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***TRUMP'S ELECTION:
WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR
EASTERN EUROPE'S SECURITY?***



Trump's election:

What does it mean for eastern Europe's security?

This policy brief is based on a webinar convened on 4 December 2024 within the framework of the European Belarus Forum initiative. The speakers at the webinar were: Petr Lunak, Deputy Head of Section, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO; Tatsiana Kulakevich, Associate Professor of Instruction, University of South Florida; Franak Viachorka, Chief of Staff to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; and Nigel Gould-Davies, Senior Fellow at the International Institute of Strategic Studies.

Whilst based on the webinar participants' comments, responsibility for the accuracy of the policy brief rests with the author. A recording of the webinar is available at www.warwick.ac.uk/wubhub/ and on [YouTube](#). The European Belarus Forum initiative is grateful for financial support from NATO's Public Diplomacy Division. This policy brief does not reflect NATO policy.

Executive summary

- The return of Donald Trump to the United States presidency suggests his previous term in the role should not be viewed as an aberration. Trump presents a challenge for world leaders as they contemplate security in Europe. It is a challenge to which they must rise.
- There is 'an unusually wide range of uncertainty' about how US foreign policy will look under Trump. His previous tenure in the role is one source of knowledge about how he may act, as is an understanding of how different the circumstances are this time round. Trump's 'ideas and inclinations' – as far as we can discern them – are a third source of knowledge.
- Outsiders can expect President Trump to be guided by US security and economic interests. In eastern Europe, US interests are not attained by giving Russia a free hand to dictate what happens in Ukraine. Nor are they attained by letting Russia dictate what happens in Belarus as 'a consolation prize' for concessions over Ukraine.
- Military strength is a necessary but not a sufficient factor in maintaining peace and security in eastern Europe. NATO members must increase defence spending while also focusing on economic and diplomatic instruments that can influence regional security.
- Europe's leaders need to maintain unity and affirm their commitment to multilateralism. Together their economic clout will allow them to diversify away from trade with the US rather than reciprocating any tariffs imposed by Trump with their own protectionist measures.
- The Ukrainian and Belarusian diasporas both have a role to play in advocating for their countries' futures.

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1. Introduction

Many European leaders are already fawning over Donald Trump, who will be inaugurated as United States president on 20 January. People hoping his previous term as US president was an aberration look to have been mistaken. Increasingly, people recognise that Trump's election reflects changes in the socio-political life of liberal democracies and the 'old world' of Europe needs to adjust to these new politics at a time when global affairs are the most febrile in living memory.

Trump returns to the presidency with Russia's large-scale war on Ukraine about to enter its fourth year. The incoming US president boldly and implausibly claims that he will broker a settlement 'in 24 hours', which many fear implies pressuring the Ukrainians to capitulate. A week after Trump re-enters the office of president, Belarus's dictator will claim victory in an election that will be neither free nor fair. Both Belarus's dictator and other illiberal politicians in eastern Europe think Trump heralds an endorsement of their hardline ways which often leave citizens feeling insecure and vulnerable.

Whatever Trump's administration does in its foreign policy over the coming four years, he is already making Europeans uncomfortable and uncertain about the future security of the continent. Yet the challenge of Trump can be answered.

2. Prospective contours of Trump's foreign policy

There is 'an unusually wide range of uncertainty' about what Trump's foreign policy will look like, said Nigel Gould-Davies. He suggested that three sources can inform our perspectives on how Trump will behave in office: the precedent of his first term, what we know about the incoming president's 'ideas and inclinations', and the circumstances in which he takes office.

During Trump's first term, as webinar speakers noted, his record on China and Russia was tougher than many of his critics expected. In those years, the US expelled Russian diplomats in the wake of the 2018 Salisbury poisonings, withdrew from key bilateral arms control treaties with Russia, imposed sanctions on Russia under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), approved the sale of anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, and signed legislation to protect Europe's energy security. The much-hyped 'bromance' between Trump and Putin, most obviously on display when the two held a summit in Helsinki in July 2018, amounted to relatively little.

In terms of his ideas and inclinations, Tatsiana Kulakevich argued that Trump is no different to any other US president. His foreign policy will be guided by US economic and security interests. In the case of the former, the US should not be expected to withdraw from Europe, since the continent is its major trading partner, and the NATO alliance is vital in protecting US economic interests in Europe.

The major adversary of the US is China as both Democrats and Republicans agree. China historically viewed Belarus as a useful inroad to European markets and it continues to have interests in Belarus despite that country being under extensive EU and US sanctions.

It is not a contradiction to agree with Gould-Davies that ideas are not important motivators of Trump's policy. The incoming president is hardly a sophisticated thinker. Nonetheless, 'America First'

does not imply isolationism, as Franak Viachorka astutely pointed out; 'America First' should be interpreted as a rallying call for US leadership.

Indeed, the circumstances in which Trump returns to the role is one with wars raging in Ukraine, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Unconventional security threats from Russia are proliferating in eastern Europe, whether the sabotage of telecoms cables under the Baltic Sea or cyberattacks against national governments or alleged covert support for 'Kremlin-friendly' politicians. Trump's administration cannot isolate itself from these challenges even if it wants to – its economy is reliant on the globalisation of past decades and on security in Europe.

3. Prospective responses to Trump's foreign policy

The previous paragraphs suggest that a 'decoupling' of the US from Europe is unlikely. Fears about the US withdrawing from NATO, prompted by Trump's strident criticism of allies and reckless rhetoric, are therefore overblown. The preeminent security organisation in Europe is likely to survive. The US Congress has even passed legislation that prevents the president from unilaterally withdrawing from the alliance. So however unsettled European nerves may be by the Trumpian future, NATO members can focus on how to deal with the security environment in eastern Europe and the North Atlantic area more broadly, rather than panic about the bloc's existence.

Here Petr Lunak suggested a number of 'lessons' that European leaders might heed:

- 1. European states cannot have security inexpensively: the 2% of GDP spending floor agreed by NATO allies in 2014 is inadequate to meet today's security challenges.
- 2. Freedom cannot always be protected through free trade: European states' reliance on Russian hydrocarbons has undermined their security in the past and this mistake cannot be repeated.
- 3. 'Military strength is a prerequisite for dialogue': Russia's war goals in Ukraine will not be changed by talk alone, strength is necessary to compel Russia to change its strategic thinking whether in Ukraine or elsewhere.
- 4. Military strength on its own is insufficient, however, and needs to be complemented by other political and economic resources. The rebuilding of Ukraine cannot be achieved by tanks and armed drones, but Ukraine's recovery will only be possible with outside support.
- 5. The Trans-Atlantic bond is vital. With inadequate defence spending in much of Europe, allies are too dependent on the US for their security. Moreover, Lunak noted, NATO leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, without the experiences their cold war predecessors had, lack the wherewithal to face the security challenges of the 2020s unilaterally.

By now, Russia's revisionist ambitions in eastern Europe are widely recognised. Trump has repeatedly said that NATO allies must spend more on defence and allies should heed his call rather

than quarrel over it.¹ Without US support it is hard to see Ukraine emerging well from Russia's assault on its sovereignty, and Putin's ambitions could grow with success in Ukraine.

European leaders and publics will also need to deal with Trump's pledge to pursue protectionist economic policies. European nations must not let themselves be divided and should affirm their commitment to work through existing multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and abide by World Trade Organisation rules on tariffs and trade. If Trump follows through on his pledge to impose tariffs on European states it will squarely harm European economies, with the effects likely to be acutely felt in the eastern half of the continent. At the same time, Europe united is a powerful trade actor and has options to deepen its partnerships with other states round the world.

If Trump represents something new in the world order, it is the fading of liberal ideas that dominated in the 20th century. Some pragmatic engagement with Trump is necessary, not least when it comes to dealing with Russia's activities in eastern Europe, because Trump is unlikely to be persuaded by arguments based on values and principles. But as discussed above, the incoming president is motivated by interests not ideas. A secure Europe may be contingent on long-standing liberal values, but it is also a core US interest: European leaders can calibrate their policies to emphasise the material benefits to the US of peace and stability in Europe without renouncing their values.

4. Implications for Belarus and Ukraine

When it comes to the war in Ukraine and the dictatorship in Belarus, European leaders can find points of agreement with the new US administration.

Kulakevich pointed out that Trump is unlikely to want to see Ukraine weakened since China and Russia are the main adversaries of the US. Ukraine is an important component in the global balance of power and US interests dictate that Washington should not press Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government into major concessions.

Meanwhile, European states continue to have a sizable role in Ukraine's defence and future reconstruction. In his New Year's address to Ukrainians, Zelenskyy spoke of his country's 'unity' in the face of Russia's aggression and Europeans need to demonstrate a similar degree of unity writ large which could weaken Russian morale.² Public advocacy in support of Ukrainians can go a long way to showing Trump's foreign policy team the importance Europeans attach to Ukraine. The Ukrainian diaspora can contribute to this alongside European and American civil society organisations.

One of the concerns expressed by Franak Viachorka, senior adviser to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, is that Belarus might be treated as 'a consolation prize' for Putin in Ukraine peace talks. Yet, while the relative importance of Belarus may be slight compared to Ukraine, it remains an important part of the regional security formula and a vector of China's growing influence in Europe. In the words of

¹ The most recent instance at the time of writing being on 7 January 2025. Trump said NATO members ought to pay 5% of their GDP on defence. He claimed that he 'saved NATO' during his previous tenure as president and that allies 'take advantage' of the US.

² 'Volodimir Zelen'skiy vitae ukrainsiv iz Novim rokom' [Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomes Ukrainians to the New Year], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5gjDScHQ1k> (accessed 17 January 2025)

Victoria Leukavets, Belarus's significance to eastern Europe's security 'has never been greater'. Thus, leaving Belarus to Russia contradicts US strategic interests.

Viachorka noted that many coming into the new Trump administration will have little knowledge about Belarus, while others – for example those already involved in the Strategic Dialogue between the US and Belarusian Democratic Movement³ – will remain in their jobs. The Belarusian democratic forces are working hard to persuade the new administration that Belarus must be kept high on the foreign policy agenda. The wider Belarusian diaspora also has a role to play in supporting these efforts, noted Kulakevich.

America's relations with Belarus under Trump during his last tenure saw high-level officials visit Minsk, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Such visits were in part because US officials saw that Russian and Chinese influence in Belarus was contrary to US interests. The Belarusian regime's rigging of the 2020 presidential election, and the brutal crackdown that ensued, are a compelling reason that Trump's administration needs to adopt a different policy on Belarus in the years ahead.

The view is often expressed that Russia must change before Belarus can change. Not so, argued Viachorka, who pointed out that it will be easier for a transformation to go smoothly in the more compact country.

To the extent that Russia threatens Europe's security, a Ukrainian victory and political change in Belarus offer the best means to mitigate the risks in eastern Europe and beyond.

³ US Department of State, 'United States and the Belarusian Strategic Dialogue Hold Second Strategic Dialogue' <https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-the-belarusian-democratic-movement-hold-second-strategic-dialogue/> (accessed 17 January 2025)

5. Policy recommendations: Pre-empting Trump

1. NATO member states should heed Donald Trump's calls for them to increase defence spending since military strength is a necessary precondition for peace and security

Military strength is a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving a just peace in eastern Europe. Without military strength Russia will have an ability to dictate unjust terms for peace in Ukraine which could not be expected to be a sustainable peace. Many Europeans quietly acknowledge that there is a degree of truth in Trump's criticisms about European 'free-riding' - allies must therefore pull their weight.

2. European leaders must affirm their commitment to multilateral security and economic institutions

Trump has pledged to impose tariffs on imports to the United States. European leaders should resist reciprocal tariffs which will likely weaken European economies. Economic strength is a second necessary condition for regional peace and security, since without strong economies states cannot fund their militaries and 'hard' security capabilities. At the same time, some pragmatism is necessary when considering trade partners: European states' dependence on Russian hydrocarbons quickly grew into a liability and undermined Europe's long-term security; trade ties must not be fostered at the cost of security.

3. European leaders must show the Trump administration that European security is in US interests

The bond between North America and Europe has been a source of strength and stability for many decades. European leaders have a strong case to make that it is in US interests to remain engaged in the region and they must therefore make that case, while recalibrating their policies to emphasise the material benefits to the US of remaining engaged in Europe's security. Bowing to US demands will weaken all parties and that is in no one's interest.

4. The Ukrainian and Belarusian diasporas should continue public advocacy campaigns

With a new administration in the United States, many officials will be unfamiliar with the concerns of eastern Europeans. Their understanding of the region and the broader consequences of the outcome of the war are still being shaped in many cases. Diaspora communities, independent media and non-governmental organisations all have a role to play in providing good quality information to decision makers.

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