



America Votes 2024: The Transatlantic Impact

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Geostrategy

US Elections 2024: What's at Stake for The Balkans

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By Gordana Delić | October 25, 2024

The EU must take the lead in further integrating the Balkans into Europe.

The global challenges the world is currently facing—such as the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine/Russia—have made the 2024 US elections a global political event. In the Balkans, there is much discussion about possible implications of the election's outcome for the region. The uncertainty over whether and how US foreign policy toward the region could shift or change creates noise both online and offline, making it difficult to distinguish truth, substantive analysis, and conspiracy theories.

However, it is unlikely that US foreign policy towards the Balkans will change significantly regardless of the election's outcome. The Balkans are not central to US interests. With diplomatic engagement focused on Ukraine and the Middle East, priority will be given to preserving peace and stability and enhancing support for the region's EU and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The approaches of the two potential US administrations may differ, especially in communicating priorities, but several issues will remain central to either:

- finding a sustainable solution for Kosovo and Serbia
- making Bosnia and Herzegovina a viable and functional state
- cutting dependencies on Russian energy and further limiting Moscow's influence
- carefully monitoring and potentially countering the ever-growing influence of China
- creating opportunities to deepen ties via trade and economic exchanges between the region and the United States

US policy has always viewed accession to the EU as the end goal for the Balkan states and the integration process as the best driver of transformation. EU integration would go a long way towards achieving peace, stability, and—consequently—prosperity not only in the region, but also throughout Europe. Let us not forget that it was with the promise of a European home that the United States and the EU together helped end the conflicts of the 1990s. The allies enabled regional leaders to sign multilateral agreements such as UN Resolution 1244 and the Dayton Peace Accords, bringing peace after a decade of bloodshed.

Unfortunately, successive financial, migration, and leadership crises and internal disagreements within the EU have significantly slowed the process of Balkan integration, creating a void for others to exploit. Whether it is Russia's political influence, China's growing economic footprint, or the region's own organized crime, it is clear that these forces, both external and internal, threaten further destabilization that may spread beyond the region's borders.

The United States plays a key role in maintaining peace and stability in the Balkans. Both Harris and Trump administrations would have a strong interest in preventing further destabilization of the region, as that could significantly and unnecessarily impact an already overburdened transatlantic security architecture.

Certainly, there would be differences in approach between the two potential administrations. While a Harris administration might maintain the current policy toward the Balkans, the candidate's background as a prosecutor and her commitment to human rights and the rule of law may lead to a greater

intolerance of nationalistic rhetoric and a reduced willingness to overlook undemocratic practices.

US foreign policy towards the Balkans under Donald Trump was marked by transactional logic, prioritizing trade and economic growth over democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The period was marked by two main events: the economic normalization agreement between Kosovo and Serbia in September 2020 in Washington, DC, and the opening in Belgrade of the first overseas office of the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) with a lending capacity of \$60 billion. A second Trump administration may be even more focused on enhancing business and trade with the Balkan region to enhance Trump's objective to limit China's further economic expansion.

However, based on the former president's previous actions—such as pushing to [cut funding for USAID and other foreign aid](#)—a Trump administration may be less likely to actively support democracy and civil society in the region, and this could have negative consequences for US interests particularly in security matters. A trade-centered approach would also require increased direct engagement from the administration. With the current level of geopolitical wrestling, it is questionable whether a Trump administration would choose to have an even more hands-on approach to resolving regional disputes stemming from the past.

Given the historic interstate tensions in the Balkans, the United States should coordinate bilateral relations closely with the EU. Any approach that would push Balkan countries to pick sides between the EU and the United States would immediately destabilize the region, as preferences among the six countries might differ. It is in the interests of either administration to work toward guarding peace and stability via enhanced EU integration and the general consolidation of Europe.

The Balkan countries could benefit from turning slightly more inward, focusing more on necessary reforms such as the rule of law and wellbeing of their citizens to ensure both their resilience and the strategic goal of European integration. All states in the region can benefit from better EU-US coordination on Balkan issues, and the prioritization of regional collaboration over confrontation enhances each country's EU integration prospects.

Regardless of the election's outcome, the EU must take the lead in further integrating the region into Europe. Many in the Balkans hope that some type of deeper integration into the EU, together with Ukraine and Moldova, will occur within the next few years. Recognizing that the consolidation of the European continent is essential, the EU has held numerous discussions of the integration format. The United States can provide support, but without a firm political decision from the EU to secure its southeastern flank in a timely manner, the risk of destabilization will only grow.

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Gordana Delić is the regional director of the GMF Balkans program, the Balkan Trust for Democracy and deputy managing director of the Transatlantic Trusts. She has 25 years of experience in the nonprofit sector in the area of civil society development, with extensive experience in program management and development, grant solicitation, corporate philanthropy, research and planning, election processes, get-out-to vote campaigns, human rights, and reconciliation. Delić has knowledge of both the nongovernmental and governmental sectors in the Balkans, as well as of international donor strategies, programs, procedures, and operations in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Prior to joining the Balkan Trust for Democracy, Delić worked at Freedom House Serbia. Her international experience includes five years of work on different democracy development programs in Slovakia. Delić is fluent in Serbian, English, and Slovak. She also communicates in Czech, German, and Spanish

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