

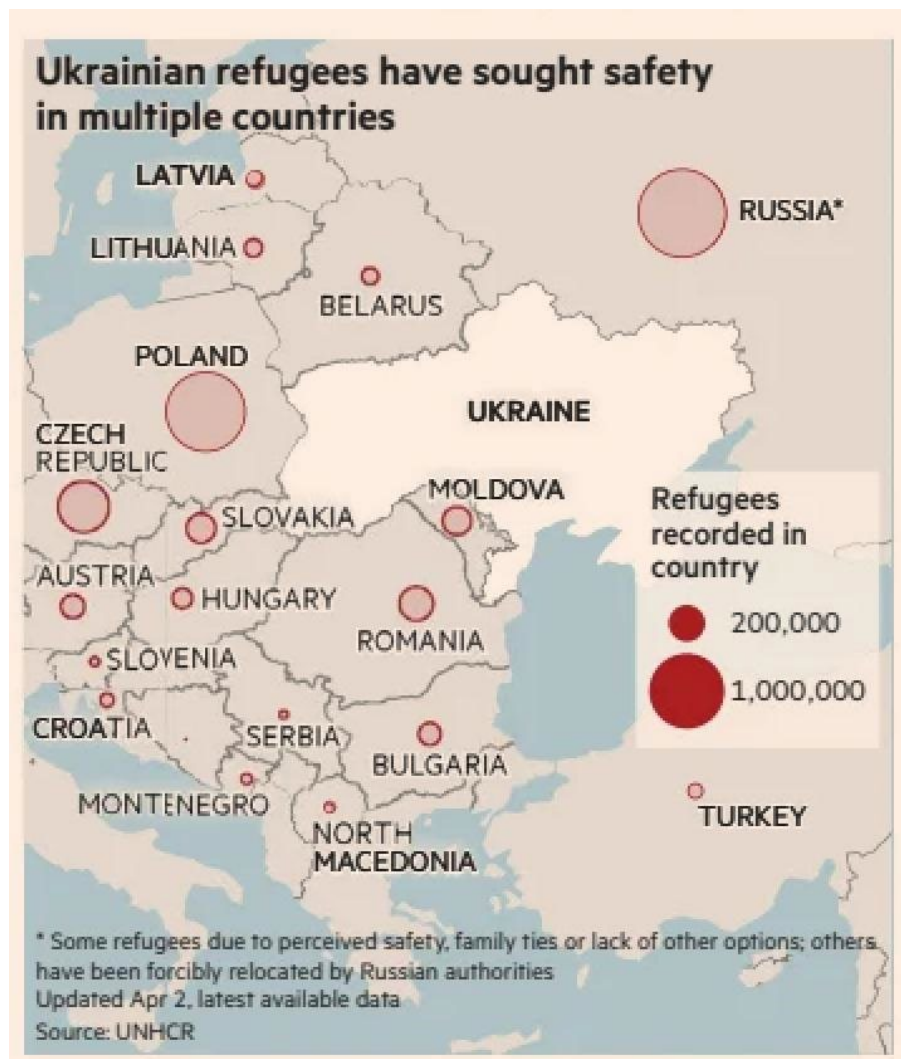
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Central Europe's Putin problem

di Raphael Minder e Marton Dunai

The rapid rehabilitation of the Russian president by the Trump administration poses awkward questions for those who admire the Maga movement but remain suspicious of Moscow.

Last November, Poland's rightwing opposition lawmakers celebrated Donald Trump's election win as if it was their own. They interrupted a parliamentary session to give Trump a standing ovation and chant his name.



Like other nationalist parties in central Europe, Poland's Law and Justice party (PiS) shares a socially conservative and anti-immigration view of the world with Trump's Maga movement. But five months on, Trump's rapid rapprochement with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and his disdain for many Nato allies, are causing consternation across a country where suspicion of Russia runs deep. The issue looms large over Poland's presidential election, set to take place on May 18.

“People knew Trump 2.0 could be more difficult than his first term, but I think that Trump’s rhetoric and what’s been happening so far have basically been pointing towards most nightmares coming true,” says Piotr Buras, head of the Warsaw office of the European Council on Foreign Relations. “Yes, there are politicians here who are playing things down . . . but I think the shock is still very, very deep,” he adds.

The US president is also casting a long shadow on countries up and down the eastern flank of Nato, as he and Putin negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine that many fear will be reached on America’s and Russia’s terms. This may suit the leaders of countries like Hungary and Slovakia, but it is causing political ruptures in the likes of Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic.

George Simion, who will contest a rerun of the Romanian presidential election in May, in place of the barred Călin Georgescu, tells the Financial Times that his party is “friends with the important figures of the Maga movement, and we learn from each other’s experience”. Last year, he plastered the streets of Bucharest with pro-Trump messages and even wrapped an entire building with a giant Trump poster.

But he has also moderated Georgescu’s more overtly pro-Putin rhetoric and has instead been discussing recently his concerns with politicians from Poland’s PiS party. “We remember well the Soviet occupation and how we were left behind. But I hope and I believe that it won’t be the case again,” he says. “We believe in Nato.”

In the Czech Republic, the Eurosceptic ANO party, which has also denied backing Russia’s president, is ahead in the polls. Its leader, former premier Andrej Babiš, says he is confident Trump will restore peace in Ukraine before parliamentary elections due by October return him to office in Prague. Karel Havlíček, ANO deputy leader, tells the FT that Trump wants to talk to like-minded European politicians rather than EU officials in Brussels.

For Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who isn’t due to face elections until 2026, there is less need to try to face two ways. A selfconfessed admirer of Trump and Putin, Orbán has visited both Mar-a-Lago and Moscow in the past year, endorsed the peace talks and warned that Budapest will seek to block Ukraine’s bid to join the EU.

Slovakia’s Robert Fico, who like Trump survived an attempt on his life last year, has also visited Putin and described Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as “an enemy”.

When Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt acceded to Joseph Stalin’s demand for a Soviet “sphere of influence” in Europe at Yalta in 1945, eastern Europe’s postwar fate was sealed.

From the Baltic states and Poland in the north to Romania and Bulgaria in the south, the Trump-Putin rapprochement has rekindled memories of that dubious bargain. Romanian presidential adviser Cristian Diaconescu has warned of a return to the “gates of hell” if it is repeated.

“I lived through that period of what Yalta means. Eleven-hour gasoline lines, poverty, cold in the houses, women dying in hospitals . . . two-hour TV adulations of the supreme leader,” Diaconescu told a Bucharest TV host in February. “Nobody should think we’re having a theoretical, esoteric discussion about global strategies that nobody understands anything about.”

In Poland, cosying up to Moscow is even less tolerable. The PiS’s anti-Russia stance is a very personal one for its leader and former prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński. In 2010, his twin brother Lech, at the time the country’s president, was killed in a plane crash in Russia. He blames Putin, and continues to accuse his domestic political rival Donald Tusk of helping to cover it up.

By contrast, support for the US across the region is anchored in strong economic and military ties that date back to George HW Bush, the US president when communism in Europe collapsed in 1989. Under him and his successors, Washington swiftly became the main driver for former eastern bloc countries joining Nato starting in 1999 — before they became EU members and before Putin became president of Russia.

The Trump administration has been quick to assert influence over the region. After Romania’s constitutional court annulled the results of the first round of its presidential election last December, US vice-president JD Vance denounced the move from the podium of the Munich Security Conference, saying the decision was “based on the flimsy suspicions of an intelligence agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbours”.

In countries like Hungary and Poland, the US presence grew during Trump’s first term, helped in part by his personal relationships with leaders such as Orbán and Andrzej Duda, the Polish president whose second and final term is now drawing to a close.

But although the latest version of Trump has caught even some of his most ardent supporters in the region flat-footed, there is no sign of the region decoupling from the US.

Premier Tusk, whose Civic Platform party is back in government, has inherited an agreement with Westinghouse to build Poland’s first nuclear power plant, despite lobbying by France’s EDF to replace the US company. Poland has also allocated 4.7 per cent of this year’s budget to defence, the highest of any Nato member.

But even as Tusk embraces European efforts to build conventional military and nuclear autonomy from the US, Poland remains committed to massive acquisitions of US weaponry, including a \$2bn contract announced this week for Patriot air defence missiles.

In Trump’s first term, Romania pledged to expand its nuclear power plant with US technology, including a fleet of small modular reactors. In addition to close military co-operation with Washington, Romania has now signed over \$15bn worth of energy projects with US companies, ranging

from the nuclear projects to Neptune Deep, a natural gas project in the Black Sea. Talks are ongoing about hydropower in Romania's Carpathian Mountains.

But some business executives are now warning about a slowdown in investments, given the heightened geopolitical uncertainty. Last year "everyone said that Romania was the place to be," recalls Razvan Nicolescu, a former Romanian energy minister and business consultant in Bucharest. But since Trump took office, "everything changed", he adds. "Investors are now putting [projects] on hold."

As in Poland, France is offering to replace the US as an investor in sectors such as nuclear energy. This proposal is "better than nothing, but if the US really leaves, it's going to be tough going", says Sorin Ioniță, head of the Expert Forum think-tank in Bucharest.

Even as Trump escalates his tariff war against the EU and other trade partners, few in central and eastern Europe are willing to contemplate life without US backing. Vance's tirade in Munich shocked not only those in the room but also many in Bucharest. "Romania always regarded the US as a strategic partnership," says Sandu Valentin Mateiu, a retired general and security expert. "We don't have an alternative."

At the same time, some central European politicians have been the main troublemakers within the EU, despite the economic benefits that membership of the bloc has brought to the region.

Orbán and Fico were not invited to talks last month hosted by Paris and London about how to secure Ukraine post-conflict and re-arm Europe to reduce its military reliance on the US. The two were the only EU leaders to visit Putin last year, generating protests and prompting disquiet among EU officials in Brussels.

During its eight years in office, the PiS government feuded with the European Commission, particularly after it froze billions of euros of Poland's EU money in protest at PiS weakening the independence of the Polish judiciary. The standoff gave PiS leader Kaczyński additional reasons to insist that Washington — rather than Brussels or Berlin — was the real guarantor of Poland's security.

Similar arguments have been advanced by Orbán, Fico and Babiš, who last year co-founded Patriots for Europe, the third-largest group in the European parliament, with Orbán and Austrian far-right leader Herbert Kickl.

Election candidates in central and eastern Europe are well aware that their prospects could be abruptly altered by the timing and terms of a truce in Ukraine, or any other sweeping gesture by Trump that could embolden Putin.

But given the US president's unpredictability, they also worry about provoking a Trump rebuff that could frighten their voters. "There are very few politicians in Poland who dare to say something bad

about Donald Trump,” says Wojciech Szacki, chief political analyst at Polityka Insight, a think-tank.

Candidates “feel limited in what they can say”, he adds, “because one sentence, one quotation might lose them voters who are very sensitive about wanting to feel safe”.

As some of their politicians lean into the Trump world view, voters across central Europe are also growing weary of the political and economic costs of supporting Ukraine.

In early 2022 Poland was the EU’s main gateway for millions of Ukrainians fleeing Russia’s all-out invasion, which generated an unprecedented show of solidarity by Polish society. At the time, the far-right Confederation party jointly led by Sławomir Mentzen was the lone voice calling for limitations on the help granted to refugees.

Mentzen is now Confederation’s candidate for the Polish presidency, an election in which most of the candidates are seeking to turn growing Ukrainian refugee fatigue into votes. PiS is adopting a more hardline message towards Ukraine, in part to counter Mentzen’s momentum in opinion polls. The Civic Platform candidate and frontrunner Rafał Trzaskowski also said in January that Ukrainian refugees should no longer be eligible for Poland’s child subsidy scheme unless they work and pay taxes in Poland.

Ukrainians living in Poland resent disparaging comments in hospitals or public transport, such as being told to learn better Polish. “We were warmly welcomed as victims, people who literally fled death,” says Anna Nowak, who escaped Kyiv for Warsaw in March 2022. “But those of us who decided to stay here are seen now mostly as economic competitors or even intruders by many Poles.”

Talk of Ukraine joining the EU has alarmed some voters, who fear the impact its large neighbour might have on some sectors of the Polish economy, particularly agriculture. “All politicians read the same polls, the same analysis of how attitudes towards Ukrainian people are getting worse, so they react to that,” says Polityka Insight’s Szacki.

The political rhetoric is also heating up. On the third anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion, Mentzen visited the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, where he launched a fierce attack on Ukrainian nationalism and its responsibility for the killings of about 100,000 Poles during the 1940s in Volhynia, a region now part of Ukraine. Lviv’s mayor, Andriy Sadovyi, denounced him as a “pro-Russian politician with a Polish passport”.

Romania’s Simion has been banned from Ukraine since 2000 for “systematic anti-Ukrainian activities”, according to Ukraine’s security services, which regard his advocacy of territorial reunification with ethnic Romanians residing in Ukraine and neighbouring Moldova as a violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Simion is also banned from Moldova. Speaking to the FT, he toned down his territorial ambitions, saying that any border change could only happen if approved by referendums held in the relevant countries.

Hungary's Orbán recently talked of "a territory called Ukraine" whose only aspiration should be to become "a buffer zone" between Nato and Russia, while Fico used a tennis analogy in February to describe talks between Washington and Moscow over an end to the war. On Facebook, he claimed that the "presidential pair" of Putin and Trump would win a doubles match with Ukraine and the EU "6-0, 6-0, 6-0".

For some of the region's politicians, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric has become a way to reconcile their long-standing fears about Russia with their enduring faith in America as a protector.

"The [Trump-Putin] situation is forcing parties to become inconsistent, and that's especially glaring when it comes to PiS, which says it's anti-Russian but also strongly for Trump and counting on Republican support in the upcoming election," says Adam Leszczyński, director of the Gabriel Narutowicz Institute of Political Thought, a Polish government think-tank.

He adds that this is why politicians "talk about Ukraine being a country with big problems and corruption and about Ukrainians behaving irresponsibly in Poland". It is easier than drawing attention to their own inconsistencies, "which really only matter if their electorate cares about them".

But some observers feel this smokescreen cannot last indefinitely. "We felt the tragedy of Yalta for 50 years, so any discussion of Yalta 2.0 concerns our big fear," explains Dan Tapalaga, editor of G4media, a prominent Romanian news website.

"With the US and Russia drawing closer, where will we be when all is said and done? Nobody has the answer now."