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The widening rift between Trump and Europe is a gift to Putin

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Analysis by  Nathan Hodge

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US President Donald Trump's emissaries to the Kremlin may have been spinning their wheels during talks last week in Moscow on a possible Ukraine peace deal, but the Russians can now press a new advantage: The deepening divisions between Washington and Europe.

On Tuesday, Trump doubled down on his administration's criticism of Europe, saying in a newly published interview with **Politico** that European nations were "weak" and "decaying" because of their immigration policies.

He also argued that Russia has the "upper hand" in its war on Ukraine and that it was time for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to "start accepting things" when it comes to efforts to end the conflict. "He's going to have to get on the ball and start accepting things, you know, when you're losing," Trump said.

The US president's remarks followed the release last week of a **new national security strategy** that aimed a broadside at European governments for their support for Ukraine, blaming "European officials who hold unrealistic expectations for the war" for standing in the way of a peace deal.

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"A large European majority wants peace, yet that desire is not translated into policy, in large measure because of those governments' subversion of democratic processes," the document asserts.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz pushed back against that strategy document Tuesday, saying in a news conference that "some of it is comprehensible, some of it is understandable, and some of it is unacceptable to us from a European perspective," adding that European nations do not need help from the United States to "save democracy" in Europe.

But the Trump administration's formulation – casting Europe as an anti-democratic obstacle to stable relations with Russia – has been a godsend for Russian officialdom.



Military equipment on display as part of an exhibition in Kyiv, Ukraine on Tuesday. (*Tetiana Dzhafarova/AFP/Getty Images*)

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov welcomed the release of the document, saying Sunday that it was “consistent with our vision.”

In remarks Monday, Peskov elaborated further, saying: “The nuance we see in the new concept certainly appeals to us. It speaks of the need for dialogue and building constructive, good relations.”

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Kirill Dmitriev, the CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund and a key intermediary in the recent diplomatic back-and-forth between Washington and the Kremlin, has also seized on the moment. In a series of posts on X, Dmitriev celebrated Trump's castigation of European countries, particularly Trump's warning that "Europe has to be very careful" and that it "is going in some bad directions ... very bad for the people."

Trump's remarks were in response to a question about X being hit with a \$140 million fine by EU regulators Friday for breaching European online content rules.

Elon Musk, the owner of X, responded with posts calling for the abolition of the EU. But it's a bit rich for Russian officials to amplify the Trump administration's accusations of democratic backsliding by Europe: Russian President Vladimir Putin has all but eliminated **political competition** and erased media freedom over the course of a quarter-century in power. What's more, Russia effectively blocks access to **social media** such as Facebook and X, although that doesn't stop well-connected Russian officials such as Dmitriev from using such tech platforms to broadcast their talking points in English.

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But there appears to be a deliberate strategy here. Russian policy has been clearly aimed at chipping away European support for Ukraine, while seizing an opportunity to sow doubt about the viability of the NATO alliance. And the Trump administration's new national security strategy gives Moscow more ammunition in an information war meant to sway publics in both the United States and Europe.

We've been here before: The fallout in Europe over the release of the Trump administration's new national security strategy resembles the shock felt by Europeans after US Vice President JD Vance delivered a speech at the Munich Security Conference in February. And the jubilation likely expressed in Moscow over Washington's put-downs of Europe is reminiscent of the glee over Trump and Vance's public scolding of Zelensky in the Oval Office later that month.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin, accompanied by Kremlin economic envoy Kirill Dmitriev and Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov, meets with US special envoy Steve Witkoff and US President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner at the Kremlin in Moscow on December 2. (*Alexander Kazakova/AFP/Getty Images*)

Zelensky has been making the rounds in Europe this week, conferring with the leaders of Britain, France and Germany in London and meeting officials of NATO and the European Union in Brussels to shore up support for Ukraine. But in parallel, Russian messaging about – and warnings to – Europe have increased in volume.

In an interview on Russian state television, hardline Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov said Russia was “at war with Europe, not with a miserable, pitiful, misled Ukraine.”

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Karaganov added that he does not speak for Putin, so he can give his unvarnished opinion: “This war will not end until we smash Europe, morally and politically.”

But even if Karaganov was not speaking on behalf of the Russian government, it was clear he is channeling threats made by Putin himself.

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was “ready right now” for war with Europe – even though it’s not planning to start one.

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“We are not planning to go to war with Europe. I have already spoken about this a hundred times, but if Europe suddenly wants to go to war with us and starts, we are ready right now,” he said last Tuesday.

But the audience for that kind of saber-rattling is clear, and the Kremlin wants to make sure that Europeans are rattled by the rhetoric that is shaking trans-Atlantic ties to their foundation.

CNN’s Billy Stockwell, Stephanie Halasz and Kit Maher contributed to this report.



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