

“Will Trump or Biden be the parenthesis?”

Take-aways from #FlorenceLive conversations season II

#FlorenceLive 3 on “America and the World in 2021”, 24 November 2020

by Jonas Brendebach (Research Associate at the STG)

Three weeks after the U.S. presidential elections, and following the opening of the academic year at the School of Transnational Governance [by Hillary Clinton](#), the STG continues the theme of the United States and its interaction with Europe with the third #FlorenceLive conversation focused on “America and the World in 2021”. The high-level panel brought together renowned experts on transatlantic affairs, featuring Anne Applebaum (journalist, historian and staff writer for *The Atlantic*), Carl Bildt (Co-Chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations and former Prime Minister of Sweden) and Peter Spiegel (US managing editor of the *Financial Times*). The panel was moderated by Alex Stubb (Director of the EUI School of Transnational Governance and former Prime Minister of Finland). Students of the STG’s new Master programme in Transnational Governance contributed with questions to the panel.

The discussion evolved around four themes:

- election campaign, result and transition,
- changes we can expect from the new Biden-administration,
- the nominations for Biden’s national security team,
- the future role of US and US-European cooperation on the global stage.

10 key take-aways:

Analysis

1. **The election was a success.** The highest voter turnout over a century ([over 66,5 per cent](#) and counting) and the relative calm of the unusually lengthy vote count, attest to a functioning democracy and the resilience of democratic institution in America. In spite of President Trump’s sustained assertion of fraud, state officials, observers and courts have detected no major irregularities in the election process so far. No violence has erupted following Trump’s refusal to acknowledge the results, nor have there been signs of foreign meddling, as had been the case in the 2016 presidential elections. The president who vowed to upend the political system in the U.S. can be expected to relinquish power reluctantly, yet peacefully on 20 January 2021.
2. **But Trump’s legacy will haunt US politics.** Donald Trump’s presidency, his campaign and the aftermath of the election were poised on creating an alternate reality: Supported by certain media outlets and by excessively using social media, Trump denied the Corona-crisis, attributed the strength of the US economy exclusively to his economic policies of tax cuts and state borrowing, argued that his foreign policy had restored American strength and prestige in

the world, and he continues to deny Joe Biden's election victory. Trump has caused "a split in reality" leading his supporters in believing in a world of alternative facts. People no longer only hold different opinions but live in different realities, leaving American politics in a worrisome "epistemological crisis" (quotes from Anne Applebaum).

3. **The spectre of 2024.** If Joe Biden received the most votes ever cast for a presidential candidate (ca. 80 million) and won by a big margin – "there is no place for Schadenfreude", argues Alex Stubb. Trump has received the second most votes in U.S. history (ca. 74 million). With economic inequality deepening, not least during the corona crisis, and the widespread discontent with politics, today's Trump voters may return in 2024 with a vengeance: "History will show whether it was Trump or Biden who was the parenthesis", states Carl Bildt.
4. **New Biden-Administration I: Its foreign policy outlook.** The panellists commonly expected major changes from President Trump's unwieldy "America First"-approach: Biden's foreign policy will be more coherent and strategically comprehensible, he will revive the conversation with U.S. allies and be supportive of multilateral institutions, including the EU and UN. There might be a "honeymoon for Europe" (Carl Bildt) with the U.S. returning to the Paris Climate Accord, remaining in the WHO and, possibly, reviving a modified Nuclear Agreement with Iran.
5. **No Obama 3.0: Biden will pursue "democracy agenda".** Panellists saw two tendencies in Biden's camp: One would prefer the restoration of a pre-Trump world, while the other would look more creatively at the future. Biden, who during his campaign had announced to hold a "[Summit of Democracy](#)" after entering in office, could be expected to pursue in stronger terms than Obama an agenda of promoting democracy and American values abroad. Adhering to the latter tendency in the Biden camp, freshly nominated Antony Blinken as Secretary of State and Jake Sullivan as National Security Advisor, both of whom had held senior government positions under Obama, could be expected to support this agenda. It remained to be seen, however, how any new initiative would differ from past attempts, such as the little-known "Community of Democracies" founded in 2000 by then Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright. In sharp contrast to the past three U.S. presidents, [Biden's security and foreign policy team](#) can draw on decades long experience and an established standing in foreign affairs.
6. **New Biden-Administration II: Two strong women.** Designated Vice-President, Kamala Harris, will be the first female Vice-President and the first to be the daughter of immigrants. Given her past as State Prosecutor in California and her track record as Senator in Congress, she is likely to focus on justice reform and police reform, including addressing race issues. She has no foreign policy profile, but paradoxically might be travelling a lot at the start of the new administration when President Biden will be absorbed with domestic policy issues. Presumed future Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen, was seen as interesting pick given here relatively progressive views on the monetary and fiscal role of governments in support of the labour market.

Recommendations

7. **Recognize the change in a "less traditional, more transformative world" (Carl Bildt).** European governments, who have sighed with relief after the U.S. election, have to acknowledge that with the US returning to the table there is no going back to traditional approaches to international challenges. The pandemic is changing societies, technological change, digitization and tech competition have accelerated, past attempts to tie China into a

Western dominated multilateral order cannot be revived. As a result of the past four years, the U.S. is de facto longer “the unquestioned leader of democracies around the world” (Applebaum). More importantly, these four years, with the many U.S. retreats from agreed common policies, have cast doubts about any long-term relation with the U.S. Any commitment of a Biden-Administration might be reversed in 2024.

8. **Expect more pressure and get your act together.** Following an expected “democracy agenda” and in line with repeated calls from all recent U.S. administrations for greater European engagement in security and geopolitical affairs, the “Europeans should expect more pressure” to take a stand, e.g. on Belarus or vis-à-vis Russia in Ukraine (Peter Spiegel). In response, French talk about “strategic autonomy” and German hopes for a revival of transnational relations are not enough. “Europeans have to get their acts together”, says Carl Bildt, “to be a more relevant partner, to be able to do things”. This may include standing up to the U.S. at times, helping Europe to become more respected.
9. **Work on transatlantic agenda.** China will inevitably be a top priority for a common transatlantic agenda. Both the Obama- and Trump-administrations have elicited only lukewarm support from the European Union on issues such as 5G and intellectual property. With the return of a more pro-European U.S. president, the EU member states should consider making new offers. The U.S. under Biden will equally be looking to Europe for robust support in Libya and on Ukraine as well as in facing Russia’s regional revisionism. Beyond geopolitics, trade and the regulation of the internet and internet platforms (“Until now, the EU has been the only regulator of Silicon Valley”, Peter Spiegel), are prime candidates for intensified U.S.-European cooperation.
10. **Reckon with lingering “Trumpism”.** Even after four years, “Trumpism” remains an incoherent, amorphous set of disruptive ideas and approaches to (international) politics. Nevertheless, we must expect it to survive in many variants, to speak to deeply anchored nativist elements in the Republican Party and to continue to influence U.S. politics. If potential future Republican leaders, such as Mike Pompeo or Ted Cruz, seem to bring less erratic personalities to the table, they are likely to continue strands of Trump’s “America First”-agenda, including suspicion if not hostility towards multilateralism and the European Union. A Republican controlled Senate could give a taste of this. Time until 2024, hence, is precious to make new transatlantic agenda stick.

Online reactions: The event was livestreamed on YouTube and elicited comments and questions from an international audience. As of 1 December, the video has been viewed some 661 times.

(Re)watch the conversation at stg.eui.eu/events/FlorenceLive