

How the US Elections Could Shake Up the Western Balkans

By Milan Nič and Frauke Seebass

While several Balkan leaders cultivated relations with the Trump camp, they can also live with a Harris victory. They seem to be better prepared for the consequences of the US presidential election than many EU member states. Yet, regardless of who wins, the role of the United States in the Western Balkans is going to decrease. Thus, the region – with its unresolved conflicts and stalled integration – will need more serious strategic engagement from the EU and Germany no matter who the new US president is.

SITUATION

The engagement of the United States and its close cooperation with European partners have been major factors in providing regional stability in the Western Balkans ever since the 1990s. America's legacy there includes a series of peace settlements reached after the wars in the former Yugoslavia that are guarded by NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo and the European Union Force (EUFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Currently, three out of the six countries in the region – Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – are NATO members. Two others – Bosnia and Kosovo – are at various stages of joining the alliance. Serbia, the largest country in the region, remains formally neutral while it maintains a working partnership with NATO and relies on KFOR for the protection of ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo.

The Western Balkans are now at a pivotal moment thanks to a combination of two factors: Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and gradual US

disengagement from Europe's peripheries. These factors have also made the outcome of this US presidential election – with its starkly different consequences for Europe – a turning point for the region. This election comes at a time when local political elites have learned to translate increased geopolitical rivalries between Western and non-Western powers to their own advantages. Most prominently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has expanded bilateral relations with China and Russia while simultaneously managing to continue with Serbia's EU accession path despite non-alignment with its sanctions on Russia. Vučić has also kept the United States on his side by providing key military support to Ukraine.

In recent years, US diplomacy in the region has become less active and taken a gradual "realist turn." These developments resulted from a preference for regional stability and broader strategic objectives that often took priority over liberal transformation. Since Russia's war against Ukraine started,

the reflex of the United States toward reliance on strong leaders ("stabilityocracy") has become even more entrenched. The war also caused the EU to revive its enlargement project to save Ukraine, bringing new impetus to a stalled accession process with the Western Balkan countries.

Meanwhile, except for in the security domain, Washington has largely accepted that the political responsibility for the Western Balkans rests with the EU, with whom the countries in this region bind their futures. Given their geographical location, the states of the Western Balkans are also much more important to the EU in terms of security, stability, trade, and transit or migration routes than they are to the United States. However, Germany and France are now politically weakened and simultaneously distracted by domestic issues, and the EU institutions are preoccupied with the start of a new political cycle in Brussels. This combination results in a lack of European leadership and resources to deal with the region's unresolved conflicts.

The challenges for the Western Balkans will become even more daunting in the context of the shifting US role there, which is especially dependent on the strategic approach and Balkan policy of the new American president and his or her administration.

SCENARIOS

PRESIDENT TRUMP 2.0

Under the first Trump presidency, the Western Balkans policy of the United States took a more unilateral turn. It also served the personal ambitions of some people close to Trump and his family, in particular Richard Grenell. The controversial former US ambassador to Germany pushed through his appointment as special envoy for “peace negotiations” between Serbia and Kosovo. Emphasizing the trade and business aspects of their constrained relationship, Grenell facilitated a series of talks between the two parties. In the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election, he managed to orchestrate a quick foreign policy win for then-President Trump – a sort of peripheral Balkan chapter to the series of bilateral agreements on Arab-Israeli normalization known as Abraham Accords. In September 2020, President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia and then-acting prime minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti signed the “Kosovo and Serbia economic normalization agreements” better known as the Washington Agreement. Today, only a small part of the 16 provisions in this agreement has been fully implemented. Such uncoordinated actions by the Trump administration served as a wake-up call to the EU and helped it to revive its mediating role in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue.

Grenell – who is being hailed as one of the contenders for secretary of state should Trump return to the White House – has remained vocal on the Western Balkans, denouncing the Biden administration’s approach. He has kept

in regular contact with Serbian President Vučić, Albanian prime minister Edi Rama, and the new head of the North Macedonian government, Hristijan Mickoski. He is using these contacts to open doors for several investment projects, including those pursued by Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. Some of these meetings included Trump’s oldest son, Donald Jr. For their part, the three Balkan leaders were able to cultivate broader personal contacts with Trump allies that now include both chairs of the Trump transition team, Howard Lutnick and Linda E. McMahon.

With no commitment to European unity or enlargement, the Trump 2.0 team would happily encourage internal EU divisions over unresolved Balkan conflicts and play their own favorites. Within the region, it would strengthen the dominant regional positions of Serbia and Albania at the expense of their smaller neighbors such as Montenegro and Kosovo, increasing security risks and regional tensions. An even bigger risk to Balkan security would come from the erosion of NATO’s credibility and the threat of the withdrawal of US troops from KFOR. This would

A second Trump administration would be more transactional, which would play into the hands of illiberal Balkan leaders

Against this background, a second Trump administration would mean a significant break with current US policy. While there might be even more high-level engagement from Washington, it would be much more selective and transactional, which would play into the hands of illiberal Balkan leaders. Such engagement by the United States would improve their bargaining position toward Brussels on EU conditionality in the areas of rule of law, freedom of the press, and fundamental rights – all of which determine the overall pace of their countries’ membership talks and integration into the EU’s highly regulated single market. Yet, the Western Balkans becoming one of the stepping stones for the Trump 2.0 team to establish a new and unilateral foreign policy style could provoke more backlash against EU enlargement voiced in the public opinion and media of key European countries, including Germany.

not only weaken transatlantic relations but also fundamentally challenge the EU strategy of using new funding and conditionality to gradually integrate the Western Balkan states.

In parallel, an alliance of Trump and Europe’s illiberal leaders, such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, would also open doors to the further consolidation of the domestic power of Balkan leaders, the manipulation of ethno-revisionist agendas in the region, and more geopolitical transnationalism with external players – to the detriment of the influence of Germany and EU institutions. It is expected that a Trump administration would apply more pressure to follow a harder US line on China. If so, the big question is how this would impact Serbia’s openness to China’s growing presence and strategic investments, including its reliance on Chinese equipment in key sectors like IT and telecommunications.

PRESIDENT HARRIS 1.0

In contrast, Kamala Harris's approach to the Western Balkans is more difficult to estimate. Her public record on this region is thin. Even as US vice president, she has not developed any personal connections or strong positions in and on the region. Yet, because she stands for liberal internationalism and alliances, she would continue cooperating with Europeans and relying on NATO as president. Still, we should not forget that – generationally speaking – Joe Biden, who has had a longstanding relationship with the Western Balkans since the early 1990s, will be the last true Atlanticist in the White House.

Her administration would expect more output from Europeans – from diplomatic engagement to NATO-led missions

When it comes to foreign policy, Harris also lacks Biden's deep knowledge and long-term experience. Moreover, she would be inaugurated at a time when the world is more fragile and unstable than it has been for decades. Inevitably, she would expect Europeans to do more for their own security, also alleviating the US burden in the Western Balkans as the United States prioritizes other regions and conflicts.

Based on Harris's experience as a member of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence prior to her vice presidency, she has a good understanding of Russia's foreign interference and its objectives. This could imply support for the current policy of putting increased pressure on Russia's proxies in the Western Balkans, particularly in Belgrade and Banja Luka.

The Biden administration has already imposed sanctions on high-level individuals, including Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin. Under President Harris, Washington might be less tolerant of Belgrade's ongoing balancing act with Russia and China while increasing pressure on all Balkan countries to reduce economic ties with Beijing. In line with her campaign's focus on personal freedoms and the rule of law, Harris 1.0 could bring more concerted efforts to support civil society under illiberal leaders, e.g., in Serbia. That would, however, depend on the resources of US embassies in the region.

The recent trip of CIA director William Burns to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo is a clear indicator that Washington is keeping a sharp eye on destabilizing moves, such as the secessionist campaign of Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik in Bosnia-Herzegovina or attempted arms smuggling by local ethnic Serbs and organized crime groups into Kosovo that resulted in a deadly firefight with police forces in Banjska. Burns reportedly also delivered a stark warning against unilateral moves by Kosovo's Albin Kurti government that could escalate tensions with ethnic Serb communities in northern Kosovo.

This strategy of diplomatic balancing and security checks in the Western Balkans might continue if the Democrats keep the White House, but the

region will certainly get less political attention at the top levels. This may be up to Harris's long-standing national security advisor, Philip Gordon, who has broad expertise in European policy. Based on his previous work, Gordon would probably seek to establish a cautious and more distant approach to the region that aims to achieve long-term goals while avoiding overstretching the US role there.

In principle, a Harris administration would further "delegate" the region to the State Department, where this portfolio is dealt with at the level of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Europe, currently Alexander Kasanof, and coordinated with key European allies through the Quint, an established diplomatic format consisting of the United States, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Kasanof reports to James O'Brien, Assistant Secretary of State for Europe who has been involved in US engagement in the Balkans since the 1990s. Whether Harris or her new Secretary of State will keep O'Brien in this position or not will send an important signal to the region that will indicate a preference for continuity at this level – also in terms of maintaining pragmatic relations with Serbian President Vučić.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A GOOD TIME FOR GERMANY TO SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES

Regardless of who wins the White House, the US role in the Western Balkans is going to change.

If Donald Trump is elected, it will paradoxically mean that some Balkan leaders, especially Serbia's President Vučić and Albania's Prime Minister Rama, will enjoy more high-level access and contacts in Washington than they have had in recent years. If they cater to

Trump's business interests, that would only increase geopolitical competition in the region – to the detriment of the EU and Germany. Such an approach might even be closer to the prevailing style and political culture in Belgrade or Tirana. In effect, it would empower illiberal political forces around the region, increase the influence of those beyond it (e.g., Viktor Orbán), undermine regional security built on NATO, and harm the process of EU accession. If Trump loses but refuses to concede, he will again stir chaos in the United States that will, in turn, further erode democratic norms in the region.

If, however, Kamala Harris prevails, Washington will stay its general course but with less high-level attention and engagement for the region than under Biden. Her administration would expect more output from Europeans – from diplomatic engagement to NATO-led missions. Illiberal local leaders will seek to use the long period of time it will take for these to be established to their advantage.

The simultaneous transition to a new US administration and new EU Commission presents Germany with a good opportunity to send a strong signal of support to the Western Balkans in the following ways:

- Build on the outcomes of the so-called Berlin Process, creating a bridge between the common regional market and the EU single market.
 - Use synergies with the Commission's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as leverage over individual governments and leaders in the region. With illiberal forces on the rise across Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic, better coordination among groups of member states will be needed to protect EU interests and values in the region.
 - Motivate the main political parties to pledge to continue to have a Special Representative of the Federal Government to the Western Balkans, currently the role of Manuel Sarrazin, in its next legislative period.
 - Seek new ways and formats for closer coordination with the UK, which has become even more eager to increase its role in the region under its new Labor government.
- Show that it takes the *Zeitenwende* seriously, for example by building up the European pillar of NATO and strengthening its missions in the region.
 - Sustain the political drive for EU enlargement and pay close attention to developments pertaining to the Western Balkans in Brussels. For example, by working closely with Kaja Kallas, the EU's new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as well as with the next Commissioner for Enlargement. For her part, Kallas is likely to pursue a more assertive approach in the region than her predecessor, Josep Borell.



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