

The Trump Effect

Published on 06. April 2017 by [Reinhard Bütikofer](#)

US President Donald Trump is, of course, an authoritarian, a racist, a misogynist, a nationalist, a reactionary and so on and so forth. But as regards his impact on the European wave of authoritarian populism, represented by the likes of Marine Le Pen, Mr Wilders or the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), he's beginning to look almost like a blessing in disguise.

Mr Trump's surprising electoral win last November was greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm by all the leaders of the European far right. They hailed him as a prophet of their own causes and regarded his success as a token of their coming victories. But their optimism has turned sour. In December, the candidate of the Austrian Freedom Party who had been leading in the polls up until election day lost to Alexander van der Bellen, the former Green Party Leader in Austria. This March, in the Netherlands, Mr Wilders, who had boasted of being the Dutch Trump, was stopped far short of his ambition, lost most of his momentum to the surging Dutch Greens and centre-left liberals, and never got even close to possibly being in government. In France, where the candidates are battling hard in the run-up to the first round of the presidential election later this April, Marine Le Pen has lost her once commanding lead in the polls to centrist Macron, and indications are that she will be beaten badly in the second round, if indeed she gets there at all. In Germany, finally, where the general election will be held in September, AfD have fallen from a proud 15% in the national polls to a mere 8%. The theory that Mr Trump is providing a boost for likeminded nationalist-authoritarian leaders in Europe doesn't seem to hold water. There are even indications that the effect is quite the opposite.

Left wing parties in different European countries have reported winning new members who explicitly motivated their new engagement with a will to fight back against the dangers of an evolving Trumpian world. The #PulseOfEurope civic movement that started very small in Frankfurt late last year has developed into a weekly demonstration of support for the European project that is anathema to all the European nationalists. Every Sunday at 2 p.m. people are getting together at public places around Europe to counter the populists and to stand by the European vision that has just turned 60 years old in March; last Sunday, over 80 cities in 11 countries participated. Even some mainstream politicians seemed to be picking up strength. The speech Germany's new President Steinmeier delivered in the European Parliament – his first public speech outside of Germany since taking office – signalled new courage and decisiveness. Steinmeier addressed Trump and challenged him. He didn't hesitate to address Orbán and put him in his place, and he was frank enough to quote Michael Heseltine with a remark that Brexit might turn out to be the greatest historic loss of sovereignty for Britain.

Of course, I might be reading more into this than is real. But my hunch is that the radicalism with which Trump is pursuing his authoritarian agenda that at first created a shock, served as a wakeup call and a call to arms for those who want to defend our liberal democratic order and develop it further. There is a story that a frog gets cooked if you gradually raise the temperature of the water in which it sits, but that it jumps out of the water if placed directly in hot water. It seems to me that Donald Trump has had a hot water effect on us: he has burnt us, but has also made us move.

Of course, apart from messing up the US, Trump can wreak a lot of havoc on transatlantic relations, Europe and the world. And certainly the authoritarian forces haven't gone away;



the conditions for our fight against them, however, have improved. The expectations on their side and our fears, that a string of victories would carry them to power across Europe, haven't materialised so far, and our animal spirits have been revived. So, in a way, Trump taught us a lesson; we will heed that and reciprocate it by teaming up with the democratic opposition to Trump in the US. Who knows, by the end of this year Erdoğan in Turkey, another authoritarian, may have lost his referendum, Trump may be under impeachment and Putin might feel lonelier again.

Let's not waste this crisis.