

Putin Needs to Bury This Relic of Stalin

Russia can't let go of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, 80 years after it was signed. Until it does, eastern European leaders are right to be nervous.

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As Europe marks 80 years of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which carved up eastern Europe between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, Russia is trying to defend the agreement again. There is no political benefit to doing this. President Vladimir Putin needs to abandon his Stalinist inheritance of a foreign policy based solely on national interest.

If Moscow needed any reminder that many in eastern Europe still hold the treaty against it and still consider it a threat, plenty came on the anniversary. The governments of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania – the countries directly affected by the pact's [secret protocol](#) – issued a joint [statement](#) saying the document "sparked World War II and doomed half of Europe to decades of misery."

More than a million people gathered to celebrate the Baltic Chain, the 419-mile (675 kilometers) long line of people who protested Soviet rule on Aug. 23, 1989. The demonstrators didn't pick that day at random – they, too, were making the point that the subjugation of their countries by the Soviet Union began with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

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Russia is fighting back. In Moscow, the original of the treaty is now exhibited alongside documents relating to both the 1938 Munich Agreement, where British and French leaders sanctioned the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland, and Poland's subsequent invasion of part of Czechoslovakia.

At the opening of the exhibition earlier this week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [spoke](#) of Britain and France's treachery: By cozying up to Hitler, they forced the Soviet Union to sign a deal with the Nazis to ensure its own security, he said.

Had the Western Europeans listened to the Soviets and set up a collective security system, the bloodshed of World War II could have been averted. Lavrov was making a clear analogy with Russia's efforts to build an alternative security architecture in today's Europe – an idea the Kremlin hasn't abandoned despite the rest of Europe's lack of interest.

For its part, the Russian mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the group the Kremlin sees as the foundation for its alternative security architecture, [tweeted](#) on Aug. 20 that lots of other countries had signed pacts with the Nazis before the Soviet Union did.

Kremlin officials can say all this until they go hoarse, but that can't erase the undeniable fact that the Soviet Union's security didn't require it to grab the Baltics and parts of Poland and Romania. Poland, which tried to benefit from the Nazis' aggression, has admitted it was in the wrong when it invaded part of Czechoslovakia. President Lech Kaczynski apologized for it in 2009.

Related article: [Putin Defends Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in Press Conference with Merkel](#)

In 1989, the Soviet Union, too, officially condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact — but subsequent Russian communications about it, including an entire [article](#) signed by Putin himself in the Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza, have come with the caveat that lots of others were at it, too.

These excuses are a major reason other European countries don't trust Russia: To them, Putin and his subordinates are saying that Moscow would do something like this all over again if its interests dictated it, small countries be damned.

Concern this might happen was what drove eastern Europeans into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The reality of the annexation of Crimea — another opportunistic move dictated ostensibly by Russian security considerations — is pushing Ukraine in the same direction.

If Putin's goal was to inspire trust and start a meaningful conversation about collective

European security in an age of increasing global competition, an unconditionally apologetic stance would work much better. Refraining from invading neighboring countries would be an even more meaningful step.

I suspect, however, that Putin doesn't really believe in such goals, because, like Stalin, he thinks a deal with the devil, based on common interest rather than trust, is the best.

My epiphany about the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact came when I read the long-lost [diary](#) of Alfred Rosenberg, Nazi ideologue and Hitler's one-time minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories. Rosenberg was skeptical about the deal and recoiled in horror when fellow Nazi Richard Darre told him of Joachim von Ribbentrop's comment that he had "felt as though among old party comrades" when meeting the Soviet leadership.

Incredulously, Rosenberg recounted that during Ribbentrop's visit, Stalin raised his glass not just to Hitler but also to Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi security chief, calling him "the guarantor of order in Germany."

"Himmler has eradicated communism, i.e. those who believed in Stalin, and this one — without any need for it — raises a toast to the exterminator of his faithful," Rosenberg noted.

For Stalin, any kind of ideology took a back seat to expediency. He was a man of interests, not values. In that sense, Putin, an avowed anti-communist who has condemned Stalin on many occasions, is following the dictator's realpolitik. His adherence to his current Orthodox Christian brand of social conservatism is as flimsy as Stalin's link to leftist idealism was. If Putin can do a deal that will promote what he sees as Russia's interests, he will do it with anyone. He will wear any hat required of him while doing so, and raise any toast. He is oblivious to Molotov–Ribbentrop's biggest lesson of all: That such agreements don't hold.

That's why eastern Europeans, and especially Ukrainians, are so worried about the possibility of a grand bargain between Putin and a U.S. president, most recently Donald Trump. The consequences for them could be comparable to those of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact.

What's needed from Russia isn't an apology for carving up Europe with Hitler, but a different foreign policy is — one in which principles trump interests. Only such a change can bring closer the idealistic vision of a Europe that stretches from Lisbon to Vladivostok, a goal to which both Russian and European leaders still like to refer. And that shift shouldn't come at a moment of weakness, as it did in the waning years of the Soviet Union. Restoring trust should be a conscious process. It will take some time.

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