

So Faraway, So Close: The Domestic Roots of Transatlantic Crisis

by Valentina Tomadin

ABSTRACT

Recent developments in the European and American political landscape highlight the crisis that nowadays characterises transatlantic relations. Questions have emerged about the wave of populism and nationalism that is on the rise in both the US and Europe and its implications for the transatlantic alliance. This report summarises the debate held at the conference "So Faraway, So Close: The Domestic Roots of Transatlantic Crisis" (Rome, 15 April 2019), organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The conference was structured in two sessions, the first on the rise of nationalism and populism in Europe and America, the second on the nationalist-populist threat to transatlantic relations.

USA | Europe | Nationalism | Populism | Transatlantic relations

keywords

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by Valentina Tomadin*

Introduction

On 15 April 2019, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) held a public conference on the domestic roots of the transatlantic crisis. The debate focused on the rise of nationalism and populism in the European and American political landscape and on its implications for the transatlantic relations. Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena provided the conference room.

Session I: Nationalism and populism in Europe and America's politics

The first panel focused on the rise of nationalism and populism in Europe and America's politics. The session was chaired by Luca Argenta from FES. The panellists were Nathalie Tocci, IAI Director, Ulrike Guérot, professor at the Danube University Krems, and Jeremy Shapiro, Research Director at the European Council on Foreign Relations in London.

Luca Argenta welcomed participants and thanked the organisers for making the event possible. He recalled some key moments of the history of transatlantic relations, whose roots lay in the military alliance established through the North Atlantic Treaty signed in 1949. He mentioned the importance of the fall of the Berlin Wall, celebrating this year its 30th anniversary, and the end of the Cold War, which for many symbolised the victory of freedom and the strengthening of liberal democracy and led to more peaceful international relations in much of Europe. Argenta remarked how the optimistic predictions of those years seem to have overlooked the long-term implications of those changes. Indeed, in the last few years, important transformations took place both in Europe and America. The Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump's election as US president in 2016 are the

* Valentina Tomadin is intern at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

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expression of important shifts in the politics of two of the leading countries of the Western world. A new age of populism and nationalism is on the rise both in Europe and in America, and it is leading to the deterioration of transatlantic relations. First clashes are already happening on important issues such as defence, climate change and multilateral cooperation. What are the domestic roots of the crisis of transatlantic relations? What role do populisms and nationalism play in Europe and in America?



From left to right: Jeremy Shapiro, Nathalie Tocci, Luca Argenta, Ulrike Guérot

Is there a transatlantic wave of populism?

Nathalie Tocci argued that the populist wave has not been always uniform. She retraced some of the most important moments of the European crisis since 2016. The fear and terror resulting from the Brexit vote were replaced by euphoria with the results of the French elections of 2017, which saw staunchly pro-EU Emmanuel Macron crush populist-nationalist challenger Marine Le Pen. Macron gave proof that mainstream parties can still win in Europe, as long as they present themselves in new forms, as Macron did by projecting an image of a post-partisan politician committed to upholding the fundamental values and achievements of liberal democracy and European integration. Tocci stressed how the sense of crisis we are living today results from the perspective that the two main political families in the European Parliament (EP) could lose the majority in the next election. Nonetheless, the most disastrous prospects forecast populists to gain “only” 25-30 per cent of seats in the EP. Tocci also presented an optimistic analysis of pro-EU forces. The Greens have been working together in the EP for a long time, they are not new to the European game and know how to play it. Besides, it is the first time that there is a real political polarisation within Europe, which could finally spark the democratic discussion about the European Union that many have complained was missing. Finally, nationalists are not good at working with each other or at doing compromises or bilateral cooperation. Tocci stated that even though threats to European integration are real, they are less connected to the institutional cycle than they are to contingencies.

Ulrike Guérot stressed the importance of recognising the incisive rise of populism in Europe and of acknowledging how pro-EU parties lost their bearings in the decade-long European crisis. She highlighted how generational dynamics led the old stakeholders to leave without being replaced by a new, younger leadership, a dynamic completely opposed to the one that interested the populist wave which counts many young leaders. Guérot then argued that even though the pro-EU parties are expected to get 70 per cent of seats at the next elections, there seems to be little agreement among them on what Europe means, a fact that has in the past

jeopardised their ability to deliver on proposed policies. She offered a reflection on the relationship between social and national. Today the main social economic cleavages in Europe are not among countries but cut across classes within several countries. Guérot pointed out how in all European societies liberals are facing populists, a confrontation that is now envisioning Europe and the EP elections as the necessary battleground. She proposed to reconsider the social crisis at the European level instead of within national borders.



Jeremy Shapiro

What is the importance of American politics for the transatlantic crisis?

Jeremy Shapiro pointed out that the US is the place where the crisis began and even though there are commonalities among the populist movements on the two sides of the Atlantic, it is important to take into consideration the domestic peculiarities reflected in national economies and policies. He mentioned how surveys across European countries show that the main problem is a lack of trust in the establishment, and not issues connected to migration or the European Union itself. A similar situation can be observed on the American side, where successful political campaigns, from George W. Bush's to Trump's, have been heavily based on anti-establishment positions. In a political climate of increasing electoral difficulties, defined by demographic changes that are affecting American society, the Republican party repeatedly chose a campaign strategy that focused on populist, nationalist and anti-migration rhetoric rather than pursuing a change of policies and the expansion of the Republican electoral coalition. Shapiro said that the doubts concerning the 2020 elections do not regard how people will vote but which voters will in the end go to vote: will the Republican electorate consistently vote for Trump? Will the larger Democratic-leaning constituency show up in number sufficient to send a Democrat to the White House? For what concerns transatlantic relations, he argued that historically they are the result of the political will and commitment of the establishment. Trump, whose election was based on strong anti-establishment rhetoric, has reduced considerably the number of establishment representatives in his entourage. This represents the clear signal that the latter are not necessary to win an election, which is leading to an even more persistent erosion of the base for the transatlantic alliance.

In the Q&A session, Nathalie Tocci stressed the uncertainty that is nowadays characterising social democracy, which seems to have lost its connection to the people and their needs, and she called for a redefinition and reinvention of what social democracy means. Ulrike Guérot singled out the importance of distinguishing between nationalist neoliberal populist and nationalist socialist populist. Tocci also pointed out that we are living in a post-American hegemony

situation, which defines a fracture in the structure of international relations. Nonetheless, she added, neither America nor certainly Europe can deal with other powers and challenges alone. Shapiro, while agreeing to cooperation being the wiser choice, highlighted that the US will not be driven by this logic in the near future because at the moment there are no global challenges or threats that America cannot face alone – although facing does not mean addressing effectively.



Nathalie Tocci

Session II: The nationalist-populist threat to transatlantic relations

The second panel focused on the nationalist-populist threat to transatlantic relations. The session was chaired by **Tobias Mörschel**, head of the Rome office of FES. The panellists were Riccardo Alcaro, from IAI, Claudia Major from the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin and Dana Allin from the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

Claudia Major contended that it is very difficult to establish a clear causal link between the rise of nationalism and populism and the crisis in transatlantic relations. She focused on three main points: what is actually changing; what it means for Europe; and a call for European strategic autonomy. Firstly, she stressed how Europe and America are now envisioning substantially different worldviews, and that the long-lasting assumption that we are better off together is now crumbling under the weight of different interests and different policies. Secondly, Major observed that Europe's response to Trump's foreign policy is fragmented and based on bilateral reactions, feeding in this way disconnect and mistrust. She insisted on the need to find new ways to connect European countries with each other and strengthen European solidarity. Finally, she pointed out that even though a transatlantic alliance is desirable, today's panorama of US-European relations necessary calls for alternatives. The European states should start working together towards strategic autonomy, not with the intent of entirely decoupling from the US but seeking to create greater room for autonomous action. Strategic autonomy would allow Europe to set its own rules instead of being at the receiving end of someone else's strategic decision chain.

Dana Allin drew a picture of today's political landscape focusing on the "sovereignisms" that are pervading narratives as well as actions in both America and Europe. Expressions of it can be recognised on the American side in the speeches of National Security Advisor John Bolton or Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo and in such actions as the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the Iran nuclear deal. On the European side, the Brexit vote was a clear expression of the willingness of pursuing independence at all cost, even at the expenses of economic wealth and unity. In such a political status quo, the question is whether transatlantic structures are strong enough to contain these centrifugal dynamics. Incidentally, he noted that the JCPOA seems to be surviving even



From left to right: Dana Allin, Claudia Major, Riccardo Alcaro, Tobias Mörschel

without the US. Allin reminded the audience that reactions to sovereignty are also taking place. For instance, today for the first time Great Britain is experiencing the presence of a strong pro-EU group. Refusing the idea that disasters are structurally defined, Allin highlighted that if just 70,000 votes had been distributed differently across three US states in 2016 (Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin), we would be living in a very different situation today. He stressed that it would be irresponsible simply to expect that more mainstream politics will be back, but he showed a certain confidence that that result is likelier than not. He conceded though that this line of reasoning would change totally if Trump gets re-elected.

Riccardo Alcaro defined the transatlantic relationship as resilient, reminding the audience how the transatlantic alliance has had multiple ups and downs for over seventy years. However, he admitted that Trump presents the biggest challenge the alliance has ever faced. The US president promotes the narrative that the European Union is an extension of German power and was created to take advantage of the US. Thus, Trump sees a divided Europe as an American interest. A hostile America is certainly less willing to continue to guarantee the European order and support international institutions and regimes that amplify Europe's international influence. The sum of these factors has resulted in a crisis of American cooperation with Europe on a global level. Wondering which the remaining options for Europeans are, Alcaro stated that they must learn to play the multipolar game. European strategic autonomy, he specified, is the question of our time and it should not be a question of small steps in defence and security policy, but it should be about regaining creativity and capacity of innovation. In conclusion, Alcaro made a call on Europe to be more confident since it has the resources to be an autonomous actor in the multipolar game.

How to understand the divergence between the narrative of the US government that is hostile to the EU and the reality of America increasing its military presence in Europe? Alcaro remarked that the US will most probably not leave Europe since it holds a strategic position there both towards Russia and the Middle East. However, he added, the risk is that the US will use its bilateral military ties as a tool to divide and rule Europe. Both Alcaro and Allin expressed the fear that contingencies will

become structural issues if Trump is re-elected. Major highlighted how today there are few people in the Trump administration's top positions to mitigate his anti-Atlantic instincts. Major argued that it is necessary to work on Europe's strategic autonomy urgently, given that its implementation will require a very long time and that Europe is being left with no other options.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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Director: Alessandro Marrone (a.marrone@iai.it)

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