

Russia, the EU, and NATO: Understanding Three Decades of Relations (1991–2025)

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Era 1: 1991-1999 (Integration)

EU/NATO Vision:

- The EU and NATO saw a chance to spread peace, democracy, and stability eastward (Paris Charter – „freedom to choose security arrangements“)
- Wanted to help new democracies join the Western system “End of History“
- Focused on values: rule of law, open markets, collective security.
- Saw Russia as a partner, but not as a decision-maker in EU/NATO policies.

Russian Vision:

- Russia wanted to be welcomed as a great European power after the Cold War.
- Hoped for “equal partnership” and a say in new European security rules (Integration with Europe = Prosperity+Security).
- At the same time: worries about losing influence and status („indivisibility of security“).

Era 2: 1999-2007 (Expansion and Distrust)

EU/NATO Vision:

- Enlargement (1999;2004) was about fulfilling the dreams of Central/Eastern European countries.
- NATO and the EU promised this was “not against Russia” (Eastern Europeans different logic) – Russia/NATO Council in 2002
- Wanted a Europe “whole and free”

Russian Vision:

- Saw NATO and EU enlargement increasingly as a threat to its security and historical sphere of influence (despite initial support – „common area of cooperation“)
- Interpreted Western interventions, like Kosovo, as ignoring Russian interests.

Era 3: Competition into the Open (2007-2014)

EU/NATO Vision:

- The EU offered its “neighborhood policy” to nearby states (but did not guarantee membership + offered Russia to cooperate like Partnership for Modernisation 2010).
- Still saw Russia as a potential partner, but increasingly worried about its assertiveness (hedging strategy).
- Wanted rules-based order, not spheres of influence.

Russian Vision:

- Putin promoted a “multipolar world” (Primakov Doctrine)
- Insisted Russia should have more say over security and integration in Eastern Europe.
- Saw EU/NATO moves as “encircling” Russia and as a threat to its role as a regional leader.

Era 4: 2014-2021 (From Competition to Confrontation)

EU/NATO Vision:

- Saw Russia's aggression in Ukraine as a breach of international law
- Wanted to defend the idea that borders can't be changed by force.
- Believed standing together was essential for European security.
- Used sanctions and increased military presence to show unity.

Russian Vision:

- Claimed to be defending Russian speakers and national interests.
- Accused the EU and NATO of undermining Russian security.
- Argued that force was sometimes ⁵ needed to protect Russia's interests

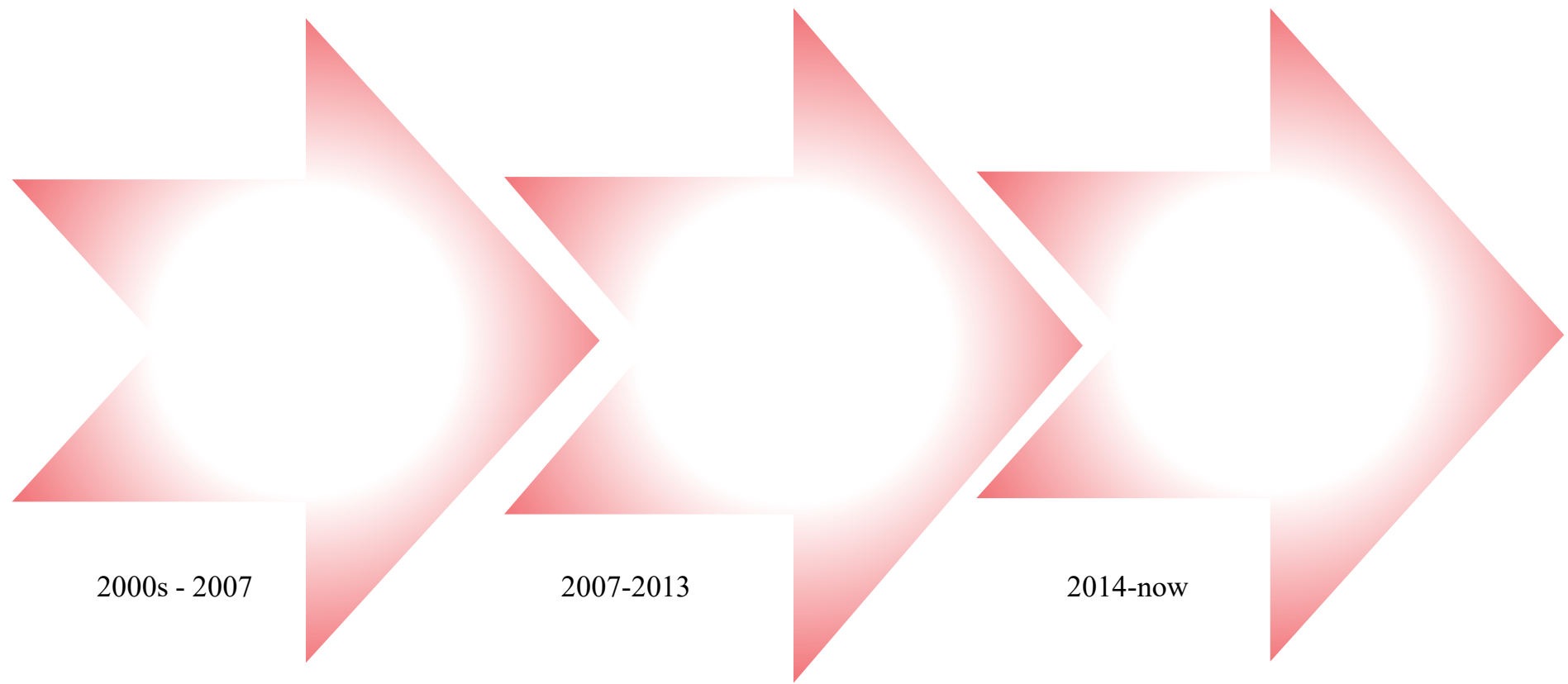
Era 5: 2022- present (Worlds Apart)

EU/NATO Vision:

- Views Russia as a direct military and strategic threat.
- Presents EU and NATO unity as vital for defending democracy.
- Sees supporting rule-based order as a core mission

Russian Vision:

- Describes the conflict as a struggle against “Western domination.”
- Portrays the EU and NATO as threat to Russian sovereignty and security.
- Attempts to build closer ties with non-Western powers.



2000s - 2007

2007-2013

2014-now

Conclusion

Russia, the EU, and NATO each believe they are/were protecting European peace—but define that peace in deeply different ways.

This clash of visions, not just interests, is at the heart of Europe's current divisions.