



The U.S. midterm elections mean changes for Europe, too | Zach Gibson/Getty Images

## OPINION

# What a Democratic House means for Europe

Expect more oversight and outreach across the Atlantic.

By **TYSON BARKER** | 11/7/18, 7:34 AM CET | Updated 11/7/18, 6:55 PM CET

BERLIN — What a difference a day makes. As the U.S. midterms break unified Republican control in Washington and pave the way for even more colossal acrimony between the American branches of government, watchers have already begun to pick apart the results for health care, border security and budgeting.

But the elections mean changes for Europe, too. A political realignment in Washington will bring new perspectives — and new opportunities — for relations between the U.S. and EU, NATO and core Europe, which have suffered particularly during the past year as U.S. President Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress toggled between indifference and hostility.

Now that the Democrats have taken the House, they will be in a position to try to use subpoena power and oversight hearings to connect the dots between Russian election meddling in the U.S.

and Europe and investigate allegations into Trump corruption. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation will provide opportunities to multiple committees to take up different threads of the case.

Democrats in the oversight, intel and other committees have been preparing for the takeover. They are ready to hit the ground running with a series of policy ideas, many of which are reflected in the meticulously researched, hard-hitting Senate Democratic report on Russian hybrid warfare in the U.S. and Europe.

The Democrats are also likely to try to use their budgetary power to bend the administration toward the targets the U.S. agreed to with the Paris climate accord and otherwise encourage use of clean energy. It will be a dog fight, most likely headed by Nancy Pelosi as speaker, and her progressive caucus will be determined to steer U.S. policy in the direction of greater climate action, pleasing many in Europe.

## Wrestling with Putin

Democratic control will acutely change the situation for the Hill's professional Euro-watchers. For the past six years, the House's primary body dealing with Europe has been essentially in a backwater.

Its chairman, Dana Rohrabacher lost his bid for reelection. Known to brag about having arm wrestled with Russian President Vladimir Putin and lost, he used his time at the helm of the European subcommittee to stymie efforts to support European integration and scrutinize Russia. So much so that outgoing House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy was once caught speculating that Rohrabacher is on the Kremlin's payroll.

While Rohrabacher allowed some examination of Turkey's democratic backsliding, he effectively blocked House deliberation on U.S. action in some of the biggest issues affecting the U.S.-European relationship, including Russia's authoritarianism, corruption and annexation of Crimea; the simmering war in Ukraine's Donbas region; democratic decline in Poland and Hungary; Macedonia's outreach to Europe; NATO enlargement to Montenegro; Brexit; and a host of EU-U.S. issues, ranging from the eurozone crisis to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.



ALSO ON POLITICO

### Democrats take the House, Republicans hold Senate in US midterms

DAVID SIDERS

ALSO ON POLITICO

### Republicans romp in Senate battlegrounds

**JAMES ARKIN**

Returning the House to Democratic control will uncork its Europe hearing authority, which has been bottled up since 2012. This means more activity; more focus on core Europe; greater support for the EU and NATO; a greater hawkishness toward corruption and authoritarianism; and attempts to yoke Trump to some of the nastiest impulses by leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. One could imagine, for instance, stepped up hearings and scrutiny as to the exact circumstances behind Central European University's move out of Hungary.

Beyond the Europe subcommittee, there will be a dramatic uptick interest in the top House foreign affairs body on Russia and the Balkans. Russia is obvious. But the Balkans not so much. It is not only because of the region's new-found geopolitical importance but also because of the personal interest of the likely incoming chairman. New York Representative Eliot Engel has made it a mission to be Kosovo's man on the Hill and has been a personal steward of U.S. relations in Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia.

### **Shining a light on dark influence peddling**

The Democratic House will also likely bring new energy to how members engage with European states and communities. Expect the same attention to diaspora issues. The Greeks, Portuguese, Polish, Italians, Irish, Armenians and others have ferocious lobbying associations who work the Hill on everything from basing to visa waivers to funding for exchange programs. This won't change.

But the Republican House turned a blind eye to the new brand of ooze seeping into Congress from foreign agents, including many in Europe. A new dark means of influence peddling runs a daisy chain of money from foreign governments into U.S.-registered institutions through lobbying shops run by former congressmen and finally into the reelection coffers of sitting politicians.

European countries that practice this sort of campaign financing include members of the EU among their ranks. They tend to be those with the least regard for rule of law, parliamentary independence and the importance of norms in democratic society. In effect, they are exporting behavior they practice at home to Washington D.C.

The Democratic majority has campaigned promising to crack down on corruption and foreign meddling in U.S. politics. While their ability to go after the White House and administration

figures may be limited to their subpoena, investigative powers and the budget, their ability to police their own colleagues reaches far beyond that. The rules committee has expansive power to investigate, censure, fine and sanction House members. One could envision that the deterrent effect of investigations into foreign corruption on the Hill will dry up such financial wormholes and put some institutions and under new scrutiny.

## The House unbound

Even in lawmaking, look for changes. The House — which had been slavishly supportive of Trump's personal proclivities under Republican leadership — could see alignment with the more liberal internationalist Senate.

A bipartisan group of senators, for instance, has introduced legislation that would force the administration's hand on sanctions in the case of cyber operations on elections from states like Russia and China. This same group has also looked at ways to tie the president's hands when he threatens to withdraw from treaty alliances like NATO.

One could imagine a situation where a Democratic House and bipartisan Senate coalition attempt to pass legislation requiring congressional approval for withdrawal from treaties like the Washington Treaty that established NATO, the INF Treaty or New START.

Ultimately, the 2018 midterms yielded a mixed mandate that reflects political polarization in the U.S. It lacked Cinderella stories in the form of Democratic victories in Texas, Florida and Georgia or the unexpected Democratic Senate takeover that many in Europe had hoped for. But it did provide a reset for Europe in Washington. The question is whether both sides of the Atlantic seize it.

*Tyson Barker, a program director and fellow at the Aspen Institute Germany, is a former senior adviser to the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs at the U.S. State Department.*

---

**Read this next: Trump claims 'tremendous success' despite Democratic House takeover**