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Highlights from our parliamentary debrief on the U.S. elections

MP Open Call – *European Tour de Table, US Elections Edition*
12 November 2024

Following the pivotal U.S. presidential elections on November 5, **13** policymakers from national, European, and local parliaments in **Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden, and Ukraine** gathered on November 12 for a special edition of the *European Tour de Table*.

They convened to unpack the results of the U.S. elections, exchange views and perspectives on transatlantic relations and insights from different member states.

The exchange featured the input of three Open European Dialogue (OED) network members and a guest geopolitical analyst:

- Helmut Brandstätter, Member of the European Parliament (Austria);
 - Natalia Pouzyreff, Member of the French Parliament;
 - Emanuele Loperfido, Member of the Italian Parliament;
- and Rachel Tausendfreund, Senior Research Fellow, German Council on Foreign Relations.

What follows are the top 5 highlights from the parliamentary exchange.

#1 – Will there be unity in the pursuit of a common European defense?

The predominant theme during the exchange was the need for a unified European approach to defense, especially as the U.S. may lessen its involvement in European security. Participants emphasized the importance of developing a common defense industry, highlighting that bolstering regional security will require overcoming the gridlock of national interests.

Cautious optimism was expressed by some as to whether Europe would band together in unity, and some early praise was directed at the leadership of [Andrius Kubilius, new EU defense commissioner](#) and OED network member. Nevertheless, particularly against the backdrop of the continuous development of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine – which remained a key theme across the 60-minute debrief – concern was expressed as policymakers noted that the ongoing conflict remains existential for Europeans too - *“if Ukraine loses, Europe loses.”*

Support for increased European defense spending was voiced by a significant number of participants, particularly, though, a strong call to pragmatism was made: *“This is an over discussed topic – we need to avoid these big words like ‘strategic autonomy’ and concentrate on the many tools available to bridge national interests.”*

A general appetite emerged for exploring with greater seriousness the avenues for enhanced financial cooperation among member states. Investment strategies for security were brought up, with some support expressed for the [initiative by Kaja Kallas](#) to issue 100 billion euros in Eurobonds to invest in the European defense industry. Other suggestions included consolidating manufacturing capacities for essential military resources to support Ukraine and other strategic security objectives.

A recently elected representative of the European Parliament nonetheless expressed a sense of urgency, warning of the potential for a missed opportunity if Europe fails to rise to the occasion: *“can we build a common defense industry? We would save a third of the money if we did. Or is this simply not possible? Has everyone understood that if we don't act together, we will fail?”*

#2 – Living standards trump concerns over global international order

Reporting back from a U.S. election observation mission, a parliamentarian shared their insights into current voting patterns, highlighting how Americans voted with a focus on their own national interests rather than for the balance of the international order.

Paraphrasing American voters, the participant shared:

“we know that in Europe you are expecting a lot from our vote but we Americans, we vote for ourselves, for our interest. We don't vote for international interests, for the international balances, for the war in Ukraine, or the war in Middle East. We vote for our economy, we vote for our safety, we vote for our country.”

Indeed, inflation and broader economic concerns were cited by multiple participants as likely determining factors influencing the electoral results:

“in the U.S. the economy is the number one priority. For everyone. It is the mentality of the Americans, because that is how one can be able to distribute richness. In these last years, because of the global economic situation – the purchasing power of people has decreased, and people are afraid to not be able to maintain their living standards.”

A participant further pointed out that U.S. public opinion, when asked: *“do you want this huge*

global security presence?” is increasingly, it seems, willing to say no. This raised the question of what these election results reveal about the weighing of the value of international cooperation and responsibility *vis-à-vis* the value of prosperity and economic gains.

One parliamentarian, reflecting on the question, suggested that the electoral results might represent an opportunity and a good thing for Europe: “the European Union needs to start understanding that it has to become an ‘adult’, and behave as such. Ukraine will be the test for Europe. Every one of us is supporting standing with Ukraine and it doesn’t depend on Trump or the U.S. or other countries. It depends on us, and it will be our next challenge that we have to stand with Ukraine, even if the politics of the U.S. will probably change in the next months.”

#3 – Will Germany’s position on debt evolve?

Discussing the pathways toward greater European autonomy in security matters, Germany’s strict budgetary stance and its domestic fiscal constraints were mentioned as key barriers to greater European defense spending and debt-sharing. Many policymakers expressed the view that this stance was hindering the achievement of stronger strategic autonomy for Europe. One parliamentarian bluntly stated: “we have to convince the Germans to accept that we have to make debts.”

There seemed to be a shared consensus that a strong alignment within Germany’s next coalition government would be critical to advancing common European defense efforts. Depending on the election outcome, one participant noted: “a window of opportunity could be opening up” within the German political landscape to push for a prioritization of European security and the necessary defense investments.

A German participants expressed the fear of an overly ‘in-ward looking’ Germany during critical months for the EU agenda; he noted that in the coming months, Germany would inevitably turn inwards and focus on its own agenda, to the detriment of a European perspective. They encouraged: “all of you in your positions, regardless of party or point of view” to “try to push Germany and your German contacts, because a strong German position will be needed.”

#4 – Avoiding the trap of dangerous bargaining and how to keep the U.S. engaged

Another highlight from the conversation included the concept of ‘dangerous bargaining’ – a seemingly ‘catch-22 situation’ in which there is an interest in encouraging Europeans towards increasing their defense investments, but where, at the same time, there is fear that this would in turn de-incentivise a continued U.S. investment.

Another participant outlined: “that is not how it works anymore. If you want the U.S. to stay in and do something, Europe has to do more. Only by showing a real willingness and ability to actually do more, we’ll be able to keep the U.S. engaged. I think also the Trump administration is quite willing to stay engaged, particularly on air defense, nuclear, but they need to see movement from Europeans on other things.”

#5 – How will Europe choose to position itself vis-à-vis China?

Potential pressure from the U.S. on Europe’s relationship with China was also discussed. A participant noted that Trump’s chosen advisors are “China hawks,” highlighting that “Trump will want Europeans to make a decision about where they stand vis-à-vis China.”

Whilst achieving a unified EU stance towards China remains a challenge, with differing approaches across member states, the relationship also represents an area where the potential for an effective cooperation of EU members can yet hold promise for the development of a “real, comprehensive, common strategic vision” for the EU as a global competitor.

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