Eastern Europe Is Planning A Future Beyond The EU & NATO | Prof. Ivo Yotsov

Does being in NATO really feel that different from being in the Warsaw Pact for those who lived through both? And is it possible for a group of Eastern European nations to actually force peace by acting as a "buffer zone" from within the alliance? To explore these ideas, I turned to someone who has watched the world shift from the deck of a ship. Captain Ivo Yotsov is a former captain in the Bulgarian Navy and currently a professor at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy. With his unique mix of military experience and academic work on "New Structural Realism," he offers a view from the Black Sea that challenges how we usually think about power, culture, and the future of Europe. Links: Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic) Merch & Donations: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Timestamps: 00:00:00 New Structural Realism vs. Liberalism 00:06:40 Civilizational Realism & The Russian Worldview 00:17:40 Comparing the Warsaw Pact to NATO 00:29:54 An Eastern European Buffer Zone 00:39:23 Preventing War via NATO Vetoes

#Pascal

Welcome back to Neutrality Studies. Today we have a guest from Bulgaria. I'm joined by Captain Ivo Yotsov, who holds a PhD in International Economics, served as a captain in the Bulgarian Navy, and is now a professor at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy. Professor Yotsov, welcome.

#Ivo Yotsov

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here in Europe, on Neutrality Studies.

#Pascal

I'm very happy to have you here. I'm very happy to have you because you are actually—well, you're in Bulgaria, in Eastern Europe—and you're writing or working on a manuscript on new structural realism. I'd like to discuss that with you. As far as I understand, the book isn't out yet; it will be out in a couple of months. But can you tell me, from your background and from looking at world affairs from Bulgaria today, what this new structural realism tells you about how the world works?

#Ivo Yotsov

Maybe, first of all, I have to explain why I wrote this book. I realized that the two major concepts related to the security environment and international relations are not able to explain the world we live in. The first one is liberalism, or liberal institutionalism. This concept sees countries as

companies. It defines the world by how it should be—for example, respecting rules, having human rights—but it cannot explain the real world. It cannot explain why Russia attacked Ukraine, or why the U.S. kidnapped the president of Venezuela.

#Pascal

I might just interject, because liberal institutionalism says that the way countries are structured is the way they also behave. So, you know, Russia invaded Ukraine because it's an autocracy, right? Because it's ruled by a dictator—therefore, they go in. But that's usually where this line of thinking ends.

#Ivo Yotsov

Yes, this is the point of view of that concept. The second one is realism, and it has two branches: classical and structural realism. It examines countries as, for example, billiard balls. It's interested in how they react, how they move and interact with each other, but what happens inside the balls it cannot explain. It works with pure numbers—it counts population, ships, aircraft, and so on—and power is related to this quantity of something. Yet it cannot explain why NATO lost the conflict in Afghanistan. It cannot explain why, despite the huge GDP of the U.S. compared to Vietnam, the war in Vietnam was lost. From this point of view, it just cannot be explained.

So, one more thing is that we have to create a framework that can explain the new reality. In this new reality, there are actors in international relations such as private military companies and groups of hackers, for example. And we are in a war—a continuous war—but without classical means to attack the opposite side. So I think the existing concepts should be made broader to include history, the red lines, the virtual pains, the feelings of countries. Some countries, OK, they are different from this point of view. There are great powers, and there are smaller powers, and they cannot react in the same way. So, in my view, realism should be made broader.

#Pascal

We have a couple of IR thinkers, of course, who try to develop this concept of realism. I mean, the original realism, as it was coined and developed by Morgenthau, has gone through a lot of changes. And Kenneth Waltz, too, has gone through a lot of iterations, right? The most prominent one in our space is certainly John Mearsheimer, who uses what he calls offensive realism. In his framework, one of the postulates is that security competition among states is unavoidable because, yeah, they're billiard balls—they're always on the playing field, right? So competition is unavoidable. War is avoidable if it's managed carefully, but the reason he calls it "offensive" is because states need to be assertive—especially great powers—in order to create a balance of power. If you give in, then, well, the other one will come and ram you through, right? So, in your view, in terms of structural realism, how do you see these forces actually moving?

Ivo Yotsov

Actually, in my view, we have to examine what is going on with the billiard balls.

Pascal

For example—may I just add, because this is very different—John Mearsheimer explicitly says, "I don't care what happens inside the balls; it doesn't matter. It's the system that…"

Ivo Yotsov

Yes, this is the main difference. It's very important to understand what's going on. Because, for example, if we take Huntington's point of view, there are different civilizations. And if you look at the point of view of—what was the name—sorry.

Pascal

It's okay.

Ivo Yotsov

But let's continue. European civilization as a whole is part of, let's say, the classical civilization that appeared in the Mediterranean. During the Roman Empire, it was separated into Western and Eastern parts. So the Eastern civilization—countries like my own, Bulgaria, Russia, Poland, and so on—is a little bit different from this point of view. The behavior of these states is very much related to that background. So we cannot just say, "Okay, we're only thinking about what's going on in the box," because we have to answer four questions: first, who; second, how; third, why; and with what kind of means will they react, and to what are they reacting.

So in this way, we can classify and find direct examples. The virtual pain, for instance—when a country that was once a great empire loses part of its territory, like Russia with the countries of the Caucasus—it feels pain as if a leg has been cut off. It's no longer part of the body, but the pain still exists. In this new structural imperialism, it's clear why Russia sees Ukraine as part of Russian civilization. I suppose many people know that Kievan Rus' is the core of the Russian state. So it's very important to understand why the leadership of a country reacts one way or another.

Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this can happen again at any time. So please consider subscribing not only here but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. I mean, this is quite important because, again, Mearsheimer's

version of realism—of course, Mearsheimer as an analyst, as a person—will never, ever ignore the beliefs, the speech acts, and so on of the Russians. He actually keeps talking about this constantly: about what we hear and how the Russian political system works. This is very crucial.

But for the theory, the point is that states necessarily behave as if security competition is always going on, and they act to maximize their security against others, right? Great powers do this through several means—for instance, by fighting other great powers or trying to prevent them from ever becoming great powers, and through alliance management to make sure their satellites stay more or less in line and don't threaten the core, and so on, right? And he said in there that it doesn't matter whether we're talking about a democracy, an autocracy, or a theocracy like in Iran. I mean, once the power develops to do something, they'll behave that way. Now, what this leaves out, of course, is exactly what you're saying.

The fact is that different civilizations might actually not behave that way, because the case studies that classical or offensive realists use are mostly those coming straight out of the Roman Empire— the Western Roman Empire, right? Then they study how the Europeans behaved among each other, then the British, then the Americans. So it's basically one long trajectory of Western Roman Empire development—breaking up and reconfiguring—and then they map that onto the whole world and say, "All of them behave like that." But that leaves out the Chinese civilization, it leaves out the Eastern Roman civilization, the Russians. And your analysis now says, no, no, no, we need to look at that. The civilizational component is essential. Is that it?

#Ivo Yotsov

Actually, my analysis says that classical realism should be extended with this point of view. Nobody says, "No, no, we can't count the numbers." And actually, power is very much related to the number of tanks, aircraft, and so on. Okay, nobody says it's not like that. But there are other issues related to power—like how the society, for example, is united, the will of the society. So, yeah.

#Pascal

So, what is it in your view? I mean, let's take Bulgaria as an example—a state or a society that's not as clearly shaped by these Western constructs as, say, France or the UK. If you, as a Bulgarian, understand Russians differently—their motivations, for instance, for doing things—what's the most important aspect to understand about how they, as a great power, as a great civilization, act on the world stage today?

#Ivo Yotsov

Actually, here in Bulgaria, we have a very powerful, very intense discussion in society about our relationship with Russia. You probably know that because of the war between the Ottoman Empire and Russia at the end of the 19th century, Bulgaria became an independent state. But at the same

time, the Cyrillic alphabet was developed in Bulgaria, so we have very close relations with what is now Russia—or the Russian Empire if you go further back in history. The feelings of Bulgarians toward Russia are very different, for example, compared to the Polish population or Western Europeans. So here in Bulgaria, we have Russophiles and Russophobes—two major, let's say, camps.

Russophiles think the country should be oriented more toward the East, and the Russophobes think political relations with Western countries should be closer. Now, my country is a member of NATO, the European Union, and so on. So, in a way, the country made a choice—maybe more than 20 years ago. But still, I think even the political leadership here can understand Russia's point of view quite well. For example, during World War II, the Bulgarian embassy in Moscow and the Soviet embassy in Sofia were points of contact between Germany and the Soviet Union. So I believe that, somehow, the war in Ukraine will end and good relations between our countries will be restored.

#Pascal

So you think that the Bulgarian–Russian relationship, once the war ends, will necessarily improve again because of the proximity and the cultural ties? Yes, for sure.

#Ivo Yotsov

May I ask? Sorry. You probably know our language is very close to Russian. Here in Bulgaria, there are a lot of people—not just from Russia, but from Ukraine as well—Russian-speaking Ukrainians who came here at the beginning of the war. They feel very comfortable living in Bulgaria.

#Pascal

Because, like, okay, it's clear—cultural proximity, right? May I ask you, though, because Bulgaria is in this interesting position where, on the one hand, it was part of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War, and in that sense, it was always counted as a satellite, right? And you probably, I mean, remember those days, at least growing up, I suppose. Yes. On the other hand... Well, I mean, I'm 40 years old, so I'm still kind of a product of the Cold War, right? I was born in 1985, so anyone just a few years older probably has active memories of growing up in that situation.

I mean, I keep saying we often forget just how many people were born in states that don't exist anymore—the Soviets, the Czechoslovaks, the Yugoslavs, right? A lot of people our age, and even younger, were born in countries that no longer exist in Europe. But let's leave that aside. The question I want to ask is: if you think about this transition—from being a Warsaw Pact member, to basically being free-floating, to then becoming part of NATO and how NATO functions today—how would you compare that transition? How would you make sense of it, and how would you compare being a Warsaw Pact member versus being a NATO member?

#Ivo Yotsov

You're right. My country has a long history with the Warsaw Pact, and we joined NATO in 2004—so more than 20 years now as a member of NATO. I was very young when the country was still part of the Warsaw Pact. Within the Pact, the level of integration was very high. All the military equipment was Russian, and all defense industry production was under Russian license. So the interoperability between the armies in the Warsaw Pact was very strong. The procedures—everything—was standardized. And, of course, Russian was used as the language of communication between the different armed forces. That was the good part of it. But from a control point of view, the Warsaw Pact was very strictly managed by the Soviet Union. You probably know about the Brezhnev Doctrine, the idea of "limited sovereignty."

According to this doctrine, the other countries could intervene to influence a specific ally and reestablish order there. The doctrine was developed after, let's say, the events in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Actually, the level of democracy—or rather, the level of sovereignty—was almost zero. In NATO, in my view, countries have the right to make their own choices—about equipment, about procedures, about how things are done in their own militaries. And this creates, from my point of view, a huge mess, because even now the level of interoperability between the different armed forces is not as good as it should be. Probably one day it will be improved, let's say. But yes, NATO allows for much more national sovereignty and democracy compared to the Warsaw Pact.

#Pascal

So, yeah, you know, when we bring it back to the theories, right, the liberalist interpretation of international relations would say that NATO is a completely different animal because all its members are democracies, and they all choose to join. They want to join. It's a democratic decision to join. Whereas under Soviet rule, because those were autocracies, all the other members that joined were autocracies too, and they were, you know, forced to join and integrated. And there might be a point in that, right? I mean, even in your explanation, the level of integration of these two systems is just very different.

#Ivo Yotsov

Yeah, yeah.

#Pascal

But the realist side would say these are just two different flavors. It's like Coca-Cola and Pepsi—they're functionally similar in the sense that they help the hegemon on either side coordinate the satellites. Would you agree with that or not?

#Ivo Yotsov

This is a very difficult question. I can't say—probably, probably even now. Actually, I think it's more valuable now, because several years ago the level of control from the hegemon was lower. Actually, no—it was just more hidden.

#Pascal

Covered.

#Ivo Yotsov

Yeah, it was covered. Now it's the behavior—it's "I won't," without any shame. They just say, "I won't." And, for example, the European Union—maybe we'll discuss that later—but after 2019, the European Union has been getting stronger, while the sovereignty of the countries is getting weaker. They create a lot of rules, a lot of legislation, which makes the sovereignty of the countries less and less.

#Pascal

Now, NATO doesn't really do that as an alliance, right? It doesn't create that many rules, but it does create a lot of pressure for interoperability.

#Ivo Yotsov

Actually, no, no. My point is that everything is correct according to the legislation, but the interpretation of that legislation is wrong. For example, the common foreign and defense policy of the European Union is used to create specific lists against people who, from the perspective of some European countries, have done something wrong. The idea was to make the European Union stronger against external threats, but this legislation is used to put pressure on people they see as being in the wrong. You had a lot of...

#Pascal

I'm glad you're bringing that topic up, because I had some very interesting email exchanges and discussions about it. One of the points is that this is a power grab—this question of sovereignty, deciding who gets sanctioned and who does not. The best philosopher who probably wrote about this was the German, the Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt, who once said that the ultimate way for states to impose sovereignty is through the power to decide who's a friend and who's an enemy—who's on the outside as a friend or enemy, and who's on the inside as the enemy.

And the sanctions of the EU are a way to determine, for the whole EU, who is the enemy on the inside—for acts that are not illegal. They didn't do anything illegal; they're just now part of the enemy group. And that's an assertion of sovereignty. And this, of course, flies in the face of

politicians like Viktor Orbán and others who say, "No, no, no, sovereignty is at home, it's in the nation-state." And we have this contest with the EU that's like, "No, no, no, you can be administratively free, but we determine friend and enemy."

#Ivo Yotsov

And actually, this behavior is now creating, let's say, a will among countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland—a will to have more distance from the other parts of the European Union. And actually, the situation is, as we say, Europe moving at two different speeds. Let's see.

#Pascal

Yeah. Different Europes moving at different speeds, yeah. But in this sense, you're more concerned about the politics of the European Union that create pressure on member states than you are about the politics of NATO, because NATO creates less pressure on member states. Is that right? I think yes.

#Ivo Yotsov

I think yes. I'm not involved in this anymore. I was in the HQ of the Navy—I was chief of the department responsible for integration with NATO—but that was more than ten years ago. Now I'm not in this kind of business. It's just a point of view from me, I'd say.

#Pascal

But you—in your view, the way you see, let's say, Eastern European countries behaving—you wrote to me that you think there might be a possibility for something like an Eastern European buffer zone toward the rest of NATO. Can you explain that a bit? How are you envisioning a buffer zone of NATO states?

#Ivo Yotsov

My point of view is that the Eastern European countries have long experience with different kinds of integration. The first one we talked about is the Warsaw Pact—it was a purely military organization. The second one is, I don't know the exact English name, maybe the Council for Economic Cooperation or something like that. I'm not sure.

#Pascal

I think the CIS—the Council on... yes, the successor of the Warsaw Pact, right?

#Ivo Yotsov

The Council for Economic... no, it was just economic integration among the Eastern countries—let's say the countries under the control of the Soviet Union, because Cuba and Vietnam were also part of this economic integration.

#Pascal

It was always a very loose integration, right? A very loose structure.

#Ivo Yotsov

Actually, it was very good integration, with a very high level of specialization. And we had a specific currency—a virtual currency, like the ECU in the European Union—and it was established in the late ' 60s. So from this point of view, that economic organization was more developed than the European Union at that time. The trade between the countries was counted in this artificial currency. Okay, the V4—it's purely Visegrad. It's a purely political organization among the countries, let's say in Central and Eastern Europe.

#Pascal

The Visegrad Group is Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia—no, no, not Bulgaria or Romania.

#Ivo Yotsov

Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Not Romania, not Romania and Bulgaria. They still have very good political cooperation, and they often react together against some political decisions in the European Union's immigration policy, for example. And the last one—Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was like a small European Union: different countries, different religions, and different levels of economic development between the North and the South. And, of course, all those examples of integration have pros and cons—some good aspects and some not so good. So, from a historical point of view, Eastern Europe has long experience. Nowadays, in NATO and the European Union, there is an initiative called Intermarium.

The countries between the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Adriatic Sea want to be more integrated—to create transport corridors, pipelines, gas pipelines, and so on. It means building transport infrastructure. So, in my view, within NATO and the European Union, this level of integration among the Eastern countries should go deeper. Okay, the point is, let's say, the right and left in different countries are very different. But people think this level of integration in Eastern Europe should be deeper because of Russia—to be stronger, to withstand potential attacks or pressure. I don't think it's a real threat, though.

#Pascal

I mean, it's a real threat, yeah. The whole idea of NATO is to deter that kind of aggression, and with Bulgaria being a member, that's a given, right? But of course, economic integration would make sense for different reasons and purposes. So how do you think this experience of Bulgaria and the Eastern European states—having already been in these mini clubs, we could call it mini-lateralism inside Eastern Europe—how could that experience help create a buffer between Russia and the Western NATO states, to decrease the risk of more bloodshed in Europe?

#Ivo Yotsov

It could happen only if NATO and the European Union were to disintegrate. With the current policy—NATO and the EU as they are—that's impossible. So, if this disintegration of the EU or NATO were to happen, the countries of Eastern Europe would have to create, let's say, an Eastern European Union that would be independent from both the West and the East. That's just my point of view. Actually, Yugoslavia used to be the leader of the independent countries, you know.

#Pascal

They're not a large movement yet.

#Ivo Yotsov

Actually, the same political behavior in international relations should be applied to this Congress and coordinated among them. How do I see this integration? Okay, for sure, some part of sovereignty has to be delegated. But I think the common policies that should be delegated are relations with outside countries and, second, infrastructure—transport infrastructure and energy infrastructure: electricity, gas, and so on. Everything else—not just like in the European Union, but everything else, education, whatever—should be handled by the governments of the individual countries. This would guarantee the specific character and culture of each country.

#Pascal

It's very interesting that a lot of people are thinking about a post-EU order in Europe, because many feel the EU can't be saved anymore—it's working itself into the ground. However, I do wonder if the approach you outlined, you know, minilateralism in conjunction with things like the veto—even if NATO doesn't collapse, NATO stays—could still work. What if, within NATO, there were a bloc of countries, the Visegrád countries or maybe Eastern European NATO members, that together decided, "We want to be a buffer zone, we want to be this de-escalatory element, and we will veto NATO decisions as a bloc to kind of lock in the status quo"? Wouldn't that be an approach?

Because we've actually seen an example of that in the past, you know, in the EU between Hungary and Poland, while Poland was still under the previous government—the nationalists, I forgot their name—and they were constantly using their vetoes to help each other. It made sure the EU couldn't

take one of them down, because you need unanimity to do that. So they just kept each other's back safe, right? All of that changed when the Polish presidency and politics shifted. But it wouldn't be unthinkable to have something like that again, because we've seen, for instance, that Turkey, as a NATO member, is actually a pretty neutral player in the whole game with the Ukraine war, right? So it's not the case that a NATO member automatically has to be on board with everything.

#Ivo Yotsov

Your point of view is very good. I think it should be like that, and I'm pretty sure it would guarantee NATO's continued existence. Because probably, you know, after the fall of the Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe, there was a strong discussion about NATO's future—since the strong enemy, the Warsaw Pact, didn't exist anymore. After that, the war on terrorism and so on appeared and gave NATO a new reason to exist. If parts of NATO became a buffer zone, okay, that would be good for peace, but the motivation to keep developing the defense industry and defense infrastructure would be reduced. So, in my view, if things developed that way, eventually the reason for NATO's existence would disappear—because there would be no enemy anymore, you know, because of this buffer zone.

#Pascal

I mean, that's why NATO has no interest in that, right? Any kind of alliance needs an enemy to ally against. But the question for people like us, who would like to live in peace, is: how do we break that logic? One way to break it would probably be to institutionalize a buffer-state policy within NATO—to checkmate the warmongers and say, "No, no, no." For instance, if Bulgaria wrote a constitutional article saying that if NATO troops are to be sent outside NATO territory, that must be vetoed, well, that would directly affect what happens, right, if the Bulgarian government sticks to it. So, in a sense, there are ways—at least in theory—to shape alliance politics.

#Ivo Yotsov

Yeah, you're right, it's not written in the constitution. Actually, I think no country has really stepped out to the end. It's a bit like that, but many countries react that way. For example, during the Gulf Wars, Turkey didn't allow the use of its airfields and didn't participate. So governments have strong power when it comes to deciding whether to use troops during a conflict. That's part of democracy in NATO—unlike in the Warsaw Pact, where generally Russia, or in the U.S. case, Washington, decides what the troops of Turkey, Bulgaria, or whoever will do.

#Pascal

You know, this is a really interesting thought that never crossed my mind—that you could try to use NATO's structure itself to start building de-escalatory principles. Of course, the way NATO currently works is very top-down, but there are strong principles that could actually allow for changes in how NATO operates.

#Ivo Yotsov

Yes, it's a time when we have nuclear weapons. We should think about the fact that a power with such weapons could use them. So politicians should think about how to reduce tension, not how to increase it. Creating a buffer zone is just one way to do that. And actually, the Russian point of view is exactly that. You remember that at the end of 2021, they asked NATO to withdraw its military infrastructure behind the frontiers by the end of May.

#Pascal

Yeah, this would create a buffer zone. The Russians think so too, and I agree. This could actually be a way to start thinking about creating a common security structure that wouldn't need to dissolve NATO. It would just need to create the strategic constraints to make sure deterrence is maintained, but offensive capabilities are taken off the chessboard—so that both sides feel properly secure from the other. Good. I find this fascinating.

#Ivo Yotsov

One more point is that we're living in very difficult economic times. And to spend money that doesn't create possibilities for future development is very stupid. Europe should spend money on education— it's like food for the economy—to increase the possibility of moving it to a higher level, to invest in high technologies, and so on. Spend money on that.

#Pascal

Yeah, for human development, not just for economic growth, yes. These are very good and important thoughts. Professor Yotsov, for people who want to find your work, where should they go?

#Ivo Yotsov

When the monograph is published, it will be open source. Our university press mainly works that way—the books are distributed electronically.

#Pascal

Once it's out, please write to me again, and I'll put it in the description box below this video. We'll also let people know that the book is out. Professor Ivo Yotsov, thank you very much for your time today.

#Ivo Yotsov

Thank you. It was a great pleasure for me. Thank you. Bye.