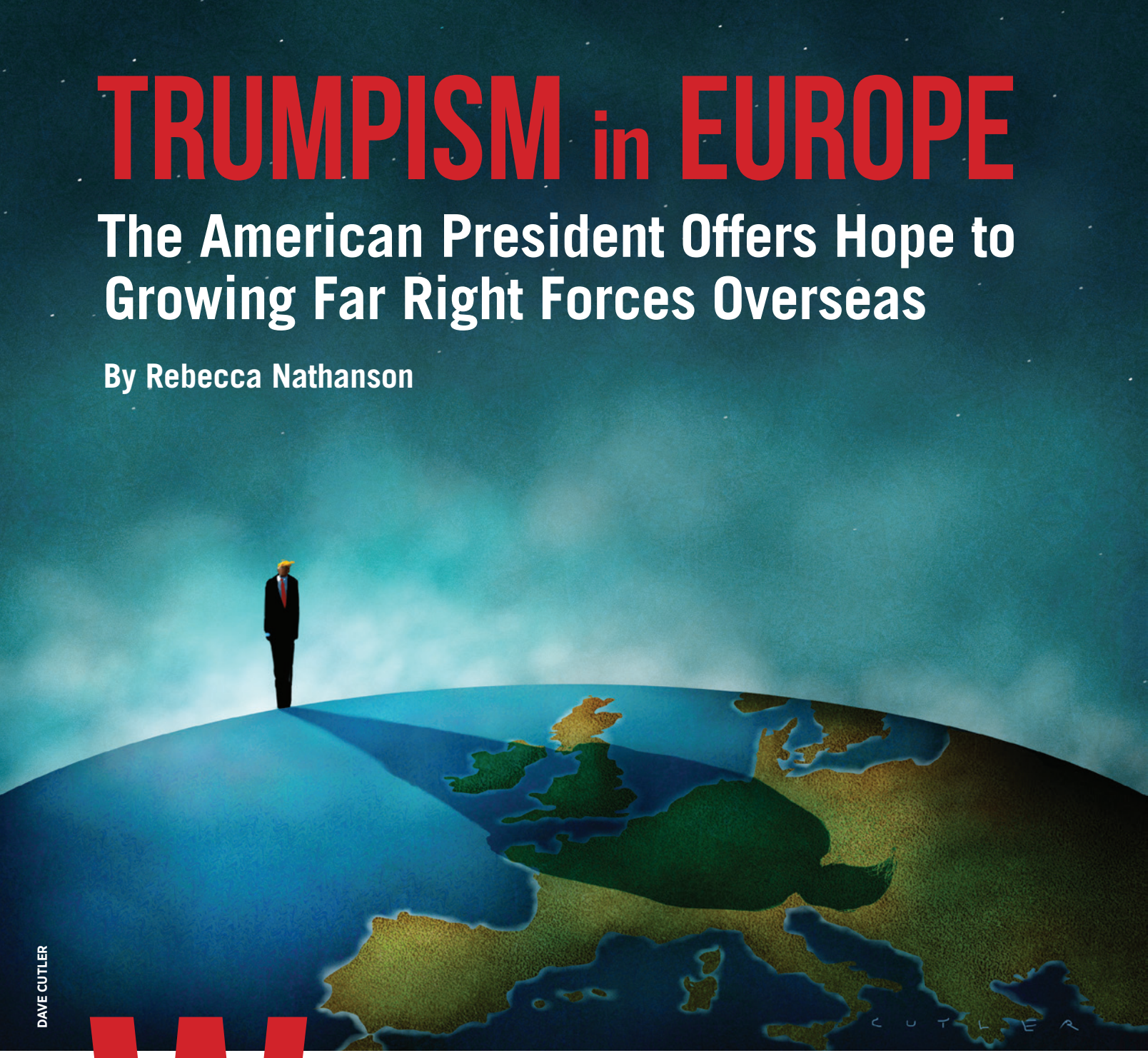
TRUMPISM in EUROPE

The American President Offers Hope to Growing Far Right Forces Overseas

By Rebecca Nathanson



DAVE CUTLER

When Donald Trump landed in London on July 13, he was greeted by about 250,000 protesters in Trafalgar Square—one of the largest such gatherings in that city since 1 million people turned out against the Iraq War in 2003. Their message—on a sign spoofing *Mary Poppins* with "Stupid, callous, fragile, racist, narcissistic POTUS," face masks declaring "#trumpstinks," and a giant banner reading, "Build Bridges Not Walls"—was clear: The American President was not welcome in the United Kingdom.

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Opposition to Trump throughout Western Europe is well established, bolstered by his summer trips to Brussels, where he questioned the usefulness of NATO; Helsinki, where he subjugated himself to Russian President Vladimir Putin; and London, where he criticized Prime Minister Theresa May's plan for exiting the European Union. In 2017, the Pew Research Center found that favorable views of the United States are on the decline in all but one of the thirty-seven surveyed countries; Russia is the odd one out.

And while Trump has shared awkward embraces with May, France's President Emmanuel Macron, and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, the lack of love between these three European leaders and the American one is obvious to all.

Yet such observations mask another trend: the rise of the right across Western Europe. Capitalizing on the Islamophobia and xenophobia spurred by a series of terrorist attacks and the wave of migration that began in 2015, rightwing parties have been gaining ground. The issues they have long focused on—immigration and Euroscepticism—have become more resonant.

In June 2016, a majority of British people voted yes in a referendum asking whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union (E.U.), the goal of hardline Euroscepticism. In April 2017, Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far right National Rally (formerly known as the National Front), finished second out of eleven candidates in the first round of the presidential election, progressing to the final round for only the second time in the party's forty-five-year history—a history that is perhaps best defined by the blatant anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial of party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father.

In September 2017, Germany's Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany became the third-largest party in the country's parliament. Meanwhile, Sweden's far right Democrats this September received the third-largest vote share in the country's election—besting its 2014 tally by almost five points—with a platform based around ending migration and calling for a referendum on leaving the E.U. Other resurgent far right parties include the Netherlands' Party for Freedom, Italy's Northern League, Austria's Freedom Party, and Belgium's Flemish Interest.

What we're missing, then, in this common narrative of Europe's distaste for Trump—referring to both his policies and the man himself—is how well the U.S. President is aligned with the growing forces that make up rightwing populism and nationalism in Western Europe. It is, of course, not a perfect match, but taken as a whole, Trump does not stand out too glaringly against the current political landscape in many European countries.

Max Jewell was about sixteen and living in Portsmouth, on England's southern coast, when he decided that his main political mission was getting Britain out of the E.U. It was June 2009, during the European Parliament elections, and he joined the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), which played a key role in the Brexit campaign.

The party was founded in 1993 with the sole goal of provoking Euroscepticism. And while UKIP has since broadened its scope, adopting other stances common to populist rightwing parties—anti-immigrant rhetoric, anti-establishment anger—leaving the E.U. remains its top priority. During the referendum campaign, UKIP's leader was Nigel Farage, who attended the 2016 Republican National Convention where Trump received the party's nomination and later became one of the first foreign politicians to meet Trump after his victory.

Jewell, now twenty-five, got very involved with UKIP in the lead-up to the referendum. When we met on a late-summer day during his lunch break from the PR firm where he now works, he said he is no longer as involved but is prepared to re-engage if the Brexit negotiations don't go well. In a crowded deli in London's Clerkenwell neighborhood, he recounted his reaction to Trump's election, less than five months after UKIP's own victory with Brexit.

"I thought it was a positive because of what he represents, which is a push-back against the out-of-touch establishment," Jewell explained. "Trump is basically the Farage figure of the U.S. So I thought what he represented was brilliant, which is returning power to the people who've been ignored."

What he likes most, Jewell says, is Trump's emphasis on "the idea of the nation and national identity," which he connects to the U.K.'s Brexit debate. "So I think 'America First,' it doesn't mean only America. It means looking after Americans' interests before anything else, which no one seems to be doing at the minute—particularly in the U.K., where you have people happily allowing Britain to be subsumed into a European superstate without doing anything. There doesn't seem to be any consideration for the national interest."

Plus, he adds, "[Trump] is, at times, quite funny."

In France, National Rally activists feel similarly. Manon Bouquin, the head of student life for the party's youth wing, Generation Nation (known as the National Front of the Youth until June 2018), remembers how the night of the 2017 election's first round—when it became clear that Marine Le Pen would move on to the final round—seemed like a continuation of the momentum that had started a year earlier.

"It paralleled Brexit and Donald Trump," she said, sitting in a café in Paris this past spring. "We saw that if it was possible in the U.S. and in Great Britain, it could happen in France. It was truly the impossible that became possible."

In the days after Trump's election, Le Pen herself said something similar, telling the BBC that his election was "an additional stone in the building of a new world." She was also the very first foreign politician to congratulate Trump on his victory, beating even Farage.

But the connections go beyond merely spreading inspiration: In February of this year, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's niece and a former National Assembly member representing the then-named National Front, spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland. Her discourse echoed Trump's.

"Just like you, we want our country back," Maréchal-Le Pen said. "I came here to tell you that there is a youth ready for this fight in Europe today." She added: "I want America first for the American people, I want Britain first for the British people, and I want France first for the French people." Then, in March, Steve Bannon, a former Trump adviser and former executive chairman of Breitbart News, gave a speech in Lille, France, to the National Rally in which he brazenly exclaimed, "Let them call you racist."

Today, support for what Trump appears to represent remains high among the National Rally, even if Trump himself no longer rests on a pedestal.

"Trump can fail like the others and I am very suspicious about Trump," said Éric B., the leader of Generation Nation's Paris branch. (He asked to be identified by his last initial only because he has previously lost work due to his political affiliations.) "But," he continued, "I'm more confident with Trumpism, which means all the people who voted for Trump, the people who are aware that the world is changing. The people are awake, and that's more important than only Trump because I'm not into this cult of personality. I think Trumpism is better than Trump."

The overarching feeling toward Trump among members of the European far right is positive. Trump himself may be suspect, but his supporters remain a sign of good things on the horizon—in the United States, France, Italy, and beyond.

In the days before we spoke, Éric had been in Italy, meeting with members of the Northern League, the country's far right party that won nearly 18 percent of the votes in Italy's 2018 general election. Knowing we would be speaking, he'd asked the League members for their thoughts on Trump. He reported back that they seemed optimistic that Trump might create change with NATO, but, for the most part, they shared his views: "It's better to save the people who vote [for Trump] than save Trump."

Despite any reservations, the overarching feeling toward Trump among members of the European far right is positive. Trump himself may be suspect, but his supporters remain a sign of good things on the horizon—in the United States, France, Italy, and beyond. "I was very happy after he was elected because the reaction in France was so funny. It was delicious," described Éric, laughing as he spoke. "Leftist tears, it's like the universal panacea or medicine. Makes your day better."

But some observers argue that the alliance of far right parties and politicians in the United States and Western Europe is based more on convenience than a genuine sense of shared purpose.

"I think this is a real mistake, actually, that people are making this parallel," says Mabel Berezin, a professor of sociology at Cornell University. She argues that the politicians in question are not populists but nationalists—"extreme nationalists"—and that nationalism is a much more natural fit in Europe. "Nationalism is not an aberration in the European context. It is the European norm and it is the E.U. that has basically been the articulator of a more cosmopolitan, globalist kind of vision."

In the United States, meanwhile, "we have a much more free-floating and amorphous country. It's always hard for me to think of one thing that we've institutionalized in the United States that makes us all American in the sense of culturally." This cultural divergence, she believes, makes nationalism an awkward fit. Berezin does, however, understand the impulse to draw these connections: "It would be natural for them to take a look at Trump and think, well, maybe he's a potential ally, but I don't think it's a marriage made in heaven. It's not a natural affinity there."

When it comes to specific policies, even European supporters of these parties acknowledge Berezin's point, clearly articulating the Trump policies that they cannot support.

"He has done—I will admit—some very unpalatable, crazy things," Jewell told me. I asked for examples. "Well, the Paris Climate Accord. The reaction to Charlottesville. I don't think that's because he sympathizes with those creeps.

I think he doesn't think things through quickly. And the separating children at the border seems a bit inhumane."

And yet, Jewell continued, "I think, on balance, what he represents and his economic policy, reducing illegal migration, all of those things are perfectly sensible."

In Paris, Éric also qualified his Trump support. "Trump has failed at some points," he said. "I think the National Rally and other parties in Europe are sort of linked because everybody wants to be independent and not have the E.U. guiding the way. The supporting of Trump in Europe is quite different because American politics are quite different than European politics."

Éric also took issue with a specific Trump goal: "What I don't like is the wall, personally. It's an amazing slogan. It's an amazing image. But it has nothing to do with Europe because Europe doesn't need walls. Europe needs borders."

Since taking over the party leadership from her father in 2011, Le Pen has worked to "de-demonize" the National Rally—a strategy of professionalization and mainstreaming. She even changed her party's name from the National Front to create some distance from its xenophobic, anti-Semitic image. In numerous interviews, party activists told me that Le Pen has successfully transitioned the National Rally from a protest party into a "governing party"—one that, in style if not in policy, has little in common with Trump.

"It's not helping us much," Éric said of Trump's presidency. "It's not a bad sign, but not a good one either. It's neutral."

Jewell's perspective is similarly positive but restrained. "I'm not one of those raving Trump lunatics who thinks everything he does is brilliant, but I just think it's very refreshing," he told me.

When I mentioned to Jewell that I was also interviewing people from the National Rally, his response underscored the shakiness of the alliances between Europe's rightwing nationalist parties that are commonly grouped together. Showing that there may be different degrees of rightwing nationalism and that even some of these Eurosceptic parties view the National Rally as toxic or going too far, he asked, "If we're both in the same article, could I just have a line in there saying I don't like them?"

In July, Bannon announced a new plan to create a foundation called The Movement to foster rightwing populism across Europe. Within days, UKIP had pledged to join. The 2019 European Parliament elections are the immediate goal—a venue in which Eurosceptic parties have traditionally fared quite well. These upcoming elections present an opportunity to fortify the alliances between these various parties in Europe.

"I think it's very possible. There's no doubt in my mind," says Christopher Parker, a professor of political science at the University of Washington, on Bannon's ability to succeed at this new venture. "I think he can form some linkages and bonds, I do."

For Parker, these parties are all connected, driven by similar domestic factors. "If you look at all these countries—you can look at the United States, the Netherlands, even Norway and Finland, France, all over the place, Germany—they're motivated by this sense of rapid social change. [They believe] the real America is going away because of the social demographic change and cultural change. It's the same thing over there."

This fortification of alliances is one potential outcome of Bannon's European initiative; another is that it could further reveal the fractures that already exist among Trump and the parties in question. As they attempt to unite more explicitly, their differences—over the Paris Climate Accord, over immigration policies, and even simple styles of governing—could become unavoidable. That sense of momentum that appeared unstoppable to Bouquin—the National Rally member who felt as though the impossible had become possible when Le Pen arrived at the final round of the 2017 election—may have been an illusion all along.

Berezin argues that what National Rally members were really hoping for was "political surprise and the fact that things can happen that you don't expect." Hope, she adds, "is a powerful thing."

Regardless of the degree of unity between the far right in the United States and Western Europe, the anti-Trump sentiment made visible in London was undeniable. That July protest was organized by the Stop Trump Coalition, a group of community organizers, students, writers, trade unionists, journalists, and people who work with nonprofit groups—"the usual suspects," as Shaista Aziz, a journalist who is one of the coalition's organizers, put it. She sits on the city council in Oxford, about an hour from London, and represents the Labour Party. When we met at a diner in Oxford, she credited the coalition's ability to draw connections between the rightwing fervor blooming in numerous countries as one reason for the protest's success.

"I think they understand that they've got this one-shot opportunity to bring down the European Union in its current form," she argued. "I mean, Trump, the fact that he's been endorsed by the KKK and he's sitting there in the White House and this week he's called a black woman a dog and it goes on and it goes on. He's their poster boy. I don't think there's a brotherhood here. These people are out just to get power in any way, shape, or form." ◆