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Cowboy Diplomacy Reloaded: Trump's reckless foreign policy and the shadow of Putin

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Madrid-based professor of international relations Chris Kostov reflects on recent actions of the Trump administration towards Ukraine, seeing the aggressive pronouncements, undiplomatic statements and proposed “deals” on resources and “peace” as a revival of cowboy diplomacy. Trump's foreign policy fuels Putin's agenda, blaming Ukraine for its own invasion while excusing Russian aggression. His admiration for strongmen and disregard for democratic alliances threaten global stability. This isn't diplomacy—it's a roadmap to authoritarian dominance, argues Kostov.

Editorial note: This contribution results from our [open call on Transatlantic Ruptures and Transformations](#). The views are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board. We welcome further contributions from multiple standpoints, addressing the current and past reconfigurations of transatlantic relations and alliances.



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Image courtesy of the [the Presidential Office of Ukraine](#), provided under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](#). Image taken during the meeting between the US and Ukrainian presidents on 28 February 2025.

[Trump's] foreign policy is not diplomacy; it's a grotesque imitation of a Wild West standoff, where international law and historical reality are dismissed like inconvenient tumbleweeds

Blaming the Victim: Trump's misguided narrative

In a stunning display of revisionist history, Donald Trump recently declared that Ukraine is to blame for its own invasion. This blatant distortion of reality is not just irresponsible – it actively fuels Vladimir Putin's propaganda machine. By accusing President Zelensky of being a "dictator" while cozying up to the Kremlin, Trump makes one thing abundantly clear: his foreign policy is not diplomacy; it's a grotesque imitation of a Wild West standoff, where international law and historical reality are dismissed like inconvenient tumbleweeds. Donald Trump's latest geopolitical absurdity was refusing at the G7 meeting to call Putin and Russia aggressors. Apparently, in his world, those seeming to commit war crimes should have the right to protect their reputations. This stance is straight out of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength." And in Trump's case: Appeasement is strategy. Dictators are victims. Allies are the enemy.

If logic still mattered in international politics, it would be obvious that a country cannot invade itself. Yet, Trump – who evidently views world affairs as a reality show where the loudest and most outrageous claim wins – insists that Zelensky provoked the war. This is akin to accusing a robbery victim of enticing the thief. Meanwhile, the actual aggressor, Putin, a man whose foreign policy resembles a historical reenactment of Tsarist expansionism, gets a free pass.

Trump conveniently ignores Putin's well-documented appetite for imperial conquest. The Russian leader has already seized Crimea, most of Donbas, absorbed Belarus into a de facto puppet state, while eyeing Moldova, Georgia, and the Baltic states with barely concealed hunger. Trump's suggestion that Russia holds all the cards in peace negotiations is not just a diplomatic blunder but signals a calculated attempt to push Ukraine toward a surrender disguised as a "peace deal".

If Trump defines a dictator as a democratically elected wartime leader, then what does that make Putin? A man who has ruled Russia through election-rigging, poisonings, and imprisonment of opposition figures? If Zelensky is a dictator, then Putin can be seen as the Godfather of modern authoritarianism.

both men share an ideological core: a fundamental disdain for democratic norms, a penchant for authoritarian theatrics, and a megalomaniacal drive to reshape borders. Trump dreams of absurd territorial acquisitions – Greenland, Canada as the 51st state, or the Panama Canal – mirroring Putin's neo-

imperial fantasies of reclaiming the Soviet sphere of influence. The only difference? So far, only Putin has actually acted on these delusions

Trump and Putin: Two sides of the same coin?

Trump's admiration for Putin is as transparent as it is troubling. Why the fascination? Because both men share an ideological core: a fundamental disdain for democratic norms, a penchant for authoritarian theatrics, and a megalomaniacal drive to reshape borders. Trump dreams of absurd territorial acquisitions – Greenland, Canada as the 51st state, or the Panama Canal – mirroring Putin's neo-imperial fantasies of reclaiming the Soviet sphere of influence. The only difference? So far, only Putin has actually acted on these delusions.

This is not diplomacy; this is cowboy diplomacy at its worst – a crude, reckless, and deeply ignorant approach to international relations where historical amnesia and brute force reign supreme. Trump doesn't engage in strategic negotiations; he bullies, insults, and dismantles alliances with the grace of a man wielding a sledgehammer in a china shop.



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Every accusation that Ukraine is at fault for its own suffering legitimizes Russian propaganda and talking points. Every call to abandon support for Kyiv signals to Putin that his tactics – war crimes, territorial seizures, nuclear blackmail – work.

Neo-Colonial Greed: Is Ukraine just another resource grab?

Let's not be naïve – Trump's sudden interest in Ukraine is not about "peace." It is about mineral wealth, strategic control, and transactional politics. His administration's backroom deals, aimed at securing Ukraine's mineral resources under exploitative terms, are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century colonial scramble for Africa.

His fixation on Ukraine's rare earth minerals – illustrated by his administration's failed attempt to secure a deal granting the United States control over the – shows that his foreign policy is not about national interest but economic pillaging. This is not diplomacy; it is economic imperialism dressed up as "deal-making." If there is a "new sheriff in town," as J.D. Vance claims, then it looks like he's come not to restore order, but to plunder the gold rush.

To Trump, Ukraine is not a country fighting for survival – it is a line item on a balance sheet, a transactional pawn in his playbook of crony capitalism masquerading as statecraft.

The EU cannot afford to remain a passive observer in global geopolitics. It must assert itself as a counterweight to both Trump's chaos and Putin's aggression, defending democratic values, reinforcing alliances, and taking a decisive role in shaping international stability.

The Global Stakes: Putin's dream and trump's chaos

Trump's policies are not just dangerous for Ukraine, they are a gift to Putin. Every accusation that Ukraine is at fault for its own suffering legitimizes Russian propaganda and talking points. Every call to abandon support for Kyiv signals to Putin that his tactics – war crimes, territorial seizures, nuclear blackmail – work.

We are witnessing a geopolitical catastrophe in the making. If Trump succeeds in normalizing his brand of cowboy diplomacy, the consequences will extend far beyond Ukraine. The erosion of international law, the emboldening of dictators, and the systemic dismantling of democratic alliances will leave the world more volatile, unstable, and primed for authoritarian resurgence.

Trump's foreign policy is not merely incompetent – it is deliberately destructive. His verbal attacks on Ukraine, embrace of Putin, and obsession with resource exploitation are not signs of a leader pursuing national interests, but of a demagogue wielding power for personal gain and glory.

If Trump's brand of diplomacy is allowed to dictate global affairs, the consequences will be catastrophic. The US and its allies must recognize that this is not about peace: it is about the normalization of authoritarian conquest. If the world, and especially Europe, is to resist the march of

authoritarianism, Trump's cowboy diplomacy must be confronted head-on, before it rides into history as the prelude to democratic collapse.

We have seen this before: authoritarianism does not announce itself; it seeps into power through appeasement, indifference, and false "deals". Trump's cowboy diplomacy is not just reckless; it is the gateway to an era where tyrants dictate peace, and democracies are expected to surrender without a fight. The world cannot afford a sequel.

This is where the European Union must step up. The EU cannot afford to remain a passive observer in global geopolitics. It must assert itself as a counterweight to both Trump's chaos and Putin's aggression, defending democratic values, reinforcing alliances, and taking a decisive role in shaping international stability. Europe's future depends on its ability to resist the forces of authoritarianism and to lead by example in a world increasingly dominated by political opportunists and strongmen.

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