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## Review

### THE NEW APPROACH OF THE US ADMINISTRATION TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

The paper analyzes the attitude of the US administration towards the Western Balkans. The United States has chosen the path of engagement with the Western Balkans under President Donald Trump. This strategy is obviously the right one, and is already paying dividends in Macedonia. But serious obstacles—a deeply troubled and divided European Union and an unpredictable and impulsive leader in the Oval Office—remain, and need to be taken into account. The amount that the United States can do under a Trump Administration may not be enough, given the region’s deep-seated problems.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

Western Balkans; United States; Trump; NATO; EU.

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***SAŽETAK:***

U članku se analizira odnos američke administracije prema Zapadnom Balkanu. Dolaskom predsjednika Trampa na čelo američke administracije dolazi do novog angažovanja Sjedinjenih država na ovom prostoru. Ta strategija je očigledno ispravna o čemu svjedoče i postignuti rezultati u Makedoniji. Ipak, duboko podjeljena i uznemirena Evropska unija ali i činjenica da u Ovalnom kabinetu sjedi impulsivan i nepredvidiv predsjednik, predstavljaju ozbiljne izazove u realizaciji ove politike. Opseg onoga što Sjedinjene države mogu učiniti pod Trampovom administracijom možda neće bit dovoljan, uzimajući u obzir duboko ukorijenjene regionalne probleme.

***KLJUČNE RIJEČI:***

Zapadni Balkan; Sjedinjene Države; Tramp, NATO; Evropska Unija.

In early June, Assistant Secretary for Europe A. Wess Mitchell—who was only approved by Congress for his job in October of last year—gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation in Washington DC outlining the contours of the Trump Administration’s approach to Europe.

Anyone familiar with Mitchell’s thinking on geostrategy should not have been surprised at the speech’s content. Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel (in charge of Europe and Russia at State’s Policy Planning office until recently) wrote a book in 2016 called *The Unquiet Frontier*, in which they advocated for a forward-leaning foreign policy for the United States. America’s peer competitors were likely to probe along the West’s borderlands, they argued, looking for weakness. A smart strategy, therefore, would be to push back at these points preemptively, rather than preparing for some kind of big fight as we did throughout the Cold War. Indeed, a policy of commitment to the periphery could be a cheaper option for the United States in the long run. Reassuring America’s allies, which collectively represent an “*important competitive advantage against rivals in the geopolitics of the twenty-first century*,” is of paramount importance. Talk of grand bargains or offshore balancing should be avoided at all costs. “*Allies are already likely to have a greater fear of U.S. abandonment at moments of systemic flux and therefore call for greater U.S. commitments*,” they wrote. “*Signs of American outreach to rivals that appear to result from probes will only intensify this abandonment dilemma for the United States.*”

In the European context, the probing rival power is of course Russia. At Heritage, Mitchell didn’t mince words: “*As Secretary Pompeo said recently, Russia’s aggressive behavior was enabled by years of soft policy toward that aggression. That is now over. We seek better relations with Moscow, but will not pay for these by sacrificing our principles or our friends*”. He spoke about a strategy for reinforcing the Baltics, a strategy for Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, and of course, about plans for the Western Balkans. “*In the Balkans, we are increasing aid against Russian influence and coordinating closely with the EU to bring greater stability. As I speak, our team is working in the field with the EU and key European partners on Serbia/Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Greece-Macedonia name issue. In the Balkans, as elsewhere in the world, the scale and depth of U.S.-European cooperation demonstrates the ways in which the Transatlantic relationship helps us address very real, common problems*”.

This is the periphery strategy made flesh. It's not just, as Mitchell notes in his book, that allies need to be reassured about predatory rival powers; they need to be reassured about America's own commitments to them and to regional security. And the role of allies in this formulation is not just the people in the Balkans who would be made into allies, but European countries who represent current allies. The election of President Donald Trump did a lot to rattle capitals across the European continent. Trump's behavior since coming into office—pointedly avoiding mentioning Article 5 at last year's NATO summit, his bullying of allies at the Malbaie G7 summit this year—has only deepened worries.

One can understand the U.S. approach in this broader context. The Western Balkans represent something of low-hanging fruit, a crisis region that nevertheless is unlikely to rise to the level of prominence of Syria, North Korea, or even Ukraine. As such, policymaking can fly under the radar of a President who prides himself on being unpredictable, and who instinctively bristles at the constraints strategists try to impose on him. If we can make progress here, the thinking goes, it not only helps the region, but helps bolster existing alliances. In other words, a unified policy for the Western Balkans, beyond any set of concrete achievements for the region itself, also represents a means of keeping the flickering flame of transatlanticism alive over the course of what are sure to be a trying four years.

But just how credible are the assumptions underlying this approach? Yes, cooperation between Europe and the United States has seen early successes, most notably on the breakthrough in Macedonia's name dispute with Greece. But is there a coherent vision that can link together isolated wins into something that resembles positive momentum? Is there a path forward? And perhaps more trenchantly, is it a correct assumption that policy in the Western Balkans can remain insulated from intervention by the Trump White House? Let's look at these questions in turn.

First: a common vision for the region. When the European Commission announced its Strategy for the Western Balkans in February of this year, everything seemed to be going according to plan. The Europeans had understood that their role was to entice the countries towards reforms while the United States helpfully nudges from the outside—carrots and light taps with a stick. The statement by Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Ne-

gotiations, was the most hopeful: *“Today we confirm that the door of our Union is open for the Western Balkans which is already an enclave surrounded by the EU, and that our offer is sincere. With the new approach, underpinned by concrete measures, we are strengthening the enlargement process which requires credible efforts and reforms in return in particular to strengthen the rule of law. We have to work for the benefit of the citizens.”*

The top-line goals were for Serbia and Montenegro, both of which were already in accession talks, to be allowed into the EU by 2025. One of the press releases put forth by the Commission alongside the plan sounded an optimistic note for the region as a whole: *“Montenegro and Serbia are the current front-runners in the process. However, other countries may catch up or overtake each other depending on objective progress accomplished.”* The reasoning was transparent. By providing a European “*perspective*”, the region’s leaders could be dissuaded from dalliances with “*external*” actors, such as Russia, China, and Turkey.

Though hopes were raised by the announcement of the plan, a parsing of the rollout revealed some of the tensions hiding just beneath the surface. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker was careful to re-state that no further enlargement was imminent, echoing his own remarks from July 2014 that were meant to keep aspirants’ expectations in check and wary European voters appeased. The cautionary tone comes through loud and clear: *“With strong political will, real and sustained reforms, and definitive solutions to disputes with neighbors, the Western Balkans can move forward on their respective European paths,”* he stressed. *“Whether this is achieved will depend on their objective merits.”* Juncker was walking a tightrope, trying to incentivize Balkan leaders to double down on reforms in exchange for progress towards accession while soothing European heads of state concerned about the rising populist anti-EU tide within their own electorates.

These tensions broke to the surface at the Western Balkans summit in Sofia in May. French President Emmanuel Macron was the most outspoken skeptic, talking about “*anchoring*” the region to Europe rather than committing to eventual accession. (During a speech to the European Parliament in April, Macron had foreshadowed his skepticism, saying that any notional expansion of the EU was contingent on serious reforms of the EU itself.) And even German Chancellor Angela Merkel,

who had been among the most hawkish leaders on the Western Balkans, was careful not to promise too much in Sofia. Asked about the 2025 goal, she said: *“I don’t think anything of this target date. Membership must be based on factual progress. It’s not about a time horizon, it’s about what’s been achieved.”*

Then, as pressures mounted in June to “reward” the Macedonian leadership for achieving progress on the name issue with Greece, what had been merely rhetorical suddenly became very real. At the monthly ministerial confab in Luxembourg, the EU decided that any discussion about the possibility of accession for Macedonia (and Albania) would be put off by a year—at the least. The countries pushing hardest against a decision this year were hardly insignificant actors, either: France, the Netherlands, and Denmark stood firmly opposed. That the Europeans spun the result of the meeting as a conditional green light for accession next year—and that both Macedonia and Albania, both given the supposed nod, claimed to be delighted with the news—should not obstruct the reality that this announcement was a bucketful of ice water. France, the Netherlands, and Denmark can just as easily choose to obstruct next year as they did this year.

And it’s not just worries about populism that presents a challenge to EU expansion. Populists themselves represent a challenge, by representing the possible emergence of a substantively different approach to difficult, fundamental issues in the Balkans. This became apparent when footage of Austrian Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache of the far-Right FPÖ surfaced, showing him defending the right of Republika Srpska to secede from Bosnia. *“The international community is protecting an artificially created state through violence, which does not reflect the wishes of the people in that state,”* he is seen saying in reply to a reporter’s question. *“For this reason, we should consider the possibility of giving the Serb Republic the right to break away.”* The clip was from last September, before Strache had entered into governing coalition with Sebastian Kurz’s ÖVP. Confronted about the clip and how his statement clashed with official Austrian policy on Bosnia, Strache equivocated, saying he supported *“the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, just as much as people’s right to self-determination for a sustainable and necessary peace process”*.

As Vice Chancellor, Strache may not have ultimate say as to what Austria’s policy on the matter may be, even though his party holds the Foreign Ministry as well.

But the stance should not be surprising: FPÖ has signed a cooperation agreement with United Russia, the party Vladimir Putin helped found, and they share many of the same political perspectives as their big brothers in Russia. It's worth noting in passing that Matteo Salvini of Italy's Lega—also now in a governing coalition, also aligned with United Russia—has been silent on Balkan politics lately. But when prompted, he too has also talked about the “*democratic choice of nations*” as being a sacrosanct principle for him.

It's unlikely that either the Austrians or the Italians are going to expend much political capital on Balkan politics at this juncture, given that EU immigration politics are much more pressing. But should a crisis erupt in Bosnia over the upcoming elections in October, and should Dodik start secession proceedings in Republika Srpska, no one should be surprised if all of a sudden the EU finds itself unable to speak with one voice on the matter. Similar discord could emerge on Kosovo, where Serbia has been pushing a plan for some kind of territorial swap. Thus far, rumor has it that the plan has been blocked by Germany. No other European country has stood up to support the proposal, but one could imagine that happening should the issue heat up in the future.

Overall, it's telling that upon closer inspection the EU's own internal travails are casting a pall over the Balkans, and thus by extension over the fragile hopes that “*wins*” there can help keep the transatlantic alliance going through difficult times. A question that will come up in Washington, if it hasn't yet, is this: if the Europeans themselves can't or won't successfully integrate the Western Balkans—if they can't or won't help protect their own “*soft underbelly*” (a memorable phrase coined by Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev)—what does the United States think it's going to achieve in the region when all is said and done?

But a more fundamental problem for U.S. policy in the Balkans is the idea that its success hinges on Donald Trump not taking notice of what is happening there. On the one hand, there's a case to be made that even if Trump knew what was going on, there would be no reason for him to be interested. The problem with that reasoning is twofold.

For one, Vladimir Putin's Russia, which has committed itself to acting as a spoiler in the Balkans, carelessly threatening to light dumpster fires on Europe's periphery,

could easily get the White House involved. If Putin chooses to bring up the region with Trump at any time, it could scramble efforts along several axes.

After warning for a long time that its NATO accession was unacceptable, Russia appears to have been involved in a botched coup attempt against Montenegro in 2016. Russian officials are now complaining that Macedonia being admitted into the alliance would similarly be “*destabilizing*”. Instead of fomenting some ill-conceived paramilitary action on the ground, Putin could just as easily broach the subject with President Trump, saying that admitting any more Balkan countries would be needlessly antagonistic. If the summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is any indication, such appeals stand a good chance of working with Trump, who was all too happy to call off the “*provocative*” joint exercises with South Korea as he emerged from talks. Already a NATO skeptic, it would probably not be too difficult to convince Trump to put a hold on further expansion in the region. His offhand remarks about readmitting Russia to the G7, and his reported comments to allies about Crimea (“*Crimea is part of Russia, because everyone there speaks Russian*”) suggest an affinity for accepting the Russian perspective.

Beyond undermining efforts in the Balkans themselves, such actions would have immediate consequences for European solidarity on Balkans policy, shaky as that may already be. Especially when it comes to Russia, European leaders have found it difficult to stand together if not bolstered by the United States—they refuse to be more Catholic than the Pope. The sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea, and especially after the shooting down of flight MH-17 over Ukraine, have held in no small part due to the hard work undertaken by Obama Administration officials to cobble together a coalition. That they haven’t fallen apart under Trump is a testament more to the power of bureaucratic inertia than to any values-based consensus in the European Union. There’s plenty of indication that in Germany, for example, Merkel’s opponents on both the Left and the Right have made rapprochement with Russia a core element of their policy. Underlying, it is the feeling that Europeans shouldn’t cause troubles for themselves with the Russians over quarrelsome, irredeemably corrupt third parties, such as the Ukrainians. A similar logic, one presumes, would apply to the Western Balkans, if the Russians were to make a fuss about them.

But it’s not just that keeping Trump uninterested in the Balkans is an unrealistic proposal, given the realities on the ground. It’s that the issues facing the region may

be too heavy lift for diplomats and bureaucrats to solve on their own. The slowly simmering crisis in Bosnia represents a case in point. Given the country's deadlock over an election law dispute, the country may not be able to have legitimate elections come October, and will at that point cease to have a government. Such an outcome may prompt Milorad Dodik to attempt to have his Republika Srpska secede; beyond his somewhat speculative statements on the matter, there have been reports that RS's police forces have received shipments of new assault rifles. Similar moves have been reported in Croatian cantons in anticipation of a possible collapse of Bosnia. And Bakir Izetbegović, head of the Bosniak SDA, has threatened to wage war against both sides should attempts to secede be made. Dodik and Izetbegović are backed by Russia and Turkey, respectively—giving both countries a lever for creating a mess in Europe's backyard. Should things come to a head in this way, it's impossible to imagine a solution that would not involve the White House at the highest levels.

With that all said, it's hard to fault Mitchell, and by extension his new boss Mike Pompeo, for their attempt at pulling together a strategy. From all evidence, President Donald Trump is the opposite of a strategic thinker. He is an impulsive man who trusts his instincts, and he has nurtured a deep suspicion of the status quo, especially in foreign policy.

This of course doesn't mean that he has no thoughts of his own. As Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institute, a Washington DC think tank, put it on the eve of Donald Trump being elected in 2016:

*I think there are a lot of areas in which Trump has no fixed view and in which he contradicts himself, but there is a core set of visceral beliefs that he's had for many years and that he's not deviated from. The first is that he is opposed to America's alliance arrangements with other countries. The second is that he opposes free trade and favors a more mercantilist international economic system. And the third is that he has this fondness for authoritarianism, particularly in Russia. Those three things—there's evidence for them going back to the mid-1980s, and he's persisted with them at often high political cost.*

Trying to channel that into something productive was always going to be a tall order. And in the Western Balkans, for the reasons outline above, it may well fail.



But given the circumstances, it would be hard to counsel a radically different approach. (Indeed, I was an author of a report for the Atlantic Council on the subject that advocated for increased American commitment.) The United States ought to remain involved, in both the Western Balkans and more broadly in Europe, to the best of its abilities in the coming years. Neglect or withdrawal risk far worse outcomes. And who knows? With some luck and deft timing, perhaps the scenarios alluded to in this essay do not come to pass.