

2017: Trump, Brexit and Nervous Anticipation

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The next 12 months will be an extension of 2016's political earthquakes. This will come as an aftershock for some and for many others as a long-cherished opportunity to make the world a safer place through cooperation instead of confrontation. Yet nothing is written, and the scenarios for the future are as variable as ever.

It is clear that the two defining developments of 2016, measured by any yardstick, were Brexit and Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. elections.

The year has produced a reverse trend to globalization and further integration into the European Union, and marked a watershed in the civil war in Syria, where the recapture of Aleppo by the Syrian government has given a peace settlement a chance.

Revolt against 'United States of Europe'

If Charles de Gaulle were still alive, the founder of the Fifth Republic in France would have probably said that Britain has reneged on a short-term whimsical ambition to be part of Europe.

The 52 percent of the 72.2 percent of UK voters who backed Leave in the watershed referendum on 23 June constitutes a peculiar mix of characters, but have a universally robust motivation.

Free trade benefits, as the original driver of Britain's interest in the link-up with the continent, have thinned out while its trade deficit soared, alienating domestic-market-oriented small and medium businesses.



[How would Russia have voted in Brexit referendum?](#)

Many of the affluent rural areas in the country's southeast – crucially, not the cities, with London residents voting categorically against Brexit – as well as political figures who resent what they see as enforced subordination to “unelected” executives in Brussels joined the Leave camp.

Being part of a European family and abiding by common rules of co-existence and interaction turned out to be a disproportionate burden for some residents of the British Isles.

It has been noted that the “sleeping giant,” as Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh once called English nationalism, has awakened. “For the real sleeping giant is not Scottish nationalism, but the English version,” he wrote in one [article](#) on his website.

Basically, Brexit is a revolt against excessive EU regulations and a failure to tackle unregulated migration coupled with a fear of further concessions to the architects of the “United States of Europe,” who Leavers perceive are demanding that the UK relinquish even more national sovereignty.

Ironically, Britain, which was once at the forefront of the globalization movement, has lost the enthusiasm to climb up another level.

The risks of losing out to other nations with a competitive edge and undermining one’s national identity now outweigh the advantages of standardizing the Western world. As Lord Ashcroft’s super-poll on Brexit [underlined](#), “The principle that decisions about the UK should be made in the UK” inspired the Leavers.

For Russia, the sudden resurgence of “national sovereignty” in the set of values accepted by part of the British political class is a welcome sign. After all, at the core of it is the Westphalian principle of respect for national diversity and abstention from forcibly reforming other nations in one’s image.

Rise of the counter-elites

The year was also marked by the mainstream media’s intimidation of counter-elites with certain political affiliations, for instance the National Front (FN) in France or Alternative for Germany (AfD).

There was plenty of labeling of such parties as “ultra-right” and “populist,” yet this oversimplification looks out of touch with reality.

Neither the NF nor the AfD can be vilified for threatening to mistreat illegal migrants, especially since the European Commission suggested in early December that individual nations – to dissuade asylum seekers from moving to northern countries (Germany, in particular) – should start sending migrants back to Greece, starting in March.

Populism has earned a negative connotation, though the Cambridge English Dictionary defines it as “political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want.”

Yet is not democracy (translated from Greek as the “rule of the people”) intended as well to give “ordinary people... what they want”?

It’s easy to agree with Jon Henley, The Guardian’s European affairs correspondent, when he [claims](#): “A wind of anxious, resentful, anti politics-as-usual change is blowing across Europe.”

Counter-elites are gaining in popularity in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. Time seems to be on their side.

Trumpeters of a new world order

International affairs face an overhaul after the U.S. political class has splintered, producing proponents of an introverted policy aimed at putting the “house back into order” (under the slogan “Make America great again”) and a non-interventionist foreign policy.



[Putin echoes Trump on foreign policy as Russia softens rhetoric](#)

However, Trump's much-deplored "isolationism" does not cover Russia: The conciliatory overtures from the U.S. president-elect toward Russia, backed by a telephone call and correspondence between Trump and Putin, testify to this.

"One thing is plain as the world looks toward 2017. It cannot ignore Vladimir Putin's Russia," Peter Ford [professed](#) in the Christian Science Monitor.

The effectiveness of the combination of diplomacy and force applied by Moscow in the conflict in Syria and around has helped Russia regain its former status of a power broker and mediator. Some Western political scientists have even [claimed](#) that in 2016 Russia has finally "revised" the results of the Cold War in its favor.

Notably, "of all the 2016 presidential candidates, only Donald Trump embraced a policy prescription designed to reverse the West's provocative eastward expansion, reduce tensions and test Russia's true intentions," recently [wrote](#) Robert W. Merry, contributing editor at global affairs publication The National Interest.

Yet, any "reset" on the bilateral track might come at a cost. Trump seems to have adopted classical Kissinger-style rebalancing tactics, which is expected to reverse the legacy of Ping-Pong Diplomacy between the capitalist U.S. and Communist China, begun in 1971.

Just as Nixon's administration masterly played the Chinese card against the Soviet Union, Trump's government will attempt to align with Moscow in its overtly bellicose stance toward Beijing.

It has already made Putin emphasize that relations between Russia with China surpass the level of a "strategic partnership," by doing so sending a signal to Washington that this is non-negotiable.

Nevertheless, Putin's "red line" does not inhibit rapprochement with the United States, which the Russian president has defined as the "only superpower in the world."

...All in all, 2017 promises no more routine easy-riding. Trump, Brexit and the rise of counter-elites in Europe will invariably challenge the old world order, if not change it altogether.

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