

# ‘We need to talk’: Trump’s electoral rhetoric and the role of transatlantic dialogues

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## Abstract

Trump’s stinging electoral rhetoric regarding Europe has profoundly challenged the foundations of the transatlantic relations. Exploring the link between electoral rhetoric and US foreign policy, this article focusses on a key feature of transatlantic policy-making, that is, the multi-levelled architecture of European Union (EU)–US dialogues, involving diplomats, legislators, and civil society. While research shows that dialogues help promote cooperation, their relevance and specific functions in times of elections have not been explored so far. To what extent do dialogical interactions change at the approach of elections and right afterwards? Why do dialogues keep going, in spite of fierce presidential rhetoric suggesting otherwise? To fill this gap, this article explores the EU–US dialogues following Trump’s election to determine the extent to which these dialogues endorse new functions that have so far been overlooked. Adopting a socio-psychological approach, it shows that one of the functions that dialogue fulfils in times of elections is the reassurance that the relationship identity of the actors will be respected to meet their ontological security needs. Drawing on interviews and official documents, this article sheds a new light on the importance of dialogical engagement at these critical points in the life of liberal democracies.

## Keywords

dialogue, electoral rhetoric, ontological security, transatlantic relations, US foreign policy

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## Introduction

Donald Trump’s scathing electoral rhetoric regarding Europe has challenged the foundations of the transatlantic relations in a way that no other US president had ever done – leaving the future of the transatlantic relations more uncertain than ever (Cox and Stokes, 2018). In line with this special issue’s aim to explore the relationship between rhetoric and US foreign policy at election time, this article focusses on the impact of Trump’s rhetorical choices on the diplomatic practice of dialogue vis-à-vis the European Union (EU). While the presidential populist rhetoric on the campaign trail and beyond has

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attracted much attention (Lacatus, 2020), a less visible yet no less important aspect of transatlantic foreign policy-making during this critical transition has been neglected, namely, the evolution and function of the multi-levelled architecture of dialogues between the United States and the EU. Dialogues – defined as face-to-face interactions in an institutionalized framework – have been a central feature of the transatlantic relationship – which is one of the richest in the history of diplomacy (Ginsberg, 2001). While research shows that the multi-levelled architecture of dialogues is instrumental in promoting transatlantic cooperation (Pollack and Shaffer, 2001; Steffenson, 2005), its relevance and specific functions in times of elections have not been explored so far. This is puzzling given the high degree of uncertainty injected in the relationship as elections approach: electoral transitions announce potential leadership turnovers with far-reaching consequences in foreign policy (Wolford, 2007). During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump's scornful rhetoric against the EU put at risk the very continuation of these transatlantic dialogues, as it is usually expected that the foreign policy of the president elect will by and large follow its rhetoric (Lacatus and Meibauer, 2020). Yet rather than dwindling, these dialogues have gained in importance.

So, why do dialogues keep going, in spite of the fierce presidential rhetoric on the transatlantic relationship suggesting otherwise? Taking a socio-psychological approach to the study of dialogues in international relations (IR), this article shows that dialogues perform a crucial function at election time. They provide an important reassurance that the established relationship identity of the participating political actors will be respected in the future to meet their recognition needs, thereby strengthening their ontological security. Role identity or relationship identity corresponds to the kind of relationship that international actors sustain through their interactions (Faizullaev, 2013: 108–110). This role identity matters, not only because it places behavioural demands and expectations on the actors in a social context, affecting their foreign policy choices (Holsti, 1970; Thies, 2010), but also because it forms an integral part of their identity. International actors will, therefore, constantly seek the recognition of this identity to reinforce their ontological security (Lindemann and Saada, 2012: 15). Drawing on the literature on ontological security (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010), I conceptualize electoral periods as potentially destabilizing the sense of self and highlight some of the ways through which dialogues help tame the uncertainty and anxiety related to the change of leadership. This article shows how dialogues can reinforce ontological security by providing the opportunity to seek and grant recognition. As such, it answers Kinnvall and Mitzen's (2017: 9) call 'to explore non-securitizing dynamics of ontological security seeking in world politics'. It is within the framework of dialogues that recognition is potentially granted, acting as a powerful glue for enduring and stable relationships.

An ontological security perspective articulates the socio-psychological and emotional need behind the decision to strengthen these dialogical interactions. This article thus complements both constructivist role theory approaches focussed on cognitive terms and historical institutionalist accounts concerned with patterns of institutional development at critical junctures based on the actors' material interests (Fioretos, 2011: 375).

To test this claim, the article focusses on the case study of EU–US dialogues during the transition period following Trump's election as the US president. It examines the dynamics of these dialogues at different levels, including meetings between diplomats, lawmakers in the framework of the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) and civil society dialogues.<sup>1</sup> The thematic analysis is based on textual, video, and interview data. The

textual data include official documents (press releases and joint statements) issued after these dialogues, and the video data consist of recordings of several debriefing meetings. Forty semi-structured interviews were also conducted with European and American diplomats, lawmakers, and civil society actors who have been taking part in these dialogues.<sup>2</sup> Data triangulation provides a useful check against the weakness of one specific approach thereby reinforcing the validity of my findings (Denzin, 1989). The analysis finds that despite Trump's disdainful electoral rhetoric against the EU, the transatlantic dialogues that have been institutionalized over the last years persist in the first months following the inauguration and fulfil an important socio-psychological function in providing reassurance that the friendship identity is still relevant. Yet there are several changes in the quality and quantity of dialogues conducted at this critical period: content-wise, due to Trump's improvised and explosive way of communication, more time is dedicated to clarifying his intentions instead of focussing on substantial cooperation and a sense of urgency prompts numerous actors to build new bridges and consolidate ties over the Atlantic. The fact that the presidential rhetoric does not easily translate into foreign policy outcomes echo other contributions in this volume (Holland and Fermor, 2020; Meibauer, 2020) and suggests the existence of strong mechanisms limiting the impact of the presidential biting rhetoric on the shape of US foreign policy. While institutionalized dialogues under the new administration keep going, a myriad of other actors *actively* seek to preserve the friendship relationship through the practice of dialogue.

The article is structured as follows. First, I summarize the proposition that dialogues fulfil important identity needs related to the quest for recognition and ontological security. I then conceptualize the function of dialogues at election time as a mechanism that mitigates uncertainty and provides reassurance that the relationship identity of the actors will be respected. I illustrate this argument with the EU–US dialogues following the 2016 US presidential election. I zoom in on the presidential transition period (from election day to the inauguration) and on the first months of governance under the Trump administration as they entail crucial transition-related activities.

## **Theorizing the function of dialogues in normal and electoral periods**

### *Ontological security, recognition, and dialogue in normal times*

Ontological security is the 'confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens, 1990: 92). Scaling up these ontological security needs to states and international organizations, the literature conceptualizes different ways through which actors seek to secure their ontological needs (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Ontological security is formed and sustained in day-to-day practices, mainly routines, and in the narratives through which actors organize their sense of selves, which rely on their embeddedness in social and material structures (Mitzen and Larson, 2016: 7). As these routines and sustained self-narratives are crucial to the actors' well-being, they get attached to and emotionally invested in them and would feel profound anxiety at the thought of their destabilization (Mitzen and Larson, 2016: 3).

Concomitantly, as ontological security is inherently a social phenomenon constructed with others – recognition plays a crucial role. Actors are viewed as ontologically secure when they feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is

supported and recognized in and through their relations with others (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017: 4). Recognition is about the Other recognizing the identities of the Self in a way that reinforces the Self's understanding of its role in the relationship (Mitzen and Larson, 2016: 16). My emphasis on the need for recognition to feel ontologically secure contributes to a central debate about the sources of ontological (in)security. Typically, the literature opposes the 'externalist' perspective focussing on inter-state relationships and routines to the 'internalist' approach, emphasizing the state's reflexive understanding of its identity in the process of ontological security (Mitzen and Larson, 2016: 6). Striking a balance, Zarakol (2010: 4) argues that 'intersubjective pressures matter more at times when traditional routines defining the self are broken'. This article echoes this argument: by conceptualizing electoral periods as potential sources of ontological insecurity, it confirms the externalist approach, as it is the prospect of unexpected *inter-state* relations that triggers anxiety. Yet this form of intersubjective pressure (i.e. electoral scathing statements) is all the more anxiety-producing, as the EU itself is not *internally* ontologically secure (Mitzen, 2018; Rumelili, 2018).

Who are the actors craving to meet their ontological needs? While the literature identifies different referent objects (i.e. individual, society, group, state); (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017), I consider the EU's need for recognition of its identity fulfilled through its representatives defined as carriers of institutional identity. Drawing on sociological institutionalism, research shows that EU officials participating in dialogues undergo a socialization process through which they internalize the role identity of their institution and thus seek recognition for this relationship identity when interacting with their foreign counterparts (Blanc, 2018).

On the spectrum from enmity to amity, I focus on the relationship identity of 'friendship' that has triggered a growing interest in IR (Bjola, 2013; Oelsner and Koschut, 2014; Oelsner and Vion, 2011). For Berenskoetter and Van Hoef (2017),

[I]nternational friendship is primarily a bilateral relationship in which both sides *recognize* each other as friends and are connected by cognitive, normative and emotional bond formed out of overlapping biographical narratives and focused on a shared idea of international order.

This mutual recognition of friendship is granted and maintained through the practice of dialogue – which in turn reinforces ontological security in an iterative way. While dialogues can also be used for coercion, cooperation, and persuasion purposes, this article focusses on ontological security-seeking actors who deliberately use this interaction to meet their emotional needs related to their quest for recognition (Blanc, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

Tackling the *quality* of the dialogue, the content, and nature of the interaction reflect the relationship identity of friendship, provided it features the following characteristics. First, actors who define each other as friends typically share a project of 'world building', which both consider desirable and possible and strive towards realizing this shared vision of international order (Berenskoetter and Van Hoef, 2017: 6). This commitment is expressed in the practice of dialogue itself (i.e. in the rationale guiding the meeting) and in the discourse – in the form of statements released following the dialogue emphasizing how the participants interpret what they are doing together in these encounters. These statements are important as they serve to reinforce the actors' biographical narratives, strengthening their ontological security.

Friendship is also uniquely associated with practices consisting of 'giving counsel and privileged access', whereby actors provide access to private information and reveal

motivations that are closed off to others (Berenskoetter and Van Hoef, 2017: 8). For Oelsner and Koschut (2014: 20), ‘friends usually expect each other to reveal more information to each other than to others, as well as to display a higher level of tolerance towards bad news’. This characteristic is recognizable in the framework of dialogues, whereby actors display high levels of disclosure and trust in the presence of each other.

Another characteristic relates to the discrimination against third parties (Berenskoetter and Van Hoef, 2017: 10). By being a source of learning and mutual affirmation, friends create an exclusive space in ideational terms (Berenskoetter and Van Hoef, 2017). In the dialogical context, the very act of ‘strategizing’ against third parties – that is, thinking together as one team of the best strategies to influence a third actor – reflects this characteristic and cements the relationship identity as friends.

In addition, a link exists between the *quantity* of dialogues, related to the institutionalization of new ties, the ‘reflex of consultation’ and the mutual recognition of both actors as friends. Close institutional bonds, frequent consultations and concerted policies between government and bureaucracies indicate friendship (Oelsner and Koschut, 2014: 16). The act of consulting each other on matters of common interest and organizing further meetings contribute to anchor on a daily basis the recognition of both actors as friends with whom it is worth engaging (Blanc, 2018).

As such, the dialogue can actively be used by political actors to stabilize the sense of self over time. Applied to the transatlantic relations, over the course of an administration, both sides come to develop shared understandings regarding their relationship through the practice of dialogue. The quality of the dialogue and the density of institutional ties provide recognition for the relationship identity of friendship on an iterative basis, providing both sides with a valuable sense of stability and continuity. It does not mean the relationship will be exempt of foreign policy crises or conflicts of interests. But outside electoral periods, both parties will already have established solid key relational norms, which is less likely with a new leader at election time.

### *Acute uncertainty in electoral periods: When ontological security is at stake*

Elections can inject a great deal of uncertainty regarding the future of diplomatic relationships, creating anxiety, and possibly even destabilizing the sense of self. Leadership turnovers have far-reaching implications for patterns of war, peace and prosperity (Wolford, 2007). In the US context, interparty presidential transitions are critical. For Howell and Mayer (2005: 537), ‘using the various powers available, a sitting President might use the transition period to secure his legacy or effect policy changes that would “tie his successor’s hand”’. Similarly, ‘a President-elect, eager to establish his policy agenda, might engage in decisions that might overturn the previous administration’s actions’ (Halchin, 2017: 5).

IR paradigms conceptualize uncertainty differently (Rathbun, 2007). Following the constructivist take, I understand uncertainty not only as the fact that states are uncertain about other’s intentions (like in the rationalist and realist vein), but also uncertain of how to understand the information in front of them (Rathbun, 2007: 534). Constructivists equate ‘uncertainty with the *indeterminacy* of a largely socially constructed world that lacks meaning without norms and identities’ (Rathbun, 2007). Because identities are formed inter-subjectively, the process of establishing and maintaining an identity is wrought with insecurity as interactions always entail a risk that

an actor's self-understanding will not be recognized (Murray, 2012: 135). In electoral periods, a possibility of 'backtracking' in terms of recognition of identity, or what I call 'de-recognition' exists. This happens when a long-recognized identity is suddenly subjected to a 'reversal', whereby actors do not get the recognition they were accustomed to getting previously. So when the relationship and understanding that actors rely on become destabilized, ontological security is threatened. As Mitzen and Larson (2016: 7) explain, 'It is because the state might no longer be able to predict the consequences of actions it has previously taken for granted. Not knowing how to respond can produce anxiety'.

In electoral periods, the extent to which elections in a third country have the potential to deeply affect the ontological security of the actors involved varies. While elections increase uncertainty regarding the future leader's preferences, the candidates' rhetoric can dramatically amplify this state of confusion by challenging the shared understandings underpinning the relationship identity. In the case elections are held in a state constituting a 'Significant Other' for a given country or institution, the stake is inevitably higher. Echoing Eznack's (2011) conceptualization of crises as signals of strength in close allies' relationships, the more affectively charged the relationship between two actors, the deeper the anxiety will be as a consequence of statements questioning core assumptions at the heart of the relationship.

### *Taming uncertainty and anxiety through dialogue*

In turbulent times, dialogues constitute powerful mechanisms of uncertainty reduction not only cognitively, but also socially in terms of role identity. In parallel to public declarations, dialogues keep going behind closed doors and constitute privileged pockets of deliberation and recognition, which serve to tame the uncertainty associated with the effects of leadership turnover. If actors feel that crucial aspects of their social world might be threatened, they will *seek* continuity by reinforcing routines or appealing to comfortable narratives, thereby reaffirming who they are (Mitzen and Larson, 2016: 3–4). It is in this perspective that we need to understand the role of dialogues. Contributing to the debate on the level of awareness involved in ontological security-seeking practices (Mitzen and Larson, 2016), I argue that more than in normal times, actors consciously use dialogues to seek the renewed recognition and re-affirmation of their relationship identity in interaction with others. They deliberately strive to ensure that the shared understandings regarding their identity will be maintained. This is the case even when the relationship is not under rhetorical threat and regular interactions could arguably fall in the realm of habits (Blanc, 2018).

I identify several markers that signify the mutual recognition of the friendship relationship through the practice of dialogue, thereby providing continuity and reassurance. First, the way through which participants understand its value and the nature of the dialogical interaction itself are highly relevant. In the case of friendship, dialogues provide an instance in which actors seek the reassurance that their shared vision of the world will be maintained. They do so by reiterating their joint commitment to a shared project and by exploring possibilities to advance their common endeavour. The way the dialogue unfolds in terms of disclosure and discrimination against third parties is also indicative of the extent to which the friendship identity is being maintained and mutual recognition granted. Second, dialogues provide continuity through the reinforcement of the friendship discourse that becomes anchored in official documents following the meetings. It

includes references to ‘defining moments’, that is, events that had a significant impact on a relationship by determining the development of its special quality (Eznack, 2011: 242). Hence each dialogue provides an opportunity to appeal to a familiar biographical narrative reinforcing ontological security. Finally, the maintenance and proliferation of multi-levelled institutional ties provide the practical and symbolic reassurance as to the continuity of the relationship identity of friendship. Institutionalized ties are a source of stability and familiarity at the working level (Berenskoetter and Van Hoef, 2017: 15).

## **The EU–US dialogues in electoral period**

### *Trump’s electoral rhetoric: Uncertainty and anxiety kick in*

The EU–US relationship is conceptualized as a security community (Risse, 2016) and as a friendship relationship due to the institutional thickness linking these entities (Steffenson, 2005), their shared idea of an international liberal order and a strong sense of solidarity. Since the early 1950s, the EU–US partnership has expanded so much that it features today an intensity of consultations unparalleled in the history of diplomacy writ large (Ginsberg, 2001). Even in the midst of significant crises, the friendship relationship has persisted – echoing Eznack’s (2011) point, according to which crises among close allies are signals of strength.

However, in the electoral period leading up and following Trump’s election, uncertainty has been building up at an unprecedented level, creating a diffuse sense of anxiety regarding the future of the relationship. In the 2016 pre-election phase, European leaders and citizens oscillated between incredulity, anxiety and consternation in light of the provocative rhetoric of the Republican candidate (Morris, 2016). Trump multiplied disparaging remarks on Europe’s future, including cheering on Brexit, stating that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is obsolete, and questioning the need for the European bloc (Collinson, 2017). By challenging key fundamentals of the relationship, he endangered the mutual recognition of the friendship identity that had been forged over time. By contrast, Clinton’s foreign policy platform appeared promising for the transatlantic relations as her campaign emphasized the idea of continuity, extending Obama’s policies and consolidating his legacy (Morris, 2016). Hence, it came as no surprise that most European governments and mainstream parties, except Hungary and far-right parties, yearned for Clinton’s election (Dennison et al., 2016: 3).

Yet anxiety reached another level with the actual victory of Trump that came as a shock in most parts of the world (New York Times, 2016). Many European leaders questioned whether Trump would honour his campaign commitments. So concerned were the President of the European Council and Commission at the prospect of a Trump White House, that they wrote to Trump calling for the earliest meeting possible to seek reassurance (Smith, 2018b: 209). Emphasizing the long-lasting friendship binding the United States and Europe, they wrote: ‘Europeans trust that America, whose democratic ideals have always been a beacon of hope around the globe, will continue to invest in its partnerships with friends and allies, to help make our citizens and the people of the world more secure and more prosperous’ – thereby expressing their wish for continuity. Others – such as the then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned against a new level of uncertainty:

I believe we must prepare for American foreign policy becoming less predictable. We must prepare for a situation in which America will be tempted to make decisions on its own more often. I don’t want to sugar coat it: Nothing will be easier and much will be more difficult (. . .).

Expressing a more dramatic vision in which key benchmarks seem to collapse, Gérard Araud, French Ambassador to the United States, tweeted: ‘This is the end of an epoch. After Brexit and this vote, anything is possible. The world is crumbling in front of our eyes’ (Spiegel, 2016).

This tangible level of anxiety has been provoked by the *unusual* high degree of uncertainty injected by the President elect’s statements. First, the kind of ‘attacks’ formulated against the EU has been *unprecedented* in the history of the transatlantic relations. Never has an American president gone so far in its disparagements – like calling the EU a ‘foe’ on trade (Holland and Mason, 2018). For Cox and Stokes (2018: 2), ‘Trump’s tendency to openly challenge the international liberal order was not just a change of direction typical when a new president enters the White House. This looked like a rejection of the whole American foreign policy tradition’. Similarly, Smith (2018b) underlines that American foreign policy-makers have been consistent in their support for the integration project, despite a few periods of ‘adversarial partnership’. But the idea of partnership – let alone friendship had never been questioned so radically. The discourse emanating from the White House has deeply challenged the shared understandings related to the notion of friendship, creating anxiety. The lack of respect regarding the essence of the Other whereby Trump criticizes the idea of post-sovereignty – a key part of the EU’s collective identity (Mitzen, 2006) – or his statements denouncing the fact that Europeans ‘exploit’ Americans in the security and trade realms are all cases in point. As Berenskoetter and Van Hoef (2017: 10) highlight, ‘among friends, practices of solidarity continue as long as they are valued by the other and are not perceived as exploitation by the one who provides the support’. This negative rhetoric is only a step away from accusations of treason and disloyalty, which has become increasingly visible in Western politics (Chernobrov, 2019).

Second, what makes this electoral period anxiety-producing is the fact that the uncertainty normally accompanying elections has only amplified over time. As part of the transition, the first actions of a new president generally focus on establishing the administration’s priorities (Halchin, 2017), thereby reducing the uncertainty surrounding its future policy. However, the Trump administration kept sending mixed signals, leading scholars to argue that ‘unpredictability’ has become the defining feature of the transatlantic relationship (Wickett, 2018). On one hand, the Trump administration expressed its willingness to work with the EU (Pence, 2017). On the other hand, Trump continued to perceive Europe in transactional zero-sum terms, with a heavy emphasis on economic nationalism. Following the suspension of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations, he engaged in escalatory trade war rhetoric against the EU, adding strains on the relationship (Smith, 2018a). The same ambiguity prevailed in the defence realm. While Trump lambasted the alliance as ‘obsolete’, questioning the unconditional solidarity underpinning NATO, his Defence Secretary Mattis praised the ‘fundamental and enduring value of NATO for the security of both Europe and North America’. To add to the confusion, Trump increased military spending and troop deployment to Eastern Europe as agreed under the Obama administration (Birnbaum, 2017). Hence Europeans have been frustrated with these mixed messages, making it difficult for them to know how to react or even distinguish between policy and rumination (Karnitschnig, 2017).

The persisting uncertainty regarding the direction of US foreign policy is partly due to the poor transition characterizing the early Trump presidency. By contrast to the Bush-to-Obama transition, a sense of general dysfunction quickly emerged, particularly so in the



foreign and national security policy arena (Burke, 2017: 575). The State Department's capacity to perform its representative role has dramatically been eroded (Drezner, 2019). In October 2017, 21 of 23 assistant secretary positions had not been filled and 48 ambassadors had not been confirmed (Filkins, 2017). Among them, the US Ambassador to the EU who took his functions only in July 2018 (US Mission to the European Union, 2018), reflecting the low priority given by the administration to the EU and its preference for bilateral relations with individual European leaders. This led to repeated complaints that there were few people in the White House whom European governments could talk to: 'To Obama and Kerry, we talked all the time. Tillerson has never taken the initiative to call' – a diplomat reported (US Mission to the European Union, 2018).

### *Dialogue as a mechanism that allows to mitigate acute uncertainty in post-election period*

The analysis of EU–US dialogues at different levels of representation in the post-election period shows that the signifiers expressing the mutual recognition of friendship through the practice of dialogue are present to a large extent – and as such, help to tame uncertainty. As the challenges to relational norms of friendship emanate from the US presidential erratic rhetoric, European representatives are arguably more craving to get the reassurance that these threats will not materialize. However, the ontological security of the United States (via its representatives) is also at stake – albeit to a lesser degree.

*Rationale and dynamics of the dialogical interactions.* First, the rationale and dynamics of the dialogical interaction confirm the friendship identity to a large extent. The dialogue provides an instance in which actors can seek the reassurance that their shared vision of the world will be maintained and through which they can reaffirm their commitment to shared values. In the debriefing session of the 79th inter-parliamentary meeting (IPM) right after Trump's election, the chairman of the European Parliament (EP) delegation to the United States emphasized the importance of the meeting with US representatives: 'We came back from Washington with a clear understanding that our relationship transcends elections. We conveyed and received a message of continuity and unity' (McAllister, in EP, 2016b). Similarly, commenting on the first visit to Washington after the inauguration, the vice-chair of the EP delegation to the US reported:

We met with various stakeholders, think tanks, people at State Department, USTR and members of Congress. I should underline that literally everyone we met, welcomed us with more emphasis. The re-confirming of the appreciation for the transatlantic relationship stood out. The sense of dramatic change was clear throughout the people we met in Washington, but we were reassured regarding NATO cooperation. (Schaake, in EP, 2017b)

This sense of reassurance regarding the continuity of the relationship was widely shared by the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) attending the 80th IPM: the high attendance of American counterparts across the political spectrum has been interpreted as a testament to the importance Congress gives to the transatlantic relationship: 'this was a successful meeting because of the presence of American colleagues on a *cross-party level* – showing a sense in Congress that the EU–US relationship needs to be nurtured, possibly to counter the disastrous impact of President Trump' (Gomes, in EP, 2017c). Recognizing the 'abnormal' political circumstances in which the dialogue took place, another MEP highlighted its relevance:

Meeting in these strange political times is more important than ever, we really need to talk – it was as if in this meeting, we had stated again that both the EU and the US are connected and we really want to push for the transatlantic relations. (Ribeiro, in EP, 2017c)

The commitment to the continuation of the relationship based on a common vision of the world – particularly challenged by the president’s rhetoric – has been anchored in the dialogue’s statement:

[W]e reaffirm our core economic values, as well as our adherence to rules-based trade, cooperation and multilateralism in setting international standards and driving the global economy forward (. . .). We also reaffirm the commitment of allies on both sides of the Atlantic to NATO’s Article 5 and the principle of collective defence. (EP, 2017a)

Furthermore, the fact that the dialogue is used to project a common message of transatlantic continuity and unity to the rest of the world is reminiscent of the characteristic of the relationship identity of friendship whereby both sides choose to present themselves as a united front facing the rest of the world – indirectly discriminating against third parties. The 79th IPM’s joint statement stipulates: ‘we welcome the timing of this TLD (after Trump’s election). We have an important role to deliver a joint message of stability, continuity and unity to our constituents and *the world*’ (EP, 2016b).

The decade-long friendship is exploited to seek advice and counsel in this uncertain transition period. In a meeting between the EP delegation and Anthony Gardner, former US Ambassador to the EU, one MEP bluntly asked: ‘How do you think Europeans can improve their image in the US to be better appreciated by the new administration? To this question, Gardner (in EP, 2016b) answered:

To counter the bilateral transactional basis that the Trump administration is likely to take, you need to prove that the EU is capable of delivering. You need to couch your arguments in terms of what EU–US relations can do for the US. This is the language that resonates. Talk less about values and more about how it makes sense in terms of US interests if you want to convince them.

This exchange shows the proximity between European and American participants and crystallizes the friendly practice of providing counsel to each other.

With the new administration in office, a high level of openness and disclosure kept characterizing the exchanges, thereby providing continuity to the friendship relationship identity that both sides wished to maintain. Many MEPs highlighted that ‘the debates were very frank with no issues left aside’ (Ehler, in EP, 2017c) and appreciated the fact that ‘both republicans and democrats were open in discussing for instance the crucial topic of their relationship with the new President’ (Suica, in EP, 2017c).

*Narratives of friendship as discursive anchor.* Another way through which dialogues provide a sense of continuity is by reinforcing the positive joint narrative of friendship so important for ontological needs, as it discursively anchors this specific understanding of the role of the EU and the United States vis-à-vis each other. The 79th IPM joint statement deliberately links common past achievements with the prospect of future endeavours to create a sense of continuity:

We are reminded of the work and the successes we have achieved together, including in the areas of the economy, trade, security and the protection of the rights of our citizens. We undertake to continue to achieve progress on challenges and opportunities ahead. (EP, 2016a)

The 80th IPM statement strengthens the biographical friendship narrative, invoking defining moments and providing reassurance these understandings remain valid:

[W]e recalled the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties and the peace, prosperity and stability they have brought to the continent. This achievement owes to the deep commitment and support of the US throughout the decades, and in this regard, we also recalled the 70th anniversary of the Marshall Plan. We are mutually indispensable partners and contributors to global stability, security and economic development. (EP, 2017a)

At the executive level, we found the same wording: ‘the meeting reaffirmed the strong and historical bonds of partnerships between the US and the EU, and the commitment to continue working closely together in the areas of Justice and Home Affairs’ (EC, 2017).

*Thickness of institutional ties.* An additional marker of mutual recognition of friendship is the maintenance of thick institutionalized ties. When the confusion regarding the US policy vis-à-vis, the EU was at its highest point, institutionalized channels of communication have been actively relied upon. While Europeans admitted they have been struggling to make sense of Trump’s foreign policy, they also highlighted the utility of the channels of communication well-established beforehand that allowed them to directly ask their US counterparts for more information in these times of unpredictability (EEAS official, personal communication, 3 March 2017).

In terms of quantity, the intensity of the transatlantic dialogues has not varied over the first months of Trump’s presidency. At the inter-parliamentary level, dialogues have kept taking place twice a year. For executive dialogues, no substantial change has been reported, if any. Dialogues keep going at technical, deputy, and even assistant secretary levels (US official from State Department, personal communication, 1 August 2019). Both European and American diplomats report: ‘the channels of communication that have been established over the years are still in place and the next dialogues on the agenda are being prepared as if nothing had changed’ (EEAS official, personal communication, 3 March 2017). As one US diplomat at the working level explained, ‘If we don’t get the explicit instruction to lower or stop a dialogue with the EU, it will just keep going’ (US official from State Department, personal communication, 21 February 2017). This suggests that once in place, the consultative mechanisms continue to work, even if the presidential rhetoric on the surface indicates otherwise. Examples of high-level dialogues that took place shortly after the elections include the meetings of the Energy Council, the Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial dialogue in June 2017, and the 15th EU–US Information Society Dialogue in February 2018 (Kostaki, 2018). At the civil society level, dialogues between businesses and consumer groups continue as usual and are working out propositions to improve transatlantic relations in light of the new situation (Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue (TACD) and Transatlantic Business Dialogue (TABC) members, personal communications, 30 March 2017).

*‘Not exactly business as usual’.* Despite the markers expressing the continuation of the mutual recognition of the friendship identity at different levels of representation, the analysis reveals subtle changes in the way the dialogues are conducted.

First, a sense of frustration and disappointment is tangible in the way through which Europeans talk about their dialogical experience at that time. They complain that the content of the dialogue is geared towards clarifying issues that were once taken for

granted, instead of focussing on substantial issues of cooperation. Following her visit to the United States after Trump's election, the former EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Mogherini (2017) stressed:

[I]t is the *first* time that my visit to Washington focuses on the bilateral relations rather than crises we have around us – this is telling us the new era we are entering in. (. . .) This is a moment in history where we are called to avoid taken for granted, that people understand the added value of our friendship.

Commenting on the first contacts between MEPs and various US interlocutors, an MEP reported: 'we welcomed these reassurances but also noted that it was *unfortunate* that they were needed at all' (Schaake, in EP, 2017b). Reinforcing this point, the delegation's chair expressed his incredulity regarding the need to constantly reassure each other: "it is *amazing* that we are re-assuring each other about the importance of NATO on an occasion like that (TLD) – I would never have thought that! Normally, we try to act together, which is the expected way to proceed but now half of the interaction is used to clarify what has been said the week before. We clearly re-iterated that it is not the way we would *expect* the leader of the Western world to act' (Ehler, in EP, 2017c). This critique referred to Trump's tweet habit, which sows confusion and undermines the well-established relational norm of regular consultation in line with the friendship identity.

Second, a new understanding has emerged regarding the enhanced responsibility of the legislative bodies to nurture the transatlantic relationship and the heightened need to reinforce existing channels of communication. Recognizing that the challenges lying ahead with the new administration will be of a different kind, lawmakers emphasize they have to play a more important role in defending the transatlantic relations: 'In this new context, we- as lawmakers – have to go out and explain the importance of the relationship to our respective administrations *more than ever*' (McAllister, in EP, 2016b). This statement expresses a palatable sense of urgency related to extraordinary circumstances and to a degree of uncertainty of a 'deeper kind' threatening established shared understandings. Concomitantly, the reinforcement of communication channels is seen as vital: 'It was useful to diversify further the people we met with, in particular universities and the think tank communities, but we also acknowledge the need to invest more in the new power brokers on the Republican side' (Schaake, in EP, 2017b). Finally, an interesting phenomenon has reappeared during this post-election period, that is, the reinforcement of direct ties between US cities and states with Europe, bypassing the Trump-era White House altogether. According to California Governor Jerry Brown, who was received at the EP, 'contacts between US states and other countries can be helpful and important, because you have to keep talking. This business of yelling at each other across the ocean is not good' (Birnbbaum and Jaffe, 2017).

## Conclusion

This article has shown that in electoral periods, dialogues perform a crucial function: they provide an important reassurance that the established relationship identity of the participating political actors will be respected in the future to meet their recognition needs and strengthen their ontological security. Around election time, a high degree of uncertainty is injected in diplomatic relationships, potentially destabilizing the established sense of self. This is particularly the case when the rhetoric on the campaign trail challenges core shared understandings that have been forged over decades.

This argument was illustrated by the case study of the transatlantic dialogues in the post-election period from the Obama to the Trump administration, involving various actors. By examining the quality and quantity of dialogues over this period, I found that through their dialogical interactions, actors seek and grant the reassurance that previous shared understandings related to their role identities will be maintained. This case is representative as it features mechanisms for taming uncertainty through dialogue (i.e. discursive reinforcement, maintenance of dense institutionalized ties, etc.) that might be at play in other political transitions. Yet what is unique in the case of Trump, is the intensity of the rhetorical attacks on European allies on the campaign trail and the confusion that persisted in the aftermath of the elections, resulting in deeper anxiety and a more urgent need to get reassured from an ontological security perspective.

By exploring the micro-practice of dialogue at these times of transition rather than describing policy trends at the macro-level, this article contributes to the literature on transatlantic relations. Moving beyond institutionalist accounts, it provides a better understanding of the utility of these channels of communication from a socio-psychological perspective. It shows the heightened importance of this multi-levelled architecture of dialogues that serves to reconfirm the relationship identity of friendship in uncertain times against the backdrop of presidential scathing statements. This is particularly true for the inter-parliamentary and civil society dialogues whose continuation is not directly affected by presidential decisions.<sup>4</sup> Critics might argue that policy shifts never translate immediately into institutionalized practices at the executive level. While more research is needed on the evolution of the dialogues over the *whole* period covering the Trump administration, it remains the case that an administration determined to stop these dialogues could easily do so even at an early stage. Under the Obama administration, executive dialogues were renewed only if they were perceived to be relevant. As a matter of fact, a few dialogues lost their relevance and effectively died (Blanc, 2018).

Going forward, future research could take a broader historical perspective by adding a comparative element to the study of dialogues in electoral periods. While I emphasized the high degree of uncertainty injected in the transatlantic relationship during the Obama-to-Trump transition, a different picture might emerge in less threatening circumstances. What is for sure is that the dialogue needs to keep going.

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## Notes

1. I focus on EU–US dialogues (not dialogues between EU member states and the United States). Actors include diplomats from the EEAS/EU Commission and US State Department, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and of Congress, and members of the TACD and TABC.
2. The interviews were conducted between December 2015 and June 2019 with a representative sample of participants.
3. For a review of the functions of dialogues in IR theories, see Blanc (2018).
4. For a discussion on the relative importance of the different types of transatlantic dialogues, see Blanc (2018).

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