

Opinion **Populism in Europe**

The European right is pivoting away from America

Electoral logic is driving a shift as polls lay bare European disgust at the US administration

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Péter Magyar speaks at the Hungarian parliament on April 17. In Hungary's election, a nationalist who rejected the country's subordination to Maga defeated a leader who championed it © Bernadett Szabo/Reuters

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With Viktor Orbán's downfall, a linchpin of the relationship between Maga and the European right has fallen. His authoritarian model was an inspiration for the second Trump term and Budapest had become a hub for the transatlantic rightwing ecosystem. Hungarians knew exactly what they were voting out when they backed the conservative Péter Magyar's opposition Tisza party: even though their main concerns were living standards and public services, fully 85 per cent of its voters also wanted a different relationship with the US.

Hungary's election result confirmed a wider trend: the convergence of the European right and the American right following Trump's 2024 election victory has recently become a divergence. Following Trump's win, Europe's conventional Atlanticist conservatives (optimistic about their ability to constrain and even co-opt a deal-hungry president) and its radical right (which saw his win as a legitimising, momentum-boosting source of potential future support) sought to embrace him. Both sentiments are now fading.

Mainstream European conservatives such as German Chancellor Friedrich Merz are moving, albeit unsteadily, in the direction of a more critical position towards Trump. Nationalists are pivoting away from him faster than the mainstream. France's Rassemblement National was fast and confident in challenging Trump's designs on Greenland and Iran. In Berlin, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) leadership campaigned against the Iran war and urged colleagues to scale back their trips to Washington. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni blocked the use of a Sicilian air base for sorties against Iran and called Trump's attacks on the pope "unacceptable".

An electoral logic is driving this. Polls are laying bare European disgust at the US administration. In Denmark's election last month, even the far-right Danish People's Party rejected the US president. In Hungary, a nationalist who rejected the country's subordination to Maga defeated a leader who championed that subordination. As multiple European countries gear up for major votes in the next 18 months, including crucial state elections in Germany and general elections in France, Italy, Poland and Spain, rightists are paying heed.

Yet there are also hints of something deeper going on beyond electoral arithmetic. The European right, from moderates to radicals, is rediscovering a spirit of European autonomy. During his campaign, Magyar asserted that “Hungarian history is not written in Washington”. In a recent speech to Italy’s parliament, Meloni criticised past Italian leaders “satisfied with a pat on the back or an endorsement tweet” from US presidents and insisted: “History is knocking at the door, and Europe must not fail this test.”

Jean-Pascal Hohm, the AfD’s youth leader, pointedly wrote after Orbán’s defeat that “the future of European rightwing parties lies in Europe” and that relations with other Europeans “are always more important to us than any special hotline to Moscow, Beijing, or Washington”.

European politicians from the centre-right to the nationalist fringes feel burned by their indulgence of or association with the American president. They are turning to visions of a more distant Europe-US relationship, and thus back to older ideas and political icons. Charles de Gaulle is once more in vogue, and not just on the right. Meanwhile, among more radical nationalists, the present moment is a chance to reconnect with the ideas of Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler and Julius Evola — thinkers who saw the US as a decadent, “plutodemocratic” society contrasting with a supposedly more soulful ethno-Europe.

Perhaps this will not amount to much. But the European right’s pivot away from the US is sincere, not just tactical. And the continent’s radical right especially has a record of adapting fast to chaotic world events; they are “crisis entrepreneurs” deft at finding ways of making their politics successively fit the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, the pandemic, then Russia’s war in Ukraine. It is thus plausible to anticipate them adapting to the meltdown of Euro-Trumpism in a similarly nimble way, switching rapidly and without sentimentality to a politics of European independence from the US.

That poses a challenge for centrist and progressive parties, which could conceivably find themselves outflanked by the right in their opposition to Trump. The answer is to move fast to craft their own, rival, more confident and emotionally resonant vision of a more autonomous Europe.

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