

Video: Post World War II History of Central Europe, From Yalta to Donald Trump

By [South Front](#)

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The First World War and the collapse of German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires led to the creation of a band of newly independent states which, due to their economic underdevelopment, were too weak to serve as a buffer zone between the revanchist Third Reich and the Soviet Union.

The reactionary nature of their political systems, Czechoslovakia being the only exception, meant these countries were incapable of forming alliances against Germany. Worse, with Czechoslovakia again being the exception, they viewed USSR's existence as posing a threat not because of any danger of Soviet military attack, but rather due to the fear Marxism. Most of them aligned themselves with the Axis powers. Even Poland, which figured very high on Hitler's target list, participated in the destruction of Czechoslovakia, prevented USSR from coming to its aid, and did not begin to craft operational plans for an eventual war with Germany until the Spring of 1939.

Needless to say, it would be Soviet troops who would have to rescue the peoples of Central Europe from their leaders' folly, and the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences recognized USSR's legitimate security concerns by acknowledging its sphere of influence as extending to the Elbe River. The next four decades would represent the fastest economic and social progress the countries of Central Europe have ever known, which transformed them from agrarian states with rampant poverty, disease, and illiteracy into modern nation-states whose institutions in some respects, for example, when it comes to the quality and availability of education and health care, surpassed their Western European neighbors. For all the current revisionist talk about Soviet "occupation", "imperialism", or "exploitation", the experience of Central Europe within Soviet orbit is not comparable to the experience of any colony of a Western imperialist power. Soviet objectives in Central Europe were, after all, radically different from, for example, French objectives in Indochina or North Africa, or British objectives in India.

To put it bluntly, Western imperial powers were usually motivated by the desire to exploit the colonies economically. In the Soviet case, Central Europe of Warsaw Pact era can be best described using the concept of military frontier. If these countries were to serve that purpose effectively, they could not be economically exploited-instead, they had to be built up and strengthened economically and militarily.

Central Europe thus became part of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, or COMECON, the first attempt at European economic integration as it reached levels of cooperation, including the use of the so-called "transferable ruble" as common currency,

that would not be seen in Western Europe until the creation of the EU in 1992. COMECON, in addition to integrating Soviet and Central European economies, would eventually extend its influence as far afield as Vietnam and Cuba, with Mexico, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Finland, South Yemen, and several others enjoying observer status.

In the end, however, the project proved unsustainable due to a combination of factors which included the cost of the arms race, the problems inherent in the 5 Year Plan central planning process, and of course the sheer expense associated with subsidizing the countries of Central Europe which enjoyed such privileges as the ability to purchase petroleum using transferable rubles, which USSR could have naturally sold on the international market in exchange for hard currency.

Those in Central Europe who expected the EU would simply continue where COMECON had left off would be disappointed, as Western powers' interests did not include creating economic competitors but rather finding a replacement for Greece, Spain, even Italy—the Southern European countries that found themselves economically drained and indebted by their more powerful neighbors. Central European countries have lost, through rapid privatization, most of their national industries to foreign conglomerates which engaged in asset-stripping on a massive scale. These practices, combined with the 2008 economic crisis and the ongoing sanctions war with Russia have turned Central Europe into a net burden on the West.

Latvian President Raimonds Veinonis asserted in a recent interview that his country no longer has an economy of its own, and is solely dependent for its economic survival on EU grants and subsidies. Whenever there is even a delay in their disbursement or utilization, the country's economic activity slows down dramatically. This is not an isolated case. The media in other post-Communist states, including Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, have also been running similar stories which underscore these countries' dependence on EU monies. Their COMECON-era industries wiped out by privatization and asset-stripping, securing subsidies has become one of the most important campaign issues in the poorer states of Central Europe.

But EU subsidies are not meant to be permanent, but rather a temporary measure that allow recipient countries to reach “escape velocity” of economic growth that enables them to function independently. Well over a decade after EU's expansion, it is becoming evident that they have also not reached a state in which their economies can prosper on their own, and will likely never reach it for as long as they remain in the EU. There are very few exceptions, for example, the Czech Republic, but even that country still appears fragile. This is a fundamental fact that nearly all the major players recognize but none wish to acknowledge because doing so would put into doubt the entirety of European integration project. Yet the millions of economic migrants fleeing Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Romania, and other countries for Western Europe in order to perform menial jobs are the accurate indicator of the true state of affairs.

The supposedly “pro-Russian” rhetoric emanating from Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and other conservative Western leaders is simply the result of their unwillingness to continue subsidizing Central Europe indefinitely. French conservative leaders, including both Le Pen and Fillon, being fiscally conservative, share his motives. After all, every post-1991 EU and NATO eastward expansion has become a net liability for the wealthier partners.

The countries of Central Europe have not only become permanent subsidiary recipients,

they are also net security consumers rather than providers. Poland and Romania have sought US bases, including for strategic anti-missile defenses, mainly because once these bases are established, US government will become de-facto responsible for the economic and political stability of these countries, which may quickly become a very expensive hobby. Therefore, as time goes by, it appears that the alternative model of Eurasian integration, the rightful successor to COMECON that now includes China, may eventually be recognized in Western capitals as a welcome alternative to the continued need to subsidize Central Europe. The recent elections and referendums in Europe and United States are certainly pointing in that direction.

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