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WHAT A CHANCELLORSHIP OF BAERBOCK WOULD MEAN FOR THE BALKANS?

By: Mehdi Sejdiu - Group for Legal and Political Studies

The 16-year Merkel era is coming to an end, and this fall's elections are set to bring new faces to Germany's foreign policy. The two strongest contenders for becoming Germany's new chancellor are CDU-s Armin Laschet and the Greens Annaela Baerbock. The popularity of the latter in the polls has prompted many to look at her [foreign policy views](#) and envision what a Green Germany would look like. Especially since regardless of whether Baerbock will be able to snatch the chancellorship from the CDU, the party is likely to become part of the next colored ruling coalition, be it a grand coalition (CDU & Greens), Jamaica (CDU, Greens & Liberals), traffic-light coalition (Greens, Liberals and SPD), or Rot-Rot-Grün (SPD, Left & Greens).

The Green's role in the Balkans

Despite only ruling for two terms, the Greens happen to lead Germany's foreign policy during historical times, they co-governed with SPD from 1998 to 2005, heading the foreign ministry during interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. The foreign minister at that time, Green Joschka Fischer led Germany into Kosovo as part of the NATO campaign to stop ethnic cleansing Albanians, a controversial decision that sparked a furious reaction from the left-leaning pacifist fraction of the party at that time. This was the first armed conflict of the country after the World War II. The tensions ran so high that at the party convention in Bielefeld Joschka Fischer was [attacked with red paint](#), but nevertheless continued to hold what was to become one of his most [memorable speeches](#) defending the war to stop genocide against Kosova Albanians , saying "never again war, never again Auschwitz, never again genocide , never again fascism".

Another involvement with the Balkans was in 2015. As Germany was dealing with the 2015 refugee crisis, the ruling coalition of CDU and SPD put forth a bill to declare the Balkan as "safe countries of origin". This categorization would minimize the chances of Balkan asylum seekers and accelerate their deportation. However, the bill had to pass both through the Bundestag and Bundesrat, and the Greens had enough seats in the Bundesrat to veto the bill. It was the Green Minister of Baden-Württemberg that managed to negotiate the vote for the safe-country of origin for the [West Balkan regulation](#), which opened a pathway for regular migrants from the Balkans to Germany since 2016.

Since then the asylum numbers have significantly dropped, and a report of the [Institute of Employment Research \(IAB\)](#) found the scheme successful as the many Balkan citizens managed to secure stable jobs.

A Green Foreign Policy towards the Balkans

The green [party program](#) for 2021 envisions concrete steps ahead in the European integration of the western Balkans, with the start of the accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia according to the Copenhagen Criteria. The party also supports more relaxed migration from the Balkans in Kosovo in forms such as the West Balkan regulation. Baerbock's foreign policy views are also intrinsically linked to human rights and climate policy.

Compared to CDU and SPD, the Greens are more critical to authoritarian powers countries like Russia and China. Baerbock vowed to halt the Nord Stream 2 pipeline within her first 100 days of chancellorship and she is less neutral to China, which could spark disagreements between Germany and Serbia. Vucic is keen on keeping good relations with Russia and China, he refused

to impose sanctions against Russia following the arrest of Navalny and supports the Budapest-Belgrade Railway project, criticized by EU that it violated competition rules. Serbia has also worked closely during the pandemic with Russia and China importing over a million 'Sputnik' and 'Sinopharm' vaccines.

Similarly the Greens would not be very enthusiastic about countries like Montenegro taking [mammoth loans from China](#). Baerbock is tougher and less neutral on authoritarians than Merkel, so it will be interesting to see whether that will have an impact on the with the increasingly authoritarian Balkan leaders.

Baerbock's staunch pro-European and transatlantic stance could create an important transatlantic push for the EU led dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. In the previous Trump administration, Germany and the US had different stances towards the border-corrections debate. US special envoy Richard Grenell led an independent dialogue from the EU led process leaving Miroslav Lajčák in the shadows. The Biden administration showed a rapprochement attitude towards the EU, and now Lajčák and Deputy Assistant Secretary Mathew Palmer show up together in visits and meetings showing commitment to resolving the dialogue, a green Germany is likely to continue the support for this process.

The new German government would continue be pro-EU and pro-enlargement, however a new green Chancellor could give a breath of fresh air to the European integration of the Balkans.

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