

Europe's Mixed Feelings About Trump

Exclusive: European governments are nervous about a Trump presidency, but – for economic and other reasons – many on the Continent would welcome a friendlier approach toward Russia, reports Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Few in Europe expected Donald Trump to win the U.S. Presidential elections last November. The picture painted by the media and political class was convincing: despite the pent-up anger being expressed through protest candidates, Hillary Clinton was headed towards a decisive victory, as the majority of Americans couldn't stomach someone as outrageous and unconventional as the reality TV star turned politician.

That's not what happened, of course, as Trump earned an Electoral College victory by winning enough votes in key Midwestern states that have suffered from a loss of manufacturing jobs in recent decades. His victory has shaken the Western world to its core, making it clear that business as usual is no longer possible in terms of both economic and foreign policy.

In Europe the signs of the anti-establishment sentiment that dominated the U.S. election campaign have been present for some time. The most obvious example was the Brexit vote in June 2016, in which the population of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. But protest movements have actually been on the rise for several years now, driven by the same basic issues as in the United States: a sense of economic and social insecurity – accompanied by a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment – driven by an economic policy that has made life harder for the middle class while enriching those at the top.

The growing anger against the institutions of the European Union, considered the main culprit for the failed economic policies, has made the élites desperate for some sense of stability, to help them weather the storm. As a result, a potential Clinton victory was openly welcomed by most political leaders.

After Trump's victory, there were numerous press reports of worries among European governments regarding the incoming Administration's foreign policy. Trump is understandably seen as unpredictable, but the key point revolves around his attitude towards Russia, the same issue that is currently dominating the institutional fight in the United States right now.

Just after the election The New York Times ran a story entitled "For Europe, Trump's Election is a Terrifying Disaster," suggesting that under the new

President, the United States may embrace authoritarianism and no longer defend democracy. It was a theme that other mainstream news outlets also pushed.

On Nov. 17, The Associated Press wrote: "NATO members and other European countries are worried that under Trump, the U.S. will stop trying to police Russia's behavior the way it has under Obama. Most concerning to U.S. allies are Trump's effusive comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin, one of the first world leaders he spoke to after winning the election."

Seeing Benefits

While it is true that former Soviet bloc countries such as Poland and Latvia would prefer to maintain the current hardline position towards Russia, the reality is that the largest E.U. members – France, Italy and Germany – actually stand to benefit from the diplomatic approach promised by President-elect Trump.

This doesn't mean they supported his candidacy, though. First of all, they were told that he couldn't win; and second, a Trump victory would seem to encourage the anti-establishment movements already on the rise in Europe, which threaten both the E.U.'s status quo and the jobs of key leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Hillary Clinton was seen as representing continuity, and for the many politicians who seek to curry favor with the transatlantic elites, it was best to show their Clinton bona fides in view of the upcoming change in power. For example, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi – now out of office due to a stinging anti-establishment vote in a referendum on proposed constitutional reforms – repeatedly broke diplomatic protocol and publicly criticized Trump during the election campaign.

However, over the course of 2016 it became clear that Clinton's foreign policy was far more aggressive than Barack Obama's, as the President had actually been seeking collaboration with Russia for several years on issues, such as constraining Iran's nuclear program and negotiating an end to the Syrian conflict, despite heavy opposition from within his own administration.

Indeed Trump's openness towards Vladimir Putin seems even more heretical now because most have chosen to forget that Obama himself had sought close cooperation with Putin on several key issues. For instance, Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomacy last year on Syria almost succeeded in implementing intelligence sharing and joint airstrikes by the two powers, before being effectively thwarted by the Pentagon and other U.S. institutional opposition in September 2016.

Now Obama seems to have forgotten his former position, and decided to fully toe

the anti-Russian line, apparently convinced that he must do his part in the campaign to weaken Trump and prevent him from being an effective president, even in areas where their positions are not far apart.

It is possible that Trump will accelerate the timid attempts of his predecessor to abandon the “regime change” policies that have led to numerous disasters in the Middle East, and heightened tensions with Russia. The President-elect seems determined to pursue this path more openly than Obama, who worked slowly towards this goal while seeking to placate his critics with more bellicose language in his public statements.

Doubts About the U.S. Hardline

Although European nations have been heavily involved in recent regime change adventures (the U.K. in Iraq and France in Libya, for example), there is a widespread preference in Western Europe for avoiding further conflict with Russia. The U.S. position on the events in Ukraine, for example, is often seen as one-sided, and the notion of NATO expansion to Russia’s borders seems like an unnecessary and dangerous provocation that can only makes things worse.

Western sanctions against Russia, and Russia’s retaliatory sanctions on food imports, have cost European economies over \$100 billion in trade, according to some estimates, hitting the agricultural sector especially hard. In addition, Russia has been concluding more economic agreements with countries such as China, leading to fears of permanent consequences for Europe.

For this reason, France, Italy and Germany have all repeatedly stated their desire to reduce or remove the sanctions altogether. The hope is that an agreement can be reached to defuse tensions in Ukraine, based on support for the Kiev government but broad autonomy for the ethnic Russian areas in eastern Ukraine.

Despite this desire to head off further conflict, European governments are usually careful not to openly break with U.S. policy; they are key members of NATO and have no desire to distance themselves from the leader of the alliance. However, if Donald Trump follows through on his stated goal of working “together with Russia,” the countries of Western Europe in particular may welcome the opportunity to advance their own economic interests and avoid finding themselves in the middle of a new Cold War.

Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of Transatlantico.info, that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. His book on the U.S. elections *Perchè vince Trump (Why Trump is Winning)* was published in June 2016.

