

Eastern Europe: Between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin

Caught between the rock and the hard place, Eastern Europe is worried about the Trump presidency.

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U.S. Army soldiers are welcomed in Zagan, Poland, Thursday, Jan. 12, 2017. **Czarek Sokolowski / AP**

Some 4,000 American soldiers arrived in Poland last week in one of the largest deployments of NATO troops in Europe since the end of the Cold War. They were greeted ceremoniously in the south western Polish town of Zagan, posing for pictures with civilians and servicemen. Some of them will be deployed to the Baltic states, as part of a promise the United States' departing president Barack Obama made to Eastern Europe at the NATO summit in Warsaw back in July. And now with Donald Trump replacing Obama in the White House, this brigade carried more symbolic weight than ever for the EU's eastern member states.

Three years after the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, another wave of uncertainty is

descending over Eastern Europe – the impending change of leadership in Washington. Last week Trump astonished European leaders by saying NATO is "obsolete" – later clarifying that it is "still important" to him. "I think we Europeans have our fate in our own hands," Germany's Angela Merkel responded. In the last months of Obama's administration, the U.S. has sent a number of signals to Eastern Europe with the aim of reassuring NATO's eastern flank that it is committed to the security of the region which fears its proximity to Vladimir Putin's Russia.

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Surprisingly, many of Eastern Europe's populist governments welcomed news of Trump's election. His social conservatism and anti-establishment platform resonated in the newest members of the European Union, many of which recently elected nationalistic leaders. Trump's rhetoric resonated with the region's right-wing parties, to the point that authorities there publicly identified with him. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, Polish Deputy Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that Donald Trump was so politically on par with his party that "he must have read our manifesto."

But, as the campaign continued, there was a growing fissure between Trump and Eastern European nationalists: Russia.

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"Eastern Europe received reasons to worry," says foreign policy expert Mikhail Troitsky. Trump's statement during his campaign that NATO members should be contributing more to their own security if they counted on U.S. support, worried governments east of Berlin. A number of candidates for Trump's cabinet cast doubts on U.S. security commitments in the Baltic states and hinted that the U.S. should negotiate directly with Moscow on the future of Europe's security architecture.

"Europe will be largely on its own," says political analyst Vladimir Frolov. Eastern Europe, he says, should be concerned by Trump's rhetoric and his willingness to make U.S. policy more "understanding" to Russia's interest in the region.

More of the same?

As the world watches allegations – some wild, some conceivable – of Donald Trump's ties to Russia circulate, some senior Republicans have taken extra steps to reassure that their party remains firm on Russia. A number of U.S. congressmen rushed to Eastern Europe to show that the United States is still willing to protect them. Some, including John McCain, visited the Baltics and Ukraine soon after the Trump won the election in November.

More recently, the testimonies of Rex Tillerson (Trump's nominee for Secretary of State) and James Mattis (nominee for Secretary of Defense) at their confirmation hearings this week

suggested that they cherished the U.S. commitment to NATO and were unwilling to waver in their stance on the Kremlin. “I think it would be very difficult for the Trump administration to review its policy and commitment vis a vis Eastern Europe,” says Troitsky.

Still, many in Eastern Europe are not convinced. Poland’s Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski who is known for his public gaffes, visited Washington and New York last week. One of his missions, he says, was to convince the Americans not to be soft on Russia. Waszczykowski met with 93 year-old Henry Kissinger and Michael Flynn (chosen by the president-elect as a national security adviser) to “warn them” not to be soft on Russia.

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What should concern the region, analysts say, is not a Russian invasion or the arrival of “little green men.” “That is not on the cards,” says Frolov. Rather, these vulnerable young democracies should be on the lookout for Russia’s meddling in their domestic politics or attempts to control their strategic and foreign policy choices. “Russia is not seeking territory. It is seeking political and economic control,” Frolov says.

Domestic infighting – not Russian influence – has sparked the rise of illiberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. But the Kremlin has welcomed the trend. Next month, Putin is due to visit his closest ally inside the EU: Hungary's Viktor Orban. The Kremlin has no need to conduct major political operations in Eastern Europe because local populists are already doing Russia’s work. The growing number of political stand-offs between the EU's eastern member states and Brussels are welcomed in Moscow. “Russia will be doing everything possible in the region to dilute consensus on sanctions,” says Troitsky.

The Kremlin, Frolov says, views all former Warsaw Pact countries as Russia’s zone of influence within Europe – all the more so when the right populist leader comes to power. This scenario is playing out throughout Eastern Europe, and no number of U.S. military personnel can do anything about it.

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