

# Obama seeks to placate concerns over Trump in final tour of Europe

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The final European trip by US President Barack Obama has been characterised by attempts at political placation and damage control. The outgoing US president is seeking to calm fears over his successor Donald Trump, to encourage close collaboration with him and on this basis retain a NATO dominated by the US as the most important military alliance.

In this, he is relying on German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom he hopes to secure as a leader of a strong Europe under German leadership. Obama's promotion of his designated successor is so obvious that the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described him as Donald Trump's "press spokesman."

After a brief stay in Greece, where he gave his backing to Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who is deeply despised for his austerity policies, and held a speech in a cultural centre belonging to the billionaire ship owner Stavros Niarchos, Obama arrived in Berlin Wednesday evening for a three-hour dinner with Merkel.

Thursday was also given over entirely by Obama to his German host. An official meeting at the Chancellor's Office was followed by a joint press conference as well as interviews with *Der Spiegel* and public broadcaster ARD. French President François Hollande, British Prime Minister Theresa May, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy were only invited to join the meeting early Friday, before Obama leaves early Friday afternoon.

An article authored jointly by Obama and Merkel appeared in the *Wirtschaftswoche* journal on Thursday titled "On the future of Transatlantic relations." The close relationship between Germany and the United States was praised. That friendship "is based on our shared commitment to personal freedom and dignity,

which only a vibrant democracy under the rule of law can guarantee."

The article invoked the global recognition of international law as "a prerequisite for stability and prosperity," as well as "our deep respect for human dignity," "protecting our planet" and other "common values." It then proclaimed, "It is our treatment of those most vulnerable that determines the true strength of our values."

These unctuous and hypocritical phrases are aimed at defending NATO and the wars in the Middle East. "Our countries are committed to collective defence within the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) because we want to preserve the security of the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole. We cooperate closely in the fight against terror, including in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, because we must protect our citizens and because we will not sacrifice our way of life to the enemies of freedom," the article stated.

In Berlin, Obama tirelessly noted that his successor also supported this line. Asked at the press conference if Trump's appointment of right-wing extremist Stephen Bannon to the position of chief strategist and his decision to make a meeting with UKIP leader Nigel Farage his first with a European politician did not prove the exact opposite, Obama responded, "I am always optimistic." This was what his life had taught him. "The solemn responsibility of the office" would result in Trump changing. Obama said he would do everything to assist him in this.

Obama showered Chancellor Merkel with praise and compliments. He lauded her strong leadership and noted that she had cooperated closely with the US during the Ukraine crisis and over Syria. Asked if he supported a fourth term in office for Merkel, Obama answered that he would not intervene in the politics of

another country—but if Merkel chose to stand, she would have his vote, if he could vote.

But Obama found it difficult to convince even US-friendly media outlets that Trump does in fact support such a course. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* dismissed Obama's Athens speech, writing Thursday, "That was someone speaking who does not seem to have understood what has happened over recent days." The paper described it as a "nice touch" that the US president, who proved incapable of preventing Trump's rise, "finds himself during his farewell European tour next to Europe's biggest deceiver, [Greek] Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras."

The same newspaper published an opinion piece by James W. Davis, who teaches international politics in St. Gallen in Switzerland and was a member of Hillary Clinton's advisory team. He described the fear rampant in Europe "that something fundamental from the already weakened trusted world order is breaking apart." In the past, all American "governments, whether led by the Democrats or Republicans, recognised the basic principles of open markets and collective defence." A president in the White House had never "openly questioned the fundamental pillars of the American-led order... Donald Trump, who has been elected president, does so."

At their joint press conference, Obama and Merkel also affirmed the significance of the European Union, whose dissolution will be accelerated by Trump's victory. The right-wing nationalist forces that celebrated victory with the Brexit referendum in Britain are on the rise throughout Europe.

In Italy, the government of Matteo Renzi is currently in a battle for survival ahead of a constitutional referendum in early December. If new elections are called, opponents of the EU have a good chance of winning. In Austria, the presidential election will take place at the same time, in which Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the far-right FPÖ, has strong prospects of winning. And in France, Marine Le Pen of the National Front is being heavily tipped in presidential elections in early spring next year.

As in the United States, the rise of these right-wing populist forces is a result of growing anger with the establishment parties on the one hand, and the lack of a progressive alternative on the other. The ruling elites are much more fearful of the social opposition

developing in an independent, anti-capitalist direction than they are of the far-right parties, which will direct the social anger into a reactionary blind alley. They merely have tactical differences with them. This is the reason why Obama is advocating cooperation with Trump in Europe.



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