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Putin says his Ukraine invasion is about NATO. Here's how you know he's lying.

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In his [fateful speech on February 24](#), Vladimir Putin justified his impending invasion of Ukraine by focusing on numerous grievances against the West. His main complaint, however, was clear: The eastward expansion of NATO since the 1990s and its enlargement to Russia's borders. This, in his narrative, is the *causis belli* justifying his campaign. Yet careful scrutiny shows that Putin is lying about NATO as his key motivation for the invasion.

How do we know? A wider view of Russian military interventions in the post-Soviet space is key. Ukraine is the most ambitious, **but by no means only**, attempt by Putin to intervene in a neighbor state. Since his rise to power in 1999, Putin has intervened in many countries, including **Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria since 2015**, and **Belarus** and **Kazakhstan** in the last two years. These events show it is democratization, more than NATO, that Putin fears.

Putin's actions in Belarus are the most telling. In the summer of 2020, **the people of Belarus rose up to protest their own dictator, Alexander Lukashenko**, who had governed the country since 1994. After a blatantly stolen election, they took to the streets en masse. **Tens of thousands of protesters turned out in Minsk** demanding Lukashenko's ouster, **rallying behind Svetlana Tikhanovskaya**, the wife of jailed opposition leader Sergei Tikhanovsky. These inspiring scenes captured global attention in August 2020, as the movement **appeared poised for success**.

Yet the uprising set off serious alarm bells in Russia and Putin swooped in to – from Lukashenko's perspective – save the day. In late August, **Putin stated quite unequivocally that he would intervene if the protests "got out of control."** By mid-September, he had done just that, **sending in Kremlin propagandists** to boost Lukashenko's media operations and **security officials** to manage his failing crackdown on protesters. And by the year's end, Putin had **committed Russia's National Guard** to maintain order in Belarus and was **sending large contingents of Russian troops to the country** under the guise of joint military exercises. The protest movement was soon quashed, and the message was clear: Belarus would

not be allowed to democratize, and Putin would use whatever force was necessary to ensure it.

Why is this so revealing? Because crucially, the anti-Lukashenko democratization movement that formed in August 2020 was decidedly *not* anti-Russian. Belarusians are notoriously pro-Russian in orientation due to the two publics' deep sociocultural ties. Protesters in Minsk often sported Russian flags alongside symbols of Belarusian opposition leaders. And the movement's leaders, including Tikhanovskaya herself, took great pains to convey lack of hostility toward Moscow. On August 25, Tikhanovskaya declared of the movement: "It is neither a pro-Russian nor anti-Russian revolution. It is neither an anti-European Union nor a pro-European Union revolution. It is a democratic revolution." She made this point repeatedly, imploring later that: "You must understand that we have absolutely nothing against Russia." The movement made no calls for Belarus to join NATO. This stands in stark contrast to Ukraine, where steps were taken to join NATO in 2008 and key figures like Yulia Tymoshenko openly endorse NATO membership.

The upshot of all this is that the Kremlin sent security forces into Belarus to help crush an emerging *pro-Russian* democracy because it perceived that as an existential threat. Moreover, the autocratic ruler it acted to save was a decidedly unreliable geopolitical ally, with Lukashenko having flirted seriously with the Europeans and showing a significant desire for independence under Putin's rule. The case of Belarus demonstrates that Putin will lash out against the threat of democratization even when the threat of NATO is absent. Democratization in a

“brother country” like Belarus is thus a *sufficient cause* for intervention, potential geopolitical realignment or not.

Looking at how other world powers react to democratization movements in key regions of interest to them sharpens the case even further. For example, scholars have shown how the US encourages democratization in Middle Eastern countries with pro-American opposition forces like Kuwait and Tunisia, while discouraging it in those with anti-American opposition forces like Jordan and Saudi Arabia. This is a potent critique of US Middle East policy. But the contrast with Putin’s Russia is clear. In the US case, the threat that spurs efforts to stymie democracy is anti-Americanism. In Russia’s case, efforts to crush democratization are made *regardless of whether it is pro-Russian or not*. Even where geopolitical alignment would *least* predict Russian intervention (Belarus), it is still squashed. This shows what triggers Putin to aggress clearly.

Objections to this argument may be raised. First, some may note that Russian intervention in Belarus since 2020 has not been a hard-edged invasion or military campaign. This is true, but only because the uprising had not succeeded – and that was all the suppression *required* to put it down. Russian analysts who are close to the Kremlin noted at the time that Putin viewed events in Belarus as an “existential question,” and there is every indication that he would have used much more force if the protests succeeded. In short, he acted preemptively. Intervention in Ukraine *before* the 2014 Euromaidan protests succeeded would have looked similar.

Second, some might suggest that Putin believes a democratic Belarus would have gone to NATO. As noted above, this is not a credible concern given the generally pro-Russia sentiment in Belarus, which diverged from Ukraine. Moreover, if democracy is viewed as automatically synonymous with geopolitical drift to NATO by Russia, this separates NATO's actual behaviors (**the alleged source of the threat according to Putin**) from the issue at hand and makes democratization a sufficient condition for intervention.

Ultimately, the fact that Putin crushes even friendly regime change movements speaks volumes – democratization itself is the unspoken threat in his mind. Ukraine did not need to embrace NATO (and vice versa) for the invasion to happen. Whatever Putin says, Belarus showed that it was inevitable just by democratizing as a major Slavic country in his backyard.

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