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Growing anxiety in Europe over Donald Trump

By Ulrich Rippert

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As it becomes increasingly likely that Donald Trump will be the Republican presidential candidate in the autumn, concern is growing in European capitals over the consequences. The fact that Trump's ascendancy is of major international significance is recognised on all sides.

Last Wednesday, when it became clear that the multibillionaire had convincingly won the Indiana primary election and his two remaining competitors had announced their withdrawal, editorial offices were taken aback. The word "shock" made the rounds.

The foreign affairs editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, titled his piece "American primaries: Shock—it's Trump!" *Der Spiegel* headlined its commentary "The shock is complete." Broadcaster NTV spoke of the "Trump shock" and "helpless Republicans." *Die Zeit*'s article was titled "Donald Trump: America's worst nightmare."

Frankenberger posed the question of why shock dominated the editorial offices when they were well connected and kept informed by correspondents in Washington. His answer was that they had falsely evaluated the animosity of the Republican establishment toward Trump. His "outsider" status had been not a handicap, but an advantage. He had become a spokesman for a section of those who oppose the political establishment.

Already on the Monday prior to the Super Tuesday contests on March 1, Frankenberger had written: “Trump is harvesting the anger of voters where others have been its victims. He is profiting from the anger of many white voters towards ‘Washington,’ the perception that the country is on a fundamentally wrong course as a result of social and cultural shifts.” Trump can portray himself as “the new leader and healer in relation to the concerns and needs of ordinary people,” and “say the most incredible things with hardly any consequences” because the anger towards the elites is so great.

“American society is much more enraged than it has been for a long time, the class contradictions are much sharper than before,” wrote Frankenberger, noting that the previous years of crisis had fundamentally changed American society. “And now Trump comes along and gathers together the victims, the angry, the enraged, those without inhibitions, who celebrate Trump’s uninhibitedness and audacity. And to whom it is irrelevant what the world thinks or if it is speechless about what is going on in the United States.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* concluded its assessment with the words, “We are writing in 2016, the year when the disillusioned strike back.”

The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* attempted to assuage concerns, writing that Trump’s elevation meant the rise of “Hillary Clinton as the bearer of hope.” For the Democratic Party, the primary result in Indiana was good, the mouthpiece of the Swiss banks declared. Clinton could now focus on Trump as her competitor, and Trump’s unpredictability increased Clinton’s chances of victory.

This was contradicted a day later by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which wrote, “Speculation that Clinton will have an easy time of it against Trump in November—because her rival is unelectable, because he has insulted too many groups of voters, because he offers simple solutions to a complex world”—was plausible, but it underestimated the “unprecedented anti-establishment furore” that had emerged in the primaries.

The newspaper does not view Trump’s extreme right-wing politics as the main danger for Europe, but rather the social movement that underlies his rise.

In an article titled “America is in turmoil,” Frankenberger wrote that there was in the population a “desire to settle accounts with the political establishment.” And such a sentiment, “which has political and economic, social and cultural roots,” is not restricted to the US, but is making itself felt in other Western countries.

The article continued: “In France, a new president will be elected in the coming year. How will the leader of the extreme right-wing National Front, Marine Le Pen, perform?” In Austria, a far-right candidate had suddenly emerged in the lead, and in Germany the AfD was registering growing support. The impact this would have on the federal elections next year was just as incalculable as Trump’s candidacy had been a year ago.

The evaluations of Trump’s political declarations have been restrained to date. Responding to his foreign policy speech last month, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said he

could “still not identify a course.” Steinmeier added, “It seems to me as though it is not quite spelled out yet.”

Trump announced his intention, under the slogan “America first,” to focus foreign policy solely on US interests. Steinmeier remarked, “I only hope that the election campaign in the US does not evade accepting reality.” The future US president would have to accept that the global security framework had changed. “To that extent, ‘America first’ actually offers no answer,” he said.

Trump’s declarations, according to Steinmeier, were “not entirely free from contradictions” because he stated his intention to make America strong again while at the same time indicating a retreat. “These two things don’t seem to me to fit together.”

Josef Joffe, writing on the same issue in *Die Zeit*, said Trump’s foreign policy speech permitted all possible interpretations. In some statements he had “outflanked Hillary Clinton from the left.” It was no accident that the former secretary of state was seen as the “lone hawk” among the remaining candidates. She had always appealed for a “firm stance,” Joffe wrote, “whether against Assad in Syria or Chinese expansionism.” He continued, “Instead of retreat, she preaches aggressive defence and loyalty to alliances.”

By contrast, Trump said he wanted “to bring peace to the world.” He would be happy “to make friends out of old enemies.” He had issued conciliatory words towards Russia, while speaking out against free trade deals.

“Bernie Sanders says more or less the same,” Joffe wrote, and asked, “Is Trump a red in capitalist clothing? Certainly in one sense: the Western left has switched sides—away from the internationalism of the 20th century to protectionism and inwardness.”

But the “other face of Donaldism” was the unrestrained nationalism, the exaltation of one’s own nation—and these reflexes were clearly right-wing. “America first! was his central message in his foreign policy speech.” He thereby placed himself in the tradition of the American right wing, which, with the support of the anti-Semite Charles Lindbergh, fought under precisely this slogan against US participation in World War II against Hitler.

While discussion of the causes and consequences of the rise of the far right on both sides of the Atlantic has been the dominant response, voices are beginning to be raised in support of a Trump victory.

The *Münchener Merkur* wrote a comment titled “A US President Trump could offer us an opportunity.” It opined, “Many in Europe are looking towards America with concern and have nightmare visions of Donald Trump becoming the 45th president of the United States. But this would be an opportunity.”

Europe had long faced the challenge of finding alternatives to greater or lesser dependence on its partner, America. But thus far, all had fallen by the wayside: “No common defence policy in the EU, no common finance policy. Europe is in a shambles just now, one only has to consider the refugee policy.”

Perhaps the words of French historian Emmanuel Todd, who described a German-French alliance as a world power, were somewhat exaggerated. But “in essence, Europe has a lot of potential for the future.” Britain would then have to decide “whether it prefers to stand with Europe rather than a world power in retreat.”

The EU was a “historically unique project” that had to newly invent itself. “If America isolates itself under President Donald Trump, this could be the opportunity.”