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'Big Men' See Everyone Else As 'Small.' That's How Washington Sees Europe and Ukraine

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and U.S. President Donald Trump. **The White House**

For decades, European security policy rested on the idea of omnipresent U.S. power. Europe was free to trim and water its garden in the comfortable shade of Washington's nuclear umbrella.

However, European policymakers forgot (or did not want to admit to themselves) that the U.S. was defending them not out of some benign ideological conviction to protect democracy or out of the Aristotelian perfect friendship. It was motivated by geopolitical ambitions and utility just like any other global power would be.

Nowhere was it more obvious than in Eastern Europe. Some Eastern European states, free of their old Muscovite overlord, sought a benign patron in the U.S. The system seemed beneficial

for the most part, even if Washington occasionally expected tribute — like in 2003 when Eastern European NATO members expectedly fell in line behind President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. The capitals of what Donald Rumsfeld once endearingly called "new Europe" knew how to play to Washington's ambitions. Sometimes they might have been a little too on the nose, like when the Polish government proposed building a Fort Trump military base.

The uniqueness of the second Trump administration is not so much in its imperialist stance — ditching Europe was hinted at even under Obama — but in its audacity. No longer is geopolitical interest dressed up in liberal dogmas. A key hallmark of Trump's style, well-recognized by his voters, is that "he tells it like it is."

Trump's entourage takes after him, as the "small man" spat between Elon Musk and Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski shows. A maverick of Polish and Atlanticist politics, Sikorski likely thinks himself a big man. Back in 2012, Varsovians used to joke that Sikorski thinks himself to be God. The Oxford-educated husband of Anne Applebaum and former Bullingdon Club member was once courteously called "the Polish Mujahideen" because of his exploits as a reporter covering the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

But Musk seemingly does not care about this European's boisterous image. "Be quiet, small man," he told Sikorski, and Marco Rubio chimed in with Trump's new de-facto foreign policy motto: "Say thank you." The X altercation ripped off the garments of Atlanticist niceties leaving naked a conversation between a superpower and what it considers a vassal.

America's hegemonic position is well-understood by the U.S. public as well. It might come as a shock to Europeans, but Americans across the pond have little regard for the cradle of Western civilization. Europeans are not universally venerated in the U.S. for their cathedrals and operas. Instead, they are mocked for their accents and customs. Trump's administration realizes this — and their vulgar treatment of Ukraine demonstrates it. In this new world, where there are no "friendly democracies" and instead there are vassals and enemies, Ukraine is the first casualty.

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Ukraine, once played up by American pundits as a bastion of freedom is being redressed in a matter of days. Comments on the "dictatorial" nature of Zelensky's government by the U.S. president, shifting the blame for the outbreak of the full-scale invasion on Ukraine, introducing the English-speaking infospaces to the ills of forced conscription — the list goes on. Comments by Marco Rubio and Boris Johnson about a "proxy war" look like something out of an alternative reality compared to their previous statements. How could Johnson, who was venerated in Ukraine, echo the Mearsheimer-esque "proxy war" sentiment?

This shift in tone, however, is not entirely surprising. From the very start, the Western media's coverage of Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was plagued with Orientalist sentiment, fueled by an us-versus-them mentality. This conflict was presented as the war of, as European Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen put it, "autocracy versus democracy." Ukraine was portrayed from the get-go as a "relatively civilized, relatively European" country, while Russia was an "Asiatic horde" with Putin donning a Mongol-esque suit of armor for the cover of The Wall Street Journal. This narrative was created and popularized by

Western media, which reduced Ukraine and Russia to orientalist tropes and stripped them of their subjectivity.

The image of Ukraine — brave, defiant, European and white — that Western audiences have been consuming for years was constructed by and for the West. Now, it is being taken apart because Ukraine, the real country, matters little to U.S. domestic politics. What American politicians are engaging with is a simulacrum of Ukraine, bent into whatever shape is most convenient to their daily messaging needs.

When the "vibe shift" began and Ukraine was slowly stripped of its status as the last bastion of Western democracy, Ukraine-sceptics did not need to invent radically new perspectives: they employed the same orientalist tropes of civilizational divide. But now Ukraine found itself on the other side of the fence — the side that has not seen the light of Eurocentric enlightenment. "Our values aren't on the line for which dude in a tracksuit runs Crimea," Matt Gaetz said in March 2023, illuminating how even way before the second Trump term, Ukraine skeptics viewed Eastern Europe as populated by caricatures rather than real people.

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The reason why it is so easy for Trump's clique to delegitimize Ukraine is precisely that the image of Ukraine in the global psyche was built in large part by the American consent-manufacturing complex. The U.S. state-affiliated channels that would uplift and lionize Ukraine are now either destroyed by Musk's shock therapy or are re-geared to promote the now-nakedly obvious American realpolitik.

Ukraine seemingly did not have the time or resources to develop indigenous media narratives that could reliably capture the Western public. So now the few Ukrainian resources that were catering to Western anglophone audiences are still operating within this external narrative framework — while the framework is rapidly turning against them.

The vibe has shifted and Ukraine-sceptics' voices become louder by the day. Ukrainian media seem to be left behind, trying to promote the regurgitated ancient trope of "Donald Trump is a Russian asset" — since the foundational "democratic bastion" narrative created by Western hegemony over the discursive field is crumbling.

Take the recent confrontation between Vice President J.D. Vance and Ukraine supporters that paints pro-Ukraine protesters, once heralded as proponents of democracy and other "Western" values, in much the same demonized light as pro-Palestine or BLM activists. In a way, Ukrainians and their supporters are being stripped of their honorary whiteness and turned back into tracksuited "europoors."

Philosopher Audre Lorde wrote that "[the master's tools] may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change," warning any minority researchers seeking the spotlight that the system would ultimately devalue them. Kyiv tried to step into that same spotlight and Ukrainian and pro-Ukraine policymakers, influencers and academics rushed in to support them.

They accepted the idea that Ukraine is a bastion of Western civilization — while ignoring (or

being forced to ignore) that within that same international order, defined by U.S. power and interests, Ukrainians were eventually destined for the bottom of the hierarchy.

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