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Changing the game

Trump's return to the White House could pose a major challenge to the EU's efforts to integrate the Western Balkans

Donald Trump's return to the White House is a turning point in US election history. This is not an election that simply reaffirmed the global trend of people embracing change in last year's 'super election year'. It is about a new president with a clear mandate that will almost certainly bring policy changes in line with his transactional approach to politics, trade and international relations. Some of these changes might decide the future of the EU integration project in the Western Balkans.

Recent picks to key positions show that Trump sees this election triumph as a confirmation of his belief that populism on social issues, job creation, border security, ending wars, trade and foreign policy under the motto of 'America First' is the way forward for the country and a way to dominate the US-led system without being held hostage to traditional allies and certain types of commitments. His picks are individuals who believe in the selective use of American power. In a certain way, their core position is that they only care about American interests and that others should only care about themselves, too.

Shifting priorities

Meanwhile, the geopolitical context has changed dramatically since Trump's last presidency, including the two major war fronts of Russia-Ukraine and the Middle East, the lack of strong leadership at the European level as a result of the crushing electoral defeats of the leading elites in Germany and France, the shaping of an alternative alliance – rather than adherence to the rules-based international order – by countries with sizeable geography and population, and the more complex and competitive international architecture.

A cloud of confusion thus hangs over the future of US-European relations. The Obama administration marked the beginning of a shift in US strategic priorities pivoting away from Europe and towards Asia and

the Pacific. When NATO was established, the US was very much composed of people who either came from Europe or had been there because of World War II. This is where Cold War liberalism was nurtured, forming the ideology that kept the alliance together.

Of the crises facing Europe, security is the most pressing.

Joe Biden will be remembered as the last Euro-Atlantic president in the White House with a worldview shaped by the Cold War. Trump's foreign policy team has a totally different worldview. They see Asia as the central stage, with Europe no longer holding the same importance — strategically or culturally. This will be a fundamental challenge for the Europeans who, since the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, have considered their relationship with the US as one based on shared values and interests, with a focus on collective security, the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, and a transparent and multilateral free trade system.

Three pillars of the current European order have been challenged: the blurring of the distinction between Europe and the US through the creation of a single Euro-Atlantic community; the blurring of the boundary between internal and external affairs through the EU deepening policy; and the blurring of the line between the core and the periphery through the enlargement and neighbourhood policy. The EU must repair the above pillars, of which only one is related to its cooperation with the US, while the remaining two fully depend on the will of the EU member states.

The Western Balkans at a crossroads

Of the crises facing Europe, security is the most pressing. Trump has promised to end Russia's war in Ukraine. While this is a desirable goal for all, the prospect of a lasting peace or ceasefire is slim. Therefore, it remains to be seen how this objective could be achieved, what steps will be taken and whether or not coordination with European allies will be maintained. And above all, what the future of Ukraine will look like.

Viewed through the prism and web of frozen or unfinished conflicts in Europe, the way this war will end will have an inevitable impact on Europe's security architecture, including the Western Balkans. This is going to change the game of the EU integration project, too. The weakening of the Euro-Atlantic relationship is not a good omen for the

Western Balkans, where the US is seen as the enforcer of the security perimeter and the Europeans as allergic to the use of force. This implies the need for increased vigilance to strengthen the deterrent capacity of KFOR troops in Kosovo and EUFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as two critical spots for regional security.

During the first Trump administration, two key agreements were concluded in the Western Balkans: the Prespa Agreement on the name issue between Greece and North Macedonia and the Washington Agreement on the economic normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which at the same time ensured the recognition of Kosovo by Israel.

There is nothing worse in politics than defending a status quo that does not work and that fails to deliver democracy and prosperity.

Although the above-mentioned agreements were important for regional stability, the EU missed an opportunity to anchor the countries of the region to its shores. Even more concerning is the EU's failure to resolve political disputes and statehood issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which are key for regional progress. Particularly, the EU's policy towards Kosovo is fragmented, with 21 recognisers, 5 non-recognisers and Hungary pursuing its own policy. This division paralyses the EU's ability to act cohesively in resolving the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo and ensuring their membership in the EU.

The West's free-value exercise of geopolitics as a tranquillizer in the absence of the EU accession process for the Western Balkans has enabled leaders of the region to translate increased geopolitical rivalries into their own power advantages. Transactional deals, whether driven by migration obsession (Italy-Albania), access to natural resources (Germany-Serbia) or military industry (France-Serbia) are a few examples that demonstrate how the EU can be 'reshaped' as a result of compromises at the expense of democracy and the rule of law in the Western Balkans. These actions undermine EU capacity to show itself as a united actor in the Western Balkans, making citizens feel as if they are not part of the European family but rather its periphery where problems are dumped.

There is nothing worse in politics than defending a *status quo* that does not work and that fails to deliver democracy and prosperity. And there is a major difference between defending values and defending the *status quo* through shallow stability. In this context, Trump's return to the White House should be seen as a game changer for clarifying the common goals

and the future of the European project in the Western Balkans.

'The hour of Europe has come'. These were the proud words of Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, who led European crisis management efforts at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars in June 1991. Indeed, it was US determination that stopped the wars and ensured peace. A quarter of a century has passed since the end of the wars in the region, and the EU has yet to demonstrate its ability to anchor the Western Balkans into the union. The change of the game in the US calls for an acceleration of the European project in the Western Balkans. The EU must rise to this challenge.



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