

What President Trump means for Poland and Europe

Foreign policy

American Presidents' domestic policies are often restrained by Congress. They have far greater room for manoeuvre when it comes to foreign affairs. Trump plans to significantly scale back America's global engagement while simultaneously boosting defence spending.

His position on NATO has been a bit more ambiguous. He argues that the US spends far too much money on its Atlantic commitments and also called on the Alliance to move its focus towards the Middle East and away from Russia and Ukraine. This could prove deeply problematic for Poland. Warsaw feels threatened by recent Russian expansionism, would like to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank, and relies deeply on US defence guarantees.

All NATO member states are obliged to come to each other's aid if attacked, a mechanism known as Article 5. Trump could be unwilling to back some of America's Easternmost European allies in case of an invasion, past pronouncements suggest. This is a dangerous statement in an age of hybrid warfare, when attacks can be hard to define. Polish diplomats could soon seek clarifications from their American counterparts on this matter.

Climate and energy policy

Trump has strongly criticised global emissions reductions deals and pledged to defund all of the UN's climate change programmes. He does not require Congressional approval to withdraw from the agreement signed at the Paris Climate Conference, though this would prove a lengthy and difficult process. Such a move would undoubtedly undermine many global efforts to fight climate change, with existing deals seeming moot without the world's second-largest emitter on board. There is a small silver lining for Europe, though: it has a bigger chance of becoming a global leader in the renewables market if the American government withdraws some support from its green industries.

Trump has also pledged to invest more into clean coal technologies. Such solutions could, if implemented properly, significantly reduce coal-related emissions and make coal-based power ecologically competitive. The biggest problem is that such technologies are not yet ready for a large rollout: they are neither sufficiently reliable nor economical at this moment. Poland would benefit significantly from a US-led clean coal breakthrough as well, which would allow it to keep its massive coal sector afloat while simultaneously fulfilling EU emissions reduction pledges.

Global trade

Trump described NAFTA, a regional free trade agreement, as 'one of the worst deals ever made'. He will probably prove similarly critical of other international trade pacts. American trade negotiations with Europe could come to a complete halt. Poland might suffer as a result: its small and medium businesses would benefit significantly from increased trade with the US, Polish policymakers argue.

Trump's proposed 'trade war' on China could also have a knock-on effect on Europe's economy as well, argues Polish economist Prof Bogusław Grabowski. It could reduce China's involvement in global trade and decrease Chinese demand for European goods and services. This could slow down EU growth somewhat, Prof Grabowski adds.

Relations with Europe

Many European leaders have clashed with Trump on matters such as his proposed ban on Muslim migration, climate change, and European cohesion. Such disputes could, if managed badly, lead to deeper divides in the near future, especially when combined with Trump's isolationist stance. Policymakers from Europe's centre-right parties often attended Republican summits in past years; they dropped out this year, deeply disdainful of Trump's rhetoric. Expect similar splits in the near future.

Richard Maher, a European political scientist, also argues that a Trump victory could embolden far-right Eurosceptic groups as France's National Front. Still, there is little hard data to support this hypothesis. Any initial difficulties that a Trump administration faces could also be used by mainstream political parties as a key argument against a rising populist tide.

The limits of Trump

Trump has promised a near-revolution. Yet political realities tend to tame even the most ardent reformists. Jacek Bartosiak, a Polish geopolitical analyst, points out that national interests rarely change, even as national leaders do. There is no indication that this case will be different.

Policymakers could also hold back some of Trump's other proposals. Republican elites are generally much more hawkish on matters such as Russia and Ukraine and oppose many of Trump's domestic ideas. Expect some tensions with Congress, even as Republicans dominate therein.

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