

How Europe views the American electoral crisis

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Three weeks after the American election, with the conflict still raging over who will be the next US president, concern is growing in Europe that a continuing power vacuum in Washington could destabilise the entire world situation.

For several days after the election the European press for the most part made mocking comments about the sloppiness of the election and the manipulation of votes in the “home of democracy”. Too often in the past, American politicians had paraded themselves as the world standard for democracy and justified military operations in other countries with talk of establishing democratic norms.

Subsequently, however, more cautious voices began to be heard raising the question: what is the significance of such a crisis in the centre of world power? “The next president of the US will be a king without a country,” wrote Stefan Kornelius, the long-time Washington correspondent of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, who now heads the foreign office of the newspaper. Under the headline “Power Without Mandate,” Kornelius opined that the near-even vote tally for both candidates meant Bush or Gore would take office “in the knowledge that the other half of the population has rejected him.” He concluded, “They lack any clear mandate.”

The division of the country, expressed in the bitter conflict between the candidates, would be “mirrored in dozens of duels throughout the country”, Kornelius wrote. Since the impeachment campaign, he continued, “the fanaticism of which American politics is capable” was common knowledge.

Kornelius went on to predict that should the “extreme situation” emerge of a “Republican president working with a Republican congress ... there would be more than a few Republicans who would see the single-party majority in the legislative and executive branches as a free ticket. Interest groups—headed by the gun lobby and the religious right—would call in their debts from a president for whose election they made sacrifices and maintained a low profile.”

The conservative newspaper *Die Welt* wrote that “after the most dramatic election night in living memory” the awareness grew “that this could be just the beginning of something enormous—a constitutional crisis” whose reverberations would go well beyond those arising from the Watergate scandal.

Reading the *Die Welt* article by Uwe Schmitt, one got the

impression that the author had gone to his bookshelves to read a few paragraphs on the American Civil War and the origins of the US Constitution. He ascribed the establishment of the electoral college system to the fears of the Southern slave states of “the majority of the mob”, and finally posed the question: was anything impossible today in America? “What began on Wednesday night could become the second American revolution,” he warned.

Evidently shocked by his own estimation of the situation, Schmitt in a number of subsequent articles has emphasised the strengths of American democracy, assuring his readers that it will stand up to the present crisis.

Behind the façade of normal diplomatic activity, the majority of European heads of state have pinned their hopes on an election victory for Democrat Al Gore. Particularly in London, Berlin and Rome the Clinton-Gore administration is regarded as a political role model. But the so-called “third way” is also favoured in other European capitals. Pointing to the supposed success of the American economy, European countries have systematically dismantled their social welfare systems, while at the same time attempting to avoid large-scale social conflicts and maintain the existing parliamentary framework.

Although the destruction of social services in most European countries still does not measure up to the extent of the devastation in the US, a situation has emerged at a political level that parallels developments in the United States. A privileged social layer, whose wealth has mushroomed over the past few years as a result of stock market trading and speculation, is attempting with all its might to exert its political influence, demanding the elimination of what remains of the social security system in Europe.

It is therefore understandable that the ruthlessness exhibited since election night by the Republican candidate, who is bent on gaining the White House by any and all means, has met with broad approval from conservative parties throughout Europe. On the night of the election, when the media for a time prognosticated a Republican victory, the head of the right-wing Christian Social Union in Germany, Michael Glos, issued a statement designed to exploit the US election for domestic purposes. Calling the victory of Governor Bush a “clear signal”, Glos declared, “It puts a stop to the turn to the left in

the Western democracies.”

The British newspaper *Sun*, part of the global media empire of Rupert Murdoch, was even more blunt. In its opinion a Bush victory would serve to “destabilise the comfortable club of left-wing heads of government”. The *Sun* has published one article after another repeating in frenzied tones Republican charges that Gore and the Democrats are seeking to “steal” the election.

Concerns about a Bush victory among European heads of state are not restricted to worries about a dramatic growth in the domestic political influence of conservatives and right-wingers; they also fear a change in American foreign policy. Statements by Republican candidate Bush and his advisors indicating a retreat from international political obligations have been carefully noted. In particular, Bush's suggestion that he might order the withdrawal of American troops from the Balkans, because it was demoralising for “soldiers and officers to spend their time escorting children to school or kindergarten instead of fighting”, has raised the question of how far an incoming American government would be prepared to respect international obligations and agreements.

In this respect, the reaction in Russia is of particular interest. While in its official statements the Kremlin exercises diplomatic caution, the predominant standpoint within the political elite is that Bush should be supported because the Republicans favour a more narrowly defined nationalist orientation. A victory for Bush is seen as leading to a weakening of the geopolitical offensive of the US, with advantages for Russia.

Typical was a commentary published October 30 in the Russian weekly *Expert*. “On foreign policy—despite their warlike gestures—the Republicans remain pragmatists and traditionalists,” the journal wrote. It continued: “According to their plans, there is to be no step-by-step dismantling of the sovereignty of other states or the transformation of the world into a ‘multicultural salad’. One can expect Al Gore to try and out-trump the globalist Clinton, and it is likely that under his rule the US and NATO would threaten to finally assume the role of ‘world policeman and world teacher’. In the event of a Bush victory, however, the Americans will concentrate more on their own national interests and refrain from continually attempting to teach the rest of the world how they should live. It is possible to get something going with such people.”

This is also the opinion of left-wing circles in Russia. A short time ago Boris Kargalitsky spoke of his participation in the Prague protests against the International Monetary Fund and said, “In various states there are agents of globalisation and they can be dangerous for us.” Referring to the American elections, he continued, “For us, the Democrats are more of a threat.”

An echo of this argument is to be found in the German daily newspaper *Junge Welt*, which before German reunification functioned as the official organ of the East German Stalinist youth organisation and now regards itself as a left-wing paper.

Two days before the election, Rainer Rupp wrote an article with the title: “The lefts in the German Federal Republic and the USA—Gore or Bush is more than a choice between the frying pan and the fire”. The article stated: “Against the background of foreign policy restraint by George W. Bush, it is even more astonishing that Al Gore, the candidate of the transnational companies, who is intent on intervening everywhere as a world policeman, is favoured by the German left. This is probably bound up with the arch-conservative social positions of Bush. But that is something for the Americans themselves. Washington's foreign policy, on the other hand, is something which affects us all.”

This expresses a thoroughly narrow-minded, nationalist point of view that displays not the least interest in the fate of the American working class. The Stalinist and ex-Stalinist “left” in Europe opposes the only viable path for American workers to defend their social conditions and democratic rights—a break from both parties of American capitalism and the building of a mass party of its own, based on socialist policies.

The outlook of Kargalitsky and Rupp also ignores the fact that a Bush government in America will encourage and strengthen the most reactionary forces in Europe and worldwide. Above all, however, such an estimation is based on a thoroughly mistaken view of the likely changes in American foreign policy under Bush and Cheney.

The withdrawal of the US from international obligations does not mean any lessening of American interference in world politics, and certainly does not point to a reduction in military activity. Quite the opposite! Under a Bush government American foreign policy would likely take even less notice of the interests of European governments and other partners than has been the case up until now. Instead, under Bush, America would likely tend to orient its policy to its most immediate and narrow national interests. One thing is for certain, whichever candidate ultimately ends up in the White House, military adventures will increase and differences between the Great Powers will grow.



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