

## From 2017 to 2018: the political rollercoaster can continue in Europe

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As we are approaching the end of the year, it's the right moment to look back on what happened in 2017. After 2016 with the results of the Brexit referendum, the US presidential election, but also of the constitutional referendum in Italy, had been a black year, this year began in a very gloomy mood.

As I wrote in the beginning of the year: *'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 good news is: the worst-case scenarios have not materialised. The French presidential election resulted in the victory of a strongly pro-European candidate – the only presidential candidate in the race whom Vladimir Putin did not want to be president and did his best to prevent this to happen – from financing his opponents to trying to discredit him and weaken him via cyberattacks and leaks. Marine Le Pen underperformed in the second round of the election, and thanks to the preparedness of Macron's team, Russia was unable to manipulate the election results. In Germany, it seems that Merkel can remain Prime Minister. The Dutch election results strengthened Rutte against Geert Wilders. It seems that the mainstream still holds out in the most crucial EU countries. Furthermore, in the United States, not independently from the mounting evidence of Russia interfering in their presidential election, there are some signs of normalisation - in terms of foreign policy at least. The most radical consultants disappeared from Trump's immediate environment, from Michael Flynn, former head of the National Security Council, to Steve Bannon, former chief strategist. After a democratic candidate won the election in Alabama – a highly atypical phenomenon – the chance that the populist takeover of the Republican Party by Bannon and Trump will actually take place, is way lower. Despite all the fears over a totally isolationist United States, the commitment towards Europe has not disappeared from US foreign policy, and the conflicts with Russia, despite lots of talks over a "reset", are more intense than before. Donald Trump, under the strong control of the establishment, simply cannot do all the harm that many thought he would be able to.

The bad news is: the mainstream, in many ways, is weakening. Emanuel Macron is unable to start implementing his ambitious pro-European transformative agenda – in lack of a leader in Germany, where the first coalition talks collapsed. While it seems that some kind of coalition or cooperation will take form in Germany, Chancellor Merkel obviously does not have the strength she had before. And another grand coalition can only further strengthen the soft (FDP) and hard (AfD) anti-establishment voices of the opposition.

In the Czech Republic, an economic populist, Andrej Babis became prime minister and has finally found the support of the far-left and the far-right in the parliament or his minority government. This can only amplify the already strong illiberal character of central eastern Europe. Their western neighbour, Austria, shifted more to the right, with the FPÖ back in power – which means that one of the most pro-Russian political forces within Europe will control the interior ministry, the foreign ministry and the defence ministry as well, of an EU Member State. This is bad for Europe, but good for Russia and its illiberal allies such as Viktor Orbán, who is on good terms with both Kurz and Strache, and has hoped to find a strong, likeminded ally in Western Europe.

While the economic prospects in Europe have definitely improved, this has not boosted the enthusiasm about Europe so far. It seems as if Europe has switched to an old-new era of 'post-materialism', where identity politics trump the importance of economic successes and the outputs.

After several electoral interferences, partially in the social media space, and the proliferation of fake news, some illusions were lost about how much social media can add to the processes of democratisation. It seems these days that the social media can do much more harm than good for the democratic World.

2018 will be not less difficult, with the Czech Presidential election – with Milos Zeman having a good chance to be re-elected. Also, the Italian elections, where pro-Russian populist forces (M5S, Lega Nord, Forza Italia) can make huge gains, weakening one of the most vulnerable spots of Europe these days- both economically and politically. And next year, we will be able to observe as well the re-election of Vladimir Putin in the presidential election, and his puppet in Europe, Viktor Orbán – which will just boost their confidence further, and encourage them for implementing and exporting illiberal practices. While Europe will survive, the gloom is already there, and the situation in the Western world will remain fragile and full of dangers.

In 2018, most probably, we will be able to see a mixed track record, with positive and negative political tendencies at the same time. In light of post-Brexit and post-Trump apocalyptic mood, in 2018, similarly to 2017, will be a lot of good news. In the light of post-Macron enthusiasm, there might be a lot of bad news. If we lower our expectations enough, 2018 can be the year of hope.