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The Sources of American Conduct

How MAGA Ideology Could Turn the USA into the EU's Implacable Adversary



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Something is amiss in the transatlantic world. Every week since January 2025, it seems, new ruptures sunder the ties that once bound American and European allies so closely together. Every new upset leaves European policymakers dismayed, confused, and stunned. The present confusion about the recent U-turn in American foreign policy centres on one single question – or rather, a desperate exclamation: *Why?* Why would the United States put the existing European security architecture in jeopardy with such reckless abandon?

It is still too early to tell which drivers prevail in the policymaking of Trump-II. Washington's foreign policy decisions so far follow the "duck/rabbit" illusion pattern, in which the same image can be seen to represent radically different figures. Either Washington's decisions are seen as instances of Trump's zero-sum economic logic, or as omens of grander, ideologically driven ambitions. Tariffs, for example, can be viewed as a strictly economic instrument to get a "fairer deal" for the United States, or as the first phase in a destructive confrontation with America's perceived enemies. Likewise, Trump-II's shift

on European security can be interpreted as a strategy of conservation, saving American dollars for issues the electorate cares more about, or as a dark announcement of geopolitical realignment. The same basic uncertainty applies to the rest of Trump-II's behaviour on the world stage. Will the administration obey an economic logic or will it subordinate any such logic to imperatives of a different kind?

"The economy is the last guardrail we have." That is how a colleague from the Bertelsmann Foundation expressed his hope, in a private video call, that the market would deter the Republican Party from attempting a domestic *coup d'état*. The same is true for Trump-II's policy towards the EU. But what if even this economic guardrail crumbles? What *coup* or revolution in foreign policy can the EU expect from Washington if economic concerns turn out to be subordinated to ideological ones? Should the risk of economic fallout fail to deter Trump-II, where does the movement behind Trump's success, Make America Great Again (MAGA), stand on Brussels?

The World according to MAGA

It should be noted that MAGA is a remarkably young ideology. As a political worldview, MAGA is still crystallizing. It is still up for debate what counts as one of its "core" propositions and what does not. Every week, the contours and outer bounds of this ideology are being contested and probed in political skirmishes within the conservative community. "Liberal democracy" took centuries to consolidate conceptually. MAGA has only just begun this process. Thirty-six percent of registered voters now indicate that they identify as MAGA supporters, which means the movement now needs to cater to the ideological needs of tens of millions of Americans representing a wide range of backgrounds and viewpoints.¹ Unsurprisingly, then, plenty of internal contradictions remain unresolved – for now. Yet essential points of overlap, and of consensus,

1 Ben Kamisar, "Polling shows growing number of Republicans identify with the MAGA movement," *NBC News* (April 2025).

are rapidly coming into focus. First, we need to consider MAGA's views on the United States themselves. Only then will we be in a position to make sense of MAGA's views on the EU.

The Internal Enemy

All varieties of MAGA begin from the axiomatic assumption that MAGA's domestic political opponents are not just rivals for power but treasonous and conspiratorial malefactors. Not only Democrats are viewed in this light. Equally so RINOs or "Republicans In Name Only," moderate Republicans who have betrayed their country by collaborating with the Democrat enemy. The moderate-to-progressive traitor is invariably described as "un-American" and "alien," promoting "a completely foreign set of (...) values."² In an important sense, this starting premise of the MAGA movement is as old as the Republican Party itself. Since its establishment in the 1850s, the Republican Party has consistently viewed the Democratic Party and its enablers as a more or less illegitimate force, as a party of (closet) secessionists and political cheats.³

When it comes to describing the kinds of views that are supposed to render Democrats traitors to the nation, MAGA ideologues differ on the details but agree on the basics. Former Speaker of the House and Republican luminary Newt Gingrich's long-standing take on this subject by now represents a moderate (!) account: Democratic politics are "secular" and "socialist," promoting corruption, inefficiency and disadvantage across the United States. Since the United States are fundamentally a godly and capitalistic nation, Gingrich argues, the Democratic Party must be considered a threat to the American way of life.⁴ More radical still are voices like those of conservative firebrand David Horowitz, author and radio host Mark Levin, political theorist Patrick J. Deneen and legal scholar Adrian Vermeule, who suggest in various ways that Democratic

2 Newt Gingrich, *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine* (2010), pp. 2-4, 33.

3 Lewis L. Gould, *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party* (2014), pp. 2-5.

4 Newt Gingrich, *To Save America*, passim; Gingrich, *Understanding Trump* (2016), p. 109.

values are not only un- or anti-American but destructive of any public good. According to Deneen and Vermeule, American culture broadly understood has taken a catastrophic turn towards hyper-individualism and mindless hedonism, with “progressive liberals” driving this societal degeneration.⁵ By interesting contrast, Levin and Horowitz (and more recently, Gingrich too) charge that Democrats have ushered in a “Marxist” and “totalitarian” regime in which speech is policed, free thought is subverted, and undesirable minorities persecuted at will.⁶ All agree, however, that the Democratic Party represents political death irrespective of national context. At the furthest end of the MAGA spectrum, Elon Musk represents the natural endpoint of this train of logic. The Democratic Party is, according to Musk, quite simply a “death cult,” because it is hostile to human activity and creativity as such. If progressives have their way, Musk argues, humanity itself will be extinguished.⁷

All MAGA figures agree, at minimum, that the American Constitution exists in writing only. In practice, the promise of American liberal democracy has long been corrupted and distorted by scheming progressive elites. “Progress,” on the MAGA view of things, represents a mere euphemism for the silent coup that America’s internal enemies have wrought on the once-great republic. Whether this development should be answered by counter-revolution or by a nihilist politics of creative destruction is a point of contention within the MAGA movement.⁸

5 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future* (2023), Chs. 1-2; Adrian Vermeule, “Beyond Originalism,” *The Atlantic* (March 2020).

6 Mark Levin, *American Marxism* (2021); David Horowitz, *The Enemy Within: How a Totalitarian Movement Is Destroying America* (2021).

7 Elon Musk & Joe Rogan, “#2054 – Elon Musk,” *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast (October 2023).

8 The full title of Curtis Yarvin’s influential Substack blog is “[Gray Mirror of The Nihilist Prince](#).” While nihilist figures like Yarvin and Costin Alamaru pursue the final demolition of the American constitutional order, so as to create space for an entirely new political project, most other MAGA theorists, including David Horowitz and Elon Musk, see their mission rather as a restoration of the (spirit of the) American Constitution.

Given these extreme views on the malignity and alienness of the Democratic Party (and its enablers), it is essential for MAGA thinkers to insist on the conspiratorial and deceptive methods by which the Democrats have managed to win elections in recent decades. Donald Trump’s repeated claims of fraud in the 2020 elections are supposed to bridge a real explanatory gap: how can the Democratic Party win elections if it is indeed manifestly evil? Trump’s assertion of electoral fraud is only the least sophisticated MAGA account of “progressive” trickery. Slightly more elaborate is the explanation preferred by David Horowitz and Elon Musk, who assert that the Democrats have deliberately imported millions of illegal immigrants and “bought” their votes through clientelist social and economic policies.⁹ But the most elaborate MAGA explanation involves large-scale indoctrination by a conglomerate of intellectual and cultural producers. This explanatory strategy, deployed by Gingrich, Musk and the political blogger Curtis Yarvin, posits the nefarious influence of the media, the entertainment industry, the legal profession, the schools and the universities – all taken to be ideological weapons of the progressive enemy. In this vein, Gingrich speaks of a “media-academic-legal elite.” In this same vein, Yarvin likes to speak (in his typical occult style) of “the Cathedral.” Musk likewise muses on the “mainstream media” being “in lockstep,” before expressing his worry about the global indoctrinating influence of George Soros, who supposedly “hates humanity.”¹⁰

If the progressive Democrat is a scheming traitor, on the MAGA view of things, then, the question remains what or whom the Democrat is scheming for. If Democrats are disloyal to

9 David Horowitz, *Final Battle: The Next Election Could Be the Last* (2022), Ch. 4; Elon Musk & Joe Rogan, “#2223 – Elon Musk,” *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast (November 2024).

10 Newt Gingrich & Callista Gingrich, *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nation’s History and Future* (2016), p. 146; Gingrich, *Understanding Trump*, Chs. 4-6; Curtis Yarvin, “[A brief explanation of the cathedral](#),” *Gray Mirror* blog (January 2021); Elon Musk & Joe Rogan, “#2054 – Elon Musk,” *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast (October 2023).

the United States, then what or whom are they loyal to instead? According to MAGA, American Democrats are (witting or unwitting) participants in a worldwide “globalist” conspiracy against the Free World. After WWII, the United States had a unique chance to impose its superior way of life on the rest of the world, so this narrative goes. The opportunity was squandered when a small elite persuaded the United States to commit themselves to an international law regime and a logic of economic integration designed to hamstring American greatness. Any proud assertion of military strength would henceforth be met with censure by an “international community.” American economic dominance was suppressed by “climate goals” and “free and fair trade.” Seditious, anti-American voices in the universities and elsewhere could go scot-free because of “human rights.”¹¹ MAGA views America’s postwar history as one great Lilliputian conspiracy, with the weak tying down the strong through laws and moral concepts. Democrats and moderate Republicans have volunteered in shackling America, so goes this view, because they loyally serve the globalist plot rather than their own nation.

MAGA spokespersons differ on the precise nature and composition of the globalist elite conspiring against American greatness. Steven Bannon, one of the most influential voices within the MAGA movement, prefers an economic approach, in which free trade-promoting organizations such as the World Economic Forum and the World Trade Organisation are the main drivers of a “globalisation” conspiracy to destroy American industrial greatness. Elon Musk and venture capitalist Peter Thiel prefer a psychological variant of the same story, in which a “woke mind virus” has been propagated by global influencers, such as George Soros, Bill Gates and the Democratic leadership, to destroy individuality and to bend national publics perpetually to their will. Costin Alamariu A.K.A. Bronze Age Pervert, a self-declared “fascist” thinker representing MAGA’s

furthest ideological extreme, uses an even broader civilizational narrative. On Alamariu’s account, “bugmen” – a shadowy cabal of subhuman technocrats – since time immemorial have sought to suppress male beauty and the glorious national violence in which “real” (American) men by nature are supposed to engage.¹²

Despite these differences among MAGA voices, a couple of institutions are mentioned with special frequency as central hubs of the “globalist” evil that has infested the United States. These are the World Economic Forum, the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, the United Nations, and – last but not least – the European Union.

The External Enemy: the EU

It is only partially correct that the MAGA worldview holds the EU in contempt. To the MAGA ideologue, the EU is indeed the epitome of geopolitical impotence and decadence. Yet precisely because the MAGA ideologue believes that institutionalized weakness has somehow overcome the strong since WWII, he is forced to attribute an almost supernatural power to Brussels. The EU presents itself on the world stage as a champion of free trade, of human rights, of ambitious climate policies, of multilateral and consensus-based politics. From the MAGA point of view, therefore, the EU is a beacon of the kind of globalist witchcraft that has successfully constrained American supremacy all these years. MAGA contempt for

11 Cf. Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018), p. 5.

12 Steven Bannon & Ross Douthat, “Steve Bannon on ‘Brogarchs’ vs. Populism,” *Matter of Opinion* (January 2025); Elon Musk & Joe Rogan, “#1470 – Elon Musk,” *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast (May 2020); Peter Thiel, “Nationalism Breaks the Dogma Machine,” speech at the National Conservatism conference (November 2021); [Costin Alamariu], *Bronze Age Mindset* (2018), pp. 13, 51. See also Victor Davis Hanson, *The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalization Are Destroying the Idea of America* (2021). On Alamariu’s influence within the MAGA movement, see Graeme Wood, “How Bronze Age Pervert Charmed the Far Right,” *The Atlantic* (August 2023).

the EU is – paradoxically – spiked with a serious dose of fear.

To MAGA, the EU represents a threat of a similar order to China. China mainly poses a geostrategic danger, whereas the EU mainly poses an ideological one. It is not just that the EU is the largest trading bloc in the world, rendering it another rival to American economic supremacy. It is mainly that the EU can call on legions of influential sympathizers and co-conspirators within the United States. That is why it is essential to understand the depth of MAGA's hatred for the Democratic enemy to understand the extent of MAGA's antipathy towards the EU: they form two sides of the same paranoid coin.

Wherever we look in MAGA political thought, we find the assertion that Democrats and Eurocrats play on the same anti-American team. The Israeli-American philosopher Yoram Hazony, for example, submits that the history of “Western nations” can be written as “a struggle between two antithetical visions of world order,” one a healthy nationalism and the other an insidious imperialism. Hazony sees the EU and liberal America, acting in “uncanny unanimity,” as the chief architects of an “imperial” and “globalist” order hostile to the “virtue” of nation-states such as Britain, Israel, and the United States. Likewise, MAGA pundit Saagar Enjeti suggests on a recent podcast that the reason why the United States is expending so many resources on Ukraine, despite having no national stake in the conflict, is because Democratic leaders such as Joe Biden have been brainwashed since youth into placing European interests above American ones. Similarly, Project 2025's “Mandate for Leadership” asserts that “progressive policymakers and pundits in America,” concentrated in “Washington, D.C. and other centers of Leftist power like the media and the academy,” both “disdain the Constitution's restrictions on their ambitions” and “enthusiastically support supranational organizations like the United Nations and European Union, which are run and staffed almost entirely by people who share their values.” Bronze Age Pervert, finally, identifies prominent Democrats such as “Hillary Clintong

[sic] or Adam Schiff” and “the chiefs of the EU bureaucracy with tiny moleman eyes behind small glasses” as joined together in a global “bugman” class conspiring against the strong, preventing them from oppressing and annihilating the weak as they should.¹³

To the MAGA mind, then, there is no real difference between the Democrat and the Eurocrat. The EU functionary is a scheming Democrat in European clothing; the Democratic politician is essentially a Eurocrat with an American accent. We will fail to understand Washington's current animosity towards Brussels until we grasp this basic pattern of projection. The EU is taken to represent an externalized version of the Democratic-progressive horror that the United States narrowly escaped in November 2024. In this way, every violent suspicion, every conspiratorial narrative surrounding the Democratic Party – in fact, the entire history of polarization in U.S. politics – becomes directly relevant for explaining MAGA's fear and loathing of the EU. Trump-II's war on woke, for example, is entirely continuous with a policy of confrontation towards the EU, as the president of the Heritage Foundation, Kevin Roberts, emphasized in a 2023 speech: “One would be hard-pressed to better describe the soft, secular, elitist totalitarianism of the EU, the UN and the woke industrial complex today. They openly, proudly and even violently attack people's natural human affinities.”¹⁴ Through acts of projection such as these, Brussels is held co-responsible for every political sin attributed to the Democratic Party in recent years. If the Democratic Party committed electoral fraud in the elections of 2020 to obtain power, then in a way, so *did the EU*. If the Biden administration was responsible for ruining American households by fuelling inflation, then in a way, so *was the EU*. Etcetera.

13 Hazony, *Virtue of Nationalism*, pp. 4, 8, 16-17; Saagar Enjeti & Krystal Ball, “Europe Freaks Over Trump Sideline Them in Ukraine Talks (...),” *Breaking Points* podcast (17 February 2025); Kevin Roberts et al., *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (2023), p. 10; [Alamariu], *Bronze Age Mindset*, pp. 4-5, 55, 128.

14 Kevin Roberts, “The Sun Has Set on Global Europe,” speech at the National Conservatism conference (May 2023).

Given this widely shared and deep-seated animosity towards Brussels, MAGA's European policy recommendations are confined to a very narrow spectrum. On the more isolationist end stands a view like Curtis Yarvin's. On this isolationist view, the EU is unworthy of any type of sustained defence because it represents a tragic mistake in world history. The EU's eventual erasure, in fact, ought to be celebrated by all. "The goal of a Trumpist foreign policy in Europe is to withdraw American influence from Europe," Yarvin writes. Instead of actively intervening in Europe, the United States ought to "give Russia a free hand on the Continent... all the way to the English Channel." Partly because such a withdrawal would reflect a justified strategic disinterest in Europe, partly because the hastened demise of a liberal organization such as the EU would strengthen antiliberal forces within the United States and elsewhere. On the more interventionist end, however, stands the view of someone like Steven Bannon. According to Bannon, the destruction of the EU is essential to the survival of the MAGA revolution. Hence, no means must be shunned to destabilize the Union. As Bannon himself put it with exceptional succinctness: "The heart of the globalist project is in Brussels. If I drive the stake through the vampire, the whole thing will start to dissipate."¹⁵ The unprecedented electoral interference of Bannon, Musk and J.D. Vance, boosting Eurosceptic parties in a range of European countries, must be understood in the light of this interventionist MAGA mission to tear the EU apart.

In short, MAGA attitudes towards the EU range from expectant jubilation about its impending collapse, to an all-out crusade against it. That is all. That is the spectrum.

Conclusion

We cannot say with certainty how MAGA attitudes towards the EU will translate to foreign policy under the Trump-II administration. Two areas of uncertainty cloud present predictions. The first is the type of uncertainty with which this alert began: we cannot accurately tell the extent to which the White House will allow itself to be corrected by economic developments. We know that President Trump wields tariffs as political weapons, but will he continue to do so even when the American economy starts to nosedive? The second type of uncertainty speaks to the ideological divergences within the MAGA movement sketched at the tail end of this alert. Will isolationist or interventionist voices prevail in MAGA's "Europe policy" debates?

And yet the current signs are ominous. Firstly, Donald Trump has shrugged at the prospect of an economic recession, calling economic harm a necessary aspect of any "period of transition." J.D. Vance has echoed these points in a recent Fox News interview, while Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has insisted that economic pain would be "worth it" in the grand scheme of things.¹⁶ Such statements ought to be taken as warning signals that Trump-II is bracing itself for serious economic damage in pursuit of its ideological aims. Secondly, Washington's activities towards the EU so far fits the interventionist interpretation of MAGA's "Europe policy" much better than the isolationist one. At the helm are not Curtis Yarvin and Saagar Enjeti but Elon Musk, J.D. Vance and Donald Trump himself. As mentioned above, Musk and Vance have actively thrown their weight behind Eurosceptic political forces on the Continent. Trump and Vance have implicitly or explicitly threatened the annexation of Greenland, formally a territory of Denmark. Elon Musk's departure from Washington has been rumoured

15 Yarvin, "A new foreign policy for Europe," *Gray Mirror* blog (January 2022); Paul Lewis, "Steve Bannon: I want to drive a stake through the Brussels vampire," *The Guardian* (November 2018).

16 "Trump says a transition period for the economy is likely," *CNBC* (March 2025); "Vance says you can never predict the future, when asked to rule out recession," *Reuters* (March 2025); "Lutnick says Trump's policies are 'worth it' even if they lead to recession," *CBS News* (March 2025).

recently, but the MAGA faction most likely to gain from Musk's ouster is headed by Steven Bannon. If the recent past is any guide to the future, American confrontation with the EU is likelier than American retreat.¹⁷

MAGA ideology has the potential to turn the United States into a revanchist power and an implacable adversary of the EU. MAGA's revenge, like Russia's, is directed at a liberal world order conspiring against the greatness of powerful nations. Unlike Putin, however, most MAGA ideologues understand their mission of revenge as a positive project of *liberation*. After America's Great Liberation from the evil clutches of globalism, Europe deserves to enjoy the fruits of "genuine" liberty, too. However, MAGA's self-perceived benevolence does not make Trump-II any less dangerous to the EU. In fact, it may push Washington and Brussels into a spiral of escalation far more difficult to escape than the kind of spiral Brussels and Moscow have embarked on. For any EU move towards strategic autonomy, towards political and military integration, towards foreign policy assertiveness – in short, any attempt to resist MAGA's "benign" influence – might be interpreted across the Atlantic as a sign that the globalist conspiracy is alive and kicking.

17 "Vance meets German far-right AfD leader amid election interference criticism," *Reuters* (February 2025); "Musk rallies the far right in Europe. Tesla is paying the price," *Reuters* (March 2025); Lisa Rein et al., "White House studying case of Greenland takeover, long in Trump's sights," *The Washington Post* (April 2025).

About the Clingendael Institute

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www.clingendael.org
info@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

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About the author

Liam Klein is a Research Fellow at the Strategic Foresight Programme, having joined the Clingendael Institute in June 2024. As a researcher in strategic foresight, he scans the geopolitical landscape for emerging trends, builds future scenarios based on those trends, and assesses relative risk. Within this broader research agenda, he is especially interested in American politics, in Republican and conservative political thought in the USA, in polarization and extremism, and in the centrality of ideology to 21st-century politics more generally.