

POST-TRUMP ASSESSMENTS AND PRE-BIDEN EXPECTATIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Democratic candidate Joe Biden achieved victory over President Donald Trump in the US Presidential elections on 3rd November and became the 46th President of the country. He had previously contested for this position twice, in 1988 and 2008, but did not succeed.

As a senior member of US politics, Joe Biden has held senior positions in American political life in his half-century political career, starting from the Senate to being Vice President of the US (2009-2017). Positioning himself as the most knowledgeable candidate in foreign policy, Biden has a wealth of experience in not only the necessary diplomacy and negotiation skills but also the lessons he learned from his failures to guide him in the next administration.

Joe Biden's victory which is being qualified as a historic turning point for the US and the

world comes after a period filled with political conflicts and confusion of Donald Trump, who assumed Presidency in 2017.

The newly elected president of one of the most affected countries by the coronavirus should first lead in the fight against the pandemic and its economic fallouts. The growing polarization between republicans and democrats, alleged to have emerged in the US society, is another major problem that Biden has to solve.

Since the US is a global power, it is expected that Biden's leadership will follow a different path than its previous president both internationally and domestically. It is predicted that Biden will try to eliminate the damages caused by Trump's policies against globalization and democracy, and he will also try to bring the US back to the number one position in global politics.

It is well acknowledged that Biden will focus on the problems in his own country first. However, as a global actor, there are expectations to the US' newly elected president from regions and countries that cannot solve their problems alone. One of these regions is the Western Balkans.

Countries facing problems in their EU membership process in particular or countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo that have not completed their statehood process have high hopes that the US will bring a solution. In this context, the comments and posts about the US elections in Balkan countries both before and after the event gave the impression that it was as if the elections took place in the Balkans rather than the US.

Also, it is more than coincidental that the indictment on Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi was accepted by the Kosovo War Crimes Special Court the day after the elections. It should not be forgotten that the court prosecutors published the indictment against Thaci, right when Thaci was on his way to the White House, in order to sign the economic normalization agreement initiated by the Trump administration between Kosovo and Serbia.¹

Series of "coincidences" like these prove that the US presidential elections - which resulted in the change of government - will have an impact in the Western Balkans. This piece will discuss how Biden will approach certain problems in the Western Balkans.

Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue Process

One of the two most important issues to be resolved in the Balkans is undoubtedly the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The bumpy EU-mediated normalization dialogue between the two countries hasn't yet been finalized. In particular, the EU's failure to fulfill its promises has shaken the parties' belief in the institution and caused them to be unwilling in continuing the dialogue.

The Trump administration ignored the EU-led dialogue process and appointed a special representative to solve the problems between Kosovo and Serbia, and prioritized economic normalization by ignoring the fundamental problems between the two countries. According to the Trump administration, it was believed that if economic normalization was achieved between the two countries, political relations would also normalize.

In this context, in order to ensure economic normalization, the Trump administration even ventured to press for the overthrow of the Vetvendosje government, which was elected in Kosovo in early 2020.² Kosovo's minus-election-newly-established government accepted the removal of customs duties on Serbian products, which was a prerequisite for the economic normalization agreement with Serbia, as requested by the Trump administration.

The economic normalization agreement, scheduled for signing in June, was postponed to a later date because the Kosovo War Crimes Special Court - which is operating in The Hague - published an indictment against Kosovo President Hashim Thaci. Thaci stated that he would not participate in talks with Serbia until the allegations are dismissed. Despite that, the Trump administration made sure that the economic normalization agreement between the two countries was signed at the White House in early September.³

The main reason why Trump insisted on the signing of the economic normalization agreement was to use this success as propaganda material in his campaign. It is clear that the economic normalization between Kosovo and Serbia is not an issue that will affect the US elections. However, the side effect of the agreement is that the two countries improve their relations with Israel rather than between each other. The agreement contained articles stating that Serbia would move its embassy to Jerusalem, Kosovo and Israel would recognize each

other and Kosovo would open its embassy in Jerusalem. At the same time, the agreement also stated that the party countries shall not transfer technology from unreliable sources (China) and agree to diversify in the field of energy (not just depend on Russia).⁴ As can be understood from the agreement, rather than an economic normalization between the two countries, it is revealed that the Trump administration realized this agreement to collect as many votes of Jewish voters in the country.

Another example of the unusual steps taken by the Trump administration in the Western Balkans, as in all regions, is that it announced that the US can even support the land exchange between Kosovo and Serbia, which may threaten the security of the region.⁵ The EU strongly objected; showing that such a change will cause the change of all borders in the Balkans hence old problems would come back to life.

Unlike Trump, the newly elected Biden administration is expected to follow policies in line with the EU in terms of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Biden might cooperate with the EU for the two countries to recognize each other's independence over the existing borders. In this context, it is clear that the land exchange discussions will not be supported by the USA ever again. Afterward, there is a belief that Trump's economic normalization in the region would not be successful without political normalization. Or, the solutions would be temporary and will not contribute to the final solution. It is also predicted that Biden will try to solve the problems not through political figures as Trump has done but through institutions.

On the other hand, it is expected that the Biden administration will continue the steps taken by the Trump administration to reduce Russia and China's activities in the region and normalize with Israel, to increase Israel's activity in this area. At the same time, without any dilemma, the Biden administration will continue its policy of strengthening relations with Belgrade or Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in order to reduce Russia's influence on Serbia.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's Absent Political System

Another Biden's awaited solution is the absent political system in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is actually produced in the USA. The Dayton agreement was signed near the city of Dayton, Ohio State, in order to end the bloody Bosnian war that took place between 1992-95. Although the agreement ended the war, it condemned Bosnia and Herzegovina to a dysfunctional presidential system of the three largest ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, and caused the country to split into two political entities that threaten the territorial integrity of the country.

According to the Dayton agreement, the ethnic groups in question - whom the only thing they can agree on is that they disagree - that make up the presidential council need to take consensus on important issues such as the country's foreign policy. At the same time, the High Representative Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR), which operates as a colonial governor in the country, has also been debated about. It is argued that OHR, which has the right to dismiss even the President, restricts the sovereignty of the country.

There is a belief that the Dayton Agreement, which gave rise to many other problems apart from ending the war, was negotiated in the USA and could only be replaced by American pressures.

In order to solve this problem, Biden should appoint a special representative just like Trump did for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue process. The appointed special representative should be tasked to put pressure on Serbs and Croats to remove obstacles in their decision-making in terms of the central government institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to adopt constitutional changes that would allow the national government in Sarajevo to take decisions in key areas such as domestic and foreign policy. If they do not accept it, the Serbs, in particular, are expected to be cast aside, punished by exposing their corruption and illegal ties with Russia.

Above all, the persistent threats of Serbian and Croatian politicians to Bosnia's integrity must have consequences and punishments, as they constrain economic development, reduce foreign investment, encourage interethnic conflict, promote radicalism and endanger the existence of the state.⁶

Bulgaria's Barrier to North Macedonia's EU Talks and US Attitude

On top of the visa liberalization that should be given to Kosovo, Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia's EU membership also harms the EU's credibility in the region.⁷ It is believed that the Biden administration's attitude on this issue will be to discourage Bulgaria from its veto at the EU and to ensure that the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region goes uninterrupted. Otherwise, the countries there will continue to accept investments of countries such as China and Russia, where they do not demand any conditions rather than trying to fulfill the reforms imposed by the EU they cannot be a member of.

This is another problem that the Biden government is facing. What steps should be taken in spite of the recent increasing Chinese influence, especially in Serbia? China invests millions of dollars in infrastructure and telecommunications in order to increase its influence in the region. In order to limit the increasing Chinese influence, as mentioned earlier, the Trump government has added a clause to the Serbia-Kosovo economic normalization agreement, stating that the countries of the region will not transfer technology from unreliable sources. However, although the Serbian administration has accepted this article, it did not take any steps until the US elections, where Trump's fate was to be determined; on the contrary, it announced that China is an important partner of Serbia.

At this point, the new US administration will try to reduce China and Russia's influence by acting in partnership with the EU and investing in key economic sectors in countries of the region.

Turkey's opportunities and Risks in the Balkans

The rising opposition to Turkey's membership in the EU also signals how Biden's attitude - who is expected to work in coordination with the EU - will be towards Turkey. However, in all analyzes and comments made about Biden's potential politics for the Balkans, it was underlined that the US administration will take steps against China and Russia in the Balkans.

Turkey, which is not jeopardizing the security of the region like China and Russia, has to fill the gaps that will occur in the said competition. The Turkish government is also trying to improve relations, especially with Serbia. Turkey has proven that it intends to move to a different level of relations with all Western Balkans countries, rather than just pursuing a policy with compatriots and co-religionists community.

Although Turkey does not constitute a threat to the Balkan countries, the EU and US deem Turkey as a competitor rather than a partner, like in the old days. Turkey's rising regional power and independent policy conducts deteriorate its relations with the EU and the US. These reflections are also seen in the Balkans. The regional countries, which always have Turkey's unconditional support, in order to complete their EU integration process, are being forced to implement policies against Turkey.

Conclusion

With Biden's presidency, some of the expectations about US major policy changes will come true, but the new administration will continue some of the practices inherited from the Trump administration.

Although Serbia interprets Biden's victory as a disadvantage, the Biden administration will not end the positive atmosphere created during the Trump period with Serbia in a way that will push it into the arms of Russia and China. At this point, it is possible to say that difficult days are waiting for Kosovo. Because Kosovo is the

most important country which has existential problems with Serbia.

On the other hand, it is important for the US to continue its efforts to shape regional politics through special representatives as Trump did. Otherwise, Biden might be seen as not attaching the same importance to the region as much as Trump.

There are two important issues for Biden, which is expected to follow parallel policies with the EU, to be resolved at this point. The first is to make possible a conclusion of the Kosovo-Serbia

dialogue to recognize each other's independence without changing the existing borders. The second is to contribute in updating the Dayton agreement, which caused Bosnia-Herzegovina's absent political system, and to complete the country's Euro-Atlantic integration process.

It is unusual for the Balkan countries to wait for the newly elected US president, international or regional actors to come up with a magic wand and solve their internal and inter-related problems. Yet, the biggest responsibility for overcoming these problems still falls on them.

Endnotes

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