

Sleepless in Europe – the Implications of Trump’s Presidential Victory

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I wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice. The last time a vote of historic proportions took place, I went to bed thinking catastrophe might just be averted. The next morning, I woke to a changed Europe; the United Kingdom had voted to leave the European Union. This time, I stayed up all night fearing the worst. As dawn broke, I went to sleep in a changed world; Donald Trump is US President-elect.

For months we have been witness to an election campaign that has brought out the worst in people, one defined by populism, elitism, egotism, sexism and racism. This has uncovered a country riven with deep societal wounds: the Disunited States of America.

Donald Trump positioned himself as the election’s change agent from the right, channelling the rage against the political machine. He was the outsider who rallied the disenfranchised, disempowered and disillusioned. They decided, better the devil we *don’t* know than the Clinton we know. He tapped into the defining American impulse for freedom and bastardised it. Not only did he promise to break free from the establishment and political correctness, in his rallies he also shook off long-established social codes, and with them decency and civility. In doing so, he gave credence to the words of the American novelist Marilynne Robinson that ‘no society is at any time immune to moral catastrophe’.

This isn’t just an American story – it’s a global story, it’s a European story. It’s the new *Zeitgeist*. Autocratic, ‘strong man’ politicians and parties have become the vanguard against the establishment and globalisation, in the words of American political scientist Mark Lilla, to ‘Make X Great Again’. It’s Trump, not Trudeau. Orban, not Obama. Putin, Erdogan, Duterte, Kaczynski – the list is growing. Former fringe parties and candidates are becoming mainstream, while the centre ground is slowly crumbling. Since 1990, the share of the vote held by the centre left and centre right has fallen by 12%.

The US election result is a populist wake-up call for the European Union, and it’s not its first. The alarm has been ringing for years: Hungary’s slide into illiberal democracy, the increased popularity of far-right parties in the European elections, backsliding on women’s rights and the rule of law in Poland, Brexit. Too often, though, the EU has hit the snooze button and finally woken up without a clue of what to do, or found itself in political gridlock. This has not been helped by the fact that, as in Washington D.C. in recent years, Brussels is plagued by political dysfunction. The European Union and its Member States have failed to implement the planned financial transaction tax, to fight tax havens, to agree on a system to manage the inflow of refugees, to advance sustainable debt relief for Greece.... The list goes on. In a world that is burning, the EU’s ‘leaky bucket’ efforts to quell the flames have unsurprisingly inspired little confidence. As a result, right-wing populist, left-wing populist, anti-EU parties are in the ascendant and the forces of disintegration are on the march inside the European Union.

Last week Wednesday, while millions of Europeans looked across the pond in disbelief and dismay, there were clearly also those who celebrated the bloody nose Trump gave the establishment. Far-right leaders such as Le Pen in France, Wilders in the Netherlands and Strache in Austria rejoiced over Trump’s victory. Europe’s populists hope that it will give them increased momentum in a number of crucial elections – in particular the referendum on constitutional reform in Italy, the re-run of the Austrian presidential election in December, and the general elections in France, the Netherlands and Germany in 2017. But how will

Trump's win, and the way the election campaign was conducted, actually affect politics in the EU?

Trump's playbook – a European translation?

Populist parties in EU Member States will study Trump's (and Farage's) methods very closely. They are likely to continue the march of post-truth politics – appealing to emotion over fact, making outrageous statements that will provide cash-poor populists with media coverage. German right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has already admitted that it makes contemptible, outrageous statements to gain media attention, allowing it to dominate the political narrative. Likewise, it aims to discredit traditional media outlets as simple pro-establishment propaganda machines. Like Trump, who baptised CNN the 'Clinton News Network' and accused the media of pro-Clinton bias, the AfD and others deride the classical media networks as *Lügenpresse* (lying press). Simultaneously, populists are building and advancing their own media brands. The Breitbart News Network, the so-called voice of Donald Trump's campaign, has already announced that it will expand its European operations from the UK into France and Germany.

With a little help from friends...

Foreign interference in European elections is also likely to be an increasingly important factor. The US electoral campaign showed the havoc caused by leaks and hacked e-mails. It is undeniable that Russia played a role in this. The Kremlin is not only funding 'insurgent' parties, it is also engaging in information warfare for their benefit. At a recent press conference, Chancellor Merkel confirmed that Germany 'is currently having to deal [...] with internet attacks that are of Russian origin, or with news which sows false information'. A case in point is the alleged abduction and rape of a Russian-German girl by asylum seekers which was reported in the Russian media. Although subsequently found by the German police to be without grounds, these reports and the Russian authorities' subsequent accusation of a cover-up led to anti-migrant protests by the country's large Russian minority at a very sensitive time.

A Brave New World: foreign policy under Donald Trump and the EU

To paraphrase Eminem: 'Will the real Donald Trump please stand up?' Naturally, it's hard to predict the extent to which candidate Trump will be President Trump – you can't study the script of an improv act. Already Trump is sounding more conciliatory ranging from his victory speech to his latest remarks on Obamacare. But, leaving aside his flip-flopping, demagoguery and the question of whether transatlanticist Republicans would be able to manage him, he has stuck to one consistent, albeit raw, foreign policy approach: 'America First'. US interests will be front and centre. Consequently, if he sticks to this, he is likely to pursue a purely self-interested transactional 'the Art of the Deal' foreign policy.

The possible contours of such a Trump scenario throw all of the United States' commitments and guarantees around the world into doubt. Everything could be up for negotiation, shaking the transatlantic alliance to its foundations and changing the very nature of the West. It puts the international order into a black box. Under such a policy, the United States would no longer be the guardian of the global rules-based liberal order. It would leave the West rudderless in uncharted waters. Great uncertainty now hangs over the world's many theatres of crisis, ranging from Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

While US estrangement from Europe isn't particularly new, this would be a historic break. The Bush administration didn't particularly invest in the transatlantic alliance and instead

divided the continent into New Europe and Old Europe. President Obama, similarly, showed little interest in the EU. A Pacific-oriented president, he pushed forward the pivot towards Asia and downgraded the transatlantic alliance. In 2011, former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates ominously declared that there is a 'real possibility for a dim, if not dismal, future for the transatlantic alliance'. That future seems to be now.

Trump's break with 70 years of US guarantees is a watershed moment. He has made no commitments to the transatlantic alliance, to NATO or to the defence of the Baltics. NATO in particular has been weakened not only by Donald Trump's position but also by the authoritarian putsch that recently took place in Turkey. There are cracks appearing in the European security umbrella through which Russia is becoming increasingly visible. The Kremlin is being emboldened by the lack of American leadership and Trump's refusal to make commitments. A Russian government spokesman has already suggested that Trump scale back NATO deployments to improve relations. It is also telling that, more or less on the same day that he sent a congratulatory telegram to Trump on his election victory, Putin said that he was ready to restore a dialogue with Poland. Now that feelings of insecurity and uncertainty have increased in the capitals of the Baltics and Central and Eastern Europe, Putin approaches them – from a position of strength – to offer talks.

Following his transactional approach, it is likely that a Trump administration would explore a grand deal with Russia on Ukraine. This could take the form of requesting Russia's withdrawal from eastern Ukraine in return for the recognition of the annexation of Crimea, and guarantees that NATO would not expand to include Ukraine. Any such overtures would endanger European sanctions against Russia, which are already under pressure from many social democrats. Many EU Member States, but in particular the Baltic countries, would be extremely concerned by such a development. To what extent, or rather for what price, might President Trump open the door for such deals and leave countries such as Estonia – 'the suburbs of St Petersburg' according to ally Newt Gingrich – to Russia? Such deals and negotiations would lead to a return to 'spheres of privileged interests' and encourage brinkmanship and showmanship in the game for the best deal.

Donald Trump's foreign policy approach also presents serious challenges in other policy fields. Nuclear proliferation could accelerate, the Iran deal could unravel, and the spectre of a global trade war looms, with Trump promising to slap more, higher tariffs on Chinese products and label China a currency manipulator. Also, given his criticism for trade deals, the controversial Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is, for better or for worse, if not dead then at least on ice. President Juncker has already said that he doesn't see TTIP materialising in the next two years. On the climate front, the European Union will also face difficulties. Donald Trump has tweeted that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese to hurt American industry. His energy transition team is stacked with oil lobbyists and climate change sceptics, and he has vowed to exit the Paris Agreement.

Europe's foreign strategy for Trump: engage, mitigate and lead

Trump is a rule-breaker in a rules-based order. He is also likely to seek to divide the EU Member States and play them off against each other. They mustn't let him. The European Union must have a strategy in place. It was the right call for German Foreign Minister Steinmeier and the Commission to insist on a special meeting of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council on Sunday to discuss the implications of the US elections for Europe, and it is more than a disappointment that the Foreign Ministers of France and the UK decided not to attend. As Europe's largest military powers, it would have been necessary to have them at the table, when discussing Trump's implications for Europe and European security. But while French Foreign Minister Ayrault had an excuse (he was meeting the UN Secretary-General),

it's clear that Foreign Secretary Johnson simply wants to ride the elevator alone in Trump Tower.

A European strategy must be built on three interlinked features: engagement, mitigation, leadership.

First and foremost, European leaders cannot wait for Trump to make up his mind by himself. They need to engage with him in unison and lay down their concerns and interests. Presidents Tusk and Juncker have already taken the opportunity to invite Donald Trump to Brussels for an EU-US Summit at his earliest convenience. But this mustn't lead to unnecessary temporising. Until such a possible summit, the time needs to be used to create links with the new Trump administration, reach out to Republicans, and promote track II diplomacy. This will help to gain a better understanding of the incoming presidency and shape its thinking and personnel on Europe. Obama's visit to Germany should be a valuable opportunity to hear his views on the matter. Likewise, different contacts and forums need to be utilised – be it US ambassadors in Europe, NATO, the OSCE and particularly bilateral contacts and visits. European leaders should also reach out and visit the US. If Prime Minister Theresa May, or any other EU head of state or government, visits the US soon, they should make sure to debrief their European counterparts with regard to foreign and security issues on their return. And a special responsibility lies with Mogherini to quickly establish working relations with the upcoming US Secretary of State. Trump has had conversations with a number of European leaders following his victory, but the person with whom he has spent most time so far appears to be UKIP leader Nigel Farage. European leaders shouldn't let that stand.

The EU also needs to mitigate the possible worst consequences of the Trump presidency. That means accepting as a starter, as President Juncker said, that 'the US will not forever take care of our security. We need to do it ourselves'. Europe needs to come together in the sensitive field of defence. To quote Abraham Lincoln, 'A divided house cannot stand'. The EU needs to further develop its Global Strategy and reinforce its security architecture. That means boldly moving forward with a European Defence Union and employing the various different options available under the Lisbon Treaty, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation, to advance a common European defence agenda, for example by pooling and sharing military assets, procurement, R&D, putting in place a European Semester for defence, and so on. It means advancing military and defence cooperation with its northern neighbour Norway and exploring it with the UK in the context of Brexit.

Thirdly, as wishful as it might sound, the European Union needs to increase international leadership. We now live in a 'no (wo)man's world' – a 'G-0' as coined by Ian Bremmer from the Eurasia Foundation. The vacuum Trump might leave needs to be filled. That means building alliances, for example with regional organisations such as ASEAN to help manage the South China Sea, with powers such as China, Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia, and Brazil, by building coalitions on issues such as the global commons (climate change, management of the high seas, cybersecurity, space policy, etc.), by establishing and investing in formats to mitigate conflict such as the Normandy format or the P5+1 effort on Iran, and by shoring up global institutions such as the OSCE and UN.

Of course, it could all end up differently. There is the off-chance that Trump will leave behind the Trump of the past and now become presidential. But that's wishful thinking and not something to base a policy on. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

For an open, progressive movement that connects the struggles

Last but not least, European democrats and progressives need to draw lessons from America's election result. There are two hard facts that confront us.

First fact: the populists are winning. They are becoming the agent of change because they empower people who feel disempowered. Progressives have been fighting amazing battles for minority rights and gender equality, and have made major cultural progress. But somewhere along that line, we forgot about those that felt left behind and disempowered, who have started to feel like politics isn't about them any longer. Too often these people have then also been treated with resentment. This needs to be addressed if we wish to overcome the current social divisions.

It means listening to and engaging with the people that feel left behind economically, socially and particularly culturally. US opinion poll analysts FiveThirtyEight illustrate the culture gap by comparing which American counties with organic supermarket Whole Foods and which with Southern-themed restaurant Cracker Barrel voted for Trump: Trump won 76 per cent of counties with a Cracker Barrel and 22 per cent with a Whole Foods. That's a 54 per cent gap compared to 19 per cent in the 1992 election.

Not everyone who voted Trump is a sexist or a racist. If those people will not be heard by progressives, then they will be heard by the Trumps of this world. If progressives do not open up and engage with people that think differently, then they are creating the very conditions in which demagogues like Donald Trump can thrive, and are contributing to the problem. Shaming and labelling people isn't going to change their minds; it's just going to keep them silent in the opinion polls until that silent majority steps inside the polling booth and then exercises its right to vote Trump.

Second fact: the autocratic populists are an international movement. Putin helps Trump emboldens Le Pen and the downward spiral continues. Progressives are fighting many separate battles and campaigns but have no common, transatlantic movement. It's really crucial to connect the different struggles – the divestment campaign, the campaign for the rule of law in Hungary and Poland, workers' rights campaigns such as fighting precarious jobs at Amazon and the pitfalls of digitalisation, protests against the Keystone, North Dakota and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, campaigns for indigenous rights, environmental and social movements, human rights campaigns, literary movements, the Black cultural revival in the US as so well demonstrated by the novelist Ta-Nehisi Coates and musician Robert Glasper – and by doing so build a progressive narrative of change. These transatlantic and intra-European bridges need building. It also means engaging with young people in a transatlantic context. The millennials have mostly lost out in each election so far. They are not coming out en masse to vote and the decisions taken, such as Brexit, are against their own immediate interests. It's a baby boomer backlash.

The US and the UK, the world's two most open and liberal countries, have just voted to close off their societies. Hate crime levels in these countries have increased. Europe must fight the forces that wish to retreat into a populist cocoon. Now is the time to go out and engage, discuss and convince, change and be the change you want to see, build bridges and a movement that doesn't stay still. It's following the spirit of Winston Churchill: gather your strength for dawn, for the dawn shall come. The alternative is more sleepless nights in Europe.