2017
12 MONTHS EXPERTS

Research Communication unit
Université libre de Bruxelles
A scientific perspective for 12 events in 2017

Donald Trump, 45th President of the United States  
A polluted abyss

Attacks, in Europe and abroad  
Emmanuel Macron and his media strategy

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Towards a social Europe?  
Twenty-five years after the first text message

Politics, society, economics, law, science and health… 2017 was an eventful year, with its share of tragedies in Belgium, Europe, and across the world. We have chosen 12 “major” events and asked 12 ULB researchers to analyse them and put into scientific perspective these 12 months.

We thank them for hitting the «pause» button in the middle of a hectic year, and hope you enjoy reading their analyses!

An initiative of the Research Communication unit, External Relations Department, Université libre de Bruxelles.

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Donald Trump, 45th President of the United States

Olivier Corten
Centre for International Law

President Trump has adopted aggressive international policies at the head of the world’s largest military power. Olivier Corten, do you believe an organisation such as the UN can hold its own against the hostile speeches and insults that were delivered before its assembly?

The UN is often seen as an institution in charge of guaranteeing peace and individual rights; however, one should not expect it to act as a ‘super-state’ that can impose its will on other nations. While the UN’s goals are universal, the organisation itself does not necessarily impose its own will, but is rather an instrument that countries use to ensure their coexistence. So when Donald Trump gives a fiery speech before the assembly, some may think that he is in blatant disregard of the UN’s values; still, they would rather not exclude him, as things would be even worse if the United States left the organisation! What’s more, Donald Trump himself has no intention of leaving. The UN’s main goal is to prevent a 3rd world war, which is why it makes efforts to be as accommodating and as transparent as possible, by ensuring its decisions are unanimous - even if this means fewer, less ambitious, decisions. Realpolitik in action.

It’s not just Donald Trump: Kim Jong-Un, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, among others, are strong leaders who are attached to their country’s sovereignty. Do they have the means to further their values and interests in the rest of the world?

A fundamental principle in international law is the sovereign equality of states: this means one state may not impose its own values on another. However, when a state decides to join an international organisation or sign a treaty, it remains sovereign and can later choose to withdraw, although the procedure involved may be slow and complex. For instance, Donald Trump decided in 2017 that the United States would withdraw from UNESCO; President Reagan had done the same previously, and the United States had returned after Reagan just like it might...
return after Trump. Some leaders may talk about isolationism, but in today’s world no state can live in complete isolation. This is because so many things are run at the international level, e.g. trade law, telecommunications law, human rights, etc.

With armed conflicts breaking out or continuing throughout the world (Israel/Palestine, Syria, Ukraine, Libya, etc.) and the serious violations of humanitarian law that such conflicts entail, is there still an international law?

This is more of a philosophical question, with no clear-cut answer. Some might argue that the number of violations is such that there might as well be no law. Others would point out that international law is still very much active in other areas, such as the European Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice, both of whose decisions are generally followed. As for me, I believe that international law does exist to a certain extent, not because it is more or less enforced on the ground, but because it is often referred to by members of the international community. Even when they violate international law, states to not deny its existence, but rather engage in legal debates over its interpretation. This proves that international law does exist, at the very least in the shared language of the international community. Still, international law is in constant flux, and it depends on societies’ values and -more importantly- on the evolution of global power dynamics.

President Trump is known for using Twitter to communicate. Is international law open to platforms that are less formal, such as social networks?

International law is not too attached to form: there is no well-defined procedure for creating it. There are international treaties, of course, as well as resolutions adopted by international organisations and decisions taken by judicial entities, but there is much room for informal practices. For instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a list of principles that have become customary, and it is referred to so frequently that its legal weight is undeniable. Similarly, a joint statement, a press conference, meeting minutes, or a tweet can be sources of law. But we should be careful: no matter how they communicate, leaders must also demonstrate their country’s willingness to follow through with their commitments.

Olivier Corten

Olivier Corten is head of the Centre for International Law and Sociology Applied to International Law, and co-editor of the Belgian Review of International Law. His main areas of research are the prohibition on the use of force and other general principles of international law: non-interference, self-determination, the existence of a state, etc. He is also a professor in the Faculty of Law and Criminology. In 2017, he co-authored the book «Une introduction critique au droit international».
Looking back: Wednesday, February 15

The world learns that even the Mariana Trench, the deepest spot in the ocean, cannot escape human pollution: traces of persistent chemical pollutants (PCB and PCBE) were found in crustaceans as deep as 10,000 metres.

In July, a research team alerts the public that the ongoing 6th mass extinction event is accelerating, with vertebrate species dying in great numbers throughout the world.

In October, a sea of plastic is spotted off the coast of Honduras, near protected areas.

Bruno Danis, should we be surprised to find man-made pollutants at the Earth’s most extreme points, such as the Mariana Trench?

” No, this is not surprising. PCBs are pollutants that persist in the environment and degrade over a long time. This means they are more likely to spread across the environment, including over long distances. For instance, PCBs were found in the Arctic. What is preoccupying is that we do not know what effects these pollutants -PCBs and others- have on ecosystems, because this subject is not well studied. Contaminants generally have effects at the sub-cellular level (e.g. by destabilising DNA), disrupt hormonal systems, and impact reproduction. At such great depths, however, biological processes occur slowly, and we believe toxicity does not affect deep-ocean organisms in the same way as in other habitats. Without knowing more about this environment, we cannot predict what the impact on its ecosystems will be.

How do pollutants reach such inaccessible places?

” First, there are ocean currents, which can carry particles over large distances. Then, it can depend on the pollutant itself: for instance, different types of plastic degrade in different ways. Certain float, others sink, others break up into tiny particles. Finally, there is a constant flow of organic matter towards the bottom of the ocean: marine animals die and sink, and any pollutants their bodies may contain end up on the ocean floor.
You mentioned plastic, which is another problem: it seems like we are seeing more and more headlines about the ‘plastic patch’, or animals eating plastic.

The presence of plastic in the environment and its impact are widely publicised topics, and people tend to pay attention. Yet the actual effects of plastics on ocean ecosystems is another dark area in our scientific knowledge. We do know that plastic attracts all sorts of other hydrophobic pollutants; but are organisms affected by the plastic, by the other contaminants, or by both? This is an area of research that is unfortunately not well studied. During our next mission in Antarctica, we will begin an inventory of marine biodiversity, which will include a study of plastic in this environment that should be relatively untouched by human activity.

How can we limit this pollution?

There is no single solution: what we really need to do is reconsider our lifestyle, our consumption, and our relationship with nature. Why are we still producing and consuming so much plastic? Why not be more cautious, instead of creating pollution without knowing the consequences? Why is there no political agreement on this topic, like there was on climate or the ozone layer? If no policies are implemented, I fear this type of pollution will simply continue. As researchers, our duty is to document and identify problems as objectively as possible, and hopefully people will react. Still, I regret that there is no coordination of research on the environmental impact of plastic and other pollutants. And this is an important question, because while ecosystems can survive without humans, humans need ecosystems to survive.

Bruno Danis

Bruno Danis is a professor and a researcher at the Marine Biology Lab in the Faculty of Sciences. His research focuses on polar biodiversity and biogeography, the impact of stress factors on ecosystems, and computer models explaining how biodiversity responds to these factors. He has taken part in several field missions in Antarctica, and will leave for his next one in February, 2018, as a part of the Belgica120 expedition.
Christophe Wasinski, many countries in Europe and abroad have been attacked by terrorists. How do you explain these attacks?

"Those who perpetrate these attacks are doing so on their own initiative, but also as a reaction to external events. As military historians wrote in the 1960s, people only engage in guerrilla warfare because they have no other solution. What they meant is that guerrilla warfare, just like terrorism, is used by those in a position of weakness. Perhaps a more exaggerated way to put it would be to say these methods of warfare are adopted out of spite.

The current attacks can be explained in part by the military interventions carried out since 2003 in the name of the 'war on terror'. Of course, it is not a simple, mechanical cause-and-effect relationship; but as the pressure of military intervention increases we should expect a more brutal response. Addressing the threat of terrorism means not only knowing how the attackers think, but also understanding the consequences of our own actions.

Is this something politicians are giving consideration to?

"Not really. In Belgium, this topic is seldom discussed. Our foreign and defence policies are aligned on our allies’, i.e. the United States’ and NATO’s, whose response to attacks consists in physically eliminating terrorists, reducing their resources and their potential for harm, and confining them to areas far from Europe and the United States. Such actions simply result in more violence, and have dramatic effects on the dynamic between social groups in areas of military intervention by strengthening certain groups and weakening others. This destabilising effect is rarely mentioned in public debates on anti-terrorism policies.
When the issue of political consequences is brought up, it generally involves ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethno-religious’ considerations. But this approach is, to a large extent, a relic of colonial times when they were used as a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy. When a Western country today decides to fight terrorism by arming this or that ‘ethnic group’, they tend to perpetuate this kind of dynamic. Even if this is not an intentional goal, such approaches fragment the areas in which they are applied much more than they stabilise them.

In addition, decision makers often do not take into consideration the effects of their military interventions on the civilian population. Their priority is keeping the terrorist threat as far away as possible, even if this involves levelling entire cities as was seen in Syria and in Iraq.

Is there a solution? Or will we have to live under constant threat of terror?

There is no silver bullet. Still, certain policies can contribute to reducing tensions. Before anything else, we should avoid warmongering attitudes and a black-or-white view of conflict, both of which only make things worse. We must also strictly adhere to international law, and increase pressure on our allies if they fail to do the same. More emphasis should also be placed on diplomacy, especially in the UN. You cannot solve all problems by talking them out, but I believe that a return to less aggressive security policies -such as those of the 1970s in Europe during the Cold War- is a good idea. Security is achieved not against the ‘other’, but with them. Lastly, I believe we should look into the underlying economic causes of certain conflicts, especially those related to energy resources in the Middle-East.

Christophe Wasinski

A researcher at the Research and Studies on International Politics, REPI (Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences), Christophe Wasinski studies the legitimisation of military violence in strategic thought and military discourse. His is also a lecturer, whose classes focus on armament and disarmament policies and the history of international relations.
French voters go to the polls for the first round of the presidential election. Emmanuel Macron and his movement ‘En Marche!’ get 24% of the vote. In the second round, on May 7, he faces off with Marine Le Pen (‘Front national’) and wins with 66.1% of the vote, making him the youngest French President at only 39. A former member of the socialist party and minister for the economy under President François Hollande, he launched his party in April, 2016. With the ‘Républicains’ candidate François Fillon embroiled in scandals, and with a deeply divided socialist party, he rose in the polls and became hugely popular with both the public and the media, an almost messianic figure.

Laura Calabrese, what communication strategies did Emmanuel Macron implement during the presidential election?

"Macron’s main strategy is to present himself as a ‘neither-nor’ candidate: neither left-wing, nor right-wing, but also both at the same time. This means avoiding sectarian speech as much as possible, and attempting to reconcile opposites. For instance, he promotes both protectionism and free trade, both secularism and religious freedom. Emmanuel Macron offers a ‘third way’, which, on the one hand, sets himself apart from other candidates, and, on the other hand, allows him to counter extremist statements, which were especially present during this campaign. His message is one of balance, measure, unity. From the election’s results, it is obvious that it was the right strategy at the time.

What's more, he did not follow the patterns of traditional political discourse, and made a point to avoid politically-loaded language. Instead, he heavily relies on abstract positive concepts such as ‘confidence’, ‘future’, ‘build’, ‘carry’, or ‘commitment’. He also draws from corporate jargon, with words like ‘investment’, ‘transformation’, ‘innovation’, ‘revolution’, ‘project’, ‘dynamism’, etc. As a start-up candidate, he is fond of the semantic field of change, initiative, and effort, with an overall emphasis on optimism."
Emmanuel Macron formally became President on May 14, 2017. Did his communication then change?

Not much, but certain topics featured in his campaign did disappear, such as the zero-tolerance policy, while new ones emerged. For instance, President Macron mentions global warming much more often than candidate Macron: at the time, this topic would not have helped set him apart from his rivals; but it has now become a way to show France’s position in the international community, especially in contrast to President Trump’s climate policies. A more dramatic change could be observed in his paternalistic attitude, which became more obvious after the legislative election. In Bucharest, he declared that the French were reform-adverse, and that one must «explain to them what the long-term strategy is and ask them to undergo a fundamental transformation for the benefit of a project larger than themselves».

He also talks to the media much less, although he has announced a change in his strategy.

Many have said he has ‘locked down’ his communication: nothing is said off the record, the ministers never make addresses after their weekly meetings, and during visits the President only talks about the reason for his visit. This vertical communication strategy sets a new tone compared to his predecessors. Previously, the political discourse had become ubiquitous, with sound bites constantly being fed to the media; Macron’s project is to restore dignity to a president’s office that had lost some of its credibility. While this communication strategy may puzzle certain journalists, it also lends more weight to their political commentary, which had been taken over by a succession of sound bites. For the President, however, this strategy has its limits: in a time of reforms, technical issues should be understood by citizens, which involves promoting a political project and communicating to the public. Another idea that should be followed up on is the majority party’s plan to launch its own media platform. This could create a confusion between information (what journalists do) and communication (what politicians and advertisers do). In the current context, it is important to stress that political discourse, whose goal is to convince, must be contextualised, fact-checked, put into perspective. A widely-accepted trend today is the blurring of this distinction (including with online social networks, which are major contributors to this phenomenon), giving the illusion of a direct line of communication between citizens and politicians, which in turn devalues the role of journalists.

Laura Calabrese

Head of the Research Center in Information and Communication (ReSIC), Laura Calabrese is especially interested in the media’s discourse, but also in how it is received. She is a Chair in multilingual communication and she is teaching discourse analysis, communication, and sociolinguistics at the Faculty of Letters, Translation and Communication. She is also a co-editor of a discourse analysis journal entitled «Le Discours et la langue».
Looking back: Friday, May 12

A cyberattack is launched that will eventually infect 200,000 computers in more than 150 countries. The virus installs a piece of ransomware called ‘WannaCry’, which encrypts users’ data and forces them to pay a ransom to have it decrypted. A number of public services are affected—including hospitals in Britain—, as well as many companies. Fortunately, Belgium seems to be relatively unaffected.

On May 14, 2017, Belgium’s federal government announces a series of measures intended to reinforce the country’s cybersecurity, with funds totalling 60 million euros.

In June, 2017, another cyberattack (the ‘NoPetya’ virus) will have major effects throughout the world.

Olivier Markowitch, what was the impact of the WannaCry cyberattack?

"We are living in an increasingly connected world, where an attack like WannaCry can be deployed very quickly at a large scale. Still, the disaster some were predicting hasn’t happened, and the consequences of the attack were less dire than expected. Belgium, for instance, did not suffer much from the attack.

Should we expect similar attacks in the future?

"Yes, certainly. Cybercriminals want to extort money, whether they achieve this through ransoms, selling stolen data, attacking a company’s reputation, or other means. They will keep doing this, with similar effects to this year’s attacks: their goal is to take advantage of the system, not destroy it altogether. Cyberactivism – e.g. the actions of ‘Anonymous’ – remains relatively marginal: it involves hackers going after a specific target in order to defend a cause. A much more serious danger is cyberwarfare, where states or groups use another state’s digital vulnerabilities to further their own political goals. France, the United States, China, and Russia already engage in these activities for espionage or to shape public opinion: for instance, Russia’s alleged influence over the latest presidential elections in the US. A much more serious risk is the potential to disrupt energy or water distribution networks, nuclear power plants, or the banking system.

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Is Belgium a target? Is it protected?

Belgium is indeed a target, especially because it is home to the EU's institutions as well as NATO. This was brought to public attention when Belgacom was targeted by a cyberattack in 2013. In the wake of the attack, a number of entities were created, such as Computer Crime Units, the federal cyberemergency team (part of the global ‘CERT’ network), and the Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium (CCB). However, SMEs remain vulnerable to certain types of cyberattacks: their limited resources do not allow them to keep their IT systems up to date or to have a specific person in charge of information security, which has become an essential task. The government has released funds this year that could help SMEs in this area.

And what is done at the EU level?

In May of 2018, the new EU regulation on privacy will require companies to inform the authorities of any data breach: this will improve the overall awareness of cyberattacks and allow information to be shared. The European Union also intends to require companies to take computer security into account when designing software or information systems, which should improve the overall state of cybersecurity in Europe. Lastly, there seems to be a push towards strengthening the mission of ENISA (the EU's agency for network and information security) to turn it into a center of expertise, certification and standardization in cybersecurity. In the meantime, it is essential to gather and share experience from past attacks: this is the purpose of the CERT network, but companies do not always think to contact it.

Are there practical solutions to prevent cyberattacks or limit their impact?

As I mentioned, keeping up-to-date software is a crucial step that can fix potential software vulnerabilities. Also important are public awareness and education on risks and good practices. Lastly, cryptography is fundamental for data protection: here at ULB, we are conducting research on the analysis and development of new cryptography protocols in order to protect the information transmitted over a network. This is an important issue, and one that students are interested in, as evidenced by enrolments to the inter-university master in cybersecurity, which we have launched in September of 2016.

Olivier Markowitch
Head of the Computer Science department of the Faculty of Sciences, Olivier Markowitch also teaches classes and conducts research in the QualSec Group (Quality and Security of Information Systems) and in the centre for transdisciplinary research on cybersecurity. His research deals with cryptography and information security, and more specifically with the analysis and design of cryptographic protocols, digital signatures, and the robustness of hardware implementations of cryptographic schemes.
He also works as an information safety adviser for ULB, and as a member of the University's ethics committee and privacy committee.
Simone Veil passes away

Axelle Pintiaux
Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, Hôpital Erasme

Looking back: Friday, June 30
Simone Veil passes away at 89. An Auschwitz survivor, former French minister of health, and former President of the European Parliament, she was at the forefront of a series of struggles throughout her life, especially for abortion rights.
When she is appointed Minister of Health by President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1974, he tasks her with presenting a bill on the depenalisation of abortion. At the time, 300,000 women are aborted illegally in France, in appalling conditions.
In order to provide a legal framework for this procedure and support women in distress, Simon Veil defends her bill tooth and nail, facing strong opposition and even hostility, including in her own party. Some of them stoop to verbally abusing at her, reminding her of her painful past. But Simone Veil stands her ground and, on January 17, 1975, the bill is passed.

Axelle Pintiaux, what has Simone Veil’s struggle taught us?

“" The depenalisation of abortion has resulted in a sharp decrease in both women’s mortality and morbidity. With abortion depenalised, there were virtually no more cases of air embolisms, a pathology that is frequently found in women who had high-pressure intrauterine soap injections.

The law depenalising abortion was passed in 1975 in France, and in 1990 in Belgium. Yet some groups are still protesting abortion. Is this right under attack?

“" Certainly, but when I see people who support anti-abortion groups I always think they are disconnected from reality and do not realise what women go through. Firstly, no matter what sphere they live in, women are at risk of non-consensual relations and do not always practice safe sex. Then, there are a number of reasons for which a woman might have an unwanted pregnancy, such as incorrect use of contraception or denial of the risk of pregnancy. And let us not forget that pregnancy is still possible with an IUD or a contraceptive pill, even when properly used! Abortion is therefore a necessary procedure, and it must be performed in a medical setting. It is clear that in countries where abortion is restricted, or even banned, women still get clandestine abortions. In fact, whether in France or in Belgium, there was no increase in the number of abortions after the procedure was depenalised. In Belgium, this number is around 19,000 each year. This is very stable, as are the profiles of women who need abortions.
So legal abortion has not created ‘baby slaughterhouses’, despite what was predicted by one of the MPs opposing Simone Veil…

“Of course not! However, an abortion is always psychologically damaging: our society is still heavily influenced by religion, and women often feel guilty about having an abortion. It is still seen as a transgression, and the topic remains taboo. As Simone Veil said herself, no woman is happy to get an abortion; it is a traumatic event, and it will always be a traumatic event.

To me, a woman who gets an abortion is a brave and responsible woman, who realises she is not in the right place in life to have a child. She is not acting in her own interest, but rather in the child’s interest.

Do you believe current laws are appropriate?

“We could reconsider whether the 6-day waiting period is still necessary, especially at later stages in the pregnancy. Women who request an abortion have generally thought long and hard about it. And if they are past the 12-week limit, they must travel abroad for the procedure, meaning they will have to pay for it out of pocket. Each year, 700 to 800 Belgian women go to the Netherlands for this very reason. The threshold could also be pushed back in order not to subject underprivileged women to this financial barrier, as it often results in an unwanted pregnancy being carried to its term, with unfavourable consequences. Lastly, the legal requirement that woman must be in distress in order to get an abortion could be removed: an abortion is always a situation of distress.

What should we be careful for in the coming years?

“There are currently not enough physicians willing to work in this field. During their training in gynecology and obstetrics, they are taught how to perform abortions, but they often go work in private practices as soon as they graduate. With specific training and drug-induced abortions, the number of health professionals available to perform abortions could increase, which would make the procedure more accessible. But this is not enough: the costs should remain covered by the healthcare system, otherwise the poorest women will suffer.

Axelle Pintiaux

Axelle Pintiaux is head of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at Hôpital Erasme, and her specialities are endocrine gynecology, endocrinopathy, pregnancy, coloscopies, diagnostic and surgical hysteroscopy, gynecologic sonography, menopause and contraception issues. A professor at the Faculty of Medicine, she was also a member of the national committee for the evaluation of abortion policy, which was disbanded in 2011.
Looking back: Thursday, July 20

AFSCA (Belgium’s Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain) launches a Europe-wide alert for eggs contaminated with fipronil, an anti-parasite that is banned from use on food-producing animals. The Agency detects the substance in early June, but the information will only made public in early August. The contaminated products originated from Belgium and the Netherlands, and were distributed in 26 European countries and 19 countries outside the EU. Losses are estimated at 21 million euros in Belgium. In October, certain organic eggs are also taken off shelves, due to the detection of trace amounts of PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl).

Pierre Van Antwerpen, how can a toxic substance like fipronil end up in the food chain?

"The product was used fraudulently: fipronil is an anti-parasite used to treat pets like cats and dogs. Here, fipronil was mixed in with another anti-parasite -‘DEGA-16’, which is legal in the food chain- in order to treat red mites. It should not have been present in the food chain.

Could AFSCA have detected this contamination earlier?

"I do not believe so, because there was no reason to believe fipronil could have been present where it was never meant to be. Current detection technologies do not let us screen for all chemical compounds: with an initial suspicion or motive, we can screen for a specific compound by following a specific protocol, but we cannot find what we are not looking for. This is a limitation of analytical methods: we can only look for one molecule -or a family of molecules- at a time. So it is impossible to always check for every known contaminant."
The compound was detected in June, and the public was informed in August; should AFSCA have released a statement earlier?

"I believe they needed time to confirm the information in the first place. Two analyses of the same sample gave opposite results, so everything had to be double-checked. Then, they had to find the contaminated batch of DEGA-16, identify which farms had used it, and so on. In addition, fipronil has a low risk of acute toxicity for humans, so there was no urgent public health issue. Had it been a highly toxic product, AFSCA's reaction would have been very different, and more drastic.

Can we expect more revelations or scandals about our food?

"As long as the food industry keeps using so many different chemicals, a risk will exist, even disregarding fraudulent uses as was the case here. Unpredictable contaminations are also possible: the organic eggs contaminated with PCB in October is a good example of this. This compound does not biodegrade, and persists in the environment: it can be present in water or in the ground. What’s more, organic food is equally susceptible to fraudulent contamination. The only solution would be to reduce the number of products on the market, which would make screening easier to implement. Another solution is to reduce our consumption of these products, which would involve changing our habits.

Is the situation comparable to the dioxin crisis of the 1990s?

"The situations are comparable to an extent, as dioxin had also been illegally added to animal feed. Still, the scale was very different from this fipronil contamination, as many more farms were affected. Checks for dioxin in food products have now become common. This will most likely not be the case with fipronil, since manufacturer BASF has announced that it would not be applying for a new authorisation to sell it on the European market. This means fipronil use will decrease, and the risk virtually disappear for European products.

Pierre Van Antwerpen

Pierre Van Antwerpen is dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy and a researcher at the Research Unit on Pharmacognosy, Bioanalysis, and Drugs. He studies the myeloperoxidase enzyme and especially its therapeutic uses. His research also covers methods for validating and detecting chemical and biological compounds. In addition, he is in charge of the Faculty of Pharmacy’s analytical platform, which makes valuable analysis and formulation equipment available to researchers.
Racism, violence, and hate in Charlottesville

Olivier Klein
Research Centre in Social and Intercultural Psychology, CRePSI

Looking back: Saturday, August 12

Charlottesville, Virginia. A gathering is announced to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. Riots break out between white supremacist protestors and counter-protesters: projectiles are thrown, blows are exchanged, and a car drives into the crowd. The driver is a young right-wing activist, James Fields; one woman is killed, 32-year-old counter-protester Heather Hayer.

The same year, ‘Detroit’ is released in film theatres. A film about the racism, hate, and violence that rocked the city of Detroit, Michigan, in the summer of... 1967.

The violence in Charlottesville this past August has shown us that 150 years after the Civil War and half a century after the civil rights movement, racial tensions are still high in the United States. Olivier Klein, how do you explain this?

"First, we should take care not to overgeneralise: the protesters in Charlottesville were right-wing extremists -Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, etc.- who had travelled from all over the country; they are not representative of all Americans, nor of the population of Charlottesville. Still, it is true that the issue of racism was never solved in the United States. There is no one-size-fits-all explanation for the current situation, but a number of factors can be identified. One of them is that the country’s white population is shrinking, and may even become a minority by 2040; this can result in certain people feeling victimised, and a fear of no longer feeling at home in the country. What’s more, the American Dream is still widespread in the United States: many believe that anyone, no matter their origins, can work their way to the top. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who has spent five years in rural white communities in Louisiana, uses a striking metaphor to explain this: Americans are waiting in a long line, leading up the hill of wealth and prosperity. Minority groups-people of colour, women, immigrants-used to be at the back of the line, but with the economic crisis the line is barely moving, and now it feels to white men like minority groups are cutting in line ahead of them, with state aid and affirmative action. To certain white people, seeing people cutting in line reinforces previously-held stereotypes that certain groups are violent, lazy, and simply undeserving, and this in turn feeds their resentment. This feeling of unfairness and injustice, together with a perceived decrease in social status, are key to understanding these people’s attitudes. As a result, part of the white population feels alienated from the elite in Washington and New York, who they believe despise them -even though they are ‘real Americans’ and ‘good Christians’- while at the same time favouring minorities."
President Trump has been accused of fanning the flames of white nationalists. What do you think of this?

"Donald Trump's response to the events was ambivalent, as he placed equal blame on both sides and refused to acknowledge there were victims and perpetrators. He also did not suggest pacification policies, which could have reduced or channelled the violence. Beyond the events in Charlottesville, studies show that prejudice has been on the rise since Donald Trump’s election, and more specifically prejudice against the very people the President has been blaming!

Why do you think this is?

"Racism is a form of prejudice, and the expression of prejudice is a process of social influence: if my peer group is accepting of prejudice, then I will feel comfortable in expressing prejudice myself. Racist statements had largely become taboo in the United States, especially among the elite. President Trump has contributed to legitimising such statements, therefore shifting the standard of acceptable behaviour: some Americans now feel they can safely disparage black or Hispanic people, for instance. Overt racism has become commonplace in the United States.

April, 2018 will mark the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. This symbolic date might crystallise tensions between Americans. Can a society exist without collective memory?

"Every community is based on a shared identity that draws upon shared memories: if a group or a nation is to develop a common political project, it must share a common historical narrative. In the United States, though, there is no common narrative: there is one group within the country that, despite the abolition of slavery in at the end of the Civil War, has been systematically oppressed from the 1870s to the 1960s. So it is easier to just leave history behind, both for those who have created this system and for those who have been victimised by it. With such a history, collective memory is not just a choice, it is also a burden. The issue of racism in the United States will never be resolved if this conflict-laden collective memory is not first acknowledged. This involves an amount of collective processing, taking into account the great variety of interpretations of the past in all its complexity. A certain amount of common ground can be found, and then everyone should be open to at least hearing out other interpretations. As my colleague Valérie Rosoux put it, it’s not about finding some ultimate truth, but rather about exploring the past with a view to cooperating in the future.

Olivier Klein

Olivier Klein is head of the Research Centre in Social and Intercultural Psychology, professor and vice-dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences. His areas of research are: collective memories of historical events; conspiracy theories; the collective action of social networks; and the social psychology of food. He is also the co-editor of the International Review of Social Psychology.
September means a new political season, and this year one word is on everyone’s lips, whether in power or in the opposition: ‘governance’.

The year 2017 starts off with a bang, with the Publifin scandal in January; media coverage lasted for months, as new revelations and investigations are made. In June, the Samusocial scandal makes headlines and leads to the resignation of Brussels mayor Yvan Mayeur.

Looking back: September

With scandals such as Publifin and Samusocial, 2017 was a busy year in Belgian politics, resulting in increasing calls for good governance. Émilie van Haute, have concrete changes been enacted?

Reflections have been under way at various levels of governance (municipalities, Brussels regional parliament and government), but without true coordination. In addition, some of these processes had begun even before the scandals broke. For instance, the Brussels government had commissioned a study on governance at the local and regional levels, several months before the crisis. The study consists in both an overview of the situation and a list of recommendations, and it was conducted by the DEGO research group (ULB’s CEVIPOL and VUB’s ES_POLI). The report on local governance is complete, and the report on regional governance will be available at the end of August, 2018.

What can we learn from the first report?

Comparing Brussels to Paris, Berlin, or Vienna, for instance, we can see that its municipal government has more members, more of whom hold several offices. The number of government members could be reduced by up to 30%, and limits imposed on how many offices can be held by a single person. In addition, the report points to a considerable disparity in pay scales from one municipality to the other, especially considering that they do not take into account field work, pre work, etc. While we were producing this report, the Brussels Parliament has adopted a series of governance reforms (remuneration rules, ethics committee) and is now launching citizens’ panels.
What about Wallonia?

The situation in Wallonia is quite paradoxical. Before the crisis, there was a special committee on democratic reform, however it has not been active since the Publifin scandal broke. What’s more, the new government’s statement on regional policy does not seem very ambitious. The plan to impose limits on the number of offices held is also surprising, as it has been passed around for years! A decree had been voted in 2010, under the Ecolo government; however, PS, CDH and MR had agreed to reduce its scope during the 2014-2019 legislative term. It is now back on the table. To sum up, reflections had started in Brussels and Wallonia months or even years ago, and the crisis has accelerated them or transformed them.

Municipal and provincial elections will take place in 2018. Will the scandals impact the results?

Scandals related to governance create uncertainty for political leaders: what will be the consequences in terms of electoral results for their party? Will there be fewer elected officials in each party? And so on. In this context, the authorities may feel the need for more caution, and postpone reforms as a result. But the parties in power are also aware that their voters are expecting changes: so might there be a major governance reform before the elections? It’s hard to tell at this point. What we can already see, however, is the birth of new political and/or grassroots movements. The electoral calendar works in favour of these newcomers, who can ‘test the waters’ with the municipal elections and garner support before the regional and federal elections of 2019. Pre-election polls are very hectic in terms of voting intentions, which could encourage political parties to innovate with their proposals. For this, however, newcomers must develop a comprehensive political platform; if they are to become permanent players in the political landscape, they cannot run on just the issue of governance. However, young political parties often attract members with a wide range of opinions; it can be challenging to speak with one voice on key topics, and failure to do so could compromise their future. The only thing we can know for sure, before 2018 begins, is that it will be an exciting year in politics!

Emilie van Haute

Emilie van Haute is a researcher at the Center for the Study of Politics (CEVIPOL), of which she is also deputy director. Her research focuses on political participation, partisan affiliation, political parties, and elections, with an especial emphasis on Belgian politics. Among other duties, she is vice-chair of the French-speaking Belgian association for political science (ABSP) and a lecturer in political science at the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences.
Pieter Lagrou, why do you think the Russian Revolution still resonates today? What made it so important?

"The Russian Revolution is important because it is directly tied to how World War I progressed, and there have been a number of World War I commemorations in the past months. The popular uprising resulted in Russia’s withdrawal from the conflict, but it also would never have happened had it not been for the war. In addition, the Russian Revolution involved an entirely new regime, with new ideas and ideals. In fact, many parallels can be drawn between the Russian and French revolutions. The October Revolution and the February Revolution involved changes in terms of human rights, such as the abolition of corporal punishment, universal voting rights, etc. History, however, has shown that things did not go as planned, and an authoritarian communist regime was eventually put into place; still, the Russian Revolution remains among the most important events in the 20th century.

With the revolution in October, 1917, the Bolsheviks and their communist ideals came to power. What is left of these ideas a century later?

"Initially, the Bolsheviks had promised that power would be given to the ‘Soviets’, i.e. people's assemblies. This is fundamentally a democratic idea, and it can still appeal to us today, even though things turned sour in Russia. Another thing to note is that the Soviet Union was based on the idea of citizenship, as a separate concept from nationality or territory: Soviet citizens had access to all rights that this entailed, plus a certain cultural autonomy related to their nationality or region of origin. In Western and Central Europe, on the other hand, our approach is more that of nation-states, where self-determination is a combination of citizenship, nationality, and territory - this can result in a majority legally abusing minorities. History has shown that neither system has truly worked out, and that conflicts
still arise throughout Europe: recent examples include Brexit and Catalonia’s independence. The European Union could provide a solution to the conflicts between citizenship, nationality, and territory, provided it can move beyond the notion of nation-state, as the Soviet Union has done in the past. We can draw from alternative ways of thinking, including ones that did not turn out well.

In 2018, presidential elections will be held in Russia, with Vladimir Putin the expected front-runner. Real democracy has yet to be implemented in the country...

Russia is confronted with a lack of democratic experience: it has always responded to demands for justice and equality by resorting to violence and authoritarianism. This is still very present in Russia’s political life today: the regime does not allow contradiction, and resorts to violence, including by intimidating or even assassinating journalists who criticise the regime. Russia is also still dealing with the frustration of losing territory when it withdrew from the front in 1917: the return to the 1914 borders was a central part of the pact between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, then between Stalin and the allies in the Yalta agreement of 1941. Putin’s strategy, like Stalin’s before him, is to present himself as a hero for the Russian-speaking minorities in these countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Latvia, etc.). During the conflict with Crimea, the European Union’s approach was not compatible with the complex geometry of nationalities -and minorities- in the area, unlike the Soviet constitution. This is a failure on Europe’s part, and one that allowed Russia to extend its influence. Vladimir Putin is following in the footsteps of his predecessors, whose values are the opposite of those of the Russian Revolution.

Pieter Lagrou
A member of the Research Centre on Modern and Contemporary Worlds, Pieter Lagrou is particularly interested in major events in European history in the 20th century. His research focuses more specifically on World War II and its aftermath. Pieter Lagrou also teaches contemporary history to the students in the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences.
Looking back: Friday, November 17

During the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg, EU leaders sign an agreement on the European Pillar of Social Rights. This declaration includes 20 principles and rights on the labour market and social protection.

A few weeks earlier, on October 23, labour ministers from each EU member state had signed an agreement on reforming the directive on posted workers: they will now be paid the same as local workers, for the same work in the same place (the only exception remains road transport).

With the signature of the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU leaders seem to be paying especial attention to social issues. Ramona Coman, do you believe this to be the case?

“...This is one of the main challenges of the EU’s integration process. The financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis have increased inequalities between member states, resulting in certain citizens feeling resentful. A convergence of social and labour policies can reduce the social impacts of globalisation as well as of the tensions on the internal market. It may be difficult, however, to reconcile the various contexts and perspective of each member state, and to make sure decisions are enforced in spite of the fragmented nature of social policy in the EU, which remains mostly under the jurisdiction of each member state.

Does this mean social issues had been ignored until now?

“...Not at all, the EU has always had this topic at heart: in the Rome Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, signed in 1957, member states agreed to ‘promote improved working conditions and an improved standard of living’ within a common market. This theory remained in effect until the 1980s: if the economy improves, then social conditions should improve. In the 1990s, however, policymakers realised that it wasn’t quite working out, and that an intervention was necessary. A reflection was engaged on this topic, but before actual policies could be designed and implemented, the 2010 crisis hit. So it is important to sign new treaties and agreements, in order to implement converging social policies. However, much of this falls under the jurisdiction of member states: this means EU leaders must decide to prioritise social over economic matters. The directive on posted workers and its recent revision are a good example of this dynamic.
Speaking of integration and convergence, what do you think of Emmanuel Macron’s idea of a multi-speed Union, which he discussed in September?

“...The French President’s idea is to not prevent countries from reinforcing their integration if they so wish, and even if other EU member states are not interested. However, the idea of a multi-speed Europe was rejected by Jean-Claude Juncker in his address on the state of the European Union. I think this would be difficult to implement in the long run, as it could exacerbate imbalances and tensions within the EU, with a core of tightly-integrated countries while others are excluded. Still, this suggestion did serve to launch a debate on the future of the EU, two years ahead of the European elections.

A question on Germany, which had supported President Macron’s project: have the latest elections in Germany weakened Angela Merkel’s position?

“...Angela Merkel won the general election in September, but she was indeed in a weaker position; I do not believe, however, that this will change much with regards to the EU’s policies. Germany’s position, on the other hand, has become more nuanced over the past months: while the country was seen as an example to follow after the Eurozone crisis, the situation is now different and EU member states are adopting different approaches. Germany is losing its position as a policy leader.

What should we expect in 2018 in terms of EU policy?

“...With the European elections around the corner in 2019, there will most likely be no major treaty revisions in 2018. However, we can expect more attention to be given to debates on the EU’s future. Depending on the election results and on the outcome of Brexit (if it does happen, as negotiations are very slow), the year 2019 should give a new impulse to Europe: either towards more integration, or towards a more nuanced and ‘à la carte’ cooperation.

Ramona Coman

Ramona Coman is head of Institute for European Studies (IEE), a professor of political science, and a researcher at the Center for the Study of Politics (CEVIPOL). This research unit focuses on EU governance, especially in relation to European values; the topics it studies are relevant to questions such as the EU’s enlargement and its political and institutional evolution.
Looking back: Sunday, December 3

Text messaging is 25 years old! On December 3, 1992, Neil Papworth sends the very first text message to a colleague. This young British engineer goes on to develop an internal messaging system for a British telephone company. Just a few years later, the technology is in widespread use. Today, billions of text messages are sent each year. Smartphones are now ubiquitous, and the new iPhone X - the latest Apple smartphone - is incredibly successful despite its €1,000 price tag.

25 years after the first text message, the phone industry has changed quite a bit. Nicolas van Zeebroeck, what do you think have been the major milestones since then?

A huge step in the evolution of telephones was the development of smartphones with touchscreens. This was a true leap forward compared to traditional mobile phones, as smartphones offer a host of features in just one device: phone, PDA, GPS, etc. This is a typical instance of the digital convergence phenomenon. The launch of the App Store in 2008, offering thousands of apps, accelerated this convergence even more by making countless new features available to users. This is one of the reasons the iPhone was so successful.

The iPhone X was launched in November, at a higher-than-usual retail price of €1,000. Apple fans seem undeterred. How do you explain this success?

Apple has always offered high-end devices; this has been its strategy from the very beginning, with the first iPhone in 2007. However, other players have entered the market since then, such as Samsung: initially offering entry-level devices, Samsung has gradually extended its line of products and is now competing with Apple. In order to maintain its status, Apple must aim higher: the company is now adjusting its target market by offering ultra-high-end products. We will see how consumers react to the variety of iPhone models on the market, including the iPhone 7, the iPhone 8, and this new iPhone X.
The iPhone X has been criticised for its relatively limited innovation, especially considering its high price.

"It’s true that a high price should imply new features. According to me, the most innovative aspect of the iPhone X is augmented reality, which can lay the groundwork for a new generation of smartphones and apps. There may also have been changes in the hardware architecture and the device’s performance, which could enable developers to push the envelope in terms of software. Just looking at this phone, though, it is difficult to tell whether it is as ‘revolutionary’ as the slogan suggests. Still, consumers are expecting a company like Apple to offer true innovation, and to give them what they didn’t even realise they needed. This is what set an innovator like Steve Jobs ahead of the rest: consumers had come to expect no less than genius from him.

What other major evolutions are you anticipating over the next few years?

"Generally speaking, I believe we are going to reconsider the ergonomics of smartphones: are they really the optimal device for all uses? For instance, consumers might want to once again be able to use their hands: I expect developments in voice recognition, cloud storage, and devices like smart glasses or connected home devices such as Google Home and Apple’s HomePod. When our current convergence phase is over, I believe usages will gradually be split between these devices.

Nicolas van Zeebroeck

Nicolas van Zeebroeck is a professor and researcher at the Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management. His current research deals with economic strategies and dynamics related to innovation and digital technologies. He is a member of the International Centre for Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship (iCITE).