

The Theory of Change: Is the Trump Administration Making It Harder for Countries in the Western Balkans to Join the EU?

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Welcome to InCLUDE, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, supported by the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans. We want to drive forward the discussion about how to integrate the Western Balkan countries as full members of the European Union. I'm your host, and my name is **Dušan Reljić**.

Today, we will discuss whether the US administration under Donald Trump has become an obstacle to countries in the region trying to join the European Union, or if we should still give the Pax Americana, which has been in place in the region since the 1990s, a chance to help ensure democracy and EU membership for the Western Balkans. Previously, US support to the region to achieve EU integration was a standard part of topical US pronouncements. However, in the recent report of the US Foreign Ministry to the Parliament on US policy to promote regional stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans, the region's membership in the EU was not mentioned once.

Our guest today is US journalist and political commentator, **Lily Lynch**. Welcome.

She was recently described in the Financial Times as a respected pundit. That is to say, a wise person or an expert. Her articles appeared in Le Monde Diplomatique, The Guardian, Jacobin and others. She has lived in Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo, and published a regional newsletter.

Lily, in this recent report, the State Department accuses Russia and China of malign influence in the Western Balkans. Yet, some critics point to the US recently easing the pressure on disruptive Bosnian Serb leaders like Milorad Dodik, or forcing the high representative Christian Schmidt to resign, and also, controversial business projects linked to the members of the Trump family in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Albania. Would it be appropriate to add now the US themselves to the malign influences of the region?

Lily:

First of all, thank you so much for having me as a guest, I'm very honored to be here. To answer your question, whether the US is now a malign actor in the region, I think we need to look at the standards by which we've labeled other actors malign and ask ourselves if the US fits that criteria.

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When I've read criticism of Chinese coal projects in the Balkans, much of the focus has been on their lack of concern for the environment. Today, we have protests erupting in Albania over Jared Kushner's plan to build a luxury resort on an Albanian island, with serious concerns with the environmental impact. When I look at years of reports about Russian influence, we see criticism of Russian money transforming places like Montenegro into a hub for kind of corrupt Russian wealth, oligarchs' yachts and money laundering. And now we see very wealthy Trump family members and associates also attempting to transform parts of the region into lucrative real estate deals.

Of course, the US and Russia are now semi-aligned with Milorad Dodik. And while I'm aware that some American officials would say, "Look, we're limiting Russia's grip on Republika Srpska this way," you know, this leads to some kind of like logical contortions, that State Department report you mentioned earlier, repeatedly emphasizes the word stability without ever naming the individual who's, I think, probably the largest factor of instability, which is Milorad Dodik. If we want to be consistent, then I think we have to conclude that the US is malign and, in some ways, perhaps occasionally even more blatant about it.

Dušan:

Another word which is not mentioned in that report, which we have quoted before, is democracy. Instead, the report says that the US-led nation-building era has passed, and that maintaining stability in the region is the prerequisite for achieving US objectives. And now, among those objectives, and this is another quote from the document, "Market access is foundational".

To what extent does Washington's actions now resemble or differ from what other external powers are trying to achieve in the region, such as Russia, China, the Emirates or Turkey?

Lily:

I think this is really the Trump administration sort of idealized self-concept. You know, we only care about markets, pipelines, hard power, whereas, all the Europeans can do is lecture about democracy. I completely agree that there are many ways that it looks like that and is like that, that the US engagement with the region is much more narrowly focused on the Balkans as an investment destination, and the side of geopolitical competition for energy without any reference to democracy or the EU.

This reminds me a bit of China. China famously likes to tout the principle of non-interference, and its investments are not contingent upon adherence to human rights norms. I do think Trump sort of sees this as an edge, but I also think that the sort of supposedly values-free nature of Trump's foreign policy can sometimes get overstated. MAGA absolutely exports its own values. If you set aside their kind of sovereigntist, hard-nosed, realist rhetoric, then I think what they're trying to do actually is kind of cultivate a Trump globalism. Something like the Board of Peace is a kind of perfect epitome of that. We see MAGA interfering in other countries' domestic politics all the

time by openly campaigning. J.D. Vance openly campaigned for Orbán in Hungary a few weeks ago. The Trump administration kind of likes the image of itself as never giving lectures, but, again, J.D. Vance's Munich lecture, Munich talk, was definitely a lecture as far as I'm concerned. And Politico recently reported that the State Department has discussed government funding for MAGA-friendly NGOs in Europe, and that a list of these NGOs that were MAGA-friendly were given to them by The Heritage Foundation.

So MAGA is exporting values. It just appears to have swapped the sort of liberal internationalist conception of Western values, human rights, democracy, and so forth, for a kind of more Christian nationalist, civilizational, conception of Western values.

Dušan:

Lily, could you explain to our listeners and viewers the term MAGA?

Lily:

MAGA, Make America Great Again. It's a very interesting kind of logic to restore the lost greatness of the United States that presumably has been made less great by liberal policies. And I think initially it had a sort of sovereigntist tone: "We're going to get back to a sort of more America-focused foreign policy instead of promoting human rights and democracy around the world." But in Trump's second term, I think that the people who are attracted to that message are now parting ways with MAGA because they see Trump as very much kind of, again, promoting values. Not even promoting values, but I would say like engaging in wars. And in a way like promoting sort of a Trump-version of globalism, a sort of Christian nationalist civilizational kind of approach to the world.

Dušan:

In Europe, I think we would call it ideology.

But what could be the next steps of this US administration in the Western Balkans, for instance, regarding Kosovo? Could, and I'm quoting again, "A negotiated durable agreement acceptable to both parties be what the State Department wants?" Does it mean the north of Kosovo for Belgrade, the south for Pristina?

Lily:

Ideally, the Trump administration, in my view, would ignore the Western Balkans. I mean, that would be the best outcome for everyone. But, as for your question about the land swap, that's what you're referring to in this question, I know this subject was resurrected from the dead last year because a land swap was suggested as a potential way of ending the war in Ukraine. But with respect to Kosovo, I just think considering how unpopular the idea is, that it's just too lacking in popular legitimacy, even for the Trump administration to consider it seriously.

Last summer, an NGO in Kosovo, CASA, the Center for Affirmative Social Actions, published the results of a new survey on Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Only 11 per cent of Kosovo Albanians said they supported a land swap as a compromise for normalization. It was even less popular than the establishment of an association or community of

Serbian municipalities, which really says a lot if you're familiar with how popular that idea is in Kosovo. When asked whether a land swap would resolve tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, 66 per cent rejected the idea, stating that it would instead create instability. This overwhelming opposition really confirms that the land swap has very little popular support and is widely perceived as dangerous. By the way, I don't think Serbs like this plan either.

Dušan:

What could be the thrust, the US thrust in Kosovo at the moment?

Lily:

Trust?

Dušan:

Thrust: what would they do?

Lily:

Considering the Trump administration and Trump has already claimed to have brought peace to Kosovo in an imaginary war that we or I've never heard about, he claims that he already brought peace to Kosovo and Serbia. I think it's very difficult to read because when it's so disconnected from reality, you can't really even perceive what is happening here.

Basically, my conclusion about the lack of popularity about this land swap is that the Trump administration is looking at these protests in Albania and the protests that preceded them in Serbia against these Kushner projects. And I think that they must be reconsidering whether the region is a place where you can truly impose unpopular policies and projects on an unwilling population.

Dušan:

Does this apply also to Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Lily:

Yes, I hope so. Well, forgive me, we'll see, we'll see. I probably shouldn't editorialize that way, but I definitely had the exact same thoughts with the Southern Connection project and Michael Flynn, Trump's crony.

Dušan:

You're talking about oil and LNG, right?

Lily:

Yes.

Dušan:

Liquified natural gas.

Lily:
Precisely.

Dušan:
What's this project about?

Lily:
The Southern Interconnection Pipeline would connect, from what I understand, Bosnia to the island of Krk in Croatia, and permit the American LNG gas transports. This would, of course, radically reduce or eliminate Russian energy influence in Bosnia, and so it has bipartisan support—the idea of a Southern Interconnection Pipeline, of course, multiple administrations have supported the idea. But I don't think that there's a wide bipartisan buy-in for what has happened with the contract to build it, which has now gone to Michael Flynn. People might remember Michael Flynn from the first Trump administration, a very odious kind of Trump crony. Now this Trump-linked private company has received this extremely lucrative deal to build this pipeline. So, we'll have to see what happens, but it's really in its sort of earliest weeks this news.

So, we'll have to see how Bosnia responds and if there's going to be this similar kind of response as we've seen in Albania and Serbia to Kushner real estate, for example. I don't know, we'll see.

Dušan:
Okay. You're now based on the Bosphorus in Istanbul. Energy is also a huge question in this part of the world, but we will not discuss at this moment energy. We will dedicate some time of our discussion to Turkey and some similarities in the Turkish and the US approach to the Western Balkans. From where you sit, do EU and the rule of law still matter in how Turkey and the US deal with the Western Balkans?

Lily:
Well, I would say definitely not, that the EU and rule of law certainly do not play a role in Turkey's approach to the Western Balkans. But that's just one area where we see a convergence in the current American and Turkish approaches.

In the State Department, on the Western Balkans you mentioned earlier this report, there's a line that says: "The Trump administration is focused on empowering local actors to resolve their own challenges rather than perpetuating an over-reliance on international intervention and supervision". At the same time, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs often talks about their concept of regional ownership, which is just what it sounds like, this idea that regional problems shouldn't be left to outsiders. As Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said last year at the launch of his Balkan peace platform, "We have come together to find Balkan solutions to Balkan problems." I think this is really music to the ears of the Trump administration. And I think if you read these kinds of statements together, you begin to understand why US-Turkey relations have improved since Trump took office a second time.

Another convergence is the shared Turkish and American interest in the narrative of European weakness. For Turkey, you see this in statements like the one made by Erdoğan last month when he said: “Europe needs Turkey more than Turkey needs Europe”. This is a general statement on EU-Turkey relations, but it extends to Turkish policy in the Balkans as well. For both the Trump administration and Turkish government, their current pitches are remarkably similar. Europe is incapable of solving problems in its own backyard; they need us in order to maintain stability, get things done and create peace.

Dušan:

There is a contradiction in Turkey’s position. On the one hand, it’s been a candidate for EU membership since 1999. Politically, at the moment, especially because of the neglect of human rights and the rule of law, Turkey politically seems to be more distant from the European Union than ever before. However, at the same time, also because of the war in Ukraine and what’s happening in the Near East, in security and military terms, Turkey is and remains a key Western ally. So how does this contradictory position of Turkey shape its approach to the Western Balkans today?

Lily:

I think the Western Balkans are one of the places where Turkey’s contradictions as an aspiring major player on the world stage really come into full view.

On the one hand, I think many in the Balkans watch this domestic political situation in Turkey in despair and with the same sense of helplessness that other Europeans feel. At the same time, as you said, as with the rest of Europe, Turkey has become more active in the Balkans since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In times of war, security needs trump every other consideration. This is especially true at a time of relative US retreat from Europe. If you’re the government of Kosovo and the US, which has been the main guarantor of your security throughout your entire existence and even before your independence, suddenly looks highly unreliable and is talking about pulling troops out of Europe, you’re going to embrace Turkey. You’re going to move closer to Turkey. And certainly, one of the big regional developments in recent years has been the intensification of cooperation between Kosovo and Turkey in the area of defense. The procurement of drones, Turkey’s been brokering recognitions of Kosovo’s independence, so this makes perfectly rational sense from Kosovo’s perspective if Serbia is your neighbor and war is a living memory, you know?

And other European countries are obviously making quite similar calculations as Kosovo. So, this is really going to be one of the most interesting questions going into the NATO summit, which Turkey is hosting in Ankara in a few weeks. How can European countries in the Balkans, but all of Europe, really preserve their defense and security relationship with Turkey to solve these multiple, severe crises, without that cooperation becoming a form of collaboration?

Dušan:

Lily Lynch, thank you for your most valuable insights and for being our guest today. I am sure that our audience will certainly look forward to reading more of your analysis in the news media soon.

Thank you for watching InCLUDE, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, supported by the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans. See you soon again.