

Eastern Monitor

Biden's administration as a chance
for a new start of US-EU
cooperation in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

After the drift in the transatlantic relations under the Trump administration in the past four years many changes are expected by the new Joe Biden administration. One of the foreign policy areas where major changes are to come is Western Balkans and the continued stabilization and normalization processes in the region. While in most of areas the capacity of the new U.S. President and his administration to achieve visible changes during the short time span of the first term is limited, in the case of the Western Balkans it represents a real opportunity for some positive impact. The historical experience showed that progress in the region can be achieved only through a coordinated joint approach by the U.S. and the EU.¹ The Biden administration is presented with an opportunity to remove the wedge driven between the U.S. and its European partners by Trump's unilateral push for unsustainable short-sighted solutions in the region.

U.S. as the driving force behind stability in the Balkans

The Western Balkans still seem to not be able to get rid of the "powder keg" label in the international politics domain despite the ongoing, albeit stalling, democratization and reconciliation processes and a promised perspective of the EU membership. It is only natural that the troubled region is a pungent issue for the EU, lacking a clear vision how to achieve both democratization and stability in the region through its enlargement policy without one coming at the cost of the other. However, since the tragedies of the 1990s following the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Balkans have traditionally gained attention from the other side of the Atlantic as well. Ever since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, the US have been a crucial actor in any breakthrough and step towards stabilization of the region. Sometimes perceived as anti-Serbian, the US

led the NATO operations during the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, aimed at protecting the ethnic or religious communities threatened by the Yugoslav, mainly Serbian, military forces. The NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 remains a wound in Serbia's modern history as well as the country's relations with the global West and explains Serbia's very hesitant approach to cooperation with NATO. The US together with the EU acted also as mediators in the internal armed conflict in Macedonia in early 2000s, resulting into the Ohrid Framework Agreement between the Macedonian government and Albanian minority.

This historic engagement of the US in the Balkans faded out when the situation in the region had been relatively stabilized with peace agreements and the launch of the Stabilization and Association Process between the EU and the Western Balkan countries. After the declaration of independence by Kosovo and provisional settlement of its status based on the Ahtisaari plan, the burning issues in the Balkans were closed well enough for the US to re-focus its attention to other, more pressing crises in the world. However, Kosovo remains of strategic importance to the US – the Camp Bondsteel near to the town of Freizaj in Kosovo is the largest and most expensive US military base in Europe built since the Vietnam War² and a crucial infrastructure for US operations in the Middle East. This very practical interest of the US in Kosovo, together with the importance of the US backing of the Kosovo independence, reflects into the influence the US have over Kosovo foreign, regional and domestic politics. The US is seen by Kosovars as the number one ally³, and the US representation is consulted by the Kosovo government in every major decision.

During 2019, there were signs that the U.S. interest in the region grew again, particularly in the potential role for the U.S. in the dialogue between Kosovo and

¹ Such as the Dayton Agreement ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, military campaign against Serbian forces ending the war in Kosovo or the Ohrid Framework Agreement ending the internal armed conflict in Macedonia.

² <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/campbondsteel>

³ KCSS, Kosovo Security Barometer: Public Perceptions on Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Dialogue with Serbia, pp. 15-16. Online at http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Public_perceptions_on_Kosovo's_Foreign_Policy_and_Dialogue_with_Serbia.jpg_531411.pdf.



Serbia.⁴ First, Mathew Palmer was appointed by the State Department as the US special representative for the Western Balkans which was perceived as positive news across the region, indicating return of the U.S. to the Balkans. However, confusions rose when shortly after Richard Grenell, then the US ambassador to Germany, was named the special Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations by President Trump.⁵ His appointment was further striking as in comparison to Palmer, already a well-established actor in the Balkans with a good understanding of the realities, Grenell was known mostly for his antagonizing approach to the German government and the EU, with little experience or knowledge of the region.⁶ Furthermore, the EU did not fall much behind and appointed Miroslav Lajčák, an experienced Slovak diplomat, as the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues. What could have promised a more intensive and synergistic approach of the major actors, the U.S. and EU, to the region, turned out to be a struggle between different special representatives and envoys and apparently competing visions for the future of the dialogue. The U.S. involvement in the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo resulted into the infamous “Kosovo and Serbia Economic Normalisation Agreement”⁷, causing more problems in the European integration of both countries rather than providing solutions. For example, both countries are expected under the deal to open their embassies in Jerusalem, which violates the EU official policy towards the status of Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, creating obstacles in aligning of foreign policies of Serbia and Kosovo with the EU’s CFSP down the road.⁸

Viewed through these lenses, the change in the U.S. administration is welcomed in Europe for one more reason. According to the promises made by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris during the election campaign, it can be expected that their approach will be radically different from the one of the Trump administration, relying significantly more on multilateral solutions and freeing the way for the EU leadership in relation to the Balkans. Joe Biden will most likely not aim for U.S. short-term foreign-policy victories in the Western Balkans, unlike his predecessor, but rather provide support to the EU in their comprehensive approach to the region based on the prospect of integration into the Union and alignment with the policies as well as values of the EU. The most beneficial form of the cooperation between the U.S. and the EU in the Western Balkans would be probably the economic support provided by the U.S. in the form of financial assistance and investments to the region, still not provided by the EU to the extent which would be necessary⁹, in combination with the political backing of the EU-led normalization, reconciliation and democratization processes. Such an approach would offer the Western Balkans an opportunity for much needed economic boost while embedded in the framework of the EU integration process and not in parallel or conflict to it as the Trump deal did.

⁴ The Game of Envoys: Are the EU and the US taking the Western Balkans more seriously?, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/08/the-game-of-envoys-are-the-eu-and-the-us-taking-the-western-balkans-more-seriously/>.

⁵ Trump Appoints Another US Envoy to Balkans, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/04/trump-appoints-another-us-envoy-to-balkans/>.

⁶ Little love, as Berlin bids 'auf Wiedersehen' to Trumpism, *EUobserver*, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/148478>.

⁷ BIRN Fact-check: Is the Kosovo-Serbia ‘Deal’ Worth the Paper It’s Written On?, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/10/birn-fact-check-is-the-kosovo-serbia-deal-worth-the-paper-its-written-on/>.

⁸ What did Serbia and Kosovo sign in Washington?, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/17/what-did-serbia-and-kosovo-sign-in-washington/>.

⁹ Although the EU’s Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans approved last year increases the funding for projects in infrastructure, green and digital agendas.



High hopes for the failed Kosovo-Serbia Dialog?

Joe Biden as the new U.S. President and the upcoming shifts in the U.S. foreign policy are welcome news not only for the European partners but also for the Western Balkans. After the signing of the deal between Serbia and Kosovo in Washington, Trump tweeted: “Another great day for peace with Middle East – Muslim-majority Kosovo and Israel have agreed to normalise ties and establish diplomatic relations. Well-done! More Islamic and Arab nations will follow soon!” This statement, together with the actual commitments stemming from the agreement, not only showed that his administration viewed the importance of the deal primarily in the context of the Middle East peace process but also raised questions about Trump’s knowledge of the region itself.¹⁰ In contrast, Biden is very familiar with the Western Balkans already from the 90s when he as a senator travelled frequently to the region during the wars and was a strong supporter of U.S.-led NATO operations against Serbian forces both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo. The Biden family has also personal ties to Kosovo, as Biden’s late son Beau worked after the war for the OSCE in Kosovo, helping to train local prosecutors and judges.¹¹

The result of the elections is also due to Biden’s history with the region great news especially for Kosovo. His hard stance on Serbs in the 1990s as well as his open support to Kosovo independence suggest that the small nation will now have a strong partner on its side, and Biden is the most desirable President for Kosovo. This expectation was reaffirmed by Biden’s statement urging for the continuation of the Dialogue, leading towards mutual recognition.¹² The issue of Kosovo

recognition by Serbia has been rather avoided in the negotiations facilitated by the EU. The chant resonating in the discussions on EU integration of both countries is a “comprehensive and legally binding agreement on the normalization of mutual relations”. This is understandable, as the EU itself has five members who do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state. However, the U.S., as the main sponsor of Kosovo independence, expects mutual recognition to be part of the solution. While this reassurance by Biden was received with excitement in Kosovo, it creates unwelcome pressure on Serbia, for which the question of recognition is absolutely unacceptable.¹³ The inability of the parties to see eye to eye on this issue seemed to be an obstacle to reaching any real and lasting solution to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute. However, with the new U.S. administration, the balance has shifted, and Biden’s term could present an unprecedented window of opportunity for progress in the Dialogue.

In Kosovo, the U.S., to whom the Kosovars feel they owe not only for their independence but even lives, has been behind every major foreign-policy decision and even under the new “self-determination” Kosovo government¹⁴, it will certainly retain its influence. The question, however, is what the U.S. or the EU could offer to Serbia in order to be even just willing to talk about potential recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The Washington deal the two countries signed with the Trump administration opens new possibilities. Despite the many serious shortcomings of the agreement, its main value for Kosovo and Serbia lies in the economic cooperation promised in the deal. The U.S. pledged to boost investments in both countries and to open the American economic development agency in Serbia and the heads of the Chambers of Commerce of Serbia and Kosovo committed to establish a joint team for economic cooperation. If

¹⁰ Kosovo and Serbia Sort of Agree to Sort of Disagree, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/06/kosovo-and-serbia-sort-of-agree-to-sort-of-disagree/>, Biden presidency is key to EU leadership in Kosovo – Serbia Dialogue, *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/biden-presidency-is-key-to-eu-leadership-in-kosovo-serbia-dialogue/>.

¹¹ ‘We owe you so much,’ Kosovo to tell Biden as street named after late son, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-biden-street-idUSKCN10017X>.

¹² Washington supports a solution that will lead to mutual recognition of Kosovo and Serbia, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/01/28/washington-supports-a-solution-that-will-lead-to-mutual-recognition-of-kosovo-and-serbia/>.

¹³ Vučić to Biden: Kosovo recognition not mentioned in any agreement, *Euractiv*, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/vucic-to-biden-kosovo-recognition-not-mentioned-in-any-agreement/.

¹⁴ Led by the “Self-Determination Movement” party



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fulfilled what has been promised, the U.S. investments and financial assistance could mean a significant contribution to the much-needed strengthening of the weak economies of the Balkan nations. If investments and financial assistance coming from the U.S. to Serbia were to be large enough to significantly increase its economic growth, and if conditioned with the eventual mutual recognition embedded in the framework of the EU accession process, it could provide perhaps the only way leading to a sustainable solution to the Kosovo-Serbia dispute.



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