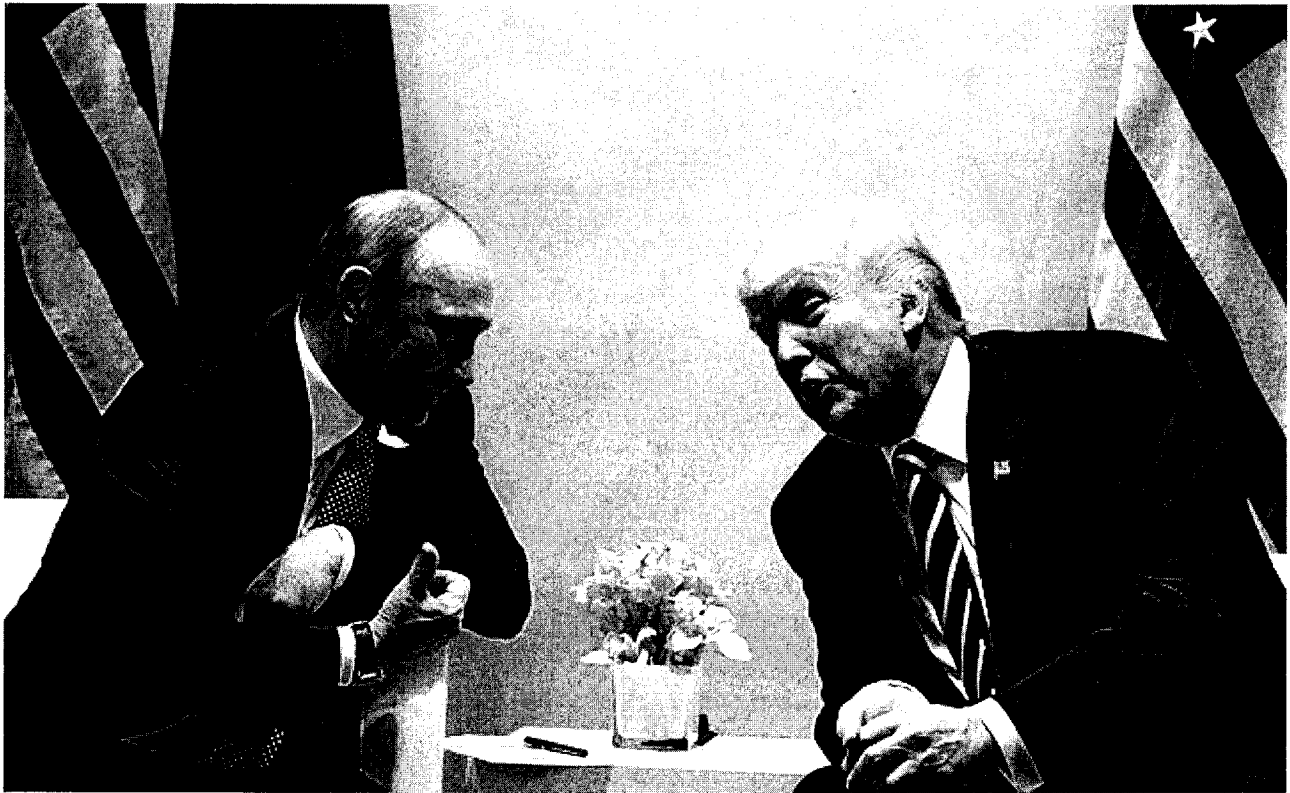




AN EASTERN EUROPEAN VIEW ON GREAT POWER POLITICS



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Last July's meeting in Helsinki between Presidents Trump and Putin greatly concerned the states of Eastern Europe. Helsinki is a highly symbolic venue for them, since this is where the CSCE Final Act was signed in 1975. The principal gain that the USSR claimed back then was the recognition of post-Second World War borders, while the advantage that the West claimed was that you are happy with it. OK

the acknowledgement of human rights. Some argue that the latter was so important that it led to the defeat of USSR – an event that Putin considers to be the worst geopolitical catastrophe in Russian history.

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The Helsinki meeting and Trump's controversial statements at the NATO Summit in Brussels just before, highlight the return of great power politics, with Russia again at center stage. The memory of past great power politics sparks many fears in Eastern Europe. The lands between the Black Sea, the Adriatic and the Baltic have been a theatre of wars for centuries, from the invasions of the Huns and the Tartars, to the clashes of the Ottoman, Tsarist and Habsburg empires, to the two World Wars. Mackinder acknowledged the strategic importance of Eastern Europe in his famous dictum: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world" (from *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 1919).

One should never forget that historically the Balkans was called the "powder keg" of Europe, and that many nation states in the region were born in a condition of almost irreconcilable irredentism. Even though most East European countries are now members of NATO, they are now concerned with renewed Russian irredentism, especially after the annexation of the Crimea. The rise of irredentism and ethno-nationalism in Eastern Europe itself can easily be exploited by Russia for the purpose of hybrid warfare, all of which makes the region vulnerable to Russian mischief.

Indeed, several Eastern European countries are themselves being accused of a slide toward authoritarianism. At the same time, the Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) has vociferously opposed the EU's migration policies, creating a strong opposition against "Old Europe". Moreover, Poland and the Baltics are opposing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a Russian-funded project designed to transport Russian gas to Germany under the Baltic Sea, considering it as a tool for Russian energy blackmail. Some of the more reckless behaviour of

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Eastern European states is explained by the influence of populism, endemic corruption, and slow economic development, which have combined to bring into power authoritarian leaders. These exploit the deficits of democracy and the misery of ordinary people.

Whatever the domestic reasons for the slide towards authoritarianism, leaders are facing challenging decisions on foreign and security policy. But how can one make realistic decisions if one is the leader of neither a Sparta nor an Athens, but of a Melos instead?

Faced with the fact that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”, the Eastern European “Melians” opted for bandwagoning with the US and NATO. They overcame historical enmities (e.g. between Poland and Germany and between Hungary and Romania) in order to join a powerful alliance.

However, bandwagoning does not explain the recent Three Seas Initiatives or the B9 Initiative, groupings that are meant to attract attention within NATO and the EU to the rising geopolitical threats on the Eastern flank. These initiatives show mistrust in recent decisions of Western European leaders, and a feeling that they ignore Eastern European views; they also reveal the fears associated with the return of great power politics. Since the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Eastern Europeans forever fear that a “pact” could be signed behind their back and undermine their security, hence the perceived need for a plan B. Nord Stream 2, for example, is considered a bad deal for Poland, Baltics and the EU; people in the region think of it as an instrument of hybrid warfare.

One doesn't have to agree with this assessment to take Eastern European concerns seriously. Mistrust is widely spread in the region, and countries are prepared to change the focus of their bandwagoning strategy if NATO or the EU would falter. But bandwagon against Russia they will try to do, as a bilateral ally of the US, for example, or as an Eastern European grouping of a multi-speed Europe.

In order to understand the mindset of an Eastern European leader, one could think of “Bogomilism”. This is an Orthodox Church sect with origins in 10th century Macedonia that believes that God and Satan are actually brothers, God ruling the spiritual part of the world, and Satan the material. It may just be a Balkan sect with a handful of followers, but this “philosophy” of general mistrust can be a perfect metaphor for understanding the (hidden) mindset of Eastern European leaders.

This article has attempted to explain the feelings and mindset of Eastern European leaders. What should a leader such as Donald Trump or Angela Merkel take from it? First of all, they should draw some lessons from history and understand how certain dealing with Russia trigger fears of a Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Secondly, they should enhance their communication with the broader public, beyond the diplomatic statements. Does the public know, for example, that in spite of all his rhetoric Trump has increased the US defense budget to more than \$700 billion, pushed NATO towards greater defense expenditure, and continued to operationalize NATO's Readiness Initiative? Finally, they should stop the “non-diplomatic statements”, such as Trump's

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ill-considered jibe about how Montenegro could start World War III. Not only does this undermine trust in American leadership, it could also send the signal that reckless behavior is once again returning to the “bloodlands” of Eastern Europe.

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