THE SHOCK IMPACT OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S RHETORIC ON EUROPEAN IDENTITY

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Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of President Donald Trump's rhetoric on European identity during his first term (2017-2021). Traditionally, the European Union (EU) has aligned its foreign policy and cultural identity closely with the transatlantic partnership, sharing values such as democracy, liberalism, and the rule of law. However, Trump's „America First" policy and disruptive rhetorical style marked a significant shift, transforming the EU's perception of the US from a reliable partner to a „problematic other."

The paper concludes that Trump's presidency acted as a discursive turning point in transatlantic relations, challenging long-standing principles of cooperation and legitimacy. This crisis evolved into an opportunity for the EU to define its role more clearly in the 21st century, asserting itself as a global actor committed to multilateralism, responsibility, and shared values.

Keywords: Trump's disruptive rhetoric, EU identity, identity construction, strategic narratives

Introduction

Traditionally, the European Union has built its foreign policy and cultural identity in close connection with the transatlantic partnership. Shared values – democracy, liberalism, rule of law, and a commitment to multilateral institutions – have long formed the foundation of the alliance between the EU and the United States. In this sense, the US has served as a „significant other" – a term used by Jürgen Habermas to describe those external actors that play a key role in shaping a subject's normative self-reflection.[1] Thus, the US has historically been a validator and legitimizer of the EU's liberal identity.

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[1]   Habermas, J. (1998). The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

However, with the election of Donald Trump and the rhetoric of his first term, this model began to shift. Many of his statements and actions transformed how the EU perceived the US – not as a reliable partner, but as a „problematic other" that caused institutional, strategic, and moral destabilization. Here, reflective identity construction occurs through distinction – both in language and policy. This results in a re-articulation of the EU's identity, much like Ian Manners described the EU's „normative power" – the ability to define itself through ethical and value-based distance from others.[2]

Trump's inaugural speech („From this day forward, it's going to be only America First, America First." – January 20, 2017) marked not just a retreat from global leadership, but also a symbolic break from the shared transatlantic narrative.[3] From a reflective identity standpoint, this statement has a dual function: it asserts a self-centred American identity while simultaneously forcing the EU to reimagine itself as a global actor following a different path.

In this context, we will highlight some of Donald Trump's most significant and expressive statements regarding Europe and transatlantic relations. Through these, we will explore how his rhetoric influences the European Union's self-perception and strategies, and how mutual identity formation between the two sides takes shape in conditions of both confrontation and cooperation. As Thomas Diez argues, identity is not a fixed essence but rather „an effect of practices of differentiation".[4] Trump's rhetoric represents precisely such a discourse of differentiation – one that pushes the EU toward a renewed effort of self-definition.

Donald Trump's presidency is marked by a disruptive rhetorical style that challenged long-standing diplomatic norms, particularly in transatlantic relations. His rhetoric – often nationalist, transactional, and sceptical of multilateral institutions – sent shockwaves throughout Europe, forcing a re-evaluation of European identity, security, and global positioning. This analysis examines how Trump's disruptive rhetoric destabilized European unity, affected nationalism, reinvigorated debates over strategic autonomy, and reshaped perceptions of the U.S.-Europe alliance.

Words and Deeds

Statements such as „The EU is basically a vehicle for Germany" (January 25, 2017) aim to delegitimize the EU as an integration project.[5] These kinds of messa-

2 Manners, I. (2002). *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms*? Journal of Common Market Studies, 40(2), 235-258

3 Time. (2017, January 20). Read the full transcript of President Donald Trump's inauguration speech. https://time.com/4640707/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript/

4 Diez, T. (2019). The European Union and the politics of identity: Reflective othering and constructive difference. Journal of European Public Policy, 26(7), 1019-1038.

5 Gove, M., & Diekmann, K. (2017, January 16). Donald Trump interview: Full transcript. The Times. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/donald-trump-interview-full-transcript-europe-nato-uk-brexit-5mfx06r7v

ges provoke not just institutional responses but also a need for self-affirmation, highlighting Europe's political diversity and unity. As Habermas argues, the legitimacy of the EU is based on a shared communicative rationality – and Trump's rhetoric undermines this foundation by suggesting that the EU is dysfunctional and dominated by one country.[6]

In the same vein, Trump's assertion that „The European Union has been terrible to the United States on trade" (March 10, 2018) reframes the EU from a strategic ally to an economic adversary.[7] The EU's normative self-conception as a fair and rules-based economic actor is placed under rhetorical attack, triggering both a defensive and proactive discursive repositioning by the EU.

Trump's populist rhetoric and anti-EU stance emboldened right-wing nationalist movements in Europe, such as France's National Rally and Germany's AfD. Trump's disdain for multilateralism accelerated debates about European sovereignty, pushing some toward greater EU cohesion while others embraced nationalist isolationism.[8]

Trump's transactional approach to NATO and trade created anxiety among European leaders. His „America First" policy forced Europe to reconsider its dependency on U.S. security guarantees, leading to discussions about strategic autonomy and defence integration (e.g., PESCO).[9] Furthermore, Trump's election exacerbated existing fractures in the EU, particularly regarding migration and sovereignty. His alignment with anti-immigrant leaders (e.g., Hungary's Orban) deepened divisions between Eastern and Western Europe, challenging the notion of a unified European identity.[10]

Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and his critical stance on the EU's climate policies were not merely political decisions but discursive attacks on the EU's normative identity. Environmental policy is one of the cornerstones of the EU's global presence, and the EU responded not by mimicking US actions, but by actively distinguishing itself as a climate leader. This is a case of reflexive differentiation: asserting one's role precisely because the „other" has rejected it.[11] Trump's climate scepticism and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement pushed the EU to assert itself as a global leader in green policies. European identity was reshaped in opposition to Trump's anti-globalism, reinforcing the EU's commitment to multilateralism.[12]

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[6] Habermas, J. (1998). The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[7] CNN. (2018, March 10). Trump hits EU on trade days after imposing new tariffs. https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/10/politics/trump-twitter-tariffs/index.html

[8] Ash, T. G. (2018). „Europe's Trumpian Turn." *Journal of Democracy*, 29(1), 5-19.

[9] Kundnani, H., & Parello-Plesner, J. (2018). „Trump and the Crisis of the West." *The Washington Quarterly*, 41(1), 73-85.

[10] Krastev, I. (2017). *After Europe*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

[11] Shear, M. D. (2017, June 1). Trump will withdraw U.S. from Paris climate agreement. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/trump-paris-climate-agreement.html

[12] Tocci, N. (2021). *A Green and Global Europe*. Polity Press.

Trump's statements criticizing NATO and accusing European countries of being strategically dependent on Russia further increased the EU's motivation to promote new political narratives, such as „strategic autonomy" and „sovereign Europe." In 2018, he stated: „Germany is totally controlled by Russia because they are getting 60 to 70% of their energy from Russia" (July 11, 2018).[13] These ideas, once marginal, gained legitimacy through conflict – a clear example of how a negative external image can trigger internal identity mobilization.[14]

This rhetoric had a double effect. On the one hand, it exposed the EU's symbolic, military, and economic dependencies. On the other hand, it encouraged a process of identity formation based on contrast with the American „other." This is a classic example of „reflective othering," which Thomas Diez describes as central to EU identity construction.[15]

Trump's claims about unfair trade and that „The EU was formed to take advantage of the United States" (June 28, 2018) not only delegitimized the historical basis of the partnership but also create space for the EU to reframe itself – no longer simply as a „partner of the US," but as a regulatory superpower with its standards and global influence.[16] The EU's responses – from launching a European Defence Fund to advancing the Green Deal – can be understood as forms of reflective agency, where actions are taken in response to challenges posed by the „other." In Habermas's terms, this is a moment of „communicative autonomy" – the EU emerges as an actor capable of defining legitimacy internally, rather than relying on external validation.[17]

In addition to highlighting the differences between the US and the EU, these remarks provide important indications of broader transformations in the international arena. According to the logic of reflective identity construction, such changes act not only as shifts in policy but also as mirrors through which political actors – in this case, the EU – recognize and redefine themselves.[18]

Donald Trump's second term deepens the tensions between the EU and the US, giving the transatlantic relationship a new character – not just as political disagreement but as a mutual identity-building process (reflective identity con-

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[13] Reuters. (2018, July 11). Trump lashes Germany over gas pipeline deal, calls it Russia's captive. https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/trump-lashes-germany-over-gas-pipeline-deal-calls-it-russias-captive-idUSKBN1K10VH

[14] Diez, T. (2019). The European Union and the politics of identity: Reflective othering and constructive difference. Journal of European Public Policy, 26(7), 1019-1038. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1605201

[15] Ibid.

[16] Galindo, G. (2018, June 28). Trump: EU was 'set up to take advantage' of US. Politico. https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-eu-was-set-up-to-take-advantage-of-us-trade-tariffs-protectionism/

[17] Habermas, J. (1998). The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[18] Diez, T. (2019). The European Union and the politics of identity: Reflective othering and constructive difference. Journal of European Public Policy, 26(7), 1019-1038. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1605201

struction), where the EU increasingly sees itself in contrast to the American approach to global affairs.[19]

Trump's rhetoric in his second term reinforces the image of the US not as a „significant other" but as a „negative other," through which the EU strengthens its value-based, strategic, and institutional autonomy. As Thomas Diez emphasizes, European self-definition often happens through „constructive difference" – a conscious distancing from an external reference point that presents a challenge.[20]

Statements like „Europe treats us worse than China" (June 26, 2019) or „They are very, very protectionist. The European Union is possibly as bad as China, just smaller" (July 1, 2018) do not simply express political criticism – they participate in a discursive process that frames Europe as dependent, ungrateful, and inefficient.[21] This negative external definition stimulates internal reassessment and institutional restructuring. In line with Habermas, who sees the public sphere and inter-institutional communication as key to shaping political identity, we can interpret this period as a transnational communicative moment in which Europe begins to define itself through a new language of sovereignty, responsibility, and autonomy.[22]

This language materializes in increasingly concrete initiatives: expanding PESCO, strengthening the European Defence Agency, establishing the European Alliance for Critical Technologies, and planning a European AI agency. All of these are part of a broader process of normative response – a concept developed by Ian Manners, who describes the EU as a unique kind of international actor. According to Manners, the EU exercises influence not through military or economic coercion, but through the diffusion of norms and values such as human rights, environmental sustainability, multilateralism, and the rule of law.[23]

Trump's confrontational style and rejection of these very norms – especially his isolationist, transactional, and often anti-institutional rhetoric – effectively served as a catalyst for the EU to deepen its commitment to this normative identity. In contrast to Trump's „America First" doctrine, the EU's emphasis on cooperative global governance and multilateral solutions appeared not just as a continuation of previous strategies, but as an active repositioning: a deliberate choice to distinguish itself as a responsible global actor.[24]

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Axios. (2018, July 1). Trump on trade: The EU „is possibly as bad as China, just smaller". https://www.axios.com/2018/07/01/donald-trump-interview-china-eu-trade-war-tariffs-fox-news
Dallison, P. (2019, June 26). Trump: 'Europe treats us worse than China'. Politico. https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-europe-treats-us-worse-than-china/

[22] Habermas, J. (1998). The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[23] Manners, I. (2002). *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms*? Journal of Common Market Studies, 40(2), 235-258

[24] Ibid.

This differentiation is not merely discursive. It is institutionalized through new policy frameworks such as the Green Deal, the Digital Services Act, and the Strategic Compass, which outline the EU's ambition to shape global standards in areas ranging from climate policy to digital governance. These initiatives reflect what Manners calls the „diffusion of norms through policy practice" – a process by which the EU projects its identity outward while simultaneously reinforcing it inward.[25]

In this sense, Trump's rhetoric and policies unintentionally contributed to strengthening the EU's self-perception as a normative power. By acting as a „negative mirror," the US under Trump forced the EU to confront its strategic vulnerabilities, redefine its goals, and reassert its values on the global stage. This is not to say that the EU's identity emerged purely in opposition – but rather that confrontation acted as a moment of clarification, a space in which European political discourse could rearticulate itself with renewed purpose.[26]

Risse applies social identity theory to argue that Trump's „othering" of Europe (e.g., calling the EU a „foe") paradoxically strengthened European identity among pro-EU citizens while alienating Eurosceptics who saw Trump as an ally against Brussels.[27] Trump's disruptive policies (e.g., Iran nuclear deal withdrawal, trade wars) pushed Europe toward „strategic sovereignty," including initiatives like the European Defence Fund. Trump's presidency was a wake-up call for greater EU autonomy.[28] Though Trump's legacy persists in lingering doubts about U.S. reliability, pushing Europe toward more independent foreign policies, it is yet far from certain whether his presidency permanently damaged transatlantic trust.[29] What is definite is that his presidency acted as a shock to European identity, accelerating both fragmentation and attempts at unity. It is worth considering individual EU countries' responses to Trump.

How Individual EU Countries' Respond to Trump's Rhetoric

Different EU countries have varying responses - ranging from alignment and admiration to resistance and strategic distancing - across key EU member states.

Germany: The Reluctant Challenger

Germany, under Merkel, positioned itself as a defender of multilateralism, leading EU efforts to uphold the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Agreement

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Diez, T. (2019). The European Union and the politics of identity: Reflective othering and constructive difference. Journal of European Public Policy, 26(7), 1019-1038. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1605201

[27] Risse, T. (2020). „European Identity in Times of Crisis: The Role of the 'Other'." *European Security*, 29(3), 275-294.

[28] Leonard, M., & Shapiro, J. (2019). Strategic Sovereignty: How Europe Can Regain the Capacity to Act. ECFR.

[29] Niblett, R. (2020). America's Great Divorce: The EU After Trump. Chatham House.

despite U.S. withdrawal. Szabo analyses Angela Merkel's cautious but firm opposition to Trump's policies on NATO, trade, and climate.[30]

German elites and the public perceived Trump as a threat to the liberal international order. Germany's push for European strategic autonomy (e.g. PESCO, increased defence spending and scepticism toward U.S. leadership) might be considered as a direct response to Trump's unpredictability.[31] Stelzenmüller argues that Trump's presidency accelerated European debates about reducing reliance on the U.S., particularly in security and technology (e.g., Huawei 5G debates).[32]

France: The Opportunistic Leader

French President Emmanuel Macron leveraged Trump's disruptive behaviour to position France as the EU's de facto leader. Macron's calls for a „European army" and scepticism toward NATO reflected a desire to reduce dependence on the U.S.[33] Thus, Macron revived Gaullist ideas of European sovereignty, using Trump's „America First" stance to advocate for EU independence in defence and technology.[34]

United Kingdom: The Troubled Ally

The UK's dilemma is about balancing its „special relationship" with the U.S. against fears that Trump's isolationism weakened Western solidarity.[35] Theresa May and Boris Johnson navigated Trump's presidency amid Brexit. While Johnson embraced Trump's populist rhetoric to secure a U.S. trade deal, British elites remained wary of Trump's NATO scepticism and divisive politics.[36]

Poland and Hungary: The Populist Allies

Poland and Hungary's right-wing governments (PiS and Fidesz) admired Trump's nationalism, anti-immigration stance, and criticism of EU elites. Both leaders used Trump's rhetoric to justify their own illiberal policies.[37] While Poland and Hungary embraced Trump, the Czech Republic and Slovakia remained more cautious, fearing damage to EU cohesion.[38]

[30] Szabo, S. (2019). Germany, Trump, and the Future of the West. Brookings Institution.

[31] Daehnhardt, P. (2020). „Germany and the Trump Shock: From Disbelief to Strategic Adaptation." *German Politics*, 29(2), 223-240.

[32] Stelzenmüller, C. (2019). „The Impact of Trump on German and European Foreign Policy." Brookings Institution.

[33] Mérand, F. (2018). „Macron's Europe: The Case for Strategic Autonomy." European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)

[34] Niblett, R. (2020). „France's Response to Trump: A Gaullist Revival?" *International Affairs*, 96(3), 675-693.

[35] Wallace, W. (2020). „The UK Between Trump and Europe." Chatham House.

[36] Oliver, T. (2018). „Brexit and Trump: Populism and the Special Relationship." *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56 (S1), 141-153.

[37] Krastev, I. (2018). „The Eastern European Love Affair with Trump." *Foreign Policy*.

[38] Szucs, J. (2020). „Trump and the Visegrad Four: A Marriage of Convenience?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(5), 789-807.

Italy: From Populist Enthusiasm to Disillusionment

Italy's Five Star Movement and Lega initially praised Trump but later clashed with his administration over trade and sanctions against Russia.[39] Italian populists' alignment with Trump backfired domestically as his erratic policies alienated moderate voters.[40] In 2017, 55% of Lega voters approved of Trump, but by 2020, his COVID-19 handling and trade wars dropped support to 32% (Ipsos).[41]

Sweden and the Nordics: Resistance and Pragmatism

Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) publicly opposed Trump's rhetoric on climate and migration but quietly cooperated on security (e.g., increased defence spending).[42] Sweden's diplomatic balancing act – criticizing Trump's policies while avoiding direct confrontation to preserve transatlantic ties.[43]

Spain: Resistance and Strategic Caution

Spain showed cautious opposition to Trump's policies, particularly on climate change and migration. Despite historical U.S. ties, Spain - under both conservative (PP) and socialist (PSOE) governments - aligned with EU multilateralism, criticizing Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and his hardline immigration stance.[44]

Trump's rhetoric on „strong borders" and national sovereignty resonated with Spanish right-wing parties (Vox), which used his discourse to oppose Catalan separatism. Vox supporters were three times more likely to approve of Trump than PSOE voters, mirroring U.S. partisan divides (CIS 2020 data).[45] However, mainstream Spanish leaders avoided direct alignment with Trump to maintain EU cohesion.[46]

Greece: Pragmatism Amid Geopolitical Tensions

Greece's Syriza government navigated Trump's presidency while managing relations with Russia and the EU. Greece welcomed U.S. investment (e.g.,

[39] Carbone, M. (2019). „Italy's Love-Hate Relationship with Trump." *Italian Politics, 34 (1), 45-62.

[40] Newell, J. (2020). „Trump and the Italian Right: A Failed Romance?" *West European Politics*, 43 (3), 732-751.

[41] Tarchi, M. (2021). „From Salvini's Trumpmania to Disillusionment." *Contemporary Italian Politics*

[42] Mouritzen, H. (2021). „Nordic Responses to Trump: Between Values and Interests." *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56 (2), 163-180.

[43] Bergman, A. (2020). „Sweden's Silent Struggle with Trump." *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 43 (4), 312-330.

[44] Molina, I. (2020). „Spain and the Trump Effect: Between Atlanticism and Europeanism." Elcano Royal Institute.

[45] Turnbull-Dugarte, S. (2021). „Vox Voters and the Trump Effect in Spain." *South European Society and Politics*

[46] Rodríguez, J. C. (2019). „Trump, Catalonia, and Spanish Nationalism." *South European Society and Politics*, 24 (3), 399-421.

energy projects) but resisted Trump's anti-EU rhetoric due to its dependency on Eurozone stability.[47]

Trump's unpredictable stance on Turkey forced Greece to strengthen EU and NATO ties. While Greece appreciated Trump's occasional criticism of Turkey, his overall transactional approach to NATO created anxiety.[48]

Eastern Europe (Baltic States, Romania, Slovakia): Security Fears and Selective Alignment

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania feared Trump's NATO scepticism but appreciated increased U.S. military presence as a deterrent against Russia. Baltic leaders publicly praised Trump's defence spending demands while privately lobbying Congress for continuity in U.S. commitments.[49]

Romania positioned itself as a loyal U.S. ally, hosting a Trump-friendly government and supporting his hardline stance on China (e.g., Huawei bans). However, Romania avoided overt anti-EU rhetoric to preserve its EU integration benefits.[50]

Slovakia's Smer party and President Čaputová diverged in their responses: while some populists admired Trump's style, Slovakia's pro-EU civil society and leadership resisted his influence.[51]

Bulgaria: Between Pro-Trump Populism and EU Dependence

Bulgaria's GERB party and President Radev cautiously avoided antagonizing Trump, given Bulgaria's reliance on U.S. security guarantees (e.g., Black Sea defence). However, Bulgaria remained firmly pro-EU, fearing Trump's rhetoric could weaken Western cohesion.[52]

While Bulgaria's nationalist parties (e.g., VMRO, Revival) admired Trump's anti-immigration stance, mainstream leaders avoided open alignment due to Bulgaria's economic dependence on EU funds.[53]

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[47] Tsardanidis, C. (2018). „Greece's Balancing Act Between Trump, Russia, and the EU." Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).

[48] Kouskouvelis, I. (2020). „Trump, Erdogan, and Greece's Security Dilemma." *Mediterranean Politics*, 25 (4), 521-540.

[49] Kasekamp, A. (2021). „The Baltic States and Trump: NATO Anxiety and Reassurance." *International Security*, 45 (3), 89-115.

[50] Stan, L. (2020). „Romania's Strategic Courtship of Trump." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 53 (1), 45-63.

[51] Gyárfášová, O. (2019). „Slovakia's Populists and the Trump Effect." *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 20 (2), 78-95.

[52] Ganev, V. (2019). „Bulgaria's Ruling Elite and the Trump Phenomenon." *East European Politics*, 35 (2), 234-252.

[53] Krastev, I. (2020). „Why Eastern Europe's Right-Wing Loved (and Feared) Trump." *Journal of Democracy*, 31 (1), 58-72.

General European Trends: Declining Trust and Polarization

Pew's multinational survey (2016-2018) found that trust in U.S. leadership plummeted across Europe under Trump, with only 30% of Germans, 25% of French, and 14% of Spaniards expressing confidence in him (vs. 80%+ under Obama). Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary) showed slightly higher approval.[54]

Krastev and Leonard discussed the generational divide: younger Europeans (18-35) viewed Trump as a threat to democracy, while older, nationalist-leaning voters in Italy, Poland, and Hungary saw him as a defender of „Western values" against immigration.[55]

German media (e.g., Der Spiegel, Bild) initially treated Trump as a spectacle but later framed him as a danger to democracy, influencing public opinion. By 2019, 85% of Germans viewed him unfavourably (ARD-DeutschlandTrend).[56]

In France there are polarized reactions. Marine Le Pen's supporters (40% of her base) admired Trump's nationalism, while Macron voters (90% unfavourable) saw him as a destabilizing force.[57]

While 70% of Greeks distrusted Trump, many conceded his tough stance on Turkey was beneficial - showing pragmatic ambivalence.[58]

In Poland 56% of PiS voters viewed Trump positively, seeing him as a counterweight to EU liberalism. Opposition voters (80% negative) feared NATO erosion.[59] In Hungary government-controlled media portrayed Trump as an ally against „Soros-style globalism," leading to 48% approval among Fidesz voters.[60]

In Bulgaria only 22% of Bulgarians approved of Trump, but nationalists (Revival party) used his rhetoric to attack EU elites.[61] Romanian public remains pro-American but anti-Trump. Despite strong U.S. ties, 65% of Romanians disapproved of Trump, fearing NATO unpredictability.

Over 90% of Swedish voters viewed Trump negatively, uniting left and right in defence of multilateralism.[62] In the Baltic states while the majority

[54] Stokes, B. (2018). „European Public Opinion Toward Trump: A Crisis of Confidence." Pew Research Center.

[55] Krastev, I., & Leonard, M. (2020). „The Crisis of American Power: How Europeans See Trump's America." ECFR.

[56] Pausch, M. (2019). „German Media's Framing of Trump: From Amusement to Alarm." *International Journal of Press/Politics*

[57] Shields, J. (2020). „Le Pen, Trump, and the French Far Right's Love Affair." *French Politics*

[58] Dimitras, P. (2020). „Greek Public Opinion on Trump: Between NATO Reliance and Disdain." University of Athens

[59] Szczerbiak, A. (2019). „Why Poles Loved Trump (and Why It Mattered)." Poland in Europe

[60] Bozóki, A. (2020). „Manufacturing Consent: How Fidesz Sold Trump to Hungarians." *Political Quarterly*

[61] Kotzev, V. (2021). „Bulgaria's Quiet Rejection of Trumpism." *European Politics and Society*

[62] Demker, M. (2020). „Trump and the Swedish 'Liberal Consensus'." *Scandinavian Political Studies*

disliked Trump, many acknowledged his administration's increased military support against Russia.[63]

Undermining Transatlantic Trust and the Crisis in European Dependence

Trump's rhetoric frequently portrayed Europe as a free rider on U.S. security and economic power, most notably through his criticism against NATO. His repeated attacks on NATO allies for insufficient defence spending (calling them „delinquent") fuelled fears of U.S. abandonment, forcing Europe to confront its military reliance on Washington. By framing international relations in zero-sum terms, Trump eroded the post-WWII liberal order that Europe had long embraced, creating anxiety over whether the U.S. could still be trusted as a guarantor of collective security.

This had immediate impact on European leaders, particularly French President Emmanuel Macron, who began advocating for „strategic autonomy" - a push for greater EU defence independence - reflecting a crisis of confidence in the transatlantic partnership.

Populist Resonance and the Fracturing of European Unity

Trump's rhetoric emboldened right-wing populist movements across Europe, which mirrored his anti-immigration, anti-globalist, and Eurosceptic messaging. Political figures like Matteo Salvini (Italy) and Marine Le Pen (France) echoed Trump's scepticism of the EU, amplifying internal divisions. Trump's attacks on the media, judiciary, and multilateralism provided ideological ammunition for European populists, weakening the EU's cohesion. While mainstream European leaders largely rejected Trumpism, his rhetoric deepened ideological fault lines, complicating EU consensus on issues like migration and rule of law.

Economic Nationalism and the Strain on EU – U.S. Relations

Trump's transactional approach to trade disrupted the economic pillar of transatlantic relations. His imposition of steel/aluminium tariffs and threats against European automakers forced the EU to prepare for a more adversarial economic relationship.

Trump's vocal support for Brexit („They called it 'the Independence Day'") reinforced Eurosceptic narratives, further destabilizing the EU's political landscape. Europe was pushed to diversify economic partnerships (e.g., strengthening ties with China, advancing EU trade deals) while reassessing its dependency on U.S. market access.

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[63] Laurinavičius, M. (2021). „Latvia's Trump Dilemma: Fear vs. Gratitude." Foreign Policy Research Institute

Reinforcing European Identity Through Resistance

Paradoxically, Trump's rhetoric also galvanized a counter-mobilization of European identity. Polls showed rising support for the EU in response to fears of U.S. withdrawal and global instability. The French president positioned the EU as a defender of multilateralism, climate action, and democratic values in contrast to Trump's unilateralism. Angela Merkel's 2017 remark that Europe could „no longer rely" on the U.S. marked a turning point in European strategic thinking.

In effect, Trump's disruption accelerated European integration in defence (PESCO) and economic resilience, though divisions persisted.

Conclusion:
A Lasting Shock to European Consciousness

Trump's presidency forced Europe into an uncomfortable reckoning - exposing vulnerabilities in its security architecture, economic model, and political unity. While his rhetoric strained transatlantic ties, it also spurred Europe to assert itself more independently. The long-term effects include substantial debate over strategic autonomy (e.g., EU army proposals and increased defence spending), a more fragmented but resilient European identity, balancing between U.S. ties and self-reliance, and a legacy of persisting mistrust, as Europe prepares for potential future U.S. retreats. Ultimately, there is an ambiguous effect of Trump's rhetoric which acted as a stress test for European identity - one that revealed both divisions and unexpected strengths in the face of geopolitical upheaval.

To conclude, Donald Trump's presidency functioned as a discursive turning point in transatlantic relations. His administration's rhetoric, which challenged long-standing principles of cooperation, legitimacy, and institutional trust, contributed not only to political tensions but also to a deeper process of reflective identity formation within the EU. In response to this new form of „rhetorical othering," the EU mobilized its institutional resources, strategic narratives, and normative frameworks to reaffirm itself as a global actor committed to multilateralism, responsibility, and shared values. Thus, what began as a crisis in the transatlantic relationship evolved into an opportunity for the European Union to more clearly define its role in the 21st century.

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