

Trump, Putin, Europe

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- 21/02/2025
- 12 minutes

The turnaround in relations between the United States and Russia brings the conflict in Ukraine closer to resolution, but Europe is confused. Principles and values are once again put forward in defense of Kiev, in opposition to the new strategy of the American ally. There is a risk of a “short circuit” between the two parts of the Western world, whereby the Old Continent could lose its influence.

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States had immediate repercussions beyond everyone's expectations (or fears). From tariffs and duties to the destruction of USAID, from claims on Greenland, Panama, and Mexico to “tourism” proposals on Gaza, Trump's policy moves will dramatically transform the current international scenario. However, it is perhaps in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that the actions of the new US president have the most impressive and immediate effect. The resumption of diplomatic relations with Moscow, senselessly interrupted by Western countries three years earlier, a lengthy and well-publicized phone conversation with Putin, statements about the inexpediency of Kiev's joining NATO, and, in essence, recognition of the

territories conquered by the Russian side on the territory of Ukraine – all this indicates a radical change of course from the Biden administration. Especially since not only is Ukraine now cornered, but also its European allies are effectively excluded from the process of resuming direct relations between Washington and Moscow.

Russia has taken this turn of events not only with obvious satisfaction, but also with a high degree of caution, as final decisions have not yet been made. Ukraine, for its part, is clearly disappointed and concerned, but has to “put on a brave face.” It has to accept even the exorbitant economic compensation that Trump has demanded in exchange for the enormous economic and military support the United States has provided during this time. However, Zelensky himself has long since given up hope of regaining by force the territories conquered by Russia. Today, his main task is to provide security guarantees for Ukraine in the conditions that will take shape under Trump’s presidency.

The new course completely dumbfounded Europe, which – with the exception of Hungary and then Slovakia – for three years had been flawlessly following the instructions of the United States and NATO, supporting Ukraine by all available means. The Europeans believed that economic sanctions would seriously weaken Russia by making it vulnerable to a Ukrainian army, funded, armed, and supported by Western experts. We are now well aware of how risky those predictions turned out to be. Anti-Russian sanctions have not resulted in the expected isolation of the country. Instead, they have accelerated its estrangement from the Western financial system while incentivizing countries like China, India, and Saudi Arabia to develop new mechanisms for economic cooperation. In the purely military

sphere, the Russian army has been successfully advancing in all southeastern directions for a year and a half now, and even the sabotage operation undertaken by Kiev in the Kursk region appears to have failed. In other words, the military conflict is tilting ever more decisively in favor of Moscow, whose economy is demonstrating a resilience and strength that far exceeds Western expectations.

Meanwhile, Europe's own economy is finding itself in dire straits. It has suffered significant losses due to rising energy prices after reliable and cheap Russian supplies were replaced by more expensive alternatives, particularly US liquefied natural gas. Germany's economic woes look greater than ever and pose a threat to the entire continent. It is noteworthy, however, that official European discourse – both in political rhetoric and in the media – sweeps these problems under the rug. And not without reason: over the past three years, Europe has essentially built a system of self-propaganda that has reached such grotesque accents that it has become increasingly difficult for public opinion to form an objective view of the political origins of the conflict and its true development. A mere doubt about the advisability of NATO's eastward expansion, Ukraine's democracy, or the veracity of the claim that the Russians destroyed Nord Stream 2 inevitably led to accusations of Putinism and almost total exclusion from the mainstream media. Not to mention the almost universal criticism of Viktor Orbán's attempts to initiate a political dialogue with Russia during his presidency of the Council of the European Union. We now have a full three years under our belt during which we have witnessed some truly bellicose rhetoric. Even NATO secretaries general were at the center of this rhetoric: first the Norwegian Stoltenberg and then the Dutchman Rutte, who was no

different from his predecessor in his endless calls for increased military spending and support for Ukraine in order to achieve an obviously unattainable victory. During these three years, Europe's founding countries – Germany, France, and Italy – have failed to stand up to US dictates and develop a more balanced political strategy that takes into account common interests. Instead, they tirelessly heeded the anti-Russian extremism of Poland and especially the Baltic republics. These states, despite their demographic, economic and military insignificance, have even been “rewarded” with several high-ranking appointments – Estonia's Kaja Kallas became EU foreign affairs representative, and Lithuania's Andrius Kubilius became defense commissioner. That is, this concerns two of the most “sensitive” areas that play a key role in relations with Moscow.

After Trump's decisive turnaround, the European Union is in a clear quandary: although it continues to insist on its participation in the negotiations, Washington's actual initiatives are already ahead of it. Today, we are in an era of deep political “confusion” that only further emphasizes the loss of our continent's influence. And this is due not only to its political disunity and military weakness, but perhaps above all to Europe's complete relinquishment of foreign policy autonomy from the United States. It would seem quite obvious that Europe's interests should not always coincide with those of the United States, either in security or economic matters. The deterioration of relations with Moscow over the past two decades is particularly striking evidence of this. The clash seen today between Europe and Russia – a country with a deeply European culture, our major economic partner and energy supplier – was not at all inevitable. To confront Moscow, which is often unequivocally held responsible for the current conflict,

forgetting the obvious role of the West, we are leaning toward the prospect of an inordinate increase in European military spending, which inevitably takes resources away from key sectors such as health care, education, etc. Moreover, we take for granted a final break with Russia, a move that actually promises Europe a strategic and economic catastrophe.

Proper understanding of the dynamics that led to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict should be the starting point for a new political phase based on a more transparent and realistic strategy than the one that has defined the current period. Instead of strengthening the hegemony of the United States and consolidating the Western bloc, the conflict has accelerated the transition to a multipolar system in which Washington is no longer the sole global arbiter. Moscow avoided isolation by turning its course to the East. The BRICS countries are gaining strength, while Europe has been weakened both economically and politically. Brussels' exclusion – at least in today's initial phase – from peace talks aimed at ending the conflict on Europe's eastern borders sends a strong signal of the peripheral position of European leadership. In the current situation, European countries, including Italy, will inevitably have to resort to the large-scale purchases of American weapons that Washington insists on. However, it would be in our interest to create an integrated European military industry to replenish arsenals depleted by the shipment of a significant portion of military supplies to Ukraine.

The same applies to the possibility of normalizing relations between Europe and Russia, which are of particular importance, primarily in the energy sector. However, these prospects are extremely difficult to implement in the short term, primarily because of the acute shortage of leaders and political forces capable of radically rethinking Europe's

strategic orientation. The unrealistic summit organized by Macron on February 17 in Paris clearly demonstrated the disunity and inadequacy of the European Union in the face of the challenges of a new international scenario. Nevertheless, in a rapidly emerging multipolar world, Europe's future will be determined first and foremost by its ability to transform itself into what it is not yet – a political, economic, and military power independent of the United States, with its own identity and interests, able to interact freely with Russia, China, India, and other global players.

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