



BRO-POLITICS IN ACTION: TRUMP AND THE “PERSONALIZATION” OF FOREIGN POLICY

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Congratulations poured in from European heads of state and government as soon as it became clear that Donald Trump was turning U.S. battleground states red and winning the presidential election last November. Many presidents and prime ministers posted selfies and pictures with Trump, emphasizing their strong personal relationship and shared history. While congratulations to the new President might seem like standard diplomatic courtesy, the enthusiasm for the upcoming Trump 2.0 administration from Paris, Berlin, and Brussels appears less than sincere, given their rather complicated relationships with the first Trump administration. In contrast, leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who described Trump’s victory as “the biggest comeback in Western political history” and forecasted a golden era in US-Hungarian relations, expressed a strong eagerness to collaborate on shared goals. Similarly, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni praised the “unshakable alliance” between Italy and the U.S., demonstrating clear support for Trump’s win. Recognizing the heightened importance of personal relationships in dealing with Trump and his administration, European leaders are hoping to establish strong personal ties with the President. This trend report predicts how in 2025 further “personalization” of foreign policy is to be expected from the next U.S. administration. I present, through the examples of Orbán and Meloni, that European leaders already possessing close ties with the next U.S. president or his inner circle might have a significant head start to influence Trump’s Europe policy, with far-reaching consequences. Europeans who were not in power during Trump’s first term are pressed for time because the start of his new presidency is expected

to bring rapid and aggressive policy changes. With the Republican Party controlling all branches of government, Trump’s administration will likely prioritize advancing its agenda swiftly, particularly before the midterm elections in 2026, when Congressional support could wane. For European leaders who are new to office or lacked strong ties with Trump previously, this creates urgency. They have strong incentives to build closer relations with his administration, whether due to shared ideologies or fears of trade tariffs; however, they face a glaring challenge. They will have to compete for Trump’s very limited time, attention and interest, as European affairs are unlikely to be a top priority for the new administration.

An emergent illiberal alliance?

Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán have a strong and long-standing personal relationship which dates back to the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign when the Hungarian Prime Minister was the first European head of state to endorse the Republican candidate (The New York Times, 2016). Throughout Trump’s first presidency, Orbán consistently seized opportunities to praise him and appeal to his ego. Sources claim that Trump sought Orbán’s perspective on resolving the conflict in Ukraine, citing their numerous phone calls since Trump’s re-election and Orbán’s visit to Mar-a-Lago, where they allegedly discussed the issue (Radio Free Europe, 2024). The close friendship with Trump is just one layer of Orbán’s cooperation with right-wing MAGA (Make America Great Again) circles. The Hungarian government has sought to portray Hungary in the U.S. as a defender of traditional family and Christian values,

protecting these from migration or cultural shifts tied to concepts like ‘wokeness’ and identity politics. They have invested heavily in lobbying, such as funding generous scholarship programs for American conservatives, paying Tucker Carlson 160 thousand USD for interviews or fostering collaboration between Hungarian pro-government think tanks like the Danube Institute or Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Budapest and the Heritage Foundation in the U.S. For years, they have also been hosting the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), aiming to establish Budapest as a global hub for ultra-conservatives (Átlátszó, 2024).

Orbán also sees Trump as an ally that can help elevate the Hungarian prime minister’s standing in Europe. Orbán’s position on Ukraine and on sanctions against Russia diverges from European mainstream politics. He constantly calls for a ceasefire and publicly doubts the efficacy of support for Ukraine. Orbán argues that such efforts would not yield a strategic victory for Ukraine and were therefore a waste of resources (Euronews, 2024/a). He hopes that with Trump potentially brokering a ceasefire, the rest of Europe will fall in line. This would, in his view, strengthen his position in Europe. This strategy rests on several key assumptions: first, that Ukraine’s future and its ability to sustain its defensive war can be decided without meaningful Ukrainian involvement; second, that the withdrawal of U.S. support would force Ukraine to accept a settlement; third, that military and financial backing from EU member states alone would be insufficient to maintain Ukraine’s resistance.

The Rome-MAGA Axis

However, Orbán faces some rivalry within the right-wing camp. Given Italy’s economic size and influence, Italian PM Giorgia Meloni is even better positioned than Orbán to serve as Donald Trump’s primary interlocutor with the EU. In less than a decade, the leader

of the right-wing Fratelli d’Italia party, has transformed into one of Europe’s most influential political leaders (Politico, 2024). Over the past two years, she was able to solidify her government as one of the most stable in postwar Italy. Domestic stability in the context of weak leadership within the EU, has strengthened her standing in the EU. Meloni has been also very successful in positioning herself as a bridge between the rising far right and the liberal democratic European establishment. Her party has longstanding ties with Trump’s Republican circles. Moreover, Meloni has recently developed a good friendship with Elon Musk, who as one of Trump’s closest and most trusted advisors holds significant sway, having been tasked with spearheading “drastic reforms” of the U.S. government. Meloni could potentially shape Musk’s and Trump’s stance on migration, advocating for solutions inspired by remote processing centers (Euronews, 2024/b). She was even called a “fantastic woman” by Donald Trump after her recent visit to Mar-a-Lago (The Guardian, 2025). While Orbán and Meloni share similar political views about migration, identity and traditional values, they don’t see eye to eye on all major global conflicts. Meloni has been one of Ukraine’s staunchest supporters in Europe, meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky numerous times since Russia’s full-scale invasion. It will be interesting to see if and how the two closest European allies of Trump will attempt to whisper in his ear and push different agendas about U.S. policy towards Ukraine in the coming year. Of course, it’s not a novel or unique idea in transatlantic relations that good interpersonal relations between a US president and a European leader result in smooth international relations and cooperation in multiple areas. Let us just think of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who shared a deep ideological alignment, or the strong working relationship more recently forged between Joe Biden and Ursula von der Leyen, particularly

on issues like the conflict in Ukraine. However, such relationships are likely to gain an extraordinary importance with Trump's radical transactionalism. His political socialization was shaped by his career as a real estate mogul, where deal-making was central to success, and projecting strength and toughness was essential. As a result, he values interpersonal rapport rooted in displays of power and has little respect for those he perceives as weak.

The new era of Bro-Politics

European governments with already established friendly interpersonal relationships to the next U.S. leadership have access and lobby power to influence US policy early on. Four consequences derive from the trend of personalization of U.S. foreign policy for Europe: Firstly, friendly governments have a better likelihood of successfully outmaneuvering the expected trade embargoes and customs on their exports. This might come at the expense of European unity and solidarity, as Trump drive EU Member States to follow their short-term economic national interests over a common EU policy. Secondly, these European leaders might serve as interlocutors to other European capitals or to Brussels, raising their importance towards their European friends and rivals. Thirdly, European countries with traditionally strong ties to the U.S., such as the United Kingdom or Germany, could find themselves sidelined simply because left-leaning governments or leaders without strong personal relationships with Trump are in office. Fourthly and most importantly, critical issues such as the future of the rules-based international order, the European security architecture, and even the survival of the Ukrainian state could hinge on who previously flattered Trump's golfing skills or business acumen. This personalization of U.S. foreign policy will likely be reinforced by Trump's anticipated radical reforms to the U.S. bureaucracy,

which aim to concentrate decision-making power in the hands of the President and his appointees. Such reforms are expected to diminish the role of traditional institutions like the State Department in intergovernmental relations, thereby increasing the significance of personal relationships in shaping U.S.-European interactions.

European governments seeking the goodwill of the U.S. will need to set aside any antipathy toward Trump, as 2025 marks the year of “personalization” in U.S.

foreign policy—the era of Bro-Politics.

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