



CEPS EXPLAINER

WHOSE 'CIVILISATIONAL ERASURE' - EUROPE OR TRUMP'S UNITED STATES?



SUMMARY

The US National Security Strategy, published in late 2025, suggested that Europe was facing ‘civilisational erasure’ or, in layman’s terms, was becoming ‘uncivilised’. This CEPS Explainer is the first of a duology addressing fundamental issues for Europe posed by Donald Trump’s second presidency. To respond to this critique, the Explainer discusses the different components of contemporary Western civilisation and subjects them to US-European comparisons.

The overall finding is that contemporary European civilisation, for all its complexities and imperfections, has a strong and positive identity, whereas under Trump’s leadership the transatlantic chasm is becoming so wide that the concept of the ‘West’ no longer makes sense. Europe has every interest in asserting its own civilisational model.



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INTRODUCTION

Europeans may be puzzled by the 2025 US [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS)'s choice of wording about Europe allegedly heading for 'civilisational erasure'. This is the first time in the history of modern transatlantic relations that one party has made the extraordinary accusation that the other party was becoming 'uncivilised'. The concept is most explicitly and officially used in the NSS document, which is an authoritative reference for MAGA doctrine about the supposed threat to white Western identity posed by immigration, multiculturalism and progressive policies.

Differences in civilisational culture between the US and Europe [are long-established](#) in their philosophical as well as practical foundations, and they predate the Trump administration. Yet Trump has been hugely amplifying these divergences.

The NSS also attacks the EU and actively seeks to undermine it. It considers the EU to be *'transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition, cratering birth rates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence'*.

This aligns with Vice-President J.D. Vance's infamous [speech](#) at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, but the NSS formally sets out the doctrine in an official policy document for the very first time.

THE COMPONENTS OF WESTERN CIVILISATION

What is 'Western' civilisation? Samuel Huntington's 1996 ['Clash of Civilizations'](#) treats Western civilisation as a coherent bloc, and more precisely as a cultural and historical group of societies sharing common intellectual, religious, legal and political traditions.

Huntington argued that future conflict in the world would be between cultures. Notably, his writing was coloured by Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book on the ['end of history'](#), which celebrated the end of the communist threat to the democratic West. But what neither authors foresaw was how a figure like Trump would drive a wedge through the heart of the Western world, to the point that it may even be now questioned whether 'the West' still exists.

But what are, or have been the components of the so-called West? Western civilisation began with the Roman Empire's Christian legacy, which became its foundational pillar, deeply influencing its ethics and law through the centuries. Its religious basis was amplified by the rise of Islam and the Crusades of the early Middle Ages. There followed

in more recent centuries the philosophy of liberal Enlightenment, which was carried across the Atlantic.

ESPECIALLY SINCE THE TWO WORLD WARS, THE POLITICAL VALUES OF DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW HAVE BEEN SEEN AS THE COMMON BEDROCK OF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE AND THE BROADLY RECOGNISED 'WEST'.

Today, with the increasing secularisation of contemporary society, the notion of Western civilisation has extended more broadly into political and economic values. Especially since the two world wars, the political values of democracy and the rule of law have been seen as the common bedrock of the Atlantic alliance and the broadly recognised 'West'.

However various constituent components of Western civilisation have for many decades seen divergences between the US and Europe and the like-minded 'virtual Europeans' of other continents (namely Australia, Canada and New Zealand – in January 2025 the Economist [semi-seriously proposed](#) that Canada should join the EU).

What's new is the intensity with which the Trump administration has been widening these differences, and categorically new are the charges from across the Atlantic that Europe is facing civilisational collapse, or 'erasure' in MAGA jargon. Since the NSS chose to open the civilisational agenda, let us examine more thoroughly its structure and contents.

This Explainer identifies eight components of Western civilisation for assessing current US-Europe tensions, with all of them having important trans-Atlantic differences. Of these eight components there's the important distinction between differences that are matters of internal political and social culture, with no direct impact externally, versus those that have external impact. There are five in the first category, where the US and Europe may observe a consistent set of civilisational differences, but without legitimate cause to press for changes on either side (religion, income inequality, public health, firearms and violence, and DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) policies).

There remain however two components that are matters of huge and legitimate concern across the Atlantic: climate change policies and the normative framework for war and peace, where the spillover of differences can pose even existential risks for humanity. Finally, there is democracy, long regarded as bedrock of the trans-Atlantic alliance, now being frayed by Trump.

1. RELIGION

The longest-standing civilisational marker has surely been religion. The Pew Research Center's data shows that 62 % of the [US population](#) identifies as Christian compared to 67 % in [Europe](#), with 28 % in the US identifying as 'religiously unaffiliated' compared to 23 % in Europe – almost the same. The real difference between the two sides is the number of people who consider religion to be 'very important' in their lives: 53 % in the US, but only 11 % in the Europe. Similarly, evangelicals count for 23 % of the US population, compared to only 2.5 % in Europe.

The fastest growing category in both cases are the unaffiliated, which is in line with society's growing secularisation.

Islam is much more prevalent in Europe (6 %) than in the US (1 %). Conversely, Jewish people are more numerous in the US (2 %), 10 times more than in Europe.

Are these differences politically significant? Evangelicals do figure among Trump's strongest supporters and the NSS seems to be pointing to the growth of Islam (though it uses the term 'non-Europeans') in Europe as a key feature of civilisational erasure. The NSS is weaponising the growth of 'non-European Europe' as a key argument, with alleged negative consequences for US interests, questioning, for example, the reliability of European NATO allies.

2. INCOME INEQUALITY

The [World Inequality Lab](#) details income inequality trends, with the share of the top 1 % of incomes accounting for 20 % of all incomes in the US, compared to around 10 % in Europe. For [wealth](#), the top 1 % of Americans account for around 33 % of the country's total wealth, compared to around 25 % in Europe. The extremes in income and wealth in the tech sector have been highlighted by Elon Musk's iconic USD 1 trillion incentive package from Tesla's board.

While this data is rather stable in Europe, growing income inequality in the US has given rise to the image of the so-called [K-shaped evolution](#) of incomes, with the rich getting richer and the opposite for the poorer. All this signals a clear divide in Western civilisation drawn down the Atlantic.

3. PUBLIC HEALTH

Similarly, differences in public health provision between the US and Europe are so important that they can be viewed as civilisation markers. The [US public health system](#) is hugely cost-ineffective. Health expenditures [cost 18 % of the US' GDP](#), compared to

around 11 % in the EU. Meanwhile, life expectancy in the US is four years less than Europe's, infant mortality is three times higher and obesity twice as high.

The norm in Europe is free or low-cost universal healthcare. In the US, the healthcare system is a patchwork of public and private schemes that still leaves around 8 % of the population uncovered. Uninsured Americans are typically on low incomes whose employment or self-employment carries no health insurance cover, coming especially from Hispanic, black and recently immigrated groups. In January 2026, President Trump announced the US' [withdrawal](#) from the World Health Organization, clearly marking out his disregard for global public health.

Europeans often struggle to understand how the US can remain stuck with such a cost-ineffective and inequitable public health system.

4. FIREARMS AND VIOLENCE.

Firearm ownership and homicidal violence are together much more prevalent in the US than Europe. The number of [guns in private ownership](#) in the US exceeds even the population total at 120 %, compared to around 16 % in Europe.

In the US, gun ownership is protected under the Second Amendment to the Constitution. This long historical heritage, combined with the formidable lobbying power of the National Rifle Association, has blocked any serious reform. In Europe, gun laws have become increasingly restrictive. Correlated (but causation is a more complex question), the yearly homicides rate in the US amount to 4.1-4.5 per 100 000 of the population, compared to around 0.19 per 100 000 in Europe, [23 times less](#).

The issue is massively and politically divisive in the US. While in 2000, 38 % of Republicans and 20 % of Democrats considered it ['more important'](#) to own guns, by 2024 it had reached 83 % of Republicans.

5. DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION (DEI).

The NSS doesn't discuss this explicitly. Yet [polls](#) show that 33 % of Europeans agree and 47 % disagree with ending DEI policies. In the US, both positions receive 39 % support.

While these differences aren't significant, they are starker at the official level as the Trump administration has been working to root out DEI policies, whereas in the EU non-discrimination in employment is mandatory and DEI policies are much more generally encouraged.

Data on the [acceptance](#) of homosexuality confirms this picture, with 72 % of the US accepting, compared to between 86-94 % in western Europe. Yet these figures drop

down to 47-59 % for central and eastern Europe, which corresponds to the European countries that the NSS considers 'healthy'.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE

One of Trump's first moves of his second presidency was withdrawing again from the 2015 Paris Agreement, following his first withdrawal in 2017. In January 2026, he doubled down on his intention to wreck international climate policies by announcing the [US withdrawal](#) from 66 international climate-related commitments, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

To all this Trump asserted at the UN General Assembly in September 2025 that climate change is the 'greatest con-job ever perpetrated on the world'. This amounts to criminal responsibility for policies that may later this century induce catastrophe for humanity.

The EU for its part continues to support implementation of the Paris agreement. Going further, in 2019 it committed to become the first continent to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. This led to the European Climate Law, entering into force in 2021 with a legally binding commitment to achieve net zero carbon emissions. In March 2026 it set the intermediate target of reaching [90 % reduction of emissions by 2040](#).

7. WAR AND PEACE

In terms of the normative foundations of war, Trump has made a spectacular jump back in time, invoking the 1823 Monroe Doctrine as a basis for his own '[Donroe' doctrine](#). He has used this rhetoric to justify the illegal capture of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro, his threats to annex Greenland, and why the US does – or should – dominate the Western Hemisphere.

The NSS also refused to criticise Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, which broke the most cardinal norms of the post-WWII security order as laid out in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, signed by the US, the USSR and all of Europe, namely:

- Refraining from the threat or use of force
- Inviolability of frontiers
- The territorial integrity of States
- Non-intervention in internal affairs

The Trump administration has itself been breaking these norms, most egregiously in January 2026 in its threats over Greenland together with the threat to sanction European states that support Greenland with extra tariffs. Meanwhile, the European project has always been about peace since its very inception. The EU has effectively become a group

of states which collectively consider war between themselves to be unthinkable – hence the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to the bloc in 2012.

Yet Trump has amplified his claims to be a global peacemaker by creating the [‘Board of Peace’](#), which he chairs and to which the leaders of 60 States have been invited, including Presidents Putin and Xi and around half of the EU, almost all of which declined. While prompted by the need to achieve peace in Gaza, the Board’s terms of reference are open-ended without specifying any specific conflict. In short, it was launched as Trump’s personal alternative to the [‘failed’](#) UN and its Security Council.

Finally, there is the Netanyahu-Trump war with Iran, following the assassination of the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei, on 28 February 2026. The divide in Western civilisation has thus become total between Trump’s US and Europe over norms in matters of war and peace. For Trump there are no norms, except that he has made political assassination a new ‘Trump-norm’ for interstate warfare.

8. DEMOCRACY

While President Trump maintains rhetorically his commitment to democracy, his actions are continuously testing how far he can go in an authoritarian direction, from his failed attempts to annul the 2020 presidential election result through to his ongoing actions to bypass Congress on matters of security and trade policy.

The [2026 Freedom House report](#) ranked the US in 53rd place among the countries of the world, way below most European states. New [research](#) has investigated how far the Trump regime’s democratic backsliding in the first year of his second mandate compares with the time profile of the authoritarian slides Hungary, Venezuela, Russia and Turkey. The research shows that Trump’s regime has, in its first year, been backsliding over democratic practices even faster than what’s been observed in the cases of Orbán, Maduro, Putin and Erdoğan.

9. ATTACKING THE EU

The section of the NSS on Europe is condescendingly called *‘Promoting European Greatness’* seemingly unaware that [European disapproval ratings](#) of Trump are mostly in the range of 75 to 85%. Trump has brought about a 180-degree turn in US policy, which long had encouraged the EU itself to become stronger. The key language cited above (p.1) implies that the doctrine now is to ignore the postwar history of the EU’s origins and achievements and erase any such awareness. In short, the text aims to see Europe transformed according to MAGA ideology.

This becomes clearer in wanting to encourage *‘the growing influence of patriotic European parties’* (p.26), seeking to interfere with the internal politics of Europe. These

parties are not specified, but from the various speeches of Vice-President J.D. Vance, they include the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), with some of its representatives making speeches downplaying or excusing Germany's Nazi past. Whether France's National Rally or the UK's Reform are also encouraged is not clear.

It does go on to be more specific on prioritising 'building up the healthy nations of Central, Eastern and Southern Europe...' (p.27) and Trump's gave [explicit support](#) for Viktor Orban's (failed) April 2026 re-election campaign. Going further still, there were press reports that the pre-publication draft favoured working towards Poland, Hungary, Austria and Italy [seceding from the EU](#), thus destroying it. These reports were denied but nevertheless credible given what the published text aims at for the EU in more general terms.

The text engages in long term speculation about Europe's demographic profile. "Over the long term, it is more than plausible that within a few decades at the latest, certain NATO members will become majority non-European. As such, it is an open question whether they will view their place in the world, or their alliance with the United States, in the same way as those who signed the NATO charter" (p.27). It's not said which NATO members will become non-European, and what the statistical evidence for this is, and by when.

THE ISSUE OF HOW EUROPEAN SOCIETIES MAY ADAPT TO THEIR CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OVER THE NEXT 100 TO 200 YEARS IS OF COURSE A FASCINATING QUESTION, BUT IRRELEVANT TO A US SECURITY STRATEGY WITH IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES.

However, there is a 2018 [peer-reviewed academic study](#) that projected the years in which the Muslim populations of European states could become the majority, with none reaching this until after 2100 and some even into the twenty-third century. The issue of how European societies may adapt to their changing demographic

composition over the next 100 to 200 years is of course a fascinating question, but irrelevant to a US security strategy with immediate priorities.

Regarding certain European countries plausibly ceasing to view their alliance with the US in the same way as those who signed the NATO charter, the text omits to record that European NATO members agreed in 2025 to raise their defence spending to 5 % of GDP by 2035.

Regarding the Ukraine war the text rises to its highest level of incomprehensible language, with formulations that President Putin is surely delighted to read: 'The Trump administration finds itself at odds with European officials who hold unrealistic expectations for the war perched in unstable minority governments, many of which trample on the basic principles of democracy to suppress opposition. A large European

majority wants peace, yet that desire does not translate into policy, in large measure because those governments' subversion of democratic processes' (p.26).

While this description of Europe is unrecognisable to most Europeans themselves, the level of hypocrisy is outstanding, given Trump's legally contested bypassing of Congress on tariff protectionism, the bombing of Iran and the deployment of the National Guard into US states without their approval.

The text blatantly advocates interference in internal European affairs: *'America encourages its political allies in Europe to promote this revival of spirit and the growing influence of patriotic parties indeed gives cause for great optimism'* (p. 26). The US should, among other things, prioritise *'cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within Europe'*.

President Trump revealed his personal opinion and knowledge about European affairs with an extraordinary statement in an [interview with Reuters](#): *'The EU was created to screw the United States'*.

CONCLUSIONS

This 2025 NSS is the most objectionable policy statement coming out of Washington that one can imagine. At the level of professional drafting, whatever one thinks about its arguments, it is a sub-standard document, full of vague, unsubstantiated and polemical statements, notably in its section on Europe, with its crude title *'Promoting European Greatness'*. Yet its importance is that it lays out Trump White House thinking in detail and in writing.

Setting out 'civilisational erasure' as its key idea regarding Europe, one is provoked into reflecting on the constituent components of Western civilisation and how today's US and Europe compare. There are indeed long-established differences in our respective civilisational cultures that predate the Trump administration, but these have until now been attenuated by common political values. The Trump administration has widened and deepened these differences dramatically, to the point of shattering any common understanding of 'Western' civilisation.

The eight components of Western civilisation reviewed saw five of them as a set of purely domestic internal matters, with big differences (religion, income inequality, public health, firearms and violence and DEI policies), to be observed with interest, but without legitimate grounds to make an international issue of them across the Atlantic. Still, to use the concept of civilisational erasure adopted in the NSS, most Europeans would regard the US set as being 'less civilised' than Europe's.

Then there are the two components (climate change policy and the norms of war and peace) where the differences are starker. Additionally, these are matters of legitimate trans-Atlantic and global concern, where the European side regards the Trump regime's postures to be irresponsible, especially in the case of climate policy which will only lead to severe existential risks for humanity.

Finally, there's the matter of democracy, long held to be the bedrock of Western civilisation. Here the second Trump administration is backsliding even faster than was seen during other countries' slides towards authoritarianism over recent years.

The NSS' attack on the EU reveals a total unawareness of (or more likely an intentional refusal) to recognise European values, legal structures and institutions as they developed out of the wreckage of the Second World War. Europe's 2012 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded due to having overturned centuries of incessant war. This has been a supreme achievement, threatened by today's great powers, with Presidents Putin and Xi no doubt also pleased to read Trump's NSS.

But still things could change. The divide in Western civilisation opened by the Trump administration could be compared with a not-so-distant episode in US history, between the Gilded Age of the 1870s to 1890s to the Progressive Era from the 1890s to the 1920s, going on to the New Deal of the 1930s. The Gilded Age was stylised as standing for the extreme wealth of the new industrialists (notably Rockefeller and Carnegie), corruption and an absence of regulation and morality in politics. Carnegie himself wrote a famous essay on *'The Gospel of Wealth'* (1889) that lauded the societal benefits of extremes of wealth, so long as this was accompanied by philanthropy. The Gilded Age echoes today's AI-fuelled tech boom and the immense wealth of its leaders (although only Bill Gates has engaged in the philanthropy championed by Carnegie), coupled to the Trump regime's corrupt confusion of public and private financial interests.

Later, the Progressives stood for anti-trust policy, regulation and morally good governance including social policies. Today, it could be argued that the Trump administration encompasses the Gilded Age and Europe the Progressives. But the historical passage of the Gilded Age to the Progressives is also a reminder that the time of Trump may give way, perhaps sooner than we imagine, to a major correction.

In the meantime, it's vital that Europeans champion contemporary European values and culture, given the current fraying and breaking of Western civilisation at the hands of the Trump administration. Governments and the EU institutions should take a lead in such efforts, deepening cooperation with like-minded countries on other continents, as elaborated in our second paper.

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