



## Election Series in 2017 – If Europe Wants Peace, It Should Prepare for War

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2017 is a year of many elections in Europe: presidential election in April-May in France; parliamentary elections in March in the Netherlands, in June in France, in September in Germany and in October in the Czech Republic, and, more and more [likely](#), interim elections in Italy as well, in the summer. While not all these elections have the same importance – the German Bundestag and the French presidential elections are unquestionably the most crucial ones – all of them will have an impact on the direction in which the EU will develop. Furthermore, a presidential election in Serbia is coming up in April – which is important for the future of the Western Balkans, with nationalist candidates competing with each other, fuelling the already tense situation in the region.

In 2016 and early 2017 we could observe a populist landslide, with the Brexit referendum, the US elections and the referendum on the Italian constitution. The main question regarding this year's elections is: for how long can the democratic mainstream persist in Europe? The most important lesson from 2016 is that nothing is impossible anymore; populism can successfully demolish the values and the institutions that the cooperation of Western States has been built upon. In 2017, we will see decisive battles in the war between democratic liberalism and illiberal populism that can determine the fate of Europe and the Western World in the longer run.

Europe has few friends but more enemies than ever before – both outside and within. The radical left and the radical right are on the rise in many countries. The United States, for the first time in history, has a president that is [openly hostile](#) towards the European Union, with a [chief strategist](#) who is actively working on destabilising the European Union and making deals with Russia behind Europe's back. Luckily, [some](#) European leaders have [recognised](#) this threat. And while in the total cacophony of messages there will always be [pleasant sounds](#) coming from the US administration, especially from the Foreign and Defence Ministers, it is better not to be fooled by them. While governing in the US is far from being a one-man show, the negative attitude of the US president and his closest colleagues towards the EU remains a threat to deal with.

And, to make things even worse, the enemies of the European Union in the West find a natural ally in Vladimir Putin's Russia that increasingly aims to destabilise and disintegrate Europe and interfere in its political processes. If Russia was [successful](#) in interfering in the US election to a certain extent, why do we think it is not capable of doing the same in the middle of Europe? Attempts by Russia to destroy the campaign of candidates which have reservations towards Putin, such as [Angela Merkel in Germany](#) and [Emanuel Macron in France](#), are obvious. Russia is pushing the Eurosceptic candidates on the left and right in an attempt to undermine the stability of the European Union and destabilise it. Last year's successes only boosted Putin's self-confidence. Chief Strategist Steven Bannon, an advocate of Marine Le Pen, tries to [provide support to the](#) forces on the populist right with political advice and weaken pro-EU candidates with the [expansion](#) of his media empire to Europe. Breitbart already has an office in London (which pushed the Brexit campaign with its articles), and will open offices in Paris and Berlin in the coming days.



Eurosceptic populists in Europe, an isolationist US president that regards Europe as a rival, and Vladimir Putin's Russia are together forming a powerful coalition to bring Europe down. The refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks – which will, unfortunately, predictably not cease as ISIS wants to take revenge on Europe – are directly playing into their hands.

The European Union and NATO are organisations that were highly successful in maintaining the peace in the Western World in the last seven decades. But we should not be under any illusion about how much this still matters at the polling stations. There is [no 'end of history'](#): for the Western electorates, the experiences from WWII are too far away to still shape their voting decisions. Peace, democracy and tolerance are no longer words that 'sell'. Furthermore, voters are not so very much more difficult to manipulate than they were in the 20th century, as the [success of the fake news sites](#) perfectly illustrates. The big difference is that there is no need for totalitarian regimes to brainwash the electorate: the current media environment provides enough opportunities on its own.

The post-WWII world order is in danger. The EU should not be taken for granted. NATO and the good transatlantic relations should not be taken for granted. Peace should not be taken for granted – as the Vice President of the European Commission Franz Timmermans recently [pointed out](#). In order to avoid the worst in 2017, European democratic forces have to prepare for the worst.

As Anton Shekhovtsov argued recently: *'the struggle in the West now is not left versus right (...) but liberal democracy versus illiberal democracy.'* For this reason, he presses for a *'united, radical centre left/right front'* of liberals, social-democrats, greens and conservatives. This does not mean of course, that there is a need for overcoming all the ideological differences between democratically committed forces in Europe. What is most certainly needed, however, is to identify the most important enemies of European integration and peace, and to join forces against them whenever possible. If hampering the victory of a far-right candidate was possible in Austria, it can work in other countries as well.

The era when illiberalism was at a comfortable distance for the West – in autocratic regimes outside Europe or at the peripheries of Europe – is over. Illiberalism is more and more capable of taking over and infiltrating into the mainstream. What is at stake in the elections of 2017 is whether illiberalism will succeed in this or not.