

Espresso.Insight

No. 04/2024

October 28, 2024

From D.C. to the Balkans: Why America's Choice Matters More than Ever?

—

Besar Gërgi



GROUP FOR LEGAL
AND POLITICAL
STUDIES



GROUP FOR LEGAL
AND POLITICAL
STUDIES

Group for Legal and Political Studies

is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit public policy organization based in Prishtina, Kosovo.

Our mission is to conduct credible policy research in the fields of politics, law and economics and to push forward policy solutions that address the failures and/or tackle the problems in the said policy fields.

legalpoliticalstudies.org

FROM D.C. TO THE BALKANS: WHY AMERICA'S CHOICE MATTERS MORE THAN EVER?

By: Besar Gërgi - Research Fellow at Group for Legal and Political Studies

In a few days, Americans will go to the polls in an election that will be pivotal for the next four years of the United States. However, the profile of the next president of the world's leading superpower will have consequences not only for the nation, but also for the rest of the world. The globe itself has become significantly more volatile since the last elections in 2020. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shaken the core of the liberal international order to an unprecedented extent. In tandem to that, there has been an ongoing war in the Middle East for over a year (with a significant potential for further escalation), Houthi rebels have practically blockaded the Red Sea & the vital Suez Canal and elsewhere, such as in the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwanese straight, tensions keep rising.

This has led some intellectuals to argue that the [Third World War has already started](#) and these are but the initial phases. The next American president's political profile will be pivotal in either furthering the breakdown of the global order or returning to peace and stability. In these difficult times, Western Balkans can be easily overlooked by any decision-maker in Washington, D.C. Luckily, both candidates have policy experience in the highest executive offices, which will be extrapolated in this analysis to predict their foreign policy towards the Western Balkans region.

As Joe Biden's Vice President, Kamala Harris did not produce an outstanding foreign policy record. She [has not been active in European](#), let alone in the Western Balkans affairs. Comparing that to Biden's tenure as Vice President, when [he frequently engaged with the region](#), it is evident that she is disinterested in this part of the world. In some sense, that was expected given the scale of multiple crises going on in Ukraine and the Middle East. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect in a Harris Administration much of the affairs of the region would be handled by the foreign policy establishment of the Democratic Party, much as has been the case during the Biden Administration.

The key policy of the administration in the region has been [the appeasement of Serbia](#), in the hopes that one day in the distant future, Aleksandar Vucic will have a genuine change of heart and abandon his Putinesque ways of autocracy and join the liberal world order of the West. The working logic behind this school of thought was explained by none other than Viktor Orban who argued that [pacification of Serbia](#) as the largest nation in the Western Balkans, would lead to pacification of the whole region. Although that policy has yielded some results, such as the sale of Serbian ammunition to Ukraine, many have argued that the [appeasement of the Vucic](#) regime has led to a [more aggressive posturing in regional affairs](#) marked with tensions in Bosnia and Montenegro and, worryingly, a terrorist attack in Kosova. Bill Burns as the head of the CIA had [to visit the region in August](#) to quell any potential tension. Therefore, a Harris Administration would in all likelihood result in the extension of the status quo.

Donald Trump on the other hand has a policy record as president himself that is indicative of a potential second mandate. Instead of an established doctrine or ideology, Trump's approach toward foreign policy has been much more [tactical and transactional](#). He has been focused on trade balances, financial contributions to NATO, and above anything else, personal relationships. Such a maverick attitude has alienated much of the diplomatic establishment in Washington DC. This has only added to the unpredictability of the Trump administration which

was not shy to pursue [unorthodox policies](#) such as pulling out of the Paris Accords and the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Pursuant with his personal-relationships-based foreign policy, Trump appointed an equally controversial envoy for Western Balkans; Richard Grenell. In this position, his track record is mixed, to say the least, and has succeeded only in brokering a short-lived agreement between Serbia and Kosova known as the Washington Agreement. Grenell can be expected to run the Balkan affairs in some capacity in a potential second Trump White House. Given that Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Grenell are [planning to invest in Belgrade and Albania](#), the policy choices of the administration are likely to be affected by the financial benefits by the local governments. Another important contingency would be Milorad Dodik's actions, as he has promised to [declare the independence](#) of Republika Srpska if Trump gets reelected.

Therefore, a clear picture emerges. A Harris Administration would pursue the current policy of appeasement while trying to put out the fires that inevitably arise from condoning an expansionist agenda. The key word to the Trump Administration on the other hand is 'unpredictability'. How much will his family's investments in the region affect his policy? How would he respond to the implosion of Bosnia & Herzegovina? How would he respond towards a more comprehensive second Banjska? The short answer is ambiguity. That is why the Western Balkans are left with two options that have neither a strong position in the region, nor any willingness to defend that. This will, therefore, translate into less American leadership in an already fragile part of the world.

However the following days play out, it is important to remember that the election will be very close, at least in terms of Electoral College votes. Last election's winner was decided by [less than 45k voters](#) in key states. This election will in all likelihood be no different than the last one. Another important thing to bear in mind is that with the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the troubles brewing in the Western Balkans will largely go under the radar. With the [June 8th All-Serbian Assembly](#) as the ideological driving force behind the so-called 'Serbian World' and the [rapid remilitarization](#) of the Serbian state, the years ahead will see increased tensions and we cannot rule out a military conflict in our region. American leadership will be decisive in preempting or acquiescing against this threat. The Western Balkans will need to learn with an apathetic USA, lethargic EU and an aggressive Russia & China.

Espresso.Insights

Espresso.Insights are aimed at decoding the policy research of our Fellows to a broader audience. Espresso.Insights present short summary of analysis and information that help readers and policy-makers in particular, to understand the relevant research, as they suggest possible policy options and argue for certain path of action. Aiming to intensify the debate about policy issues and general public concerns, Espresso.Insights will, in addition, serve as gears to aid an informed decision-making process.



GROUP FOR LEGAL
AND POLITICAL
STUDIES