

# EUROPE LOST THE TRADE WAR. NOW TRUMP WANTS A POLITICAL ONE

**SAMUEL DEMPSEY**  
TRANSATLANTIC POLICY ANALYST

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Part of why Europe lost the trade war with the United States (U.S.) - though Brussels will claim it avoided one - is because the European Union (EU) still believes this U.S. administration acts within the traditional confines of American national interest. Do not be deceived: this is not a negotiation between allies, but a battle against a transnational far right to which Donald Trump is the kingpin and which seeks to erode the EU. If Europe wants to effectively make it through the next three years (or more) and build genuine strategic autonomy, it must start fighting back against Trump's main instrument of influence in Europe: the political far right.

Unlike any previous U.S. president, Trump and his conservative network are actively integrating with far-right leaders across Europe. The Heritage Foundation - the think tank behind Trump's second term and the infamous Project 2025 - is [exporting](#) its Make America Great Again (MAGA)-inspired agenda by partnering with nationalist parties across Europe. In March, Heritage convened a closed-door workshop in Washington with Polish and Hungarian nationalists to discuss a blueprint for dismantling EU institutions. The result is a transatlantic alliance aligning Trump's movement with Europe's rising illiberal right.

As the State Department's own Substack [noted](#), this reflects a search for "[civilizational allies](#)" in Europe to stand against the EU's liberal order. Alex Bruesewitz, a senior Trump adviser, recently [told](#) Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) leaders they were "brave visionaries" and that MAGA Republicans and Europe's far right are united in a "spiritual war"

against "Marxists" and "globalists." The White House has [hosted](#) AfD figures, and at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Vice President J.D. Vance [mocked](#) Europe's censorship of extremists and endorsed the AfD in Germany's federal election. Elon Musk piled on, [calling](#) Berlin's decision to classify the AfD as extremist an "attack on democracy," and he publicly endorsed the AfD in December 2024 while serving as a senior adviser to the incoming Trump administration, then doubled down with a [livestream](#) and rally appearance after Trump took office.

The European far right is stronger than ever now, having the backing of the most powerful man in the world. In February, shortly after Trump's return to office, Orbán [declared](#), "Yesterday we were the heretics; today we are the mainstream." Orbán has been the chief architect of the MAGA-MEGA link (Make Europe Great Again), picking up on Trump's former chief strategist and architect of the transnational far right Steve Bannon's [idea](#) of a transatlantic right-wing "supergroup." Hungary now [spreads](#) this message through state-funded institutions - the Center for Fundamental Rights, the Danube Institute, and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), now one of Brussels' most heavily [financed](#) political think tanks. These organisations work to propagate Trump-style conservatism, shape EU debates, and influence electoral strategies.

In March, Heritage hosted a closed-door workshop with MCC and Poland's ultraconservative Ordo Iuris Institute presenting a paper titled 'The Great Reset: Restoring Member State Sovereignty in the 21st Century', a blueprint for hollowing out the EU institutions. Trump-linked Christian fundamentalist groups have also [poured](#) millions in "dark money" into Europe, often through organisations like the [World Congress of Families](#) that knit together America's and Europe's far right. MAGA is not only backing Europe's far right but also building permanent

infrastructure to coordinate transatlantic conservative strategy. Founded in the U.S. in 1974 as a major annual gathering of the Republican Party, the Conservative Political Action Conference ([CPAC](#)) has since regularly hosted spin-offs abroad, platforming far-right forces. It was once held in Europe only in Hungary; its next gathering will take place in Poland.

As Célia Belin [notes](#), Trump treats foreign affairs as an extension of U.S. domestic politics, as another front line in America's culture wars: "Liberals and Democrats are the 'enemy within'; Europeans are their extension abroad."

The EU has been unprepared for this new, transnationally illiberal U.S. administration, partly because of the political instincts of its dominant force, the European People's Party (EPP). Long fixated on maintaining [close ties](#) with Washington, the EPP has often done so at Europe's expense. Late last week, it went even further, fulfilling Orbán's wish, bringing them into the mainstream, when just a few weeks ago, it would have been seen as impossible.

Last week, the European Parliament [voted](#) on the Green Omnibus Simplification Directive, a deregulatory package dismantling much of the Green Deal. To pass it, the EPP [drafted](#) amendments designed to win far-right support and shut out the left after the centrist bloc fractured in October. This marked the death of Europe's *cordon sanitaire*: the long-held principle that mainstream parties never govern with extremists. Now, Orbán's Patriots for Europe - which Washington leverages influence through - have become kingmakers in von der Leyen's agenda.

The EPP is marching the EU toward its own undoing. Once extremists enter the political mainstream, it becomes nearly [impossible](#) to push them back to the margins. Their inclusion legitimises and entrenches their influence long after initial breakthroughs. When those

extremists are aligned with MAGA, it means MEGA is not just a slogan - it is the powerbroker shaping future European policy on trade, defence, and technology.

Europe has three courses of action to move against Trump's malign influence.

First, the Commission just presented its [Democracy Shield](#) against foreign interference. President von der Leyen promised it will "reinforce the core elements that allow citizens to live our shared democratic values - free speech, independent media, resilient institutions, and a vibrant civil society." But so far, the framework focuses almost entirely on Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. It lacks clear, binding measures to address all forms of foreign interference - including from the U.S. That must change. The EU needs to define and codify what counts as external political interference and apply those standards equally to all foreign actors.

Second, the EU must also impose bloc-wide restrictions on foreign political financing - including through religious or 'family values' organisations - and empower the European Anti-Fraud Office and the European Public Prosecutor's Office to investigate transnational funding networks.

Third, and most importantly, the EU's mainstream parties must also move quickly to re-establish a functional *cordon sanitaire*. This requires the EPP to confront its leadership, which has turned a blind eye to the consequences of its current legislative strategy. Above all, the defence of liberal democracy must be framed not as a partisan battle but as an act of European sovereignty - essential to safeguarding the Union's legitimacy and independence.

The threat to the European project is no longer limited to Russia or China - it now includes the radical right of the U.S. As long as that

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movement holds power, America's government itself becomes an instrument of its ideology. The U.S. national interest is no longer the interest of the nation but of Trump and his allies. If Europe fails to recognise this, it will not just lose the trade war - it will lose the political one on which its very survival depends.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or its members.

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*Samuel Dempsey is a Brussels-based transatlantic policy analyst working with clients including POLITICO's Research & Analysis Division. He is a Next Gen Leader at Foreign Policy for America and a member of Youth Security Europe. He hosts The Neomedieval Ledger, a podcast and Substack on European security and transatlantic politics. His writing has appeared in CEPA, SAIS Review, the Wilson Center, Oxford Political Review, and The Brussels Times, and his analysis has been featured in the Financial Times, HuffPost, and other outlets. He previously served as a Presidential Management Fellow at the U.S. Department of State, as the editor at The Mainichi Newspapers Europe Bureau, and as a project assistant at TEPSA in 2023. He has worked across the U.S. government, including as an international affairs advisor in the U.S. Congress is working on Europe, China, and MENA policy. He holds an M.A. in Geopolitics and Strategic Studies from Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and a B.A. in Journalism and Communications from the Anglo-American University Prague.*

