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BLOG POST

US mid-term elections: what are the implications for Europe?



Following Donald Trump's already disastrous first term (2017–2021), Joe Biden had set out what US foreign policy should be: a foreign policy for the middle classes. Yet Donald Trump did exactly the opposite: a foreign policy for the ruling class – in other words, himself, his family and his billionaire tech allies. The result is indisputable: he suffered a resounding defeat in the mid-term elections. This is a rather rare occurrence in the United States: it was a crucial foreign policy blunder – the war against Iran – that led to a colossal political defeat at home.

Rising energy prices have, in fact, sent inflation soaring and alienated a huge proportion of his 2024 voters. His excesses on immigration, his phenomenal corruption, his arrogance and his contempt for everyone and everything also played a part, but it was primarily his betrayal of his promises – increased purchasing power, an end to overseas military operations – that voters punished him for.

Should we rejoice at this electoral slap in the face for Donald Trump? Of course we should. Should we assume a major upturn for Europe and transatlantic relations? Of course not. Let us begin with the positive effects: there are two. The first concerns the new budgetary constraints that Congress can impose on the Trump administration's interventionist tendencies. It is indeed unlikely that members of Congress will vote for excessive funding for risky overseas operations decided upon by the President. Admittedly, the House of Representatives already passed a defence budget of $1,150 billion last July.

But the Senate has yet to approve it: it will not call into question either the major rearmament programmes aimed at replenishing stocks depleted by the campaign in Iran, or the high-tech investments necessary to maintain American military excellence.

On the other hand, cuts to spending on any other potential overseas operations seem inevitable: despite Donald Trump's statements on the need to 'finish the job', a third war against Iran therefore does not appear credible at this stage.

The second positive effect of the Democratic victory in Congress concerns Ukraine. The Graham Act, passed in July 2026, will take centre stage in the debates: it allows for a wide range of sanctions against Russia (notably against its financial infrastructure or its 'ghost fleet') and against countries that purchase oil from it, including India and China. The President had initially signed it before abruptly suspending its implementation on 16 October, in order to exempt Russia from sanctions, resume purchases of Russian oil and thereby win over voters. Even if Congress fails to secure the two-thirds majority needed to override the presidential veto, it will make a serious effort to resume financial aid to Ukraine, and Donald Trump may find it in his interest to make certain compromises on the budgets.

The less welcome consequences for Europe of the mid-term elections are also twofold. Firstly, there is the possibility that the US president will take out his frustrations on foreign policy, an area where his powers remain intact. Indeed, nothing prevents him from continuing to seek a 'deal' with Vladimir Putin, to the detriment of Ukraine and right under the noses of the Europeans: his business interests are at stake, as is the opportunity to taunt the new Democratic-controlled Congress. A trilateral 'technical' meeting with China and Ukraine has already been confirmed in Abu Dhabi, perhaps foreshadowing a summit on a possible global security architecture in Europe. Without the Europeans.

The second negative consequence relates more to perceptions than to political realities, but it is a significant one. A large proportion of Europeans will no doubt be tempted to see the Democrats' landslide victory as the long-awaited return of a more conciliatory America, within a transatlantic relationship that is once again reassuring, credible and reliable. For the most Atlanticist of Europeans, the temptation is indeed immense to believe that the Trump interlude is all but over, pending the Democrats' full return in 2028: there would then be no need to continue down the (costly and risky) path towards greater strategic autonomy for Europe, if in two years' time NATO and America were to once again become the effective leaders they once were. Yet this hope is nothing but an illusion: let us remember that it was a Democratic president, Barack Obama, who first signalled to Europeans that they had been downgraded strategically in the eyes of the United States, with China now taking priority.

There is no reason why the Democrats of 2027 should turn back the clock by ten years: Europe is no longer their priority, and China undoubtedly represents one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in Congress. Otherwise, Europe must maintain the momentum, or even redouble its efforts, to build its strategic autonomy.

Superimposed on this Atlantic illusion is an equally dangerous political illusion: it was not, in fact, Trump who created extreme populism in the United States; rather, it was populism that elected Trump. Yet this wave of anger, resentment and disaffection towards the Western liberal economic and political system did not die with that election: the roots of the problem, in America as in Europe, run far deeper. They stem from the explosion of social inequalities, the fragmentation of Western societies into the winners and losers of globalisation, and identity-based reflexes that are all the more hostile towards foreigners as the demographic foundations of our societies have become rusted.

The US mid-term elections have not defeated populism, let alone extremism of any kind. They have defeated one of its most brutal, most extreme and most delusional representatives. But the system thatproduces him remains – a system that an ever-growing middle class rejects, and which is as vital as it is difficult to reform. Let us reread the epilogue to *Arturio Ui*, where Brecht addresses us directly, transcending the confines of history: 'You, learn to see, rather than just staring wide-eyed.

Act instead of chattering. That is what might, by a hair's breadth, have come to rule the world! The people have defeated it, but we must not claim victory; it is still too early: the womb is still fertile, from which the hideous beast sprang.'