the West is a victim of that success. Enlargement was in many ways more successful and went further than some ever expected. It anchored the eastern half of the continent and arguably has made Europe more secure than it has been in over a century. Both the EU and NATO are still struggling to adjust to having new members and could also be said to be suffering from “enlargement fatigue.” But it would be wrong to simply attribute the demise of enlargement consensus to past success or fatigue. The reasons for the current malaise run deeper. The paradigm that was developed for integrating Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s has been overtaken by new realities. It no longer fits today’s circumstances.

It is therefore time for a rethink. The West’s vision and tactics need to be revised if they are to regain political and strategic traction. Clinging to the status quo is a losing proposition. While the prospect of an open debate on the future of enlargement may frighten some, it is badly needed. If the concept of enlargement is not to die, its supporters need to develop a new moral and strategic narrative for why further enlargement still matters and how policies should be modified to fit today’s political realities.
Eastern Europe into the West. The perspective of membership in NATO and the EU proved to be a powerful transforming force that accelerated and reinforced reforms in these countries. But Ukraine is not simply another Poland, and Georgia is not Slovenia or Estonia. These countries are poorer, less developed, and have much further to go. The geographies, histories, economies, and cultures of Eurasia and the Southern Caucasus are different from those of Central and Eastern Europe. Their claim to be part of Europe is more tenuous, the perceive Western imperative to help less obvious, and the transformative power of aligning with the West less powerful.

The flip side of this is that there is less Western consensus on how far enlargement should go—or whether it should go any further at all. This divide also goes back to the early post-Cold War years. The moral foundation of post-Cold War enlargement was the theme of a “return to Europe” for newly liberated countries that had been artificially cut off by the forced partition of Europe during the Cold War. When political leaders in the 1990s talked about a return to Europe as a reason for the EU and NATO to embrace new democracies in the East, no one questioned that claim by Poland, the Czech Republic, or Romania. Those same arguments do not resonate as well, however, when it comes to countries lying deeper in Eurasia or in the Southern Caucasus.

There was also a latent contradiction between the universal nature of the West’s commitment to extending enlargement to any European democracy, on the one hand, and the more limited foreign policy aims of the different countries in question, on the other. The compromise was to fudge and leave the policy open-ended. Rightly or wrongly, at the time this was also judged to be the easiest way to manage Russia’s concerns. Whereas Moscow actually sought to cap enlargement, the West—in particular, the United States—opted instead to leave the door to future NATO membership wide open—indeed, so open that we could even say to Moscow that one day a democratic Russia might be able to walk through it as well.

That strategy worked for a decade, right through the successful completion of the “big bang” enlargement of 2004 that fulfilled a vision of the EU and NATO stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. But then reality caught up with theory. The Rose and Orange revolutions opened the possibility of another wave of democratic enlargement extending into Eurasia and to the Southern Caucasus. The leaders of those revolutions were in part inspired by the West's democratic enlargement, which included the Baltic states which had been part of the former USSR. Yet their push to go West also quickly exposed the ambiguity in our own thinking, which Ivan Krastev has termed the “strategic schizophrenia” in Western policy toward the post-Soviet space: We talk the talk of universal norms and principles, but in practice we are reluctant to fully embrace them as we reach the post-Soviet space and their implementation becomes more politically difficult and strategically riskier. Perhaps the best example of this is the asymmetry in the effort the West was willing to put into stabilizing the Balkans, as compared to its attitude toward the Southern Caucasus.

The final and perhaps most important difference we face today is, of course, Russia. In the 1990s, we were dealing with a weak, quasi-democratic state that was seeking to become part of the West. Moscow joined the West in embracing the notion of a new democratic peace at a time when it wanted to shed its imperial past and join an enlarging Western community. Today, however, these new rules which were supposed to govern European security have become a liability in Moscow’s eyes—in part because they are seen as facilitating and legitimizing EU and NATO enlargement at Russia’s expense. Now, a more autocratic and nationalist Moscow has embraced its own model of modernization and wants to renegotiate the rules of the game on European security. Rather than seeking to become part of the West, it aims to demarcate itself from the West and reclaim a sphere of privileged interest on its borders and in the post-Soviet space. The Russia–Georgia War showed that Moscow is prepared to go quite far, including using force, to prevent countries from breaking out of what it considers its sphere of influence. The recent Russia–Ukraine deal on the Black Sea fleet demonstrated Russia’s willingness to use soft power and cash to regain influence to achieve the same goal.

The way ahead

The West needs an open debate about the future of its strategy toward Wider Europe and the countries located between Europe’s eastern borders and Russia. Perhaps the central issue that needs to be clarified is whether the principles agreed to twenty years ago in the Charter of Paris continue to provide a compass for policies today. Do we still believe in that document’s vision of a democratic peace, its rejection of zones of influence, and its affirmation of the right of all countries, big and small, to enjoy equal security and their own alliance orientation? While governments today pay lip service to these principles, in Europe one also encounters suggestions about returning to notions of limited sovereignty—often referred to (inaccurately, in the eyes of this author) as “Finlandization”—as a policy option. Absent a reaffirmation of its original core principles, the idea of enlargement is dead. And if we want to continue to assert those principles, how do we pursue them in practice in today’s strategic circumstances?
Second, we need a new narrative that explains why the success of candidate countries in Eurasia and the Southern Caucasus matters. We need to demonstrate why and how we benefit from a world in which a democratic Ukraine seeks to align itself with the West, or in which Georgia’s success has helped stabilize the southern flank of the Euroatlantic community. We need to overcome the schizophrenia in our own policies when we articulate universal principles for the Euroatlantic region but are reticent to apply them in the post-Soviet space for fear that they are too risky and difficult. That narrative must go beyond the theme of a “return to Europe” or the need to eliminate the risk of a security vacuum emerging between Germany and Russia. If the challenge of the 1990s was to consolidate democracy in Central and Eastern Europe along a North-South axis from the Baltics to the Black Sea, today’s challenge is to extend peace and stability along the southern rim of the Euroatlantic community—and a region that connects Europe, Russia, and the Middle East and involves core security interests, including a critical energy corridor.

Third, we also need new forms of engagement to help countries that are weaker, more vulnerable, and more politically problematic. This means we need more cooperation and presence on the ground earlier. If EU or NATO membership is less and less plausible as a short-term option, then the quality of ties other than membership must be improved to compensate. The United States and Europe need to reconsider what anchoring means in practice. In the 1990s, it meant membership in NATO and the EU in rough parallel. Today, the West needs to be more flexible and take a longer view. For some countries, this may mean eventual membership, but for others it may mean simply much closer relations with the West. Policy will have to be much more à la carte than prix fixe.

Last but certainly not least, the West needs a new strategy for Russia. Part of that strategy undoubtedly entails rebuilding a cooperative relationship with Moscow where possible, both in Europe and on global issues where our interests converge. But it also entails standing firm for our principles when we disagree with Moscow, and reassuring our allies and partners when their independence, sovereignty, or territorial integrity is threatened. Above all, it requires us to find way to persuade Moscow to modify how it exerts its interests in a common neighborhood. We have failed to convince Russia that the consolidation of a democratic peace on its borders can provide more, rather than less, security. We need a strategy that encourages Moscow over time to seek influence in its neighborhood through partnership and cooperation, rather than through manipulation and intimidation.

This will require the West to take a new strategy. It will require the United States to partially re-engage in this part of the world—in spite of the long list of other national security challenges it faces in the Middle East and southwest Asia. The passage of the Lisbon Treaty notwithstanding, it is clear—unfortunately—that the EU is by itself not yet able to play the role of a Western anchor for these countries by itself. That is why we need a common U.S.-European response. In the 1990s, the West had a vision, as well as a strategy, and was deeply committed to the project of building a Europe whole and free. Today it is Moscow that seems to have the vision and strategy, and to care more. The result, to use a sports metaphor, is that Moscow is playing offense and we are playing defense.

In the 1990s, the West produced a vision, a narrative and a strategy for the enlargement of the EU and NATO from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Getting that vision and strategy required an open and at times contentious debate. But the strategic benefits we achieved were enormous. Coming up with a grand new strategy to address Wider Europe and to create a new relationship with Russia will require equally innovative and bold thinking today as well. But it is what is needed. Otherwise the vision of an enlarging democratic West as the core of a new European peace order is likely to wither, and its demise will mark the end of an era.