

SYNOPSIS FOR THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE POSSIBLE CHANGES OF THE AMERICAN POLICY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States was a shocking event for the majority of the Americans but also for the world. It was a democratic choice of the American people, special and historic for its way and outcome. Now that emotions have calmed, the country is busy dealing with analyses for the reasons that brought victory but also with its consequences in the American internal and foreign politics.

Non-conformist statements of the President-elect of the United States for US involvement in world affairs, in the relations with NATO, EU, Russia, China and the current regional conflicts have caused concern and reactions. In this paper the goal is to outline the possible consequences in foreign policy of the future administration of Donald Trump in the Western Balkans after 20 January 2017. The Western Balkans have not been at least in the past 16 years in the strategic priorities of foreign policy of the United States. In 90s of the last century they intervened in the region in 1995 in Bosnia and in 1999 in Kosovo under NATO to save Bosnian Muslims and Albanians by the extreme violence of Slobodan Milosevic's regime. US presence over the years has declined in the Western Balkans. The United States have left greater responsibilities in the region in the political, economic and trade field to the European Union, and strategic responsibilities to NATO. They have maintained a traditional engagement in the Western Balkans in the areas of strengthening democracy, the rule of law, human and minority rights, the fight against corruption, organized crime, etc. As elsewhere in the Western Balkans, Trump's presidential election has been subject to different reactions by the political forces and public opinion and civil society segments, some with satisfaction and others with despair. Official policy of the regional countries has welcomed the election and has expressed the willingness but also the hope for further development of relations with the new administration of President Trump. However beyond the official protocol uniformity, governments and state and political institutions of the countries in the region have started to make the first analysis and accounts for the consequences of possible changes in US policy in the Western Balkans, including also the impact of the relations' change between the United States and European Union, NATO, Russia, China, etc.

Keywords: *NATO, Western Balkans, president Trump, European Union*

Election of Donald Trump as US President was a shocking development for the majority of Americans, but also for the world. It was however an election made by the American people, unique and historic in terms of how it was conducted and for its outcomes. Now that emotions run low, there are many cold analyses made about the reasons accounting for such a victory for him, but also about its implications for the US domestic and foreign policy.

The non-conformist statements by the US President-elect on American engagement in the world affairs, its relations with NATO, EU, Russia, China, and on current regional conflicts have caused a lot of concern and responses. In this paper, my intention is to set out the potential

alternative consequences of the foreign policy of Donald Trump future administration for Western Balkan after 20 January, 2017.

The Western Balkans has, for at least the last 16 years, not been among the strategic priorities of the US foreign policy. In the 90s of the last century, in the context of NATO, United States intervened in 1995 in Bosnia, and in 1999, in Kosovo in order to save the Muslim Bosnians and Albanians from the extreme violence exerted against them by Slobodan Milosevic regime.

American presence in the western Balkan has been on the decline over the years. The United States has relegated the greatest political, economic and commercial responsibilities in the region to the European Union, whereas the strategic responsibilities, to NATO. It has maintained its traditional engagement in the Western Balkans in the areas of strengthening of democracy, the rule of law, protection of human and minority rights, the fight on corruption, organized crime, and others.

As everywhere, in the countries of the Western Balkans too, the election of President elect Trump has been received in different ways by the political forces and segments of the public opinion and civil society, some of which have expressed joy, and some others concern. The official policy of the countries of the region has hailed his election and expressed its willingness and hope in the further development of relations with the new administration of President-elect Trump. However, beyond the official protocol and uniform stance, the governments and high state institutions of the countries of the region have started to make the first analysis of and reckonings with the potential changes of the US policy in the Western Balkans. They have also stated to analyze the impact that the potential change of relations between the US and the European Union, NATO, Russia, China, and others might have on the region.

The United States has played a decisive role in the redefinition of the geopolitical boundaries of the Western Balkans in the last 20 years. Democrat President Clinton led two major actions of the US policy in the region, the establishment of the hybrid state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the basis of the Dayton agreement in 1995, and the military intervention of NATO in Kosovo against Serbia in 1999. President Bush Jr. was engaged in the proclamation of Kosovo an independent state in 2008. Both these Presidents were also engaged in the gradual non-conflicting separation of Montenegro from the Serb Federation and its proclamation an independent state in 2006. The US policy of the last years has supported the existence of the independent Macedonian state through the conclusion and implementation of the Ohrid Agreement of 2001. In general lines, President Obama's administration followed the same policy but with a more active engagement.

Likewise, Croatia and Albania became NATO members with US support, while Montenegro is waiting for its membership to be ratified by the parliaments of NATO member countries in order to formalize its membership in this political-military organization. Unfortunately, Montenegro has been prevented from joining NATO because of its name issue with Greece. Official Serbia and most of its public are not in favor of NATO membership because of its intervention in 1999, although in Belgrade there is a NATO office. Due to the internal political circumstances, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not on NATO membership agenda. Kosovo is politically willing to join NATO, but it needs time to meet the required standards. However, NATO

is present in Kosovo through the KFOR forces, and especially through the American forces stationed in the Bondsteel large military base.

US strategic interests in the world are not the same, they differ in time and space, and it is true that the Balkans is not part of the current priorities of US foreign policy. The main focus of US policy is the near and Middle East and Eastern Asia. If President elect Trump sticks to his electoral promises on relations with NATO and Russia, then the geopolitical ratios in the Western Balkans are likely to be compromised. Still remaining in the realm of suppositions, a lowering of tensions and improvement of relations between the new US Administration and Kremlin would be concretized with the reaching of some agreements and compromises. Such agreements and compromises would first of all affect the major issues where both sides' interests are not in agreement. In Europe, Ukraine and the Baltic countries have priority for the United States vis a vis the countries of the Western Balkans. In the event that a satisfactory solution would be found for these two regions, a broader Russian influence in the Balkans might be tolerated, especially in the Slavic speaking and Orthodox countries.

What might be the consequences of such a compromise in the Balkans? Firstly, a greater encouragement of the pro-Russian forces, who are only too eager to come to power in their countries. Such an act would definitely lead to an aggravation of interethnic relations, but also of the relations between the pro-Russian and the pro-Western forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, but most probably also in Bulgaria. In such a scenario, Serbia would be Russia's viceroy in the region. Serbia's state policy has approached this project in indirect forms and manners. If President elect Trump, as the well-known American analyst of Balkan issues, Daniel Server wrote, "Is willing to accept a Russian sphere of influence in the Balkans, then the consequences for the relatively new democracies of the region would be dramatic. An added Russian influence would threaten new ethnic divisions and open conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia".

Such an alternative of development in the Western Balkans would weaken first of all the US geographical position there, the more so when it is a fact that the region is a key point on the road to the near and Middle East. The potential shift in the American priorities outside Europe may not, now or in the future, break the traditional and natural links of the old continent with the "American world". American disengagement from the Western Balkans would create a favorable terrain also for the advancement of the Chinese strategy of the "Silk Road", which is being materialized through the Chinese initiative "16 + 1" with the Central and Eastern Europe.

Turkey would be the most interested regional power to make use of every geopolitical gap that might be created in the region. Its historical links with some of the Western Balkans countries, its important economic and commercial presence, as well as the customary, religious and spiritual affinity with part of the populations of this region make Erdogan's Turkey an ambitious precedent that needs to be reckoned with. It might revive its well-known efforts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania. Erdogan has shown that he is an authoritative leader, who aims to rule his country with an iron fist. He looks beyond Turkey's borders and Western Balkans has always been and remains a favorite region in his strategic objectives, to restore his country the erstwhile place among the

Great Powers. The recent obvious rapprochement with Vladimir Putin and his threats to the European Union regarding the refugee issue are evident symptoms of the dangerous potential geopolitical changes round and near Western Balkans. A new wave of refugees from the war in Syria and Iraq landing on the shores of Greece and then Macedonia and Albania, and in the north of the region would be fraught with grave consequences for the stability of these countries and, beyond, for Europe.

In the event of a relative withdrawal of US from the Balkans in favor of a larger Russian presence, the European Union would be the great loser. It would have to cope not only with the Russian pressure, but also with an integration process of the Western Balkans countries that is not likely to be speedy. The EU is at a difficult moment in its history, due to the prolonged crisis and Brexit, but also because of the election of President elect Trump, which has encouraged the extreme nationalist circles in Europe, in particular in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Austria, and others, to exit the EU. The future of the European Union has been put in question. The attractive power of the European integration in the Western Balkan countries is not the same as before and people have begun to be mistrustful and pessimistic of it. EU Membership perspective remains a relatively far off dream.

President Trump election is a vote by almost half the American voters against the old political establishment. It marked an overturn of American traditional philosophy, concepts and electoral platforms. Unlike most expectations, Donald Trump proved to be a farsighted and careful observer of the American people's sentiments and mood. He was capable of properly reading and understanding them and transforming them into a movement that contained in it the protest against the reality and the platform for change. Whether this platform is going to be realized, it remains to be seen.

It is beyond any doubts that we are faced with a new model of policymaking which will have great or minor repercussions all over the world. However, this is a model that cannot be implemented as it is, or copied in the Western Balkans. The Trump movement was a complex one, an outcome of the interaction of a number of factors, primarily the outcome of a high civic and political level of awareness and civic culture of the American people. If someone is over enthusiastic to implement such a level in the Western Balkans, he should first of all ask himself the question: Do such circumstances and factors exist in the Western Balkan countries? Not merely Trump doubles, but also the same philosophy and structured movement, as well as voters like the American voters.

Like everywhere in Europe, in the Western Balkans too, the election of Donald Trump has encouraged rightwing nationalist parties and forces, but also the center right forces in opposition or in power. In general, they have embraced the xenophobic and racist explicit or implicit views of Trump statements. Milorad Dodik in Republica Srpska in Bosnia, Vojislav Sesel in Serbia, the pro-Russian forces in Montenegro, and the anti-Albanian forces in Macedonia celebrated the victory of newly elected President Trump as their own victory. They look upon him as a forerunner and model for their own coming to power. The Serbian official circles have clearly implied that

they hope in a possible American-Russian agreement on the Western Balkans, which they see as an agreement against Albanians.

In the Balkan space, Trump's electoral statements may have been translated by given nationalist circles as hatred of immigrants, the hermetic closure of borders, and the building of walls. The effects of such statements may be felt in the revival of the pathology of hatred against ethnic and religious minorities.

Macedonia is the first country in the Western Balkans that held parliamentary elections after the victory of Donald Trump in the United States. Albania and Serbia shall have parliamentary and presidential elections next year. Political parties or individuals who are in opposition now are rejoicing at the idea that the Trump phenomenon may be repeated or may have a positive impact on them in these upcoming elections. In Serbia, there is an obvious euphoria which is being manifested by Sesel; in Albania too, by the Democratic Party. Such hopes are certainly naïve and ungrounded. The more so the hopes based on the traditional Balkan mentality, hence, Albanian as well, that President elect Trump will take revenge against Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama for his non diplomatic statements against American President elect some months ago during his electoral campaign.

The American foreign policy, including that on Western Balkans, is guided by sustainable principles in the interest of the nation. Every new Administration that comes to the White House every four or eight years respects some fixed axes of the American foreign policy, bringing of course innovative and especially tactical developments to it. Likewise, Donald Trump too is not going to reject many postulates of the American foreign policy, but will impart it a new style, whose usefulness and success will be shown in the course of time. American diplomatic bureaucracy will continue up to a near future to stick to the traditional principles and stands in its relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. The statements of American ambassadors in the countries of the region some hours after the conclusion of elections in the United States, that there will be no changes in our mutual relations, were not simply a tactical diplomatic act, but they stem from the guarantee that American democracy and institutions provide. In the United States, there is no overturn of power but only its rotation within the constitutional framework. Therefore, despite all commentaries and forecasts, it is hardly likely that American foreign policy will deviate from its main policy axes.