Commentary
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Munich – 2025: The birth of a new “Collective West”

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Summary

The recently concluded Munich Security Conference (MSC) will undoubtedly go down in history as a pivotal moment in transatlantic relations. However, this turning point does not signal the imminent demise of the “Collective West.” Rather, we are witnessing the birth of the West in a new form.

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The Munich Security Conference (MSC) of 2025 will be remembered for a long time. Most of the annual meetings at this venue, like many others, proceed in a routine manner, blending into an indistinct mass of discussions about the same topics, in the same place, with the same people, who largely agree on everything. But occasionally, there are major exceptions that stand out sharply against the routine backdrop and are remembered for a long time as a turning point. These moments are not always recalled positively. In fact, they are often viewed in the opposite light. However, they are still remembered, quoted, interpreted, and in this way, they measure the passage of time and the course of history. This was the case, for example, in 2007, when Vladimir Putin delivered his famous speech in Munich, which later became regarded as a turning point in the crisis in relations between Russia and the West.

Indeed, this time will be no different, without a doubt. Moreover, it came as no surprise.

> What wasn’t surprising was that the MSC-2025 turned out to be a major, historic event. But its most memorable and significant moment still occurred unexpectedly, both in form and substance.

Vance shocked and panicked Europe

Before the conference, it was expected that it would be special and historically pivotal due to the potential landmark negotiations and agreements regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Following a series of dramatic news from Washington about the beginning of talks between the US and Russia, and numerous statements from Donald Trump’s administration about its vision for halting hostilities and resolving the conflict, everyone literally held their breath in anticipation. Journalists were closely tracking the lists of expected American and Ukrainian participants at the MSC, even speculating that, after several years of absence, a serious Russian delegation might appear in Munich. The media was filled with speculation about planned meetings and hypothetical outlines of negotiating positions.

It was precisely in this context that one of the key speeches at the MSC was awaited: that of US Vice President JD Vance, who led the American delegation at the conference. After a series of stunning decisions and statements from the White House in recent weeks, something similar was expected here as well. Especially considering that, just the day before, at the meeting of the “Ramstein Group” defence ministers, the new Pentagon chief, Pete Hegseth, had delivered a similarly shocking address on the prospects of the Russia-Ukraine war and NATO’s future. Vice President Vance himself had made expansive statements on these very issues at last year’s MSC, while still a senator, in line with the best traditions of the MAGA Republicans.

In the end, the second-highest figure in the US political hierarchy did not disappoint the mass expectations. His speech was so memorable that it will be dissected into quotes and continue to stir the Western world for a long time. However, he still managed to surprise both the immediate participants of the MSC and those following the event online, as the theme and focus of his speech turned out to be completely unexpected. Instead of the standard issues typically discussed at the Munich conference, Vance primarily spoke about the state of democracy and freedom of speech in Europe.

The following quote perhaps best sums up what the American vice president said: *“The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia. It’s not China. It’s not any external actor. What I worry about is the threat from within — the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America.”*

> According to Vance, the crisis that Europe and the entire West are now facing is “one of our own making.” It lies in the retreat of many European countries from the sacred core of democracy—the freedom of speech and fair elections.

Vance even compared the political mainstream in the Old Continent today to the worst manifestations of autocracies. And, in his words, this all deprives the West of a positive vision for the future and security: *“How will you even begin to think through the kinds of budgeting questions if we don’t know what it is that we’re defending in the first place?"* The Republican then struck a final blow to European allies: *“I believe deeply that there is no security if you are afraid of the voices, the opinions, and the conscience that guide your very own people.”*

Naturally, such assessments from the new US administration caused shock and even some panic among the top European politicians attending the conference. Many of them, immediately after Vance’s speech, began holding emergency consultations to devise joint responses. The President of France, who was absent from Munich, quickly became, in his usual manner, the one to invite European colleagues to an emergency summit in Paris to determine the next steps.

At the conference itself, European speakers who followed the US vice president had to address his words, although many of them would have clearly preferred to refrain from public comments for the time being. However, the opportunity to remain silent was almost non-existent, especially for representatives of the recently fractured ruling German coalition. *Firstly*, because the status of the event’s hosts required a response. *Secondly*, because just a week later, Germany would hold snap parliamentary elections, which many of Vance’s remarks seemed to hint at.

The first to respond to Vice President Vance’s criticism was Germany’s Minister of Defense, Boris Pistorius. His reaction was quite sharp. The next day, a more focused response came from another Social Democrat, the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz. “We will decide for ourselves what happens to our democracy,” he said, rejecting any attempts at external interference in their elections, including from “friends and allies.”

Ideological drama and “multipolarity”

In fact, an ideological drama unexpectedly unfolded on the main stage of the Bayerischer Hof hotel, outside all the planned scenarios of the Munich conference organizers, a drama solely directed by US Vice President Vance and his speechwriters.

> The ideology of the revived MAGA conservatism collided with the centrist, left- and right-liberal mainstream, which still dominates the political landscape of Europe.

It seemed that the Americans had chosen a highly inappropriate venue for such ideological battles. These discussions would have appeared more fitting, for example, at the Davos Forum, which, over several decades, has become a symbol and inspiration for the liberal-democratic mainstream that is now being criticized by Trump and members of his administration. The Munich Security Conference, however, is focused on somewhat different issues. Many European speakers, in their remarks following Vance, emphasized this, hinting that the vice president’s themes were out of place.

In some ways, these European speakers are correct, but not entirely. Simply opening the annual report prepared by the MSC team before the conference reveals an interesting connection between Vance’s words and the narrative the organizers themselves suggested for framing the discussions. The report, once again, received a very fitting title — *Multipolarization*. While the organizers clearly could not have predicted that the American delegation would steer the entire conference toward ideological debates, they did provide a solid foundation for these discussions in the document.

The term “multipolarization” is the result of merging two important concepts: multipolarity and polarization. The authors rightly acknowledge that the degree of the world’s multipolarity remains a topic of discussion. One could add that this will continue to be the case until either the “Trump instead of war” effect we recently described, real wars, or a combination of both, clarifies the actual balance of power and potential.

However, they consider “multipolarization” to be an accomplished fact. On one hand, the authors argue, more and more actors in the world are gaining the power to influence key global issues. On the other hand, “*the world is experiencing growing polarization both between states and within them, making it harder to develop unified approaches to global crises and threats.”* Much of this polarization, they claim, runs along ideological fault lines.

The end of the “Collective West”?

In the end, the main takeaway from the MSC 2025, as now reported by leading Western media, is that it marked the beginning of a new chapter in transatlantic relations. The model of coexistence between Europe and the United States that had been familiar for decades will no longer be the same. No new democratic American president will step onto the stage of the same Munich Security Conference, as Joe Biden did in 2020, before

winning the election, and simply promise to restore everything to the way it was. Because what was is no longer possible in its exact form. This is a historical fact. History does not stand still.

At the same time, loud and far-reaching statements like “the collective West is no more” and similar ones are, at the very least, premature. It is perhaps unnecessary to explain that a complete “divorce with shared custody” does not align with the interests of either Europeans or Americans.

> Moreover, there are no objective opportunities, to paraphrase Vladimir Lenin, to decisively and definitively split, only to later reunite—transatlantic allies simply lack this possibility.

However, let us emphasize again that living according to the old patterns is no longer an option. In some respects, borrowing from the same classic, “the rulers can no longer, and the people no longer want.”

Therefore, the February Munich of 2025 does not put a period at the end of the history of the “collective West” but opens a new and fascinating chapter within it. Its further text has yet to be written and is not even predetermined. And because of this, it is all the more interesting.

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