

A European Declaration of Independence

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Before taking office, Donald Trump gave interviews to European newspapers suggesting that he would endorse the breakdown of the European Union. Members of his transition team, in their first contacts with Brussels and other European capitals, even asked, in a provocative way, which other countries would be following the Brexit route.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Donald Trump has as his counterpart the only politician he has never openly criticised, whom he has even praised on various occasions: Vladimir Putin. The strong man of Russia who once said he considered the end of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' also despises the European Union. Unable as he is to rebuild the USSR in which he was born and in whose secret services he served, Putin has only one option to satisfy his revanchist fantasies: to undermine the European Union and set off its collapse.

When Trump and Putin meet, this will be an encounter of two gloriously insecure men who both believe that they can regain lost strength by re-creating the world of their youth, which was the world of the Cold War. The only role Europe plays in their old man's fantasies is that of a helpless victim, divided and disoriented, ready to be 'saved'. For Putin, salvation means that everyone will have to have 'respect for Russia' – by acquiescing in a Russian sphere of influence of which Putin can dispose as he wishes, either by annexing territory and/or by militarily destabilising countries whose existence he barely acknowledges. For Trump, the path for salvation will be one of bilateral trade agreements negotiated and concluded under the weight of the disproportionate power of the US leaving it in the air as to whether he will actually honour these agreements – very much in line with the arbitrariness characteristic for mafia bosses. For both Putin and Trump, the infamous 'return to the nation-state' – which nowadays satisfies the minds of the intellectually superficial – is nothing else than a new version of the old 'divide-and-rule'. Facing small-to-average European countries of ten, twenty or even 50 or more million inhabitants, many of them fervently believing in their exceptionality and yet ever less relevant on the world scale, these huge Trump- and Putin-style cold-war revivalist empires would be able to do whatever they like, not only because of their business clout or military power, but also because of their determination to wreck what is left of the planet. The enthusiasm Trump and Putin have been showing for Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and the xenophobic AfD party in Germany, makes perfectly clear that voting for them would be voting for the end of the EU and play into the hands of these two authoritarian strongmen.

But our future does not have to be like that. As Donald Trump goes about establishing his power in the first days of his administration, it is important that we as Europeans also do our thing; i.e. refuse national populism and stand firm, each and every one of us, as a steadfast supporter of a democratic and multilateral alternative in the world. For those who believe in the path of democracy, rule of law and cosmopolitan citizenship, a path that we have barely begun to tread after two devastating world wars, this alternative will entail what can amount to a true Declaration of European Independence. We will not share the senile delusions of those who desire a return to the Cold War. We will not do their bidding. They shall not pass!
¡No Pasarán!

Today, a declaration of independence in Europe and in the rest of the world must be met by a *declaration of interdependence*, i.e., by understanding that only united in diversity can we resist and that the resistance of those who still believe in responsibility towards the planet and in international humanitarian law will be ever more crucial in the coming years. Citizens of the world, on both sides of the Atlantic and all over the planet, will have to be united in order to defeat the scourge of national populism.

Indeed, this seems like a tall order; like something too vast, too difficult to enact, *too big to even think*. Each of us is just a common individual; many of us feel powerless and even isolated. That's the way it feels but not necessarily the way it is.

A declaration of independence is always – let's not forget this – an individual statement made in full awareness of the inadequacies of politics and of the political leaders who are temporarily in power. In the face of difficulties, a declaration of independence is more than a *cri de coeur*, which at a time like this could even mislead many sincere people to give up on the EU. A declaration of independence is a first prerequisite to build a political community – a fully democratic Europe – made up of many other independencies, the independencies (and interdependencies) we wish for our countries and our lives. The most solid declarations of independence are those instigated by men and women without power, by young people and committed civic-minded citizens, those which succeeded in mobilising society.

It is precisely in these difficult times that we have the opportunity to build a fully democratic and autonomous European Union capable of defending the values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, shared prosperity and responsibility towards the planet. We cannot afford to waste it.