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EVALUATION NOTE

THE TRUMP-MUSK RIFT: WHAT DOES IT SAY DOMESTICALLY AND ABROAD?

U.S. President Trump has fired the world's richest man — and now Elon Musk is finding himself on the receiving end of Trump's political wrath. Musk has scaled Mars-bound rockets, reinvented the electric automobile, and helped Trump ascend to the most powerful political seat in the world for a historic second time. Observers have long speculated that their relationship would not last, and those predictions have come to fruition with an astonishingly rancorous public spat.

Musk spent more than \$250 million helping Trump win reelection in 2024, then went to work in the administration as an “outside advisor,” serving at the pleasure of the president as he took a chainsaw ²to the U.S. federal government. Musk's involvement in the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — for which he was neither vetted nor approved by Congress — stands in direct conflict with scores of ethics regulations and political norms regarding business leaders' direct involvement in policies that affect them. Trump and Musk's open defiance of those norms illustrates precisely why they exist, and why the idea of political donors buying not only access to politicians but influence over policy undercuts the very nature of what American democracy is supposed to be.

The Immediate Triggers: Policy, Personality, and Power

On the surface, the rift began with Trump's so-called “Big Beautiful Bill” — a sweeping tax and spending proposal criticized for ballooning the deficit³ while slashing green energy incentives. The broad measure poses a direct economic threat to Tesla, whose success is partially

¹ <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1499>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkMVb0RNptA&ab_channel=AssociatedPress

³ <https://apnews.com/article/cbo-deficits-tax-cuts-trumps-big-beautiful-bill-64d7de49aef62ba07b7f6f45c1ca73d1>

dependent on such programs. Musk called the proposal a "disgusting abomination" and warned it would "massively increase the already gigantic budget deficit."

During a bilateral meeting with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Jon Decker, the White House correspondent for Gray Media, pressed Trump on Musk's criticism and whether it would hurt the bill's passage in the Senate.

"Well, look, you know, I've always liked Elon... I was very surprised," Trump said. "You saw the words he had for me. And he hasn't said anything about me that's bad. I'd rather have him criticize me than the bill because the bill is incredible. And, you know, Elon's upset because we took the EV mandate, which was a lot of money for electric vehicles. And they're having a hard time... But I'm very disappointed in Elon. I've helped Elon a lot."

Musk quickly fired back on X (formerly twitter): "Without me, Trump would have lost the election."

The two men have since engaged in an escalating online war of words, with Trump threatening to cancel federal contracts with Musk's companies and Musk hinting at releasing compromising information about the president. As if it is not enough, Musk had also publicly condemned Trump—calling for his impeachment and even suggesting Vance as a replacement. Yet in sharp contrast to all that, in a matter of a day or two, Musk retweeted President Trump's Truth Social post and Vice President J.D. Vance's tweet asserting that "the president will not tolerate rioting and violence," signaling a surprising show of solidarity amid heated protests in Los Angeles.⁴

On Capitol Hill, the fallout is tangible. Republican senators are struggling to rally support for the "Big Beautiful Bill," and at least one, Rand Paul of Kentucky, has openly refused to back it.

Midterm Fallout: Could this Dispute Reshape U.S. Politics?

The split also casts a shadow over the upcoming U.S. midterm elections. Musk has not only contributed financially to Trump's re-election campaign, but he has also leveraged his social media influence in support of this election. If he withholds this support in the upcoming elections⁵ as well as works to ensure that Trumpists are not elected, he could pose a serious problem for Trump.

Senate Republicans, already struggling to defend tight margins, may need to choose between loyalty to Trump and the ideological discontent Musk is amplifying. The Republican Party's digital infrastructure, long reliant on social media momentum, could suffer if Musk reshapes X into a platform that curtails MAGA dominance.

This falling-out may not determine outcomes, but it is introducing even more uncertainty⁶ and fragmentation.

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⁴ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/musk-tries-trump-threat-l-145351082.html>

⁵ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2025/06/04/the-road-to-the-2026-midterm-elections/>

⁶ <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/02/republicans-midterm-backlash-fears-030290>

Global Reverberations: Cracks in the Illiberal International

This isn't just a domestic dispute. The Trump–Musk feud is also poised to send ripples across the globe, and the fallout could send a sobering signal to world leaders who have sought to erode or bypass democratic norms.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose strategic window to resolve the war in Ukraine is rapidly narrowing, is among those potentially most affected. Like Turkey's **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** and Israel's **Benjamin Netanyahu**, Putin benefited for years from Trump's transactional worldview and tolerance for illiberal governance. However, his position is now tied to the political fortunes of Trump, whose earlier proposal to end the Ukraine war along current territorial lines was not unreasonable, particularly given that neither Ukraine nor Russia is currently able to win decisively.

But with Trump embroiled in a battle with Musk and potentially facing political isolation or even impeachment if he loses control of Congress, that window is at risk of slamming shut. In fact, after his telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on May 19, Trump had already concluded that Russia and Ukraine should find a solution to the war themselves⁷. If he ends up focusing on domestic political conflicts, the hawks among Ukraine's Western backers will certainly have a free hand.

Ukraine's recent drone strikes⁸ deep inside Russian territory — the product of 18 months of covert preparation — have not only exposed Russian vulnerabilities but also confirmed Ukraine's operational resilience and intelligence discipline. Putin, already struggling with the war's mounting costs, must now contend with the reality that a divided Washington could leave him with fewer options and a shrinking window of time. This power vacuum could ultimately work against him, both at home and on the battlefield.

If Trump falls or loses political traction, Putin may end up more isolated than at any point since 2014. The symbolic protection of a significant Western political figure providing legitimacy or distraction will vanish. A weaker grip on the American right by Trump will give global autocrats significantly less room to maneuver.

The Trump-Musk split will inevitably create unease in countries prone to populist and autocratic governance, as well as among leaders who continue to be elected despite their words and actions often harming the country.

Netanyahu: Losing Cover

Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu has relied heavily on right-wing support from the U.S., including evangelical allies and Trumpist networks. He faces growing internal dissent over Gaza and constitutional overhauls. As Trump weakens and Musk defects, Israel, now clearly an electoral issue in American domestic politics, will be seen as a costly cause for both parties, and Netanyahu⁹ may risk losing the symbolic protection of being "America's indispensable ally".

Moreover, Musk is a businessman with close ties to Netanyahu. If, following his break with Trump, Musk initiates a new momentum on X that critiques economic decisions only insofar

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/20/us/politics/trump-ukraine-russia.html?smid=url-share>

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/DRONES-RUSSIA/mypmjzayyvr/>

⁹ <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/se/date/2024-07-24/segment/05>

as they affect his interests, it could also serve as a vehicle to expose humanitarian dilemmas in Gaza in ways we have not yet seen or heard. In such a scenario, Western publics may no longer be convinced by the framing of the Gaza war as a justified response to the October 7 attacks or as a desperate campaign to rescue hostages held by Hamas. This, in turn, could mark the beginning of the inevitable end for Netanyahu.

Erdoğan: The Dealmaker in Decline?

Turkey's President Erdoğan has long positioned himself as a master tactician in a multipolar world. His approach mimicked Trump's: prioritizing transactionalism over values, and emphasizing strength over process. The symbolic and practical alignment between Trump and Erdoğan lent Ankara cover for democratic backsliding. If Trump cared about democracy or justice in Turkey, he would condemn the operations against the municipalities¹⁰ of the main opposition party, CHP — just as the U.S. administrations have relied upon democratic norms¹¹ in the past for all the troubles Erdoğan had faced against the state. But his administration remains silent.

If Trump's international stature flags and Musk continues to threaten Trump with hidden truths about him, Erdoğan may find his model's prestige eroding. While he faces no immediate political threat, the shift in global discourse could empower Turkish opposition figures and civil society actors to advocate for a more rules-based and accountable political order.

A Breathing Space for Liberalism?

The fight between Trump and Musk will not single-handedly restore liberal democracy, but it does fracture the myth that autocratic populism is inevitable or unified. Musk's criticisms — erratic as they often are — undermine Trump's style of governance. It would also be wrong to approach events with the illusion that Musk is a Trojan horse from the start. Because Musk, along with Trump, was happy to attract attention and interest, which is a means of satisfaction for populist leaders. However, the fact that they pose a threat to each other based on everything they know will further demonstrate that the era of this authoritarian style of governance is coming to an end.

But what if the opposite happens? What if, instead of ushering in democratic renewal, this public feud accelerates cynicism, deepens polarization, and intensifies global instability? As political fatigue and disillusionment mount across the U.S. and beyond, citizens may see no alternative to Trump — or any current political figure he points to. This distress and accelerating belief in citizens that their country is in decline¹² will only promise unrest, economic deterioration, and further erosion of democratic norms.

For liberal forces in Israel, Turkey, and elsewhere, this may represent a strategic window. However, they are also well-known for failing to capitalize on opportunities to bring change to their political discourse, so it is better to be less optimistic.

Conclusion: From Fracture to Possibility

The rupture between Trump and Musk is more than a feud; it's a symbolic realignment. It plainly displays the contradictions within modern populism: between control and freedom, discipline and disruption, loyalty and merit.

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/19/turkiye-istanbul-mayor-detained>

¹¹ https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/114139/2008_09_Turkey_IdentityCrisis_Power.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹² <https://www.ipsos.com/en/support-populist-ideas-remains-strong-some-countries-have-seen-belief-fall>

What comes next is uncertain — but, nevertheless, an opportunity for a new generation of political actors to ask not just who rules, but how and why. And for those living under authoritarian rule, this moment may be the sound a fortress makes when its foundations begin to crack.