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Europe at the foot of the walls



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Two images will go down as landmarks in the collapse of the West. The first is Elon Musk's salute at a meeting on 20 January 2025, the day Donald Trump was inaugurated in Washington. It looks like a Nazi salute, no matter what the billionaire's friends say to play it down.

The second image takes place in Munich. On 14 February 2025, during his closing speech at the Munich conference, Christoph Heusgen, President of this illustrious Security Forum, wept. Speaking of transatlantic relations, he confessed his fears: "We must be afraid that our common basis of values is no longer as common as it used to be". The Munich Security Conference was "something of a European nightmare", he later told the press.

Two men, two symbols: one of the new hubris of American power, the other of the return of tragedy to Europe. One dazzled by the victory of his world, the other aghast.

by the collapse of his own. Between the two shots, just 4 weeks will have been enough to shake the Western world.

In less than a month, Donald Trump has turned everything upside down: resumption of diplomatic contacts with Vladimir Putin's Russia, prospects for negotiations on ending

the conflict in Ukraine, promises of trade taxes against the EU, not to mention his plans to annex Canada, the Panama Canal, Gaza and Greenland.

In this mad maelstrom, Europeans are up against two walls. The first is political: it is a question of defending liberal democracy, against all odds, and first and foremost against the libertarian ideology of the *tech* giants, taken up by Vice-President J.D. Vance in Munich. In front of a stunned audience, the American number two explained that the greatest threat to Europe was not Russia or China, but the decline in freedom of expression. This is where the libertarian ideology, extreme in its defence of freedom, is a cousin of fascism, in the sense that it is the very safeguards of democracy that it seeks to eradicate. When they defend freedom of expression, they are in effect abolishing the truth of the facts, denying science in favour of conspiracies of all kinds, and doing away with the standards, rules and prohibitions that every democratic state must issue precisely to protect and define freedom of expression. They want the freedom to say anything, the facts and the fakenews, the truth and the lies, the provocations and the calls to crime, because they want no regulation of AI, no responsibility for digital platforms, no criminalisation of invasions of privacy, no legal prohibition of racism, of apology for Nazism, of wilful disinformation etc. These extremists of freedom are gravediggers. If there were a Nobel Prize for cynicism, people like Elon Musk and his cronies would be the most deserving. In the name of freedom of expression, it is no more and no less than the protection of freedoms that they hope to eradicate.

The second wall is strategic: we have to defend Ukraine's sovereignty against Russia and defend ourselves as Europeans if America decides to break the Atlantic contract. The stakes are immense, because they shock the most sincere European beliefs about the "American friend". Back in 2003, George Bush 2 and the neo-conservatives who served him had already shaken Europeans' blind faith in America's political and moral excellence. He justified the invasion of Iraq by promoting democracy and liberating the Arab peoples through successive domino effects. The American fight for freedom involved "regime change", the violation of international law, and the injunction to allies to blindly follow America or suffer its reprisals. The pill was hard to swallow, but the presidency of Barack Obama succeeded in allaying European anxieties about the credibility of the United States' democratic leadership. Twenty years on, Donald Trump is reawakening the angst: he is saying all sorts of things about the reliability of NATO, while demanding that European defence budgets be set at 5% of GDP so that American equipment can be bought; he is sticking to Russia's arguments against the Ukrainian president, playing cat and mouse over whether or not Europeans should be present at future negotiations on Ukraine; he is treating his allies as strategic peccadilloes, political myrmidons, just fit to pay or die on the ground to serve American interests. Vladimir Putin must be jubilant: a kind of American-Russian condominium is being set up, just as General de Gaulle feared and fought against during the Cold War.

Europeans are not yet united against the tragic collapse of the West and the global chaos implied by the law of the strongest. Some still want to believe in the world of Atlantic concord and the alliance of democracies. Some are already dreaming of being good little replicas of American Trumpism. France, Germany, Poland and Spain, as well as neighbouring Britain, are not on the same wavelength either. But they will get there. Concern about the future of peace in Europe is already common. It is a powerful lever for uniting and defending ourselves, against Putin as much as against Trump.

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