



**Contemporary Southeastern Europe**

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

# **The Trump Election and its Consequences for the Western Balkans**

Event Analysis

Michael Rossi  
Instructor, Rutgers University  
[Michael.Rossi@polisci.rutgers.edu](mailto:Michael.Rossi@polisci.rutgers.edu)

[www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/rossi](http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/rossi)  
*Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2016, 4(1), 87-92

---

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe* is an online, peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-oriented research on issues relevant to societies in Southeastern Europe. For more information, please contact us at [info@contemporarysee.org](mailto:info@contemporarysee.org) or visit our website at [www.contemporarysee.org](http://www.contemporarysee.org)

# The Trump Election and its Consequences for the Western Balkans

Michael Rossi\*

Donald Trump's stunning upset victory in last year's U.S. Presidential elections sent shockwaves through nearly every political corridor in the democratic world, and seemed to confirm, at least in the immediate days and weeks leading to his inauguration, that American politics were radically breaking from conventional norms. Following the political fallout of the so-called "Brexit" campaign the same year, it appeared that the politics of populism, and more specifically national populism, were beginning to replace the international order established in the wake of the Cold War two and a half decades prior.

Within the Western Balkans – the region comprising Albania and the countries and territories of the former Yugoslavia – Trump's victory (and simultaneous defeat of Hillary Clinton) was met with a wave of reaction ranging from disbelief among socio-political Europhiles to hubristic "I-told-you-so" vindications from Euroskeptics. Perhaps no other political leader in the region seemed more elated to hear of Trump's victory than Vojislav Šešelj, the (in)famous long-time leader of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, who had not only supported and predicted a Trump victory months before the election, but saw such an outcome as a direct defeat of the American foreign policy model established in the 1990s, long anathematized in Serbian nationalist circles. Indeed, opponents of the perceived American New World Order throughout the Balkans and the wider European region held to a convoluted sequence of logic that interpreted a Trump victory as a defeat for the internationalism of the European Union, a reclaiming of some sort of national sovereignty, and a triumph of popular (and populist) democracy. Included in these narratives is a sort of appreciation for the leadership of Vladimir Putin as the consummate counter-symbol to organized transnational institutionalism.

In a part of the world where nationalist resentment against the political, economic, and social establishment of the American-led international system runs high, a victory for Donald Trump was really a rejection of Hillary and Bill Clinton and everyone and everything associated with them: Madeline Albright; Wesley Clark; John Kerry; Hashim Thaçi; an independent Kosovo; Nelson

---

\* Michael Rossi is Instructor in the Department of Political Science at Rutgers University – New Brunswick. Previously he was Visiting Professor of Political Science at The College of New Jersey, and Visiting Instructor in the Department of Political Science and Economics at Rowan University.

Rockefeller; Henry Kissinger; George Soros; the neoliberal trans-Atlantic order; and post-Cold War American political unipolarity. It doesn't have to make sense; it simply means that the shock and disbelief of every Hillary supporter from the Jacob Javits Center to the political parties of Kosovo were channeled into energizing *Schadenfreude* for those who waited and hoped for what they expected to be a new kind of leadership and a new kind of America.

However, after the initial shock had worn off and more than 100 days of Trump's presidency have passed, we find that little has changed by way of foreign policy, and Washington has displayed no particular interest in the region beyond the rhetorical and staid policy statements of supporting peace, stability, and a "European" future for all communities. In this short narrative, I offer three predictions/assessments of the region in the Age of Trump: a possible galvanization of executive leadership mimicking the illiberal authority of the U.S. presidency; a sustained pattern of the hands-off diplomacy already exhibited by Washington under the Obama Administration; and a continuation of European, and more specifically German, inheritance of the region in the wake of American disengagement. Optimistically, a Trump presidency will have few long-term consequences, since the Balkan region will increasingly fall under the scrutiny of Berlin and Brussels. However, if the European Union does not step up to the proverbial plate and provide sound foreign policy and determined diplomacy, the region may risk gravitating towards the illiberal influence of Russia and Turkey.

One, and in my opinion the only, foreseeable consequence a Trump presidency may have on the Western Balkans, or the entire Balkan Peninsula for that matter, is a possible validation of the type of top-heavy, confrontational, and even braggadocious leadership that he has made his trademark character. Southeastern Europe is full of political officials who look at figures like Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Erdogan as role models. The non-conventional, anti-establishment, chauvinistically charismatic champion of illiberal democracy in the name of collective security and sovereign democracy is more than appealing to leaders like Milo Đukanović, Aleksandar Vučić, Nikola Gruevski, Edi Rama, Hashim Thaçi, Milorad Dodik, and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, all of whom lead tiny unstable states and statelets with dreams of making their nation "great again." For them, Trump's victory is one more sign that a leader who promises to get things done with an "opposition, minorities, and sensitivities be damned" attitude may be the long-needed remedy to years, if not decades, of managed democratic transition and economic modernization by unelected international organizational officials that hold the fate of nations in their unaccountable hands.

A Trump presidency may not so much enable would-be demagogues as it would validate their existing socio-political platforms, undermine efforts at reform and good governance, and entrench incumbent governments against embattled

and increasingly demobilized oppositions. Obviously it is still too early to identify any definitive connections, but it is safe to assume that the existing affinity Balkan leaders have for characteristics in the Putin-Orbán-Erdogan triad will only be strengthened by seeing similar mannerisms from Washington; especially the way in which Trump (dis)regards any and all socio-political opposition to his authority. In so many words, the art of compromise risks itself being compromised in favor of the tyranny of the political (and ethno-political) majority.

Despite the possible effects Trump's presidency may have on individual leadership, American foreign policy will not deviate from the strategies to which it has been committed for the past twenty-five years. This is not because Trump shares a similar vision of international order to that of Hillary Clinton, but rather because American foreign policy changes very little with new presidential administrations. Less than a month after his inauguration, Trump sent a letter of congratulations to Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi on the anniversary of Kosovo's declaration of independence, quashing hopes – however fanciful they might have been within certain nationalist circles in Belgrade – that Washington would take a different stance towards the disputed territory. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, is maintaining Washington's previous foreign policy of supporting Kosovo's hopeful membership in the organization. More recently, Trump's campaign musings on the relevance of NATO were just those, as Washington approved Montenegro becoming NATO's newest member. These are all issues that would have had the same outcome if Hillary Clinton, Jeb Bush, or even Bernie Sanders were elected president, and with U.S. foreign policy increasingly wary of Russia's influence in the region, the foreign policy of Donald Trump will remain competitive, rather than conciliatory, towards Moscow – despite the endless rumors of him being at best a dupe and at worst a puppet of Vladimir Putin.

One must remember that Trump is only one person, and the day-to-day operations of American foreign policy – especially in non-flashpoint areas of the world – will fall outside the interests of the White House. Whatever lingering issues remain can, according to the State Department and some American foreign policy experts, be managed by the European Union, which will most likely continue policies set forth in coordination by the previous Obama Administration, maintained by its own foreign policy crafted from the Lisbon Treaty. It must also be remembered that rhetoric during a campaign can envision whatever future a candidate wants. After inauguration, existing foreign policy commitments to other countries and international organizations prevent Washington from making any real changes in engagement. It's not that old habits are hard to quit; more that it can be quite costly to do so. The promises Barack Obama made to depart from the reckless foreign policy of the George W. Bush Administration still produced regime change in Libya, insurgent support in Syria, a blind eye to Israel, and military aid packages to

Saudi Arabia. The alleged chummy relations Trump apparently has with Vladimir Putin – a man he has never met – which many media outlets seem to suggest endanger America’s security and compromise its diplomatic presence in the world will most likely fail to produce tangible evidence of collusion. In the end, whatever effects the United States under a Trump Administration has on global security will fall into prefabricated patterns of operation.

Another point to note regarding Trump’s presidency is his oft-mentioned “America First” policy, which aims to recede from diplomatic engagement where U.S. leadership is not directly needed. If any specific consequences will be felt from a Trump presidency in the Western Balkans, it will be the noted *lack* of American presence, rather than a change in foreign policy. But as mentioned above, this is consistent with previous presidential administrations, as Washington effectively handed the responsibility of the region over to the European Union for management and safe-keeping almost a decade ago. Certainly, no Balkan leader would pass up an opportunity to meet with any American president, and many of them appeared to work hard to get into President Trump’s good graces (and photo opportunities) at the NATO summit held this past May – even to the point of being literally pushed aside – but it is increasingly clear that having the ear of the German Chancellor and the EU Foreign Affairs Office carry increasingly greater weight and importance. This is especially true where membership in the European Union is considered. The remaining countries and territories of the Western Balkans outside the EU all have governments wanting to join. Its leaders may limit the degree of political rights and civil liberties for their citizens at home, but these would-be Trump fans are keen on maintaining good relations with Berlin and Brussels for continued economic assistance and diplomatic support. As such, a Trump presidency, if anything, reinforces the increasingly ancillary role Washington has played in politics and statecraft in the Western Balkans, which will most likely be filled by the European Union and the German Chancellery.

What diplomacy there is will also remain within existing frameworks of committed coordination with the European Union and NATO. The Trump Administration will be far more engaged in regional flashpoints in the Middle East and East Asia than in a part of Europe that has been “solved” from the point of view of the State Department and the Pentagon. Beyond the usual political flare-ups in Bosnia and Macedonia, usually associated with domestic political agendas, there is little risk to the geo-political status quo. Kosovo also will most likely remain a frozen conflict for the foreseeable future, with continued support from Washington, but no special efforts made to end its status as a disputed parastate. Finally, reports of Russia’s encroaching influence in the region are limited both by the deterrence of the EU and NATO as well as Russia’s greater interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. Russia will continue its close ties with Serbia, but this relationship will not

prevent Belgrade from simultaneously deepening ties with the European Union.

Trump has offered little to no indication that his administration has any plans, let alone interest, in treating the Western Balkans particularly differently from the rest of Europe. The State Department will continue to call for the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, support the territorial integrity of Bosnia, and back efforts in power-sharing based on the Ohrid Agreement in Macedonia. Much of this monitoring will be handled by American ambassadors, who in turn will most likely defer to the European Union's managerial nature in handling day-to-day issues. Additionally, security and stability are guaranteed by NATO as an organization either to join, as was recently the case with Montenegro, or with whom to cooperate, as with Serbia. More specifically, Belgrade's uneasy relationship with the military organization will most likely favor continuing the good cooperation it has not only with its own armed forces but also in maintaining peacekeepers at key Serbian Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo.

As a final bit of guarded optimism, many of these visions of the future depend on one critically important constant: the European Union assuming responsibility previously held by the United States. At the time of Trump's inauguration, the media championed the peaceful transition of power from one democratic leader to another. What they seem to have forgotten is that in actuality the power was transitioned from Barack Obama to Angela Merkel, who in the wake of last November's election and the Brexit referendum, suddenly finds herself and her country functioning as the last major promoter of liberal democracy in the trans-Atlantic network of states. In many ways, Germany has become the major political, economic, and diplomatic power in Europe since the 2008 economic crisis, and has assumed much of the responsibility the United States previously held up to the early years of the George W. Bush Administration.

As long as Germany continues to serve as the leader of a united European idea, and as long as the proverbial doors to the European Union remain open to the Western Balkans, the slow, delayed, staggered, uneven, haphazard, yet inevitable progression towards democratic consolidation will remain assured. Whether or not this is indeed the "Hour of Europe," a reduction in American diplomatic presence may not alter the geopolitical landscape as long as Berlin and Brussels step in to fill any voids. This may be the one (and possibly only) silver lining in the cloud of American diplomatic withdrawal. However, the American vacuum does risk an opening not only for Russian strategic interests, but also Turkish, whose policies under Recep Tayyip Erdogan have sought to reestablish a political presence in Bosnia, and in cultivating ties with Albanian communities in Albania, Kosovo, the Preševo Valley, and northwestern Macedonia. Neither Putin nor Erdogan will deter any state or territory from

advancing towards EU membership, but they may be the biggest capitalizers on a wave of illiberal democratic government if Germany does not maintain a visible diplomatic presence.

My argument for little to no change in Western Balkan politics and development stems from the understanding that the United States effectively passed diplomatic responsibility to more European-centered powers years ago. As long as the European Union guarantees a clear path of membership for all remaining states and territories over the next ten to fifteen years, a Trump Presidency, aside from abetting the temptation to dabble in a little illiberal populism now and then, will have no serious effect on already-problematic politics and statecraft in the region.