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## **Political Landscape of Europe. The Spectre of Geopolitical Solitude.**

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**Abstract.** *In recent months the events confirm the trend of the West undergoing political fragmentation accompanied by increasing contradictions between the US and its allies as well as among different groups of European countries. The White House has shifted to the principle of transactional relations with its partners. The results of the G7 summit in Canada have become one more evidence of this novelty. The approaches to relations with Russia have become a factor in the West's transformation. Another one is the evolution of New Populism. Considering the changes taking place in the world and increasing uncertainties, the importance of Russia's efforts to consolidate a number of Eurasian integration projects is growing.*

**Key words:** *transformation of the West, New Populism, transactional relations, Russia, USA, European Union, NATO.*

Perceptions of the main challenges to the stability of the conventional state of the world are changing as rapidly as the events themselves. The political establishment in the United States still sets the tone in shaping these perceptions in the West, although the uniformity of the Euro-Atlantic region is withering away. An obvious example is the G7 summit in Quebec in June, which ended in fiasco with Donald Trump withdrawing his signature from the final communiqué. The refusal was accompanied by harsh criticism of Justin Trudeau, the Prime

Minister of Canada, whom Trump accused of lying and undermining the agreements<sup>1</sup> reached in La Malbaie.

### **Deconstruction of the Liberal West**

The liberal part of the European political establishment continues to nourish hope that the current US behavior is temporary phenomenon, not a long-term trend. The increasing contradictions between the two shores of the Atlantic are most painful for orthodox Atlantists, most vocal in the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, Sweden. As Britain withdraws from the EU, a number of European countries aspire for more United States in the Old continent. However, their desire is checked by a person who is supposed to symbolize the US – Donald Trump. So some of the America's European acolytes are ready to bow their heads in acceptance even of this twist of history. Others view the neoliberal opposition to Trump as their mirror and wait for their return.

For European pragmatists represented by such countries as Germany and France, Spain and Belgium, the contradictions, accumulating with Washington, serve as a signal for more independent stance and for the transformation of the EU into an autonomous player on the international scene. Berlin and Paris, supported by Rome, are pursuing a proactive policy of developing the military-political instruments of the EU and strengthening the capacity of the national military-industrial complexes.

The other category of EU member states – Italy, Hungary, Greece, Slovakia, partly Bulgaria and the Czech Republic – countries with strong populist movements and eurosceptic sentiments, are gaining more influence. The prime minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, assuming the post for the fourth time last May, addressed the Parliament stating that the era of liberal democracy had come to an end and called for replacing it with 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian democracy<sup>2</sup>. The confrontation with ideological rivals plays into his hands. The decision of the Central European University, sponsored by Jorge Soros, to relocate from Budapest to Vienna became a symbol of this. If previously Orbán was routinely portrayed by the liberal press as a political renegade and an outcast, now the flow of events in Europe shows that his personality, like many others, testifies to profound changes in the European thinking and reflects large-scale socio-economic changes. As a result, the established party political systems experienced a profound change.

In discourse on the liberal international order and New Populism, Britain is a special case. Its home-grown euroscepticism has gone much further than in Hungary, Greece or Italy. It not only brought eurosceptics to power, but also caused a political earthquake in the form of Brexit. However, the country's political elite, in spite of all its connivance to populism and strategic miscalculation, continues to portray itself as a genuine pillar of the liberal international order. To make these mutually exclusive attitudes compatible – the exit from the EU and leading positions in the Euro-Atlantic region, the British authorities have been

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<sup>1</sup> D. Trump reacted to the statements of J. Trudeau made at a press conference after Trump's departure about the injustice of the US tariffs on steel and aluminum.

<sup>2</sup> ITAR-TASS. The era of liberal democracy has come to an end – the Hungarian Prime Minister. May 10, 2018

engaged in incredible adventurism, including the Skripal case. Despite all the differences, the nature of populism in Britain is largely the same as in the US, Italy, France or Germany – the protracted stagnation in the middle-class income and the increase of social inequality. For example, according to the British Trade Union Congress, after the 2008-2009 world economic crisis the average real wages of British workers remain lower than 10 years ago, and will not return to the pre-crisis level until 2025<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Advent of New Populism**

New Populism has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has turned into a mainstream one. Euroscepticism, one of its currents, which until recently was an abusive term, now is an official policy of forces at the helm of power. The new prime minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte is at the head of the first Italian entirely populist government, formed by representatives of the Five Star Movement and the League. This government is unique in bringing together left and right populism, the genesis of which is very different, but the approaches to solving a number of transnational problems are similar. The concept of empire<sup>4</sup> was once rehabilitated in the Western historical and political literature to the extent of the rhetoric of "benevolent empire", especially in the US. At present the notion of "populism" is being rehabilitated as well. This is exactly what G. Conte stated in the Senate of the Italian Parliament on 5 June, indicating that the new government has nothing against being called populist in case it means respecting the views of the citizens.

Indeed, populism in the traditional meaning is the preserve of small parties and, consequently, of small groups of population. However, almost 50% of the citizens, who came to the polling stations at the election on 4 March, voted for the "Five Stars" and the League, which converted to a substantial majority of mandates in the parliament. In Italy and in a growing number of other European states New Populism becomes the pool of opinions expressed by the majority or a significant part of the population. As a result the former mainstream parties trade places with their opponents, thus becoming populist themselves and yielding mainstream ground to the new opinion formers.

Populism in the traditional meaning is a negative phenomenon, mapping the way for demagogues. On the contrary, many movements of New Populism contribute more to apprehension and resolution of modern crisis than the conventional ruling parties. For example, the emphasis on pragmatism in solving the problems of uncontrolled migration or improving relations with Russia appears to be more responsible and promising for stabilizing the situation in Europe, than the position of traditional centrist forces on these issues. Therefore, the arguments of those who accuse Russia of sympathizing with mainstream currents of New Populism allegedly with the aim to split up the EU, are not convincing. In fact, the reverse is true: Russia is at loggerheads with the British conservatives, who are main contributors to undermining European integration.

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<sup>3</sup> ITAR-TASS. In London, several tens of thousands of people showed up at the rally in support of the workers' rights. May 12, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Niall Ferguson. Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World. Penguin, 2003.

New Populism is often compared to and associated with the interwar years populism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which made it easier for the World War II to happen. Of course, there are ultra-right parties in Europe, and some of them embrace neo-Nazi ideology. But they do not fall under the category of New Populism. Moreover, they continue to maintain their marginal character. The political heights are contended by those, for whom national identity, not nationalism is a means to overhaul the European project, to solve, not to aggravate the problems of democratic deficit, social inequalities, national and supranational bureaucracies, feebleness of the EU foreign policy. Majority of those, who represent New Populism, oppose the use of military force abroad, “humanitarian” and regime change interventions, while defenders of the "liberal international order" usually initiate or participate in application of hard power, from sanctions of different kinds to military force. The policies of conventional ruling parties, not those of the new populists, failed to prevent the migration crisis and in some cases have made it worse. As a result, we have the rise of xenophobic and racist attitudes in Europe.

Populism is a neutral phenomenon in a sense that the public frustration can be channeled in different directions. Populism itself is neither negative, nor positive; it is a resource that may be used to implement either progressive or destructive political projects. The populism of British eurosceptics has dilapidated consequences, either visible or hidden, both for the European integration project, and for the international standing of Britain. At the same time, the populism of the "Five Stars", The League or Viktor Orban is also a reaction to various dysfunctions, both at the national and the EU levels, but it does not go as far as the British eurosceptics. The dissatisfaction of the voters, whose aspirations are the prerequisite for the electoral success, can ultimately benefit the EU, forcing the conventional political parties either to adapt and metamorphose or to give way to new political forces.

The success or failure in this self-transformation or self-annihilation of political establishments will be determined by two more issues. Firstly, they will be judged by the ability to implement the EU Global Strategy, in particular, the thesis of strategic autonomy. The second issue is normalization of relations with Russia and the revival of the concept of strategic partnership between the West and the East of Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

There is one more group of countries – Finland, Sweden, Austria and Switzerland, which adhere to different variations of neutrality. They have played an important role in the modern history of Europe as elements of checks and balances, which support peace in this versatile region. They have made a significant contribution to the de-escalation of various conflicts. The special role of neutrality was demonstrated during the visit of Vladimir Putin to Vienna in June, where the two countries signed an unprecedented agreement on the Russian gas supplies up to 2040. The federal chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Austrian president Alexander Van der Bellen made statements, which in effect run counter to the official policy of Washington and some of its allies towards Russia. However, Helsinki, and especially Stockholm have become a weak link in European neutrality. The sustained efforts of the USA to draw Finland and Sweden into NATO, if not de jure, then de facto, are by no means accidental. The next step in this direction was the signing on 8 May in Washington of a trilateral declaration on expanding military cooperation between the United States, Sweden

and Finland. Prior to this, in 2016, both North European countries had already concluded similar bilateral agreements with the United States.

The Euro-Atlantic solidarity is cracking at the seams. That makes the member states of the EU and its supranational structures review their strategic priorities. One of them was expressed in a statement in favor of normalizing relations with Russia, made by Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, at the conference "Re-energizing Europe – Now!" on 31 May. The conference was a concluding event of a major project, involving a number of leading European think tanks.<sup>5</sup> Growing geopolitical solitude of the EU is pushing the national capitals and Brussels towards revival of the imperative of the pan-European security and common economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

### **Transactional Relations**

The dreams of the orthodox Atlantists of preserving the "liberal international order" led by the United States of the pre-Trump period are becoming ever more intangible. It is difficult to give more convincing evidence of its malaise than the recognition of Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, who calls himself "an incurable pro-American European fanatically devoted to the idea of trans-Atlantic cooperation".<sup>6</sup> On the eve of the G7 summit in Canada, he was deliberating whether the new policy of the White House was merely seasonal or a symptom of the breakup of the Western political community.<sup>7</sup> Shortly before the EU – Western Balkans summit in May, Tusk said that the EU should be grateful to president Trump, "because thanks to him we have got rid of all illusions".<sup>8</sup> And, it should be kept in mind that Tusk is a Pole. "Euronews", the leading news channel of the EU, echoing such sentiments, called the Canadian G7 summit a symbol of the Western world split.<sup>9</sup> A new term, "G6 plus one", was coined, reflecting the further erosion of the club's influence following the reduction of its membership after suspension of Russia's membership.

The relationship between the US and its allies in Europe increasingly resembles the transactional type of interaction, a notion from the world of finance that means a concrete one-time deal. Until recently it was broadly used in the West to characterize the relations with Russia since 2014. In other words, it is a targeted cooperation on agreements, which the West is interested to strike with Russia, for example, the settlement of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, the salvation of the Iran nuclear deal, some elements of the fight against international terrorism. This type of relationship was officially embodied in the "five guiding principles for EU-Russia relations", adopted by the Council of the EU in March 2016. These days, the cooperation between the leader of the Western world with its other representatives is becoming transactional as well.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.newpactforeurope.eu](http://www.newpactforeurope.eu)

<sup>6</sup> The European Council is the highest political body of the European Union; consists of heads of state and government of the EU member states.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Tusk. Despite Trump, the West Must Stay United. New York Times, 6 June, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> ITAR-TASS. Pulse of the Planet. Europe. The EU should be prepared for the negative consequences of the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, - Tusk. May 16, 2018

<sup>9</sup> <http://ru.euronews.com/2018/06/11/g7-end-multilateralism>

Trump's way of thinking represents a strategy of a business manager, who primarily is interested in profitability of the enterprise. To be more precise, that is a type of profitability associated with the principles of shareholder economy (the interests of a narrow group of people focused on short-term benefits) in contrast with stakeholder economy. The shareholders for Trump is his electorate and the interests of Trump's opponents and other members of the Western community become irrelevant. Trump offers a type of a business model, which envisages taking into account as much interests of the US allies as is acceptable for the America's national interests, interpreted through a prism of Trump's election promises. And most of them are interpreted in a narrow economy-centered context.

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The political landscape of Europe is undergoing a profound change. The drama of Brexit, the US withdrawal from the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal, the fiasco of the G7 summit in Quebec, the intensifying trade war between the US and the EU, new populist governments, this time in Italy, the Catalan and Scottish separatisms, the EU internal quarrels on migration, the solidifying success of "Nord Stream 2" are symptoms of deep shifts in international relations. In general, the ongoing events confirm the emergence of the polycentric model of global governance. They also point to growing awareness in the EU of the need of strategic autonomy. The Russian foreign policy acquires more space for maneuvering in different geopolitical directions.

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