Is J.D. Vance Right about Europe?

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Christopher Caldwell June 2, 2025

Imprimis (im-pri-mis), [Latin]: in the first place

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on April 25, 2025, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Kansas City, Missouri.

Vice President J.D. Vance's first major assignment from Donald Trump was to join a bunch of European leaders who thought of themselves as our close allies—and to read them the riot act. This happened at the Munich Security Conference on February 14. Instead of discussing armaments and armies, Vance said: "The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia. It's not China. It's the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values." Europe, according to Vance, had become hostile to free speech. It was hostile to free speech because it was hostile to democracy. And you could measure its hostility to democracy by the fact that for 50 years European voters had kept asking for less immigration and had kept getting more of it. Vance admitted that it reminded him a bit of the United States.

Is Vance right about Europe and the West more generally?

Vance is certainly right that the Europeans' situation resembles ours. Europe is split between two camps: so-called "populists" and "elites." (Neither of the two camps has a name for itself, so—without any ill will—we'll use the names applied to each by their foes.) The difference between here and there is that for the second time in three elections, populists have now taken power in the U.S. In Europe they have a harder time, ruling only in Italy, Slovakia, and Hungary.

As Vance sees it, that's because Europeans have worked to make populist victories impossible. He has been particularly critical of Germany. In February, the main anti-immigration party there, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), became the country's second-largest, close behind the Christian Democrats. The Social Democrats, who are one of the most successful political parties of modern times, have been contending for power in Germany since the middle of the 19th century. The AfD has now left them in the dust. And yet the AfD was kept out of the Munich Security Conference, so Vance went out and met with their leader, Alice Weidel. In so doing, he waded into a live controversy.

German progressives argue that ostracizing the AfD is necessary—even if it means excluding the AfD from legislative functions to which they are constitutionally entitled as the largest opposition party. Otherwise Germany risks repeating the horrors of Nazism. The AfD's supporters counter that their party was founded in 2013 by a bunch of macro-economists concerned about German bailouts of deeply indebted European countries. It can have little to do with the Nazis. Of the war criminals long tracked by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, only three appear to be still alive, all of them about 100 years of age. Not much to build a revanchist movement around. And yet efforts to police Nazism have suddenly taken on a new life, ten decades after Nazism's founding and eight decades after its defeat.

While Vance has not said much on the subject, his opinion can be guessed: for him, the criticism leveled at the AfD in the name of anti-Nazism is a lot like the criticism leveled at populist Republicans in the U.S. in the name of DEI, ESG, wokeness, or civil rights. It is political sabotage masquerading as historical responsibility. Vance was criticized for meeting with Weidel, not without reason. A politician on a state visit is hosted by the government, not the opposition—his meeting with Weidel was a breach of protocol. On the other hand, evidence for his way of viewing things continues to mount. In April, a poll by the Forsa Institute showed the AfD to be not the second but the top party in Germany, with 26 percent approval. Then the federal office of constitutional protection declared that AfD would be placed under heightened surveillance as a "threat to human dignity."

It is a troubling sign when a party's rise in the polls doesn't mean it's about to take office but that it's about to get banned. Attempts to disqualify candidates have gone global, and the candidates who get this treatment tend to have a common, anti-establishment profile. There's Trump, with his 34 felonies. There's Marine Le Pen, the top-polling candidate for the next presidential elections in France, who was recently banned from those elections—for an irregularity in the procedures for paying office assistants that her party established seven years before she became its leader.

Just as troubling is what happened last November in Romania. The same political establishment has ruled Romania since the Cold War. A populist candidate named Calin Georgescu rose quickly in the polls by attacking this establishment—and also by opposing the Ukraine war. Not only did the first round show Georgescu the big winner, but it also eliminated the Social Democratic prime minister who had been thought to have a lock on the presidency. With voting already underway in the second round, authorities canceled the election and claimed that Georgescu had been backed by Russian disinformation spread on TikTok. Not a scrap of proof was offered. In fact, the president said that it was "impossible" to find hard evidence in cases like these, so voters would just have to believe the intelligence services.

The election was postponed until May. By March, it was obvious that Georgescu was going to win the rescheduled election, too. This doesn't prove anything about any criminal charges, but it does prove that "Russian disinformation" was not responsible for Georgescu's win the first time. At that point, authorities arrested him and banned him from the May vote. Was it based on new evidence that might prove the allegations from the first canceled election? Apparently not. Those allegations were not even mentioned.

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A basic question emerges, though: Why does Vance care? Maybe he and Trump are in sympathy with Weidel, Le Pen, and Georgescu. But Trump and Vance are nationalists—or sovereigntists, to use the newfangled word for it. They think every country has the right to choose its political system and its leader. Even if these countries are being run corruptly, so what?

The reason Vance is bothered is that, since the end of the Cold War and the rise of the global economy, foreign policy has become less national, more transnational, and more partisan. When Europeans influence a national election, they are also influencing international bodies to which the U.S. is bound by treaty. The most obvious example is NATO, but there are also various bloc-to-bloc trading arrangements and informal groups that work together at summits.

The importance of Germany and France is obvious. But Romania is vital, too. Alongside Poland, it is the pivotal European country in NATO's attempt to support and arm Ukraine in its war with Russia. The American public has soured on this war and elected a president who was skeptical about it from the beginning. Electing such a president is exactly what the Romanians tried to do—and arguably *did*—in November. Had their decision been honored, then the American understanding of the Ukraine war would have had much more credibility in NATO discussions and in EU conclaves.

So what does it mean that Romania's elites—possibly working with those in Europe and America—were unwilling to let that happen? They say they are intervening so as not to help Vladimir Putin. But Vance suspects they are intervening so as not to help Trump.

By “Europe,” of course, we mean not the whole continent but the European Union, based in Brussels. Since 1992 it has taken control of steering the politics of 27 nations. The EU is not a democracy. It usurps the sovereignty of various great nations. Before Americans heap abuse on it, they should remember that it is a project that America launched and abetted throughout the Cold War. It was the pro-American part of the European public that backed the dream of building an organization like the EU. They did so in the name of certain values they called Western—not Christianity (in which any European country could claim as great a share as America) but human rights (in which America had a better record, at least as people saw things late in the last century).

European right-wing parties always distrusted the EU. They saw it as a form of Americanization. They were right to do so. The EU helped spread global capitalism after the mid-1980s, annulling all those quirky regulations that had made globalization impossible (and made Europe distinctively European). The EU also, for better or worse, made possible the spread of NATO after the 1990s. President Trump’s claim that Europe doesn’t pay for its own defense is true if you look just at military budgets. But in a broader sense it is questionable. The U.S. may have bought the heavy weaponry, but the EU has spent lavishly to develop its eastern flank economically. It has decked out these post-communist countries with everything from opera houses to traffic circles to feminist NGOs. All these things may be superficial, but they made it seem less absurd that countries like Romania should belong in a U.S.-led Western alliance in the first place.

The EU brings benefits, but it does so by destroying national sovereignty. It seems to turn the countries it dominates into whimpering, simpering, dysfunctional shadows of the proud nations they once were. As Vance notes, 40 years ago all these European states had really good militaries. Belgium and Austria, for example, would have robust tank brigades and well-drilled air forces. EU membership has made such duplication look wasteful, so the national militaries have been allowed to decay and the large amounts of money saved have been poured into social benefits. Meanwhile, the EU has neither the political legitimacy nor the budget to start a military itself. Today these countries spend just enough on F-16s and F-35s to convince Americans to take the whole job of defending Europe on themselves. As power shifted to Brussels, all of these European countries became less impressive in Yankee eyes—and in their own. That gives a partial explanation of why the UK left the EU with Brexit.

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The Trump-Vance view of Europe comes with certain ironies. Both really believe in national pride and national sovereignty. And yet the loss of those virtues in the nations of the EU has been one of the preconditions of America’s claim to “world leadership.” Trump and Vance are now proposing to strengthen European nations by giving them their sovereignty back, even at the price of strengthening them against us, their imperial masters. The feeling of the new administration seems to be that there is not really an alternative. The European countries have grown too weak to help us defend the West.

The EU is a system run by and for technocratic elites. During the financial crisis, which in Europe lasted for a half-decade after 2008, Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicholas Sarkozy were able to use the EU's institutions to replace the government of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy with a technocratic one. They also blocked a referendum that would have allowed Greece to exit from the Euro. The EU is offstage most of the time, but it has mighty strings to pull when it needs to. It shifts power from legislatures to courtrooms and regulatory bodies. It offers a way for alumni of the better universities to veto democratic decisions and private contracts. EU politicians like to call Brussels a "regulatory superpower." That's a boast.

This means that the underlying problem that is being hashed out between Trump and Brussels has a partisan aspect. Since 1992, the year the Maastricht Treaty was signed and Bill Clinton elected, the EU has been in harmony with the Democratic Party in the U.S. When Democrats are in power, American relations with the EU tend to run smoothly. More than smoothly. Whenever Brexit-style anti-EU parties have governed in any of the EU's member states—especially in Poland and Hungary in recent years—U.S. Democrats and their allies in the foundation sector have joined the EU in sanctioning, harassing, and investigating these populist parties until they become more EU-friendly. In 21st-century Europe, the U.S. has pursued not a national but a partisan foreign policy.

Consider Poland and Hungary. After the migration crisis of 2016, Law and Justice (PiS)—a Catholic, populist, anti-immigration party in Poland—won a powerful mandate at the ballot box. They pursued tight immigration policies and justice reform. They succeeded until Covid. But at the height of the pandemic, the EU passed a trillion-dollar stimulus and rescue plan. Although this was meant to be an emergency fund, with no political strings attached, the EU decided to withhold Poland's $60 billion share, as long as the populists persisted with their immigration and justice policies. PiS was defeated in the 2023 elections by a pro-EU party that was almost immediately able to get those funds released.

Proportionately, it was as if someone had been able to withhold $2 trillion from the American economy until Americans agreed to vote a certain way. The Polish elections of 2023 were thus free—but they were not fair. Trump and Vance have taken notice. When they see the EU not only not sanctioning but congratulating Romania for emergency actions that are orders of magnitude more undemocratic than anything the Polish and Hungarian populists ever did, Vance and Trump smell a rat. Again, they believe the EU's actions are not about "values" or "good government" or Putin, but about thwarting the U.S.—at least in the Trump era. The EU is turning into a conspiracy to deprive the U.S. of European allies and to sabotage the American position on the world stage.

Trump's understanding of the global economy is of a piece with his understanding of the national economy. He sees both not as societies but as networks—networks where the borders between public and private, between domestic and foreign, are not always clear. This view drives Trump's thinking on everything from tariffs to government efficiency. Recently, when Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced he would cut 132 offices, he explained on Substack that he was focusing his cuts on agencies that served as "a

platform for left-wing activists to wage vendettas against ‘anti-woke’ leaders in nations such as Poland, Hungary, and Brazil.” MSNBC, in turn, accused Rubio of “taking a chainsaw to America’s soft power.”

Rubio’s description of his adversaries as “woke” is a useful reminder. In the half-year since Trump’s election, the U.S. appears to have overthrown wokeness. But other countries—with the possible exception of Britain—have not been convinced to do the same. In Ireland, France, and Germany, wokeness is still in the saddle. This tends to vindicate the Trump view that wokeness is not a culture but a power network. Wokeness doesn’t rest on convictions. It rests on the power of governments and employers to punish and threaten.

A battle is underway. In March, a poll of EU citizens found that 51 percent consider Trump an “enemy of Europe,” versus just nine percent who consider him a friend. Europeans now say of the U.S. what so many Americans said of Islamists during the George W. Bush administration: “They hate our values.” It’s as wrong now as it was then. The problem is not values but interests. American and European progressive elites have made themselves partisan actors in the other’s politics, assuming Republicans and other populists would be too dim to notice. For decades that assumption proved correct. Now that things are changing, friction is the natural result.