



## What way for NATO? Hungary follows Turkey down the authoritarian path

Doug Bandow

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Critics claim Hungary has turned into an elective dictatorship, with parliament voting to give Prime Minister Viktor Orban power to rule by decree. This follows Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who effectively rules by decree—as well as manipulates elections and arrests critics. What is NATO, an alliance focused on supposedly democratic Europe, going to do?

A better question would be, why should the U.S. continue to underwrite the transatlantic alliance?

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization began in 1949 with 12 members. A more accurate name would be North America and the Others. Now up to 30 members—the comedic Duchy of Grand Fenwick became a member in late March, in the guise of North Macedonia—the alliance long has been notable for enabling military free-loading by a continent whose wealth matches and population exceeds that of America.

By a vast margin the biggest spender with the largest military and greatest combat capabilities is the U.S. Only eight other governments meet NATO's official objective of military outlays reaching 2 percent of GDP. Four of them barely hit the line. Only Bulgaria is significantly above that level. Greece makes this elite group because it is arming against fellow alliance member Turkey, not Russia or any other outside threat.

The 2 percent goal is not new: it was set in 2006, when seven members total met that level. Most significant, even now only one of the continent's major powers, the United Kingdom, makes it across the line, staggers really, with a bit of fiscal legerdemain (expanding the definition of military outlays). France comes close. Expenditures by Germany, Italy, and Spain fall abysmally short.

Admittedly, the 2 percent standard is arbitrary, merely indicating military effort. Nevertheless, it represents important evidence of a country's commitment to defend itself and its region. Apparently most Europeans can't be bothered to do so.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the states viewed as most at risk seemingly view the floor as a ceiling. Poland spends 2.0 percent, Latvia 2.01 percent, Lithuania 2.03 percent, and Estonia 2.14 percent. All claim to feel frightened by possible Russian aggression, yet is that all they believe their independence and freedom are worth? Even the very nations that proclaim themselves to be most at risk prefer to rely on Washington than devote their own resources to their defense.

Of the other 29 members only two have genuinely capable militaries, France and the United Kingdom. Germany, despite a storied past, when its prodigious battle skills were put to ill ends, has been embarrassed for years by reports of minimal readiness. Small nations such as Denmark and the Netherlands have contributed forces to allied endeavors (losing lives in the process) but would be marginal players in any continental conflagration. And mini-states, such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Croatia, are merely geopolitical ornaments, increasing allied defense responsibilities but not capabilities.

The basic problem is two-fold. Most European nations, certainly those constituting “old Europe,” as Donald Rumsfeld referred to it, have little fear of Russia. Vladimir Putin is a nasty authoritarian, not a foolish megalomaniac. Martians are more likely than Russians to invade the continent. European peoples know that and offer little support for a military build-up to satisfy Washington’s threat conceptions.

Equally important, NATO members assume Washington would deal with any crisis, so ask, why spend more money on the military? Moscow’s assault on Ukraine has spurred a small but steady spending increase by some members. However, despite constant whining by Washington, expressed more vociferously by President Donald Trump, the substantive impact is and will remain small. After all, even as U.S. officials insisted that Europe must do more, they repeated reassurances of America’s commitment to the continent and increased funding for and placement of men and materiel in Europe. Congress even approved more military subsidies as part of “The European Reassurance Initiative” (since renamed The European Deterrence Initiative).

What incentive does any European government have to do anything more than the minimum necessary to reduce Washington’s complaining?

Now even alliance advocates are appalled by Hungary’s authoritarian move. Yet Turkey has gone much further down this path, wrecking a democratic order, crushing dissent, threatening fellow NATO member Greece as well as Cyprus, aiding the Islamic State and other Islamic radicals in Syria, and moving close to Russia, even purchasing weapons from Moscow. Who seriously believes that Turkey would go to war with Russia over a threat to, say, Estonia?

Still, the more fundamental issue is whether the transatlantic alliance serves America’s interests. Orban’s power play should trigger a review of America’s, not Hungary’s, membership in NATO. The U.S. should turn responsibility for Europe’s security over to Europe, which could take over NATO’s leadership or create an organization tied to the European Union. Washington still should cooperate with the Europeans but need not guarantee the security of nations well able to defend themselves.

The EU has 10 times the economic strength and three times the population of Russia. With America so busy elsewhere in the world—fighting endless wars in the Middle East and confronting a rising China in Asia—European governments should do what all governments

normally are supposed to do, defend their peoples. It is time for burden-shedding, not just burden-sharing.

Alliances should be a means to an end, enhancing U.S. security. In Washington, NATO has become an end, even as it undermines U.S. security. Hungary's transformation is forcing an alliance rethink, which is long overdue. In the midst of a viral pandemic and debt explosion, Americans cannot afford to provide military welfare for the rest of the world, especially populous and prosperous Europe. The Europeans should take over that responsibility.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire*.*