

The End of the Concept of ‘the West’?

12. March 2018 by [Vessela Tcherneva](#)

‘You, Europeans, come to this town to preach to us, to complain and accuse, and then expect us to protect you,’ an American colleague told me on a recent trip to Washington. His bitterness, nothing new in substance and form, however surprised me, as I had known him for almost twenty years, from the times of NATO’s expansion to Central Europe. He was quite unwaveringly optimistic back then, in the spirit of the time, and, to expand the term ‘transatlantic’, very ‘western’. The optimism of the early 2000s had been an ideal fit to the concept of the West as [a concept of the future](#) (‘Zukunftsbegriff’), in opposition to the fallen Soviet empire, the final victory of liberal democracy and, in short, the End of History.

For someone coming from Central Eastern Europe that sort of optimism was appearing quite natural. We had witnessed the end of unwanted totalitarian regimes, the rise of civil societies and the willingness of the free world to embrace a common future. The transition, no matter how painful, was popular because it meant ‘returning to Europe’, with the US completing the picture of the prosperous, creative, united West.

That enthusiastic picture of the West had taken the first heavy blow already in 2002, in the run-up to the Iraq war, when Robert Kagan famously wrote: ‘(...) the fact is Europeans and Americans no longer share a common view of the world. On the all-important question of power – the utility of power, the morality of power – they have parted ways.’ Kagan argued that since the end of the Cold War, Europe and the US had developed fundamentally different views of just what sort of place the world was and should be: for the Europeans it would be rules-based, for the Americans chaotic and calling for exercising hard power.

The current resentment of my Washingtonian colleague was surprising, because back in the early 2000s he was not bothered by the Mars/Venus breach. He, amongst many others, saw it as an opportunity to bridge the gap, to calibrate views, to work intellectually within the framework of transatlantic trust and a sense of belonging to the West. Today, I realised, that broad framework was gone. The US-European relationship is permissive of open hostility and distrust – and, while in Kagan’s 2002 estimation of both views, the American one seem to have better grasped global realities, in 2018 it is lacking any intellectual effort by the US to respond to it.

The anti-intellectual nature of the debate in Washington is striking as it focuses around one person, the US president, whose egotism and shallowness, disrespect for institutions and partners seem unprecedented. The administration and the President speak in different languages, and the post-war history of Western foreign policy experience has evaporated.

There is a national security strategy, produced by Trump’s White House, but it is ‘divorced from the reality of Trump’s presidency’, [‘a purely academic exercise’](#). The main question the strategy does not answer is what the administration’s real priorities are, as the document is in stark contradiction with Trump’s statements on the key topics. For instance, the strategy urged American and European unity against the common threat from Moscow. ‘Russia’, it declared, ‘is using subversive measures to weaken the credibility of America’s commitment to Europe, undermine transatlantic unity, and weaken European institutions and governments.’ To combat that, ‘The United States and Europe will work together to counter Russian subversion and aggression,’ including by reaffirming that ‘the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty,’ which obligates America to defend its NATO allies.

Trump’s discussion of NATO, by contrast, omitted any reference to a Russian threat and focused exclusively on the threat posed by America’s deadbeat allies. ‘I would not allow member states to be delinquent in the payment while we guarantee their safety and are willing to fight wars for them,’ he boasted. Unlike the National Security Strategy, Trump said nothing in his speech about America’s obligation under Article 5.

Some US officials have been trying recently to close that growing gap between the President's and the administration's positions. Look at the policy and focus on it dispassionately, don't pay attention to the noise and the package, has been the message to Europeans in closed-door meetings. But the fact that in a 2017 Pew Research survey [75% of the respondents in 37 countries](#) around the world describe Trump as arrogant makes it impossible to separate the messenger from the message. Even more staggering are the results from a report focusing on the German and US public opinion. 'While roughly two-in-three Americans characterize relations as good, a 56% majority of Germans take the opposite view,' the [study](#) has found. Here the German elite and public are probably on the same page; what however politicians in Berlin understand too well is the utmost importance of the security and defence relationship with the US – a view shared only by 16% of Germans.

This year's Munich Security Conference stated the risky nature of the current chaotic multipolarity paired with huge US defence spending and no trustworthy transatlantic framework ('[The world is on the brink](#)'). However, the disappearance of the optimistic concept of the West is not only bad, some hope: it is supposed to trigger more concerted efforts in creating European defence. An opinion poll commissioned by the MSC and McKinsey shows that a majority of Europeans want to have their armed forces to be deployable beyond their national borders, preferably around the world.

Moreover, the good news is that Trump's tide did not translate into strengthening nationalists and populists in Europe. As [Natalie Nougayrede](#) wrote, his lasting effect may be in strengthening the Euroliberals and provoking a debate in Europe whether transatlanticism still made sense. It is unclear what the American response to Putin's strategic arms race invitation. And with the announcement of trade protectionism measures by Trump, a trade war seems underway. How can one be transatlanticist these days?

Reagan, Trump and the Evil Empire

Loyal Americanophiles from Central and Eastern Europe still remember Reagan, the US president who beat the Evil Empire. His election slogan was similar to Trump's, 'Let's make America great again', and in the first year in the White House he introduced a tax cut and raised military spending (which in turn lured USSR into the economic abyss). By the way, the combination of those policies led to an explosion in the budget deficit, hitting close to six percent of gross domestic product in 1983 – a path that Donald Trump has taken [by borrowing nearly \\$1 trillion this fiscal year](#).

Reagan also tried imposing protectionist elements but unlike Trump today, he had negotiated those steps with European partners ahead of adopting them (and soon thereafter removed them). Today, with the increased steel tariffs, the US federal government is about to alienate its friendliest neighbour, Canada, as well as a number of European governments. A similar pattern emerged around the recent adoption of sanction against Russia by Congress: it happened without consultations with the EU, although the economic ties between Europeans and Russia are far more significant than the US-Russian ones.

The parallel to Reagan would probably be most telling in relation to Russia. While his policy had a clear goal to 'write the final pages of the history of the Soviet Union', Trump's is beyond ambiguous. Not only does he stand out against his hawkish administration on the topic, but also his ambiguity on Russia's meddling in the US presidential election has solidified a cross-partisan majority against him.

The schizophrenia of Washington does not seem to bother leaders in Poland or Hungary. US military support in Poland has satisfied Warsaw's expectations of the US in security terms. The Polish leadership is now preoccupied with assuring his American counterparts that 'nothing' will happen when a widely-criticised law against Poland's role in the Holocaust takes effect. Poles, of course, are grateful to Reagan for defeating communism, advancing freedom and democratic principles (he was posthumously awarded Poland's highest honour for

foreigners — the Order of the White Eagle — by President Lech Kaczynski in 2007). Today, Jaroslaw Kaczynski may relate to Trump's populism but Trump's unformulated crusade against liberal democracy actually goes against Reagan's legacy in Poland.

In Budapest, the soft autocrat Orban had celebrated Trump's victory. But his hopes for a close relationship have to be realised yet: because of his sympathetic stance towards Putin and his (quite successful) attempt to transform Hungary to resemble Putin's Russia, an invitation to the White House has so far been denied by its staff. To Mr Orban's regret, Hungary is not important enough to become '*Chefsache*'.

One thing Mssrs Kaczynski, Orban and Trump share beyond their ability to speak on behalf of the people and the resentment of liberalism, is the lack of love for Mrs Merkel's Germany. Next to the Reagan statue in the Liberty Square of Budapest a new monument to the victims of the Nazi occupation of Hungary has been erected. It is interpreted by its critics, at best, as an attempt to gloss over Hungary's complicity in the tragedy of the Second World War, but mostly as expression of Hungary's new nationalism. The stark contrast between Reagan's call for re-unification ('Mr Gorbachov, tear down this wall!') and Orban's isolationism who did build a wall against the immigrants, points again towards the feebleness of the Reagan-Trump parallel in US-European relations.

The presidency of Donald Trump will have undoubtedly lasting implications on Europe, the transatlantic relationship and the world, and those effects will be probably felt on global security, the international trade system and global governance beyond his tenure. But what is already a fact, the destruction of the West as a concept has come closer. It may well have been in the making before Trump's surprising victory and may have arrived slightly later with another candidate but the truth is that the 45th president of the US has infused the mistrust, allowed hostility and started actions that fundamentally undermined that concept. If there is coming back, is difficult to see.