

How U.S. Elections Could Impact EU-Russia Relations

Even a partial restoration of transatlantic unity under a President Biden will be a blow to the Kremlin.

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For several long years now, the European Union has been waging onerous trench warfare on two fronts. On the eastern front, Brussels has been in conflict with a malign Moscow since 2014: refusing to repeal sanctions against Russia, deflecting all the Kremlin's new information attacks, and attempting to maintain a unified position among its disorderly ranks.

On the western front, for nearly four years the EU has been warding off the advances of Donald Trump: the bête noire of global politics who insists on overhauling EU-U.S. trade relations and backs Euroskeptics and dissidents within the EU, demanding loyalty from the

latter that borders on a rejection of European sovereignty entirely.

History teaches us that a war fought on two fronts never ends well — at least not in Europe. Brussels is fortunate that Moscow and Washington do not coordinate their operations with each other. Still, the EU has not yet managed to reach a separate peace agreement — or even a stable ceasefire — on either front. Diplomatic démarches by French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen end every time in more disappointment and paroxysms of Europessimism. The EU's geopolitical opponents in both East and West are not inclined to make any significant concessions.

Following the poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, the next round of peace talks with Russia has been indefinitely postponed. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has cast doubt on the value of continuing contact between Moscow and Brussels. The Kremlin can hardly be satisfied by the “new normal” in its relationship with the EU, but clearly no one there has any intention of discussing the terms of their capitulation. The Russian leadership seems determined to fight until the bitter end.

If Trump gets reelected to a second presidential term, the EU's war on two fronts looks certain to continue for another four years. There's no reason for European politicians to hope that the egocentric president will have an epiphany and suddenly embrace Western values or ideas of transatlantic solidarity. If anything, the reverse is likely: the inevitable difficulty of economic recovery and likely escalation of the confrontation with China will push the Trump administration to ramp up pressure on the EU even further.

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“The European Union is worse than China. Just smaller,” Trump said just last year, complaining of taxes and tariffs. The president considers his decisive policy on the United States' European allies to be one of the main achievements of his administration, and he has every intention of sticking to it right through to 2024.

If in January the Democrat Joe Biden is in the White House, changes are inevitable on the western front. Of course, the numerous political, economic, and strategic differences between Washington and Brussels won't just disappear, and certainly there'll be no return to the good old days of Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

But Biden, with his foreign policy experience and his inclination to compromise, will work diligently to restore transatlantic relations. Under Biden, we will likely see more flexibility from Washington on trade talks with the EU, more readiness to consider the EU's opinion in U.S. approaches to global problems, and increased attention to European positions on regional crises. In other words, the Democrats are ready if not for eternal peace, then at least for a lasting ceasefire with Europe. They are counting on uniting with the Old World in the fight against their increasingly powerful shared geopolitical foes.

Even a partial restoration of transatlantic unity will be a blow to the image of the world that the Russian leadership likes to paint. A new consolidation of the West, no matter how temporary, is at odds with the official Kremlin narrative about the inexorable movement of

the international system toward a polycentric world order. Worse still, it might give the collective West new confidence.

In addition, a ceasefire between the EU and the United States would be a major blow to the various Euroskeptics, populists, and nationalists for whom Trump is a role model, and would tip the scales within the EU against them. It would also hurt the Kremlin's political partners in Europe. A Biden victory would inject new life into proponents of the Western liberal values that Moscow has already written off as hopelessly obsolete.

A change of administration in the White House will likely reduce, though not eliminate, the EU's interest in normalizing relations with Russia. Having agreed a truce on the western front, Brussels would be more than capable of swiftly transferring its forces to the eastern front. A Democratic U.S. president would likely applaud such a strategic move, seeing the standoff with Russia as a way of cementing the transatlantic partnership.

In all likelihood, a Biden victory would severely limit Russia's room for maneuver in its EU policy, and perhaps in its broader foreign policy too. A more united West might consolidate itself not only on an anti-Russian platform, but also, to a lesser degree, against China.

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Amid the standoff with Beijing, a Biden administration would probably seek to expand its alliances and establish new partners in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Though such a policy would target China, it would also indirectly affect Russia, as it would likely accelerate the move toward a bipolar international system, increasing Moscow's dependence on Beijing, with all the ensuing consequences.

This is not to say, however, that nothing good for Moscow could come of a Biden presidency and strengthened transatlantic cooperation. Improved ties with the EU could rein in some of the destructive impulses coming out of Washington today. For example, the United States could show renewed interest in arms control, in softening its current uncompromising position on Iran, and in a more balanced approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Overall, it can be expected that U.S. policy under Biden would become more professional, rational, consistent, and predictable. A new American foreign policy style will engender both new opportunities and new challenges for Moscow.

Of course, it's a risky business predicting what U.S. foreign policy might look like under a Biden administration. No one knows what might happen in the world in the next few years. But it can safely be said that a Biden victory could mean a key turning point away from instability and chaos in international relations toward a gradual and—perhaps slow and inconsistent—systemic stabilization.

This would undoubtedly mean a new reality for Russia that would challenge the Kremlin's image of how the world is developing. Indeed, to continue the military history analogy, in this new reality, the idea of a new Brest-Litovsk peace treaty for Russia would no longer seem utterly absurd.

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