

## Introduction

The primary purpose of this book is to explore the role of democracy in NATO enlargement decisions throughout its history, and to offer an assessment of how the notion of democracy is expected to navigate decision making about future expansion. The principal puzzle that the book tackles is vested in the question of why NATO admits new member states that fall short of the organization's robust expectations of democracy, as stipulated in an elaborate scheme of texts, speeches, and statements set forth by the Alliance throughout its history. In pursuing this perspective, the book sheds light on the multilateral/institutional framing of the enlargement process: how NATO bureaucrats and officials opened the gate for further expansion. The NATO story is not merely about the domestic conduct and decision making of each Ally—whatever large and central—but rather it is a tale of an international organ with a unique viewpoint. It is about the meaning and role of the *O* in *NATO*—an international *organization*, that took upon itself the grand historic mission of anchoring and preserving the postwar rules-based multilateral order, a calling that looms large in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. To address the puzzle of NATO's diminishing democratic threshold, the book maintains that this policy results from gradual erosion in the prominence of democratic discourse within the organization, normalizing deviations from previous optimistic expectations that became increasingly unsustainable in recent decades. During this hopeful period, NATO turned to expand into former Soviet Republics and ex-Communist regimes, quickly exhausting its democratic pool. To ensure the preservation of the expansion train—which provides an invaluable lifeline for every international organization (IO)—NATO was willing to overlook the democratic deficiencies among aspiring member states. The analysis of NATO's conduct in this regard builds on archival research and interviews with NATO officials and senior

member states representatives, complemented by detailed case studies that scrutinize the genuine role of democracy in organizational decision-making on enlargement throughout the Alliance's history.

The book is structured as follows. chapter 1 unpacks the roots and causes of enlargement in IOs—formal institutions established by legally binding treaties incorporating three states or more. In the post-war global order, IOs have become broadly prevalent for a myriad of functions, with recent accounts identifying more than five hundred and sixty formal IOs, and another two hundred informal IOs (frameworks for global cooperation, such as the G7 group of states). IOs are often negotiated and formed by a collection of like-minded states around a particular issue area or boarder purpose, and expand their membership over time, as other states join their founding treaties. With the slow widening of organizational membership, the rules and norms that underpin the IO's operations become more prevalent in the global system. All types of IOs are equipped with administrative resources and structures (most commonly, secretariats and plenary organs) to realize their purpose, coordinating the mechanisms for enlargement. IOs seek expansion for several reasons. First, IOs are fundamentally international bureaucracies, for whom expansion constitutes an organizational lifeline: admitting more members requires additional resources, creates jobs, and generates growth. Indeed, IO bureaucracies are vast powerhouses. NATO, the focus of this book, entails a substantial bureaucratic chain, encompassing around 4,000 employees and national delegates in its Brussels headquarters alone. In the long term, these immense structures and their employees develop strong multinational identities that sometimes transcend the domestic mind-set, creating a group identity that contributes to expansion pressures. The appropriate proceedings for IO enlargement are defined in their founding treaties, which specify the mechanisms and requirements for expansion. In procedural terms, the actual moment of IO enlargement is preceded by a demanding and sometimes lengthy process, over the course of which the candidate state is scrutinized, required to meet various criteria the IO had put in place—a process known as membership conditionality. Some IOs—typically those where membership entails genuine financial, administrative, or military implications—are notoriously arduous in the process of vetting new members. Subscribing to this approach, NATO's membership conditionality involves a multifaceted set of requirements on several realms, including a strong commitment to democracy—a key pillar that constitutes the theme of this book. Over the course of NATO accession talks, experts and

representatives from the candidate state and the Alliance meet in several sessions, attending to the political and military criteria, as well as to the technical, legal and procedural matters. The candidate state then provides a letter of intent to NATO's secretary general, outlining the schedule for the conclusion of all required reforms. A satisfactory implementation of all agreed modifications is considered a prerequisite for accession, enabling progress toward membership invitation—followed with signing accession protocols, and finalized with unanimous Allied domestic ratification. The domestic ratification phase can become stained due to political circumstances and considerations, as exemplified by Turkey's delay of the ongoing process with regard to Finland and Sweden's accession.

After laying out the theoretical foundations of IO enlargement and surveying the mechanics of NATO expansion, chapter 2 extensively outlines the central role democracy had played in the formation of the Alliance, demonstrating how pivotal this notion has been in enlargement decisions throughout its history. Since its establishment, the Alliance issued numerous documents, declarations, and communiqués that underlie the importance of democracy for NATO's mission. In the midst of the Cold War, NATO strove to enhance political cooperation among its member states—with democracy as an organizing principle. In the final years of the Soviet Union, with its grasp on Europe quickly eroding, the Alliance increasingly referenced the necessity for West-East dialogue. The chapter reveals the narrative aimed to bring the newly established Central and Eastern European states closer to the Western set of values, based first and foremost on adherence to democracy, framing the core purpose of the Alliance around this theme. As rapprochement toward the East became a core mission, in November 1991, NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept, followed with the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC)—a forum for dialogue with ex-Warsaw Pact states (later replaced with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council—EAPC). A crucial step in the preparations for NATO's Eastern enlargement took place in January 1994, with the formation of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program—a tailor-made instrument to facilitate a bilateral partnership with participating states. At its core, the PfP was designed as a preparatory mechanism for future membership, with the stated aim of consolidating the democratization of civil-military relations. Shortly afterward, NATO released its most significant document to clearly define the various aspects of enlargement—the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement. This formative text leads with the notion of advancing democratic values as one of the

defining features for progress, grounding NATO expansion in the principles of the UN Charter. Following the 1999 enlargement round, integrating Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, NATO approved a new Strategic Concept, emphasizing the Alliance's commitment to remain open to consider new candidates, famously stressing that no European *democratic* country will be excluded from consideration. Ever since, this wording will have accompanied the vast majority of NATO statements and speeches on enlargement. In practice, in 1999, the Alliance's Washington Summit charted a way for future enlargement, introducing a carefully tailored new mechanism—the Membership Action Plan (MAP), created to assist aspiring members to meet NATO's expectations. To date, eleven aspirant countries that took part in the MAP were ultimately able to gain full membership (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), with Bosnia and Herzegovina remaining the sole active participant. At the Brussels Summit meeting in June 2021, the Alliance commissioned the formation of a new Strategic Concept, finalized and introduced during the June 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, sustaining the reliance on the notions of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights as the core instruments shaping the Alliance. Against the backdrop of the dramatic events of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the tragic war that ensued, NATO's compass—emphasizing democratic values and credibly committing to defending these values—remains the guiding principle for the Alliance's future in the decades to come. The 2023 accession of Finland (and the much-anticipated Swedish membership)—represents a powerful signal for the attractiveness and relevance of the Alliance by two of the most robust and vigorous European democracies, which for decades maintained a policy of military nonalignment.

After the first two chapters provide a comprehensive account of the centrality and importance of the notion of democracy for the structure, cohesion, and enlargement conditionality of the Alliance over its history, chapter 3 connects these dots with the occasionally painful reality of enlargement. How did NATO translate this ironclad commitment to democratic values into its enlargement decision-making over the years? And what are the consequences for the future of NATO expansion? To assess this theme, chapter 3 first dives into the conceptualization of democracy in modern political science, touching on the various ideational and empirical aspects of this term, in an attempt to offer a multifaceted framing for the analysis. This is performed by harnessing methodological

and conceptual insights from leading global democracy indices—complex structures that connect the theoretical language to real-world measurement. A sober evaluation of the actual state of democracy in the ranks of the Alliance, and particularly among its newest pre-Ukraine members, is crucial for understanding whether NATO’s democratic conditionality indeed has been rigorously applied throughout its expansion history. Undeniably, this assessment paints a somewhat gloomy picture, detached from the optimistic expectations reflected in the Alliance’s inaugural texts and speeches—demonstrating that NATO has been experiencing democratic backslide. Then, the chapter introduces a new theoretical framework to explain this phenomenon, building on the constructivist school of thought in the study of international relations (IR). This conceptual approach suggests that the desire to expedite the historic process of NATO enlargement encouraged long-term organizational behavior that eroded original organizational norms, diminishing—over time—the key tenet of uncompromising importance of a robust democracy, a process known as normalization of deviance. This term was devised as part of an analysis of the organizational culture in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the period before the 1986 *Challenger* crash, in an attempt to investigate the structural behavior that contributed to the negligence that underpinned the disaster. The chapter then proceeds to apply the notion of normalization of deviance to NATO’s enlargement practices, using a wide array of originally performed interviews with NATO officials presently or previously involved in the various aspects of enlargement decision-making. This effort lays the groundwork for the next chapters, which offer elaborate case studies on every enlargement round in the history of the Alliance, including the most recent process concerning Sweden and Finland, while also aiming to identify the prospects for future enlargements.

In accordance with this line of investigation, chapter 4 surveys internal NATO deliberations and decision-making rationale vis-à-vis the Alliance’s early enlargements states—Greece and Turkey (1952), West Germany (1955) and Spain (1982)—in the context of democratic membership conditionality. This task entails harnessing archival evidence and historical accounts to assess the genuine role played by adherence to democracy in NATO’s enlargement decisions throughout the internal deliberation and bargaining process. Relying on the prominent democracy indices available for the period, Polity IV and V-Dem, these enlargements vary in their accession-day levels of democratic consolidation. While Greece and Turkey

were dubbed electoral autocracies or borderline democracies, West Germany's reintegration into the family of nations brought into the Alliance a full-fledged liberal democracy. Spain, another European postfascist giant, also held quite robust democratic characteristics on accession day, while not as comparatively inclusive as West Germany. The chapter thoroughly fleshes out NATO's perspective on these three enlargements rounds.

Chapter 5 takes on the journey of post-Cold War enlargement. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw NATO's transformation into a centerpiece mechanism of the newly established unipolar American-led global order. Absent its core founding military mission of protecting European democracies from a possible Communist invasion or threat, NATO willfully embraced the endeavor to facilitate and promote democratization in Eastern Europe, positioning itself as a lighthouse for projecting democratic norms toward its East. A meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in July 1990 best exemplifies how essential it was for NATO to provide Eastern Europe with the chance to integrate itself into the Western sphere of influence: "NATO must evolve and it must look back to its origins. It is a defensive Alliance of free and democratic nations on both sides of the Atlantic which is adapting to a new European reality. . . . East European countries have expressed their will to adopt a new way of life shaped by the common denominators of the Alliance such as pluralistic democratic administration, supremacy of law and free market economy."<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, this chapter investigates this transformation, harnessing archival material to flesh out the role of democracy in post-Cold War expansion decisions. This account includes a discussion of the 1999 enlargement round, incorporating Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, followed with an assessment of the massive 2004 expansion round (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia). To conclude, the chapter also attends to the accession of Croatia and Albania (2009), Montenegro (2017), and finally, North Macedonia in 2020. Large-scale analyses of the levels of democracy in all post-Communist NATO members demonstrate that democratic regime characteristics are positively associated with the prospects for NATO accession.<sup>2</sup> However, while the 1999 enlargement round was relatively strong in terms of democracy rankings, further enlargements—in particular those of the recent decade (Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia)—were increasingly unable to uphold the same standards, effectively lowering the democratic entry bar. Hence, a more fine-grained breakdown of the role of democracy in NATO accession is essential to further flesh out the dynamics behind

enlargement decisions, helped by an analysis of how processes of domestic liberalization unfolded in aspiring states, and in turn perceived by NATO.

Chapter 6 offers an assessment of the future of NATO expansion, and the role democracy is expected to play in enlargement decisions. Following the Finnish and Swedish dramatic decision to pursue NATO membership in the aftermath of the February 2022 Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine, three countries formally remain in the running for future membership: Georgia, Ukraine, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The potential candidacy of Georgia and Ukraine has been mulled over by the Alliance since the late 1990s, but has become significantly strained over their recent military confrontations with Russia. These wars—that is, Russian military campaigns in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014 and 2022)—had left parts of these countries’ territory under Russian occupation or separatist rebel rule, rendering their future membership immensely challenging. A substantial portion of this challenge is derived from NATO’s policy, according to which prospective members should put to rest any existing territorial disputes before finalizing their membership. The 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement determines that “States which have ethnic or external territorial disputes . . . must settle those disputes by peaceful means [and] . . . resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the 1999 MAP framework also references territorial disputes, emphasizing that their resolution is *expected* from aspirant members.<sup>4</sup> This reality considerably strains Georgia and Ukraine’s NATO membership bids, but the tensions with Russia are not the sole delaying factor. As the book exemplifies, the democratic record in candidate countries is vital for an aspirant nation to be considered suitable for NATO membership, albeit the importance of this notion has been gradually eroding. However, Ukraine’s democratic ranking reflects a partly free hybrid regime nature (also referred to as an Open Anocracy in the Polity IV index), a sharp decline since 2014, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, placing it below the expected NATO threshold. Georgia’s rankings had steadily improved since 2004, yet it is still struggling to maintain the ability to meet the Alliance’s expectations, while currently still dubbed partly free and hybrid. As Ukraine struggles for its mere survival and existence, Ukrainian President Zelensky acknowledged the challenges for Ukraine’s possible NATO membership, yet still formally submitted an application for NATO membership, requesting an accelerated ascension into the Alliance, backed by NATO’s Eastern Flank countries. The chapter assesses the future scenarios for NATO’s relations

with Ukraine and Georgia. The third potential candidate—Bosnia and Herzegovina—fares worse than Ukraine and Georgia on all existing indexes, also defined as a partly-free hybrid-regime. It is not, however, presently involved in international disputes or conflicts over its own territorial borders, rendering it as a more feasible candidate compared to the former group. Considering the gloomy developments in NATO's relations with Russia, the Alliance cannot allow Sarajevo to become the next victim in its struggle with Moscow over regional influence on its Eastern Flank. The chapter assesses the possible constellation for Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership bid.

Then, chapter 6 provides an assessment of the circumstances that had led to the historic Finnish and Swedish membership bid. The two Nordic states are among the world's most robust democracies, with a rich history of exemplary respect for the rule of law, human rights, and individual freedoms. Their momentous decision to pursue membership is the direct result of enhanced security concerns in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which changed the security architecture of the entire region and indeed, the post-Cold War order. The chapter details Sweden and Finland's road to membership. As both states rightfully expected swift vetting procedures in the Alliance's internal consultations, eyeing a possible integration as early as June 2022, the Alliance's domestic ratification process proved more stubborn. Nevertheless, this step, in which thirty Allies ratify Finland and Sweden's accession to the Alliance, turned out to be quite lengthy and strained—contrary to the preliminary optimistic expectations—and resulted in Finland's accession in April 2023, as well as a significant delay over Sweden's membership (driven by Turkey and Hungary). The chapter explains Turkey's opposition, stemming from its demands to comprehensively halt all forms of support of Kurdish elements deemed terrorist organizations by Ankara, and assesses the future role of both Nordic countries within the Alliance. Finally, the chapter lays out the intricate history behind the notion of nonalignment in Europe, and surveys the current state of affairs with regard to the chances that other traditionally neutral states (such as Austria, Ireland, and Malta) would opt to pursue full membership in the future. It also identifies those European states that presently seem highly unlikely to pursue a membership path, most prominently Belarus, and explores the current positioning of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kosovo, and Cyprus in this complex web of political-military interests and preferences.

Chapter 7 concludes, developing a discussion of NATO's present-day increasing role and visibility in global affairs, and considers what this reality could mean for the cohesion and structure of the Alliance in the decades to come.