Commentary
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How to Make Non-Interference in Internal Matters Great Again?

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

Europe is in turmoil over Elon Musk's high-profile political statements. Mainstream politicians are calling for decisive measures to curb the billionaire's influence and the power of social networks. However, the real issue lurking in the background is the need for new global agreements on non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

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Just six months ago, the greatest nightmare for most European politicians was Donald Trump—or rather, the possibility of his return to the White House as the head of the American state. In November, this nightmare became a reality, as the 45th President of the United States is poised to become the 47th. This reality is gradually being processed and accepted across Europe, as well as in other parts of the world.

Even though Trump was recently perceived as "worse than a nuclear war," there is no changing the fact of his latest electoral triumph. It's virtually impossible to fully prepare for his new term in office: as the president-elect's latest statements on Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal show, he has a knack for surprising even the most seasoned observers. However, openly expressing outrage over Trump's political style and philosophy is no longer a viable option for foreign politicians, particularly those from European countries that are dependent on the United States. On the contrary, an increasing number of these politicians are eager to demonstrate their respect and admiration for the new-old American president, lining up for an audience with him.

Brussels is shaken by Musk

Against this backdrop, a new nightmare has emerged in the European media—Elon Musk. Given the media, financial, and political power of the richest person on the planet, this nightmare is all the more real. This is especially due to Musk's warm and, seemingly, trusting relationship with Trump. As is well known, Trump tasked the billionaire, alongside politician Vivek Ramaswamy, with improving the efficiency of the U.S. government through a specially created department. Musk is also, at least for now, involved in some foreign policy work within the forming team of the 47th president.

The black cat has long run between Elon Musk and the European political-bureaucratic elite. The entrepreneur does not hide his negative stance towards mainstream political ideologies and does not mince words when critiquing the politicians who represent them. Many European officials and politicians, particularly from the EU institutions in Brussels, are accustomed to denying and condemning anything that does not align with their own views of what is right and beautiful. However, for a long time, the absence of mutual sympathies did not particularly hinder the development of mutually beneficial cooperation between Musk's companies and European jurisdictions.

> However, in recent years, ideological and aesthetic differences seem to have started to come to the forefront.

This is particularly true after the billionaire acquired Twitter, rebranded it as X, and began pushing his media-communications agenda there. In August of last year, a public conflict erupted over freedom of speech between Musk and Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for the Internal Market at the time. Ahead of an interview with Trump, who was still a presidential candidate, on the X platform, the EU official threatened Musk with sanctions and fines over misinformation. Musk, in his characteristic manner, sent Breton a rather blunt message. In the end, the scandal was downplayed, as the European Commission leadership distanced itself from the comments of its colleague.

Now, public spats between the billionaire and the European political mainstream have resumed and appear to be escalating to a new level. As Politico reported, the whole of Brussels is "tremored" after Musk's recent statements. Referring to the owner of SpaceX, Tesla, and X (formerly Twitter), European left-leaning parties, including the German SPD, issued a joint statement urging the EU to use "all available means" to protect democracy from misinformation and foreign interference on social media. The liberal faction in the European Parliament has called for an urgent debate on "Musk's growing interference" in European politics.

Similar sentiments are also being expressed from some national capitals. Emmanuel Macron has accused Musk of interfering in democratic processes in Europe. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre is deeply concerned that "a man with enormous access to social media and large financial resources is so directly involved in the internal affairs of other countries." German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called Musk a troll. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated that the businessman had crossed the line by spreading lies. The Spanish Prime Minister shares a similar view. Meanwhile, France's foreign minister has called on the European Commission to take "strict measures" against the American businessman.

Not groundless

All of these statements from European politicians and the "tremors" in Brussels did not arise out of nowhere. They are a response to a series of actions and comments from Elon Musk, some of which, it must be said, do indeed appear as interference in the internal affairs of foreign states.

In Germany, Musk effectively launched a media campaign in support of the far-right political group, Alternative for Germany (AfD). Just over a month before the snap parliamentary elections, this political force is in second place in nationwide polls. The world's richest person has actively expressed the view that "only the AfD can save Germany." He also publicly called Chancellor Scholz an "incompetent fool."

In a similar style, Musk is also clashing with the Labour government of the UK, led by Keir Starmer, whom he accuses of concealing numerous cases of rape. According to the billionaire, the British Prime Minister has long (including during his tenure as the Director of Public Prosecutions) deliberately downplayed the mass rapes of minors by immigrants. During an indirect media spat, Musk described Starmer as "absolutely vile."

The recently resigned Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, was also labelled by Musk as a "girl." In response to a post by Trudeau on X (Twitter), the platform owner wrote: *"Girl, you're not the governor of Canada anymore, so doesn't matter what you say."* In addition to the insulting personal remark, this phrasing also alludes to the notion that Canada should cease to exist as a sovereign state and become the 51st U.S. state.

> In diplomatic practice, such statements usually lead to a strong protest, often followed by an escalation of political tensions in bilateral relations, which can result in more serious consequences.

New agreements on non-interference

In Brussels and other European capitals, the discussion is gaining momentum on how to respond to Musk's actions and how to safeguard Europe's information space from external interference. Much has been said about the EU's Digital Services Act and ways to limit the overwhelming influence of social media and other private communication platforms on socio-political processes.

These are understandable and important issues, and in one way or another, they are relevant not only for European countries. The rest of the world is facing and will continue to face the same challenges, especially as various aspects of life continue to digitalize, with increasingly powerful artificial intelligence infiltrating them. However, amid these challenges and discussions, there is a fundamental issue that is not being addressed at all in Europe.

The issue is that today, Elon Musk is doing roughly the same thing that most Western countries and politicians have been doing without the slightest doubt or remorse for the past two or three decades. Under the guise of promoting "bright ideals and universal values," they have indiscriminately and often crudely interfered in the internal affairs of sovereign states around the world. This has often been done with the help of the media and social networks. Moreover, in most cases, this interference was carried out with little to no understanding of the local context, without grasping the real-world consequences their calls could provoke. It was often done simply for show, to appear to their own voters as "unyielding fighters against all that is bad."

Yes, there may be stylistic and ideological differences in these cases of intervention. But in practice, they become secondary. In Elon Musk, the Western political mainstream has now encountered the embodiment of the principle "what you fight for is what you get."

> If some can do it, sooner or later, others will be able to as well. The only question is the resources and political will to do so, and by definition, no political force or specific group of states has, or can have, exclusive rights to them.

Therefore, in a global sense, this entire situation should stimulate a discussion not only about the technical means to combat disinformation and the unchecked power of social media but also about timeless principles. Specifically, the need to fully revive the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states to reduce global tensions. As Donald Trump's supporters might say – to make this principle great again.

The issue of (non)intervention has historically been the Achilles' heel of international relations. On one hand, with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which established the concept of sovereign states, came the understanding of the importance of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. On the other hand, the boundary between domestic and international affairs has always been and will always be thin, and in some cases, even arbitrary. This is especially true in an era of growing global interdependence.

This dilemma was clearly evident during the legendary Helsinki process, which led to the signing of the Final Act of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, and later to the creation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, at that time, the participating states were formally able to enshrine the principle of non-interference and separate general and specific issues into different thematic baskets.

> Now that global security is once again teetering on the edge, a new interpretation of the non-interference principle is needed—one that all, or at least the vast majority of, states around the world can agree on.

Without such a compromise agreement in this area, there can be no new architecture for regional, let alone global, security.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations