

## Trump and the Age of Uncertainty in Europe

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### *Summary points:*

- *US foreign policy priorities in (Central and Eastern) Europe will change, which will effect stability of Europe as a whole;*
- *A different approach to the issue of collective defense in NATO shall be taken;*
- *Resetting damaged relations with Russia seems a very likely option for the US, making Central Europe more vulnerable to Russia in the process;*
- *Domestically, Central European states face strengthening of (far) right-wingers, anti-liberal and uncivic ideas;*

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With a style that some label as coming out of a reality show and with a specific affinity to erratically expressing his views on social media, Trump has managed not only to win the election but also to surprise many after only a few days in office. The plan of 'Making America Great Again' has been rolled out in quite a manner with immigration regulations changed, 'special ties' with the UK reaffirmed, and, now already very famous, 'wall with Mexico' announced: all within the first week! This is probably the first time in the US history that a start of President's term has caused such a commotion and received such media attention.

With his relentless anti-elitist and anti-liberal calls<sup>1</sup>, Trump managed to win the presidential post by presenting himself as an outsider in the fight *against* the

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<sup>1</sup>In all fairness, there are obvious differences between this rhetoric and the President's largely white male cabinet composed of picks mainly belonging to business elites. See [New York Times] [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/politics/donald-trump-administration.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/politics/donald-trump-administration.html?_r=0) (accessed

political establishment and *for* the American people. Opinions on him both at home and abroad being highly polarized, Trump's rise has effectively left primarily nationalist and right-wing politicians sharing his anti-liberal rhetoric utterly impressed. This stance has proven to be a very powerful magnet attracting certain segments of politicians and citizenry alike, in Europe but elsewhere, too. For instance, Trump's very vocal agenda on immigration, his rather positive turn on Brexit, and his ultimate dismissal of the EU have all found supporters throughout Europe. His calls have been answered by primarily those European politicians believing that the EU is in deep crisis, that it is effectively unable to cope with current issues, and that it is bound to fall apart. Some anti-EU oriented all along and others disappointed with the state of the Union and its institutions, believing these have become an ultimate sanctuary of bureaucrats, these politicians have expressed their full support to the new US President.

Now, going beyond Trump's (un)popularity, style, and content of address, there seems to be very little, if any, consensus among analysts on what the new President's course of action will actually be. Doubts and fears over foreign policies of the new President are now stronger than ever, particularly on this side of the 'pond.' Global partnership with the US and respective trans-Atlantic relationship have been a bedrock of the Western collective security and economic prosperity, and for many they now stand challenged by the new President. There are two quintessential international issues that seem particularly important with regard to (Central and Eastern) Europe: the future of NATO and Russian policy of the new Administration. In addition, Trump's fiery rhetoric has had quite an influence on rise of nationalist, uncivic, and far right agendas in Europe, with Central European states being an interesting example in this domestic political and social regard.

### **A Change in NATO Priorities: Still an Indispensable Alliance?**

Trump's remarks on NATO made during the campaign forced many to think that the new Administration would completely reset its approach to the system of the collective security. In addition, the President's take on the EU as being on a verge of collapse and his 'America First' approach have made many nervous and left wondering about the US abandoning Europe altogether<sup>2</sup>. These fears have always seemed far-fetched, now even more so, but truth be told, it seems quite credible that the Trump Administration shall indeed take a different approach to Europe in defense terms. It is to be expected that the Administration will examine and question the overall financial commitment that the US has had towards the Alliance and perhaps decide to take a more market-driven approach in this regard by downsizing the American presence in Europe. To put it in Trump's economic logic, the US approach to the Alliance and to the American presence in Europe may indeed change to make Washington certain that the US 'gets what it pays for' in NATO. Although much of Trump's economic calculus seems quite dubious when closely inspected, as, after all, much of his rhetoric, this reasoning nevertheless highlights Trump's views on ineffectiveness of the Alliance. Still, the new US Defense Secretary James Mattis did try to soften this rhetoric by speaking of NATO-US ties as "unshakeable,"<sup>3</sup> but nature of these unshakeable ties may in all likelihood change.

This issue of the Administration and its approach to the collective security is, of course, a point that has been of a particular concern for a number of European countries, predominantly those in Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, it seems very realistic that the new Administration may indeed ask for an increase in defense spending in a number of NATO countries, including all Central European members except Poland. For instance, Poland got applauded by Trump

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<sup>2</sup> [Politico] <http://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-leaves-europe-in-the-cold-in-inauguration/> (accessed on 27 January 2017).

<sup>3</sup> [CNN] <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/24/politics/mattis-nato-calls-commitment/> (accessed on 25 January 2017).

for abiding by its NATO obligations and spending more than the minimum 2% of its GDP on defense, while other NATO members not keeping up to their (financial) pledge were warned that defense is not free and that the US would not secure those who failed to invest in their own security.<sup>4</sup> In that respect, Europe would be very wise to start redefining its own approach to security and to do so by taking into consideration nature of changes in the American approach to NATO. Central and Eastern European states can play particularly important role in this regard by trying to work out security arrangements that would enable them to properly respond to current and future security threats, predominantly those coming out of Russia. The current US Administration is unlikely to leave Europe militarily abandoned altogether, but the very fact that the Administration has a different understanding of its international security commitments highlights the necessity of Europeans taking respective matter into their own hands. If Central European states have proved quite successful in cooperating on a number of issues for many years, there is no reason to believe they would not be able to do the same in the area of security.

### **Russian Policy: Ties (Fully) Restored?**

In addition to the issue of collective defense and trans-Atlantic partnership, European context in general is going to be greatly affected by the US approach to Russia. This policy is definitely going to have an immense impact on any European, and, of course, global, scenarios in the coming years, with a particular influence on the position of the Central and Eastern European states that have eyed Russian aggression in Ukraine with fear. Tense relations with Kremlin, Western economic sanctions, and increasingly authoritarian Russia have raised additional suspicions over possible Russian intrusion and destabilization of Europe, especially after seeing how impotent the West actually seemed while Moscow was occupying Crimea. Moreover, reports of Russian hacking

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<sup>4</sup> [The Daily Signal] <http://dailysignal.com/2017/01/24/are-nato-members-carrying-their-weight-only-5-of-28-countries-pay-fair-share/> (accessed on 25 January 2017).

involvement in the US elections have once more shown how powerful and capable of inflicting serious damage Kremlin can really be.

There are several options on the table for the new Administration in dealing with Russia. The first option of continuing to interact with Moscow by economic sanctions and refusal to accept Kremlin's invasion of Crimea while keeping the collective defense of the West its top priority seems improbable due to a number of reasons. First of all, this scenario could play out only in circumstances of the new Administration actually being aware of the fact that Russian potential and power are being used against the West collectively. This would mean taking these matters seriously rather than completely dismissing and downplaying them.<sup>5</sup> In order to understand this, the Administration would need to have appreciation of liberal values of the West as a whole, which, by the way, have been criticized on numerous occasions by Trump and his cabinet. This option would, at least for Europe, mean much of the 'same old' approach inherited from the previous Administration, with collective defense and American presence in Europe still ranked at the top of American priorities. In this scenario, Central and Eastern Europe would still benefit from considerable US military presence and would have the backing they actually need to keep Moscow at bay.

The second option, the one of (comprehensive) rapprochement with Moscow regardless of the form it takes, is definitely the worst scenario seen from the European perspective.<sup>6</sup> If Trump's rhetoric on Putin, that has been as inconclusive as most of Trump's public statements so far, would somehow be translated into foreign policy of simply yielding to Russia, it would definitely mean that the US security commitments to Europe as a whole would significantly change.<sup>7</sup> Coupled

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<sup>5</sup> On the issue of Trump's foreign policy assumptions see [Brookings] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/01/23/seven-trump-foreign-policy-assumptions/> (accessed on 31 January 2017).

<sup>6</sup> [Foreign Affairs] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-01-04/rapprochement-russias-terms> (accessed on 5 February 2017).

<sup>7</sup> [Politico] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/trump-russia-intelligence-need-to-know-214520> (accessed on 30 January 2017).

with any troop reductions and a different approach to the collective defense in NATO, the US would in this scenario accept Russia into the 'global power' club and would also remove sanctions against Kremlin. This development would leave Europe, particularly Central and Eastern, largely vulnerable, with Russia being effectively given an upper hand. It would mean ultimate trouble for Central and Eastern Europe since worrying over Russian intentions would become their daily routine. The only positive coming out of this scenario could possibly be Central and Eastern European states coming together to try and find appropriate mode of their defense, quite conceivably in a broader European context. This particular turn of events presented as the second scenario also seems improbable, given, for instance, the opposition that Trump may encounter in GOP in lifting the Russian sanctions,<sup>8</sup> as well as some of his personal advisors being against it.

The third option, and probably the most credible one regarding the scenarios presented here, is a gradual engagement of Kremlin on behalf of Washington, whereby improved relations would depend on the two being able to agree on a number of issues, for instance, crisis in the Middle East where finding solutions agreeable to both is more likely.<sup>9</sup> This scenario would allow the two to work together on a number of issues where mutually acceptable deals could be reached and trust established. This scenario may also result in a change for Europe in general, as Washington could start to treat Kremlin more benevolently than it has until now. Question remains whether this scenario would lead to removal of American sanctions on Russia, or would be limited to cooperation in areas where this is acceptable to both sides. If used intelligently, this scenario could prove a formidable framework for the US to handle Kremlin, engage it as much as possible, but avoid lifting sanctions and thus sidelining the European allies. If, on the other hand, the US decides to apply this framework selfishly and solely for purposes of its own and its particularistic agenda by removing Russian sanctions, European

<sup>8</sup> [PBS] <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/trump-gop-russia-sanctions/> (accessed on 30 January 2017).

<sup>9</sup> [CNN] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/14/politics/russia-us-trump-reset-pros-cons/> (accessed on 5 February 2017). Also, [Politico] <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/trumps-plan-to-fight-isis-with-putin-isnt-just-futile-its-dangerous-214743> (accessed on 5 February 2017).

allies in NATO would find themselves in a problematic spot. This turn of events could then lead to deteriorated relations between the US and Europe and quite possibly motivate Europe to begin search for its own vision of a new security agenda.

### **Domestic context: 'Make (Central) Europe Great Again'**

Trump's rise and his fiery rhetoric have indeed attracted a lot of attention in Europe, particularly with far right and nationalist agendas mostly revolving around anti-liberal ideas that have sprung back up in recent years and got legitimized in the process. These political notions in Europe touch mostly upon heavy criticisms of the EU and its institutions, as well as, in a more general sense, liberal world order supposedly resulting in economic and cultural destruction of Europe as a whole. Trump's refusal to be politically correct, his anti-elitist approach, and his call for 'bringing power back to the people' have, therefore, resonated remarkably well within aforementioned European political circles. Hence, politicians from all sorts of corners in Europe have supported Trump: from nationalist (Marine) Le Pen in France, to EU-bashing Farage in the UK, to Russian-loving Orban in Hungary, and to, among many others of course, Wilders in the Netherlands and Zeman in the Czech Republic.<sup>10</sup>

Take, for instance, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland: while three states' elites have similar views on the immigration, they differ in their Russia approach, predominantly with the Polish being the most intimidated by Kremlin. It is particularly in the case of Hungary and Poland that political elites have chosen a path of supporting often uncivic and undemocratic initiatives that have been, by the way, lauded by Trump and perfectly exemplified by his Administration. In addition, Czech President Zeman has spoken favorably of Trump and has

<sup>10</sup> [Quartz] <https://qz.com/893348/far-right-european-politicians-are-talking-about-making-europe-great-again/> (accessed on 3 February 2017).

expressed his support particularly for Trump's immigration policies as well as his security agenda.

Furthermore, those politicians with technocratic views of the US President, glossing over many inconsistencies of the current US Administration, have also succumbed to Trump's rhetoric. While the need to have an efficient state is commendable, particularly when fighting corruption, crime, and terrorism, it is nevertheless important not to overlook that this must not be done at the expense of democratic values. For example, politicians the likes of Babiš, current Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, tend to make this move. Trump's 'outsiderness' to politics is by these politicians seen as inherently positive and a value in itself.

Last but not least, politicians emphasizing the need of leaving established boundaries of conventional politics, those whose political agenda revolves around immigration and/or are based on far right platforms, the likes of Okamura in the Czech Republic and ultra-nationalist Kotleba in Slovakia, have chiefly applauded Trump's anti-Muslim stance, his 'outsiderness' as well, and have strongly urged for the need to leave the EU. Trump may legitimize these outsiders and create public space for them to be accepted as regular political forces with acceptable opinions.

There are, as has been shown, several different types of Central European politicians supportive of Trump-like values in a Trump-like world. First, there are those agreeing with Trump principally on his anti-immigration and Muslim ban agenda, as well as his populist stance and his uncivic and anti-liberal values. Then there is the group of those unconventional politicians admiring Trump's experience in business, as well as the President's professed goals of bringing 'power to the people.' Last but not least, there are politicians advancing various (far) right agendas. All these groups are witnessed to have occasionally attacked news reporters over political affairs by labelling the press in Trump-style as

‘unpatriotic.’ Hence, Central European context has in this regard been very interesting, as not only opposition but also some ruling elites have been very supportive of the US President. For that matter, it seems very likely that, echoing Trump’s victory, right-wing politics and nationalist agendas of all sorts will continue to strengthen in Central Europe. For instance, immigration issue has been one of the focal points of Trump’s rhetoric as well as one of the burning issues in Central Europe in the last couple of years. Given the criticism of the national governments aimed at the EU immigration policy that has been the regional point of contention for a number of years now, it seems certain that anti-immigration stance will remain politically significant in this part of Europe. In addition, bashing of the EU institutions and their legitimacy, as well as liberal values and human rights in general has also been a surging phenomenon. Last but not least, given the Western sanctions on Russia seen unfavorably by some Central European politicians, it is expected that the EU will experience certain amount of pressure in this particular regard.

## Conclusion

It seems quite certain that the US will change its foreign policy stance, but it has perhaps never been as hard as today to guess what course this policy shall take. With the erratic style of the current Administration, its policy based on nationalist “Jacksonian populism”<sup>11</sup> and ‘America First’ approach (whatever that is), the only conclusion that seems guaranteed is that the international scene is in for quite a few surprises. Being the closest American ally, Europe may indeed be the first to actually experience this change. In that respect, it can easily happen that Western security commitments become victim of new policies of the Administration, which refuses to further invest in trans-Atlantic partnership. In addition, any US dealings with Russia, if played out in scenarios serving only narrowly defined US interests,

<sup>11</sup> [Foreign Affairs] [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt?cid=%3Fcid%3Ddemc-paywall\\_free-the\\_jacksonian\\_revolt-013017&sp\\_mid=53313799&sp\\_rid=dmxhZGFkam9AeWFob28uY29tS0&spMailingID=53313799&sp\\_UserID=MjIxMjkzMjU0NTE5S0&spJobID=1085849983&spReportId=MTA4NTg0OTk4MwS2&t=1485811807](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt?cid=%3Fcid%3Ddemc-paywall_free-the_jacksonian_revolt-013017&sp_mid=53313799&sp_rid=dmxhZGFkam9AeWFob28uY29tS0&spMailingID=53313799&sp_UserID=MjIxMjkzMjU0NTE5S0&spJobID=1085849983&spReportId=MTA4NTg0OTk4MwS2&t=1485811807) (accessed on 31 January 2017).

would result in changes to the collective security arrangements of the once united liberal West, and effectively highlight the need for Europe to reexamine its own security approach and start searching for a new security vision. Last but not least, European domestic politics may experience shift towards anti-liberal and uncivic, thus threatening, above all, the body of liberal political values that has been the cornerstone of the unity of the 'old continent.' This change would then lead to the rise of illiberal social discourses questioning democratic political order, much stronger calls for a return to nation-states, and doing away with the whole EU project altogether by introducing radical and seemingly fast and effective undemocratic political solutions on the way.