

THE BIDEN AGENDA:



**HOW THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION CAN
HELP WESTERN BALKANS
OUT OF STAGNATION**



Author: Muhamet Brajshori

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Muhamet Brajshori

Muhamet Brajshori was Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo. He previously served as Ambassador in Thailand and ASEAN countries. Before that he was Deputy-Director General in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as an advisor to consecutive Foreign Ministers of Kosovo since 2012. Previously worked for Southeast European Times (SETimes), USAID BEEP, and World Bank. He studied international relations at Uppsala University and Siegen University and spent research semesters at the Universities of Cologne, Heidelberg, Turku and Staffordshire and speaks fluently English and German.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While many issues remain unresolved in the region, ranging from a lack of mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia, the political fragility of Bosnia and Herzegovina and new challenges such as Chinese and Russian influence, growing autocracy, and lack of economic development, the US role has been weak to advance Euro-Atlantic agendas over the past years. The current challenges in Western Balkans have lingered for decades. Unless the challenges that hinder the European future of the region are tackled, the deadlock will be a norm in Western Balkans, thus keeping the region without a clear perspective to move forward. The presidency of Joe Biden has brought optimism in the EU as well as in countries like Kosovo where American leadership is perceived vital to maneuver in an increasingly changing international environment. At the same time, fatigue with the enlargement agenda in the EU has left the region in limbo experiencing a political stagnation that has been used by malign actors to expand their influence.

President Biden's administration has shown signs of seeking to focus in the region by having a non-motive-based policy in place to address issues that empower the region and help the region by undertaking reforms and making progress on Euro-Atlantic integration. One of the main aspects of this re-engagement will be the sensitive political issues that hold the region in deadlocks, such as the complicated relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and the risk that Bosnia and Herzegovina will turn into a totally failed state in the heart of Europe. A key element of Washington's engagement will be closer coordination with European allies to complete the remaining open issues in the Western Balkans. But the challenges are immense and the expectations are high.

Kosovo and Serbia are far from normalizing relations and the status quo is holding both societies hostage making them unable to make progress towards European integration; Bosnia still fails to have a functioning state, while the region is experiencing a major Chinese penetration that will challenge the US and the EU mainly in countries that are undergoing democratic recession such as Serbia. These and many other issues such as the pandemic, energy security, and democratization will require strategic clarity from Washington and a determination to make progress. Bringing the region back on track in the democratization, rule of law, and EU enlargement prospects would require the involvement of the US administration. The fundamental challenge for durable peace and stability in the Western Balkans is risking Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to become frozen conflicts. If both countries can resolve their bilateral and internal challenges respectively, the region has a higher chance to move forward in the path of cooperation and European integration. However, if the sensitive political issues that characterize both countries turn into frozen conflicts, there is an opportunity for malign actors to become more active and present in the region than they currently have.

On the other hand, no matter how complicated the situation may seem, it is not an impossible mission to make progress in the region. Progress can be made in fighting corruption, economic development, and strengthening democracy, which can have a significant impact on addressing political issues. At the same time, greater pressure is required from Washington on the European Union to unblock the European integration process towards the Western

Balkans, otherwise, any US effort in the region will not be effective if the integration process remains blocked due to the EU. Reform, progress toward EU integration, and American engagement should be seen as an interconnected cycle, not as separate issues.

The new Biden administration has a lot of work to do in the Western Balkans. Challenges are many, but the key to overcoming them, at least from the perspective of the region seems to be the political will in Washington to truly engage with the issues and move the countries towards the EU or even NATO integration for those who have this goal. The potential complacency with the situation in the Western Balkan in the Biden administration can exacerbate the prospects for a frozen conflict in Kosovo and BiH and at the same time, a crucial test will be for the Administration to manage the expectations inside and outside of Western Balkans. Adaptation to the current circumstances in the region is a necessity to address the political, economic or security challenges more effectively than what has happened in the last 4 years.

1

The Biden administration has a potential in the Western Balkan to show stronger involvement, and work closely with European partners, that can address key challenges in the region and unblock the current status quo.

2

The Biden administration should have clarity in addressing political issues in the region. There should be a focus on achieving mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kosovo but also protecting the constitutional and political order that has been a result of the Vienna negotiations for the final status of Kosovo in 2006-2007. At the same time, political and constitutional reforms should be undertaken in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which aim at strengthening the central institutions and preserving the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

3

The Biden administration should end the lack of consensus of what to do in the Western Balkans. The recent actions from Washington seem to suggest that the Biden administration has clear goals on addressing corruption and organized crime, outstanding bilateral/internal disputes, and third-actors involvement in the region, but it must be more direct on the strategy, timeframe and resources in place to move on these and other issues and challenges the Western Balkans face.

4

The region must seize the opportunity that there is an American president in the White House who knows the region and for decades was actively involved with the Western Balkans. The governments must show willingness and ability to undertake transformative reforms and tackle political and security challenges. They cannot hope that Washington will solve the problems of the region if there is no will within the region to move forward. This is especially the case for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are most challenged and hindered by the current deadlock.

5

The most important transformation in the Western Balkans would consist of a focus on strengthening democracy in the region to counter authoritarian efforts and at the same time fighting corruption and strengthening the rule of law as essential preconditions for all countries in the region to move forward. The Biden administration has recognized the need for stronger engagement in these essential areas for the future of the Western Balkans because the risk of bypassing current threats to democracy could deepen strategic corruption, the establishment of stronger authoritarian governments, and the enforcement of the Russian and Chinese presence throughout the region.

6

Recent actions by the United States in distributing vaccines and addressing the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, which are inevitably economic, are also indicative of the need for a greater focus on investment and infrastructure projects, not only to develop the region's economies but also to avoid the presence of malign actors from the region. Energy security is what represents a strategic area for the Biden administration and for the future of the region where there are great opportunities for success.

CONTEXT

Since the decade of the 1990s, and especially against the background of the wars that led to the dissolution of communist Yugoslavia, the role of the United States has been essential in stabilizing the region, resolving conflicts, and paving the way for the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. The US played a vital role in Kosovo's independence and in keeping Bosnia and Herzegovina a unified state, while it has been the sponsor of Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia's pathway to NATO membership.

The Western Balkans, especially since the 1990s have enjoyed bipartisan support and engagement. Political changes in the Presidential administrations in Washington have not led to significant policy changes on the part of the United States. This has led many in the region to see a more consistent vision on the part of the United States about the future of the Western Balkans, centered on the need to bring peace and stability, strengthen democracy and bring countries closer to EU and NATO integration. At the same time, actions in the Balkans have been coordinated with the Europeans, and in many situations where the EU and its member states have been rigid or slow in action, the driving force came from Washington. This has been the common recipe that has been calculated for wellbeing in the region. But the everchanging international environment and the apathetic Trump administration in Washington have implicated new shifts in this relationship that resulted in different views and actions towards Western Balkans, especially in the facilitation of the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia. Aside from an active role in Kosovo, the Trump administration played an active role in finalising the membership of Montenegro in NATO, supporting the Prespa agreement in North Macedonia that paved the way to membership in NATO,¹ and unequivocally saluting the transition of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a defense force. These were strategic achievements for the Western Balkans that have strengthened the Euro-Atlantic sphere in the region.

The US role during the Trump administration is largely seen in Kosovo, as influenced by the EU's own shortcomings in advancing the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and the very fact that the Trump administration has had a different approach towards Europe where there has been a deep mistrust in cooperation with the EU. This situation had led to the appointment of a political representative from the White House, Ambassador Richard Grenell, and a career Foreign Service member from the State Department, Mathew Palmer, both responsible for the dialogue but who did not have much interaction and trust.² The American engagement during this period had led to a lack of coordination with the EU and resulted in a crisis in mediation by the EU but also inside Kosovo due to fragmented political spectrum and intense polarization vis-à-vis dialogue with Serbia most importantly. While part of the political spectrum was in favor of moving forward under American mediation albeit being led by Ambassador Grenell, on the other hand, it was the newly appointed Prime Minister Albin Kurti who rather preferred a dialogue within the framework of the EU. Kurti's Government was overthrown in March 2020, widely perceived in the public as a result by

1 Radio Free Europe. (2020, March 27). North Macedonia Officially Joins NATO. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/north-macedonia-officially-joins-nato/30513509.html>

2 Balkan Insight. (2019, October 4). Trump Appoints Another US Envoy to Balkans. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/04/trump-appoints-another-us-envoy-to-balkans/>

“Washington’s intervention”, amid his refusal to engage with Ambassador Grenell. Also, frequent government changes over a year have prolonged progress in the dialogue and the handling of domestic issues, including the challenge of the pandemic.

US Presidential Envoy Grenell called for 27th June 2020 a Summit at the White House in which Kosovo’s then President Hashim Thaçi and Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti would have to meet Serbian President Aleksander Vucici under US mediation. While the delegations were on their way to Washington, the Specialist Prosecutor’s Office (SPO) filed an indictment with the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) against Kosovo President Thaçi for war crimes for the time he was political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) during the war of 1999 against Serbia.³

A re-scheduled White House summit was held on September 4, 2020 resulting in the delegations of Kosovo and Serbia agreeing to what is commonly referred to as the “Washington commitments for economic normalization” as two separate commitment by Kosovo and Serbia. Although the goal of the summit was largely seen as an effort on the part of the United States to secure a mutual recognition agreement, Serbia did not agree on, but the Trump administration used the momentum to drive some of their agendas aimed at a greater American engagement in the region and decrease Russian and Chinese influence through the commitments that both parties accepted in energy, telecommunication and infrastructure projects.⁴ The Washington summit, with President Trump hosting the signing at the Oval Office, marked a significant shift in the approach of the United States towards the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia facilitated by the European Union since 2011, as the American officials had ‘lowkey’ participation and were seen as taking a ‘back-seat.’ But critics of the Richard Grenell-led process saw the timing of the White House meeting as part of President Trump’s re-election campaign.⁵ Despite criticism on the timing and the agreement to be used as a “trophy” in domestic US politics, the Washington meeting re-launched the Brussels led-process.⁶

Nearly a year after the Washington meeting, the political scene in the United States and Kosovo looks different, President Joe Biden was sworn in just a month before Albin Kurti, a staunch critic of the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was re-elected as Prime Minister in February of 2021. The momentum that the Washington Summit presented started to fade away. With a new political scene in Kosovo and in the US, the expectations for the new administration are high in Kosovo but also in other countries across the region where deadlock and uncertainty is the keyword in the political landscape.

³ Specialist Prosecutor’s Office. (2020, June 24). Press Statement. Available at: <https://www.scp-ks.org/en/press-statement>

⁴ Reuters. (2020, September 15). Trump lauds economic steps between Serbia and Kosovo. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-serbia-kosovo-int-idUSKBN25V2LX>

⁵ Interview, April 16, 2021.

⁶ European External Action Service. (2020, September 09). Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Joint Statement by President A.Vučić and Prime Minister A.Hoti ahead of their meeting in Brussels. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/84787/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-joint-statement-president-avučić-and-prime-minister-ahoti-ahead_en

BIDEN FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH

The Biden administration officials in most of their addresses have conveyed a message that the US will reengage with its allies and partners, giving Europe an assurance that a transatlantic partnership will be repaired and that the US and Europe will work together to address the challenges in Europe and beyond.⁷ The Biden administration's foreign policy appears to be focused on a number of key themes that will set forth traditional American values and principles, such as democracy, human rights, and free trade, and are engaged to work with allies and partners and have trust in multilateral institutions.⁸ Such a foreign policy seems reassuring to America's allies, but the challenges are greater more than ever. A more aggressive China is on the rise, the world faces a health crisis and a pandemic that has created significant economic challenges, while authoritarian trends are on the rise. This has led to many multilateral mechanisms being weak in addressing current challenges. Furthermore, it makes US foreign policy more challenged, and how much space the Western Balkans and Kosovo occupy in this mosaic of topics remains to be seen in the coming months, but at the last sign towards the region from Washington, there is a repositioning around some key principles that make up the Biden administration's overall foreign policy approach.

President Biden's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans and key issues in the region will be adapted to this broad global agenda aimed at restoring the American leadership of the international society. There is an understanding that in Washington there is an agreement that coordination with Europeans in the Western Balkans is essential to making progress in Western Balkans and that critical issues that are a challenge to democratization, economic development, and Euro-Atlantic integration must be addressed thoroughly.⁹ Following increased discussions for border changes in the region, which seems to be projected towards Bosnia and Herzegovina where the political situation is more fragile than anywhere in the region, the new administration has reaffirmed its stance against border changes in the Western Balkans, which represents a return to the pre-2017 consensus when this issue was a taboo and that the broad understanding was that the political order established in the region after the Yugoslav wars must be respected.¹⁰

The Biden administration will most likely need to balance between expectations on them, the reality in the region, and European slow engagement which has already damaged credibility in the region because of the stalemate in the enlargement process in Western Balkans. The administration has shown that its priorities in the Western Balkans will focus on addressing a number of issues that ensure the region to move forward, but also to adapt to new challenges, which are not the same as 20 years ago when the region was transitioning from war. Today, the challenges in the region have to do more with backsliding of democracy, the severe challenge of corruption and organized crime, and instability due to the inability to resolve

7 U.S. Department of State. (2021, March 03). A Foreign Policy for the American People. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>

8 Biden, Joe. 2020. Why America Must Lead Again-Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump. Foreign Affairs, March/April 2020, 99/2. pg.64-72.

9 Interview, April 21, 2021.

10 U.S. Department of State. (2021, April 26). U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>

and address the open political issues in the region, all of which make it impossible to move forward with European integration and economic development.

The recent actions of the Biden White House and State Department have shown that their approach is to address the essential issues that hold the Western Balkans in the deadlock. Many of the strategic issues in the region require cooperation with the Europeans, in order to accelerate the European integration process that should be associated with possible progress. It will be very difficult to make satisfactory progress if the Biden administration's approach does not find the necessary support in the European Union, and this necessitates greater progress and speed within the European Union to unblock the European integration process.

KOSOVO-SERBIA DEADLOCK

The dialogue for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia was the most highlighted issue from Western Balkans for the Trump administration. An active role is expected to be played by the Biden administration and the messages that have been sent so far by the new administration through letters from President Biden and Secretary Blinken to the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia express a readiness to address the key issue in the normalization process, that of mutual recognition.¹¹ President Trump became the first Western leader that demanded from Serbia the recognition of Kosovo officially, and today this policy is reconfirmed by President Biden, thus showing a bipartisan consensus in Washington on the recognition of Kosovo from Serbia. From the American point of view, Kosovo and Serbia should reach a permanent agreement that would address the open issues between the two countries which should be centered on mutual recognition.

The United States are a power in Europe, it is the engine that moves Europe on key international issues, and this has been the history of Kosovo over the past decades. But with the growing international challenges and the everchanging international scene, there was not a linear engagement by Washington. The Obama administration abounded Europe thus leaving Kosovo-Serbia dialogue mainly to the EU facilitation, while the Trump administration completely neglected Europe but engaged on Kosovo – allegedly for also internal political gains - and this impacted the dynamics in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. If the Biden administration is taken by words it wants to engage together with Europeans, but it must see the Kosovo-Serbia relationship as it is, the most delicate issue in the region and it needs the US role to be concluded successfully.

The approach set by the Biden administration for its foreign policy provides assurance that there will be a partnership with the EU in facilitating by supporting the EU-led process in the dialogue and that there will be continuity in the themes and principles formulated years ago. At a time when global challenges are great, the G7 at the meeting of foreign ministers in London had placed the Western Balkans and the importance of dialogue on one of the key issues. The G7 urged Kosovo and Serbia to engage constructively in negotiations in the framework of the EU-facilitated dialogue and to normalize fully their relations through a comprehensive and legally binding agreement, whereas voices calling for border changes in the region was fiercely opposed.¹²

The Biden Administration has given its support to the Washington Agreement on Economic Normalisation of September 2020, which brings it in contradiction with the statements of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, who has expressed opposition and reluctance to implement it.¹³ While there is room for many elements to be implemented, especially those related to investment projects, greater independence from Russia in the energy sector and

11 VOA. (2021, February 24). By Weighing In on Long-running Serbia-Kosovo Dispute, Biden Signals Interest in Europe. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/usa/weighing-long-running-serbia-kosovo-dispute-biden-signals-interest-europe>

12 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. (2021, May 05). G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting: Communiqué, London, 5 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-may-2021-communication/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-communication-london-5-may-2021>

13 U.S. Department of State. (2021, April 26). U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>

from China in the 5G network, the Kosovo government needs to find a common language on topics related to its international integration, specifically the process of recognition and membership in international organizations. During the Obama Administration, there was support for dialogue but also for Kosovo's membership in international organizations and recognition of its statehood by third countries where there have been dozens of results. Such compliance must be found again before the one-year period expires in September on the moratorium to not apply in the international organizations (Kosovo) and not engage in the de-recognition process (Serbia). Otherwise, putting an indefinite moratorium on Kosovo's foreign policy does not go in Kosovo's nor US interests itself as it gives Belgrade a veto right over Kosovo's integration in the international community.

On the other hand, ways must be found to prevent Belgrade from withdrawing the recognition of Kosovo, and the best form is the policy of US and EU sanctions because the position of third countries should not be a hostage to Belgrade resistance to come to terms with Kosovo. The reluctance of the EU and the US during 2017-2019 to properly address the derecognition campaign of Serbia led to the situation that Kosovo had to impose trade tariffs on Serbia as the last sort of reaction towards what is seen in Kosovo as a direct attack on its independence and sovereignty by Serbia.¹⁴ There's a need to understand how US and the EU can influence Serbia and its actions.

With respect to the role of the United States in the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, the Biden administration seems to be focused on returning to the support role for the EU it had embraced during the Obama administration. At that time the logic behind this formula was that Kosovo should not be a topic where countries like Russia seek involvement, which has been Belgrade's insistence for some time.¹⁵ This has enabled the Obama administration to engage in other regions and the Western Balkans issues to be within the Euro-Atlantic framework where the problems should be resolved. Yet, this does not reflect the present. European enlargement has stalled in the region, there is not much support within the EU for the enlargement policy, while in Kosovo the frustration of not allowing free movement in the Schengen area despite meeting all the criteria severely discredited the EU's credibility. This seems to be the reason why, as long as the EU is supported in its role, it is also reminded in the communiqués of the G7 and the State Department that enlargement policy remains an essential carrot to make progress in the region. US officials themselves have on many occasions lobbied European capitals to grant visa liberalization for Kosovo or on the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.¹⁶

The Biden administration can play a supportive role to the EU in the dialogue process. The various messages conveyed to Pristina and Belgrade are proof of such readiness. But that will not be enough to move forward. It seems very unlikely that much attention will be paid to the issue of Kosovo from the highest level of administration, and unlikely to the Trump Administration, it is not clear whether there will be a Special Envoy appointed, which remains to be seen later because the appointment and confirmation of senior officials have been slowly in Washington. But currently, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue doesn't occupy even the top foreign policy issues of the highest level in Washington.¹⁷ A Special Envoy would be an important intervention by Washington to assist the EU in facilitating the dialogue and undertake direct diplomacy with Kosovo and Serbia on issues and in moments where EU stalls, but it is very

14 Visoka. Gëzim. (2018, December 12). Nga çnjohja në vetënjohje. Sbunker. Available at: <https://sbunker.net/osf-alumni/89803/nga-cnjohja-ne-vetenjohje/>

15 Interview, May 04, 2021.

16 Interview, May 04, 2021.

17 Interview, May 01, 2021.

likely that the appointment of such an Envoy will be affected by the willingness of both parties to engage or not in the dialogue and come to terms with an agreement. The EU Special Envoy Miroslav Lajčák was accompanied by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer in his recent visit to Pristina and Belgrade, which can help especially in Kosovo, where US leadership has influence and it can confront the stagnation, otherwise, the EU alone will not be a capable foreign policy powerhouse and capable to exercise influence.¹⁸ The recent joint visit by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Matthew Palmer and the European Union Representative for Dialogue, Miroslav Lajčák, has reminded Kosovo and Serbia that there's joint coordination between the US and EU on the dialogue.

The responsibility is with Kosovo to be vocal in articulating its expectations and goals having in mind that it is the main subject in the dialogue. While it is almost beyond reasonable doubt that Serbia has no interest in reaching an agreement with Kosovo in the near future, Kosovo itself needs to change its narrative towards the dialogue. As long as there are messages of support from the US and the EU for resumption of the dialogue, Kosovo should line up in this direction. The Government of Kosovo should formulate clear policies that make it a partner in the dialogue, and avoid situations in which it can be blamed for blocking or failing the dialogue process. There are some voices in the EU thinking that the dialogue should come to a conclusion, even with the idea that it may be considered failed, and clarify which side is to blame and which one was cooperative.¹⁹ At the same time, there is an increasing tendency among some EU member states that Serbia should not be held hostage in the EU integration process because of Kosovo if the latter is the cause of the blockade or failure in the dialogue.²⁰ This situation doesn't suit Kosovo and a more creative strategy should be applied by Kosovo's Government in the dialogue process.

A great impetus to an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia would be the moves towards greater regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans, if it is utilized properly by Washington and Brussels, where the countries of the region would have a common market. As an economic idea, this can help the region for more openness for investment and trade, but this idea should be turned into a new political momentum for the region and the EU, to be used as a model for EU membership en bloc. Such a view is being echoed by Kosovo's government that aims to benefit from a potential common market modeled on the current EFTA-EEA Agreement to move to EU membership en bloc while preparing the economies and undertaking political and legal reforms.²¹ The reality is that it takes political courage to find a way to advance European integration, and the models and practices so far have shown to be ineffective and slow due to the excessive bureaucracy that has been installed in the process by the EU member states themselves in order to slow down integration. This model could also be a creative option to address a potential agreement between Kosovo and Serbia and providing the necessary carrots to the parties for possible progress. But the establishment of a common regional market where there is no mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia and no connection to the European integration process where all parties could enter the EU together would only further complicate the situation in the region and offers no solution. The Kosovo government has rightly shown reluctance because they would hold Kosovo hostage and the common market would not be effective without addressing political problems.

18 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). (2021, June 01). Top U.S., EU Envoys Tell Kosovo That Better Ties With Serbia Will Open Door To Europe. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-kosovo-normalization-palmer-lajcak/31284455.html>

19 Interview, April 22, 2021.

20 Interview, April 22, 2021.

21 Kosovo Prime-Minister Office. (2021, June 10). Prime Minister Kurti at the Tirana Summit: Kosovo cannot engage in initiatives that are adapted to deny it citizenship, we will engage only as equals. Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/speech-of-prime-minister-kurti-in-tirana-at-the-summit-of-the-six-western-balkans-states-2/>

The new administration, because of the long experience of Joe Biden with Kosovo, and his engagement in the region for over three decades, make the next period crucial for Kosovo to reach a final agreement in the dialogue with Serbia. The geopolitical outlook in the world is not on Kosovo's side. It is a crucial moment that, under European facilitation and American support, to come to conclusion on the key issue that keeps hostage today regional cooperation and the progress of both Kosovo and Serbia towards European integration.

Above all, it is necessary to understand the position of Kosovo, that in the current circumstances the maximum it can achieve is to unblock the NATO membership process and obtain candidate the status by the EU by reaching an agreement with Serbia and as a result, the recognition from 5 EU member states: hence the US leadership and its assurances are essential in NATO. The dialogue will unlikely offer Kosovo a seat in the UN, at least not immediately, due to the Russian and potentially Chinese veto threats. Yet, an agreement could facilitate international recognition of Kosovo and membership in all international organizations where Russia and China have no veto rights. The US relations with Russia and China will affect Kosovo's path to the UN undoubtedly. But there are benefits for both countries from the dialogue that needs to be communicated by Washington and Brussels to Kosovo and Serbia.

A blockade on both countries' path to the EU, and to Kosovo's path to NATO (as it stands now), implies daunting consequences in internal areas such as economic development, the rule of law, and the migration of young people, but more than that this goes to the benefit of Russia and its proxies in the region. At the same time, it is essential that in addition to opposing border changes in the region, the Biden administration transmits clear messages that what Kosovo has agreed with the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (Ahtisaari Plan) is the final compromise by Kosovo and that any agreement must be made within that framework. Otherwise, opening up the Ahtisaari Plan endangers the functioning of the state of Kosovo and its stability in long term. A dysfunctional Kosovo would not be the right response to the current stagnation. Both are dangerous for the future of Kosovo and of the region.

But there's a need for a serious discussion between Kosovo and United States and European partners on the way forward if the dialogue doesn't produce any result or it continues to stall. The risk of frozen conflict is serious and dangerous, thus there's a need for a plan B. There must be an interim goal that prevents Kosovo's isolation. Dialogue is important, but a stalemate in the dialogue cannot overtake the importance of the integration of Kosovo in the international community. Kosovo has been mostly harmed in the last years from the stalemate in the dialogue process, that's why this situation cannot continue endlessly. Thus, it is strategically important for the United States and European Union together with Kosovo's government to come up with a plan B if dialogue cannot come to a conclusion, but this will definitely require from Kosovo's government also a concrete and realistic strategy how to integrate the Serbian community living in Kosovo, especially in the northern municipalities of Kosovo.

THE BOSNIAN KNOT

Bosnia and Herzegovina have been struggling with ensuring the effective functioning of the state system because of the way the political system was built by the Dayton Peace Accords. The Dayton agreement was indeed preoccupied with halting war and not avoiding features leading to dysfunctionality. Most recently, in BiH nationalist rhetoric between communities are at its peak and the Republika Srpska secessionist tendencies are growing under the leadership of Milorad Dodik. BiH is currently not in a position to respond to the needs of its citizens and democracy is severely stifled by the ethnic divisions in the political system, with the most affected being minorities not belonging to the three large communities: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. At the same time, the deep interethnic and political polarization has caused institutional deadlocks at the central and local levels. Solving these political challenges that hold the country's economic progress and integration into NATO and the EU hostage will not be able to be overcome quickly and without intervention in the political system itself. But this remains hostage to the veto of the three main communities in the country.

Unlike Kosovo where there is a set structure of international engagement to address issues with Serbia, in BiH, there is no special attention from the EU nor was it by the US during the Trump era. The institution of the International High Representative is seen as relevant, but in practice, the IHR has been drawn to a role of an observer despite still being vested with the power to influence directly the decision-making processes in the country. Bosnia is a challenging node to be addressed. The challenges facing the country, apart from those of domestic politics, also are affected by the new geopolitics of the Balkans, where there is an increase in the Russian engagement in Republika Srpska, and which seems to be the key obstacle to the West in any reform effort in BiH.

BiH has been receiving more attention from the West, as a result of the increasingly divisive rhetoric as well as actions by the nationalists such as Milorad Dodik, the Serb Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to this, the appointment of Christian Schmidt from Germany as the new International High Representative and the circulation of the so-called "Slovenian non-paper" – which was denied by Slovenia as the source of this document – that called for a change of borders in the Western Balkans, shows there is a renewed interest by the international community on possible scenarios on the future of the BiH.²² The appointment of the new International High Representative has sparked controversy in Bosnia, largely due to the risks that Republika Srpska with the support of Belgrade and Moscow will concoct a crisis to test Schmidt's ability and willingness to act against those who obstruct Dayton Accord. Critics rightly argue that the outgoing IHR Valentin Inzko who has been in office for more than a decade has not been a problem to its mandate or lacked willingness to act, but he lacks the political will and support from the International Community to use the political power of the Office of the International High Representative within the Bosnian political system to address obstacles from Banja Luka.²³

22 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). (2021, April 29). The 'Phantom Papers' That No One In The Western Balkans Will Own Up To Writing. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/non-papers-phantom-brussels-kosovo-serbia-bosnia-slovenia/31229431.html>

23 Sevdik, Senad. (2021, April 07). Germany's High Representative Candidate in BiH, Christian Schmidt, and his possible use of Bonn powers. Center for Eurasian Studies. Available at: <https://avim.org.tr/Blog/GERMANY-S-HIGH-REPRESENTATIVE-CANDI->

Despite criticism towards Christian Schmidt in BiH, the G7, including the United States, have backed his nomination.²⁴ Not just on the Bosnian side has been opposition to Schmidt's appointment²⁵, opposition voices have also come from Republika Srpska calling for the closure of the Office of the International High Representative.²⁶ The reason why there is an opposition to the international presence in the Republika Srpska part is mainly related to the mandate that this Office enjoys to intervene in the situations when the Dayton agreement is challenged, and the challenge to Dayton today comes mainly from Milorad Dodik and his secessionist tendencies, who frequently in recent months is applying the term "peaceful partition of BiH", which elicits a return to the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of the 1990s by Bosnian Serbs leaders.²⁷ Dodik is considering that the appointment of the new International High Representative is contrary to Dayton Accords itself, which seeks the agreement of the two entities in BiH, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on which he and the Republika Srpska parliament have warned that will challenge the appointment. Such a challenge is not just a challenge to a nomination of an individual, but the first challenge that may come from Dodik to BiH's unity and the political order established by Dayton, no matter how much dysfunctional, it has served to maintain peace between the large ethnic groups in the country. The ability of the new International High Representative to extend his influence and authority will depend very much on US support, and such support will be vital for the future of BiH.

There are clear signs that indicate a much more direct American involvement in BiH aiming to push forward constitutional reforms and safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has sent a clear message to the BiH tripartite Presidency that limited constitutional reforms are needed for the future of the country, but compared to the past, the US government does not seem to be interested in drastic reforms, but some actions that make BiH a more functional state than it is now.²⁸ Reforms that aim to make BiH more centralized will not be supported by the Serbs, while more decentralization to the two entities without more democratization of BiH and installment of a more civic rather than ethnic oriented political elite will not help to address BiH challenges.²⁹ Washington remains to be more clear on its goal in BiH and ensure broader support, including that Serbia and Croatia become more constructive in the Bosnian affairs. The first challenge is to ensure Schmidt takes office and will be supportive to a US-led constitutional reform effort, that could eventually ensure a smooth 2022 general elections, that are threatened by Serb and Croat hardliners to be boycotted. Bosnia like Kosovo will be a crucial test for US-EU coordination in the Western Balkans.

[DATE-IN-BIH-CHRISTIAN-SCHMIDT-AND-HIS-POSSIBLE-USE-OF-BONN-POWERS-07-04-2021?](#)

24 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. (2021, May 05). G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting: Communiqué, London, 5 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-may-2021-communicue/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-communicue-london-5-may-2021>

25 Interview, April 29, 2021.

26 Balkan Insight. (2021, March 01). Bosnian Serb Parliament Says 'No' to New High Representative. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/10/bosnian-serb-parliament-says-no-to-new-high-representative/>

27 Balkan Insight. (2021, March 01). Bosnian Serb Parliament Says 'No' to New High Representative. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/10/bosnian-serb-parliament-says-no-to-new-high-representative/>

28 TRT World. (2021, April 01). US calls for changes to Bosnia's constitution. Available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/europe/us-calls-for-changes-to-bosnia-s-constitution-45528>

29 Interview, April 14, 2021.

RUSSIA AND CHINA IN WESTERN BALKANS

Today the environment in the region is more challenged by malign actors than ever before. Chinese and Russian influence in the Western Balkans has increased since President Biden was part of the administration of President Obama. Many factors have contributed to this, political but also economic backsliding in the region, especially with the underestimation of Chinese influence that only in recent years during the Trump administration has begun to be understood differently in the world and Western Balkans in more specific. If Russia is the bad weather for the region, then China is the climate change, both are a spoiler to the current political and economic order.

Russia continues to be a more directly political and security threat to the region through its influence in Serbia and in the entity of Republika Srpska in all sectors, and its actions in recent years, including the 2016 coup in Montenegro, obstructing Kosovo's international integration, or even interference to oppose North Macedonia's membership in NATO.³⁰ These actions have been to challenge the American leadership in the region, but also the integration of these countries in the EU. It is in Russia's own interest the region to stagnate, and it is the only actor that can benefit from the lack of settlement in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, the holding of Bosnia's future hostage and the growing authoritarianism in Serbia. In these three countries, Russia sees an area that should be left out of NATO, while Serbia has no such intentions to join, in Kosovo and partly in BiH there is high support for membership, and Russian actions will be to prevent a further NATO expansion in the region.³¹ That's why addressing political issues in the region by the Biden administration must be linked with offering a clear membership perspective in NATO for Kosovo and BiH.

Chinese engagement in the region differs from that of Russia, but they are not exceptional in purpose. While Russia's role is very limited in the economy and mainly in Serbia and Republika Srpska, and greater through political and security interferences, China's role is mostly in the region's economy and vital infrastructure. The Biden administration's policy toward Chinese engagement in the region will be heavily influenced by Washington's overall approach towards the Chinese's role in the world. Washington intends to work with allies in Europe and beyond to oppose the growing role of China and to compete strategically with China, which would limit its influence in many regions, including the Balkans.³² The Strategic Competition Act of 2021 a Senate bipartisan initiative doesn't have any specific reference to the Western Balkans, but addresses issues of partnership with Europe within key themes within Europe that would limit Chinese influence.³³

China's role in the region has increased significantly in Serbia, where from China's perspective Serbia today represents its closest ally in Europe, while with other countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and BiH it has involvement in various economic and infrastructure projects. But the engagement in the Balkans are not as a unified regional

³⁰ Haddad, Aya-Nay. (2021, April 19). The Western Balkans: China and Russia Steal a March. Center for European Policy Analysis-CEPA. Available at: <https://cepa.org/the-western-balkans-china-and-russia-steal-a-march/>

³¹ Interview, May 07, 2021.

³² Interview, May 07, 2021.

³³ U.S. Congress. (2021, May 07). A Bill to address issues involving the People's Republic of China. Available at: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DAV21598%20-%20Strategic%20Competition%20Act%20of%202021.pdf>

platform, but more at the bilateral level and in some ways also through the 17+1 initiative between Central Europe and China. For China the Western Balkans are important because of their proximity to the EU and can serve as an important trade hub.³⁴ For both the United States and EU, China will be a strategic and systematic rival in the Western Balkans, aiming to see the region as an enclave in Europe, where it continue to grow its presence.³⁵

The Chinese debt crisis in Montenegro has shown that Chinese financing is not only unhealthy for economic and political sustainability but also for the budget of the countries in the region. In many cases, projects that have been announced in cooperation with China by regional governments have not been implemented, or in some others have provoked local opposition. During the Trump administration, the Development Finance Corporation showed interest in the region, which was also part of Washington's Economic Normalisation Agreement. The same commitments have had a strategic element aiming to remove the region away from the Russian gas and energy network and keep the Chinese 5g network away from Kosovo and Serbia and other countries through the clean network policy.³⁶

The Western Balkans are part and a target of the Belt and Road Initiative, and Washington must see the DFC as a key rival together with EU economic programs to oust Chinese influence in the region's economies and infrastructure projects,³⁷ closing the developmental gap between the region and the EU is a crucial step to approximate the region's economies with the EU and keep China away. Recently Kosovo and Serbia as part of the Washington Agreement have signed with the US Investment Incentive Agreements, and DFC goals will be broad in expanding US investments in different areas that support economic growth.³⁸ The region will be part of the strategic rivalry between the US and China, while developments between the two countries as in Taiwan, may affect China's attitude towards Kosovo, which still does not recognize the independence and along with Russia is obstacles for Kosovo to move towards the UN. In this sense the political and economic impact of rivalry is inevitable and actions in the regions are expected to address US concerns about China as the administration is expected to publish a broader strategy towards China in the coming months.³⁹

34 Zweers, Wouter et al. (2020, August). China and the EU in the Western Balkans A zero-sum game?. Clingendael Report. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans.pdf>

35 Mardell, Jacob. (2020, January 23). China's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Bertelsmann Stiftung. Available at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/germany-and-asia/news/asia-policy-brief-chinas-economic-footprint-in-the-western-balkans>

36 Maksimović, Sandra. (2020, September 17). What did Serbia and Kosovo sign in Washington?. European Western Balkans. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/09/17/what-did-serbia-and-kosovo-sign-in-washington/>

37 Interview, May 09, 2021.

38 VOA. (2021, May 12). Serbia, Kosovo, Greece Express Hope for Sustained Interest, Investment Through US Agency. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/serbia-kosovo-greece-express-hope-sustained-interest-investment-through-us-agency>

39 Interview, May 09, 2021.

DEMOCRATIC AGENDA IN WESTERN BALKANS

President Biden is clear on its goal that a greater focus on addressing the challenges to democracy and empowering democracies is needed to halt the growth of China and autocratic countries and to restore confidence to the liberal-democratic system. The challenges and problems in the Western Balkans region are such that they align with the priorities of the administration. The lack of action against them creates space for greater influence and presence of China and malign actors to get involved in the region. Corruption, autocratic tendencies, and the lack of progress in the rule of law make the Western Balkans suitable for third-actors involvement. In this sense, the announcement of a new executive order by the White House to use the instrument of sanctioning individuals who are involved in corruption, challenge law and order and peace agreements, represents the new roadmap of US foreign policy in the region centered on democratic values.⁴⁰ Corruption presents in the view of the Biden administration a national security threat, and the kleptocratic elites in Bosnia are a good example of the negative impact in the future of the country that is disintegrating in the doorstep of Europe as Ischinger points out rightly.⁴¹

The Western Balkans have seen in recent years a been backsliding in democracy and rule of law in several countries, such as Serbia where the autocratic rule is strong in which the multi-party system is endangered. On the other hand, some progress has been made in terms of democratization, for example, in Kosovo which showed resilience in electoral democracy in the region, holding in less than 2 years two parliamentary elections in accordance with the highest international standards that have ensured a smooth transfer of power and recognition of results.⁴² A greater focus on the state of democracy in the region will be an important impetus to advance Euro-Atlantic integration. There can be no detachment from resolving political issues in the region from the state of democracy, fighting corruption, and of rule of law. In addition to the traditional challenges it has faced in democratizing the countries of the Western Balkans, the pandemic has caused a step back in different indicators for all countries without exception.

A stronger commitment and support to democracy is needed to respond to challenges countries face. In its priorities, it has enforced foreign policy actions for more democracy in the world and multilateral cooperation to support countries in addressing the challenges they face in their journey to be free, democratic, and pluralistic societies. Such commitment to the Western Balkans is emphasized by the Department of State in its different communications bilaterally through the different letters both President Biden and Secretary Blinken have sent to their counterparts or the statements issues including that of the G7. The Western Balkans will be invited at the planned Summit for Democracy as a high-level gathering under the auspice of President Biden, but due to the pandemic the date has not been set, yet.⁴³

40 The White House. (2021, June 08). Executive Order on Blocking Property And Suspending Entry Into The United States Of Certain Persons Contributing To The Destabilizing Situation In The Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/08/executive-order-on-blocking-property-and-suspending-entry-into-the-unit-ed-states-of-certain-persons-contributing-to-the-destabilizing-situation-in-the-western-balkans/>

41 Ischinger, Wolfgang. (2021, May 14). Fight Corruption! – Op-ed by Ischinger for Handelsblatt. Available at: <https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/ischinger-corruption-handelsblatt/>

42 National Democratic Institute. (2021, April 29). Kosovo: Post- Election Analysis of February 2021 Parliamentary Elections. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/kosovo-post-election-analysis-february-2021-parliamentary-elections>

43 Interview, May 09, 2021.

The current state of democracy in the region has been influenced by many factors mostly domestic, but most importantly by the slowdown in the European integration process has lacked conditionality for reforms and moving forward, because there is a deadlock in the enlargement policy in the US. In Western Balkans the stick has remained, the carrots have been less, thus the approach has not been changed. While there remain to be more linkages between democratization and of rule of law with progress in European integration, that is currently blocked by divisions within the EU, an American role like in Albania to push forward deep reforms in the rule law and other sectors can turn to be more effective in the region. The fight against corruption and rule of law based agenda that aims to strengthen democracy can be a Trans-Atlantic partnership instrument in the Western Balkans. Actions such as against former Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha, who along with his family have been publicly designated as persona non-grata by the State Department for corrupt acts and undermining democracy in Albania, may turn into the most effective action to be taken to move forward on deep reforms in the region but also to send messages to institutions across the Western Balkans for actions against corruption and organized crime.⁴⁴ This action has been enforced by the newly adopted Executive Order that aims to tackle corruption and other challenges that hinder the region, presenting a recognition of the current obstacles in the region and the executive order in itself presents a clear roadmap for actions.⁴⁵

The region will not be able to push for deeper reform and democratization without external incitement, and President Biden's agenda to fight corruption, counter authoritarian tendencies around the world, strengthen election security, and respect of human rights, presents a proper platform to ensure progress in the region. Confronting the challenges of countries in the region that are backsliding, is needed. The democratic agenda of the Biden administration offers an opportunity to counter high-level corruption in Western Balkans and would be supportive to the goals for addressing the outstanding bilateral and domestic issues but also counter the malign influence of malign actors that do apply strategic corruption and different forms of supporting organized crimes which is a very essential part of the political economy of the region.⁴⁶ A foreign policy centered on values in the region is the right way to make progress.

One challenge that the region is facing and multilateral efforts are lacking is the empowerment of the media and efforts to combat disinformation, an area in which the countries of the region do not have the capacity to deal with on their own without a stronger commitment as is the case in the Baltic states and other regions in Europe. It's unclear if the Biden administration will focus energy and resources on countering disinformation in the Western Balkans as a separate goal or part of efforts on election security, but the experience of last years shows that no progress can be made on key issues without tackling the challenge of disinformation, and as the malign activities have even hurt the US democracy, the Western Balkans are very vulnerable, thus affecting the quality of democracy in the region. The region will not be able to have strong democratization unless the security and political challenges are seen as interconnected and the stick and carrot policy is applied to ensure that the long path to the liberal democratic model is successful.

44 U.S. Department of State. (2021, May 19). Public Designation of Albanian Sali Berisha Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-albanian-sali-berisha-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>

45 Joseph, Edward P. (2021, June 11). Biden's Balkans Test Has Arrived. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/11/bidens-balkans-test-has-arrived/>

46 Maliqi, Agon et al. (2020). Transition to What? Western Balkans democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium. Sbunker. Available at: <https://sbunker.net/uploads/sbunker.net/files/2020/December/04/Transition-to-what-Western-Balkans-democracies-in-a-state-of-iliberal-equilibrium1607078207.pdf>

ENERGY SECURITY IN THE REGION

Energy security in the Western Balkans will be a strategic goal during the Biden administration. It will be a priority to counter the Russian energy presence in the region by supporting alternative projects and pushing regional governments to design new energy policies, through diversification and clean energy development.⁴⁷ Greece is becoming the main energy hub for Western Balkans, where the US is supporting the Alexandroupolis Independent Natural Gas System and the Interconnector Greece Bulgaria (IGB) pipeline, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), South Kavala underground gas storage and renewables.⁴⁸ The Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) remains the most strategic energy project for the US in the region that connects already Albania and is planned to be connected to North Macedonia and Kosovo, and can counter Russian Turkstream which is seen as a direct threat to US energy interests in the region and already under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act (PEESA) is under sanctions.⁴⁹ Serbia and BiH are connected to Turkstream now, thus Russian gas is flowing into these two countries.

US-backed projects in the region will rival Russian-backed projects, and the strategic goal is to limit Russia's presence in the Western Balkans energy network, creating more independence for these countries and diversifying energy access for them. More than this it will serve also the overall goals to ensure more energy independence in Europe from Russia. In Kosovo which is not yet connected to any gas pipeline and still its energy resources are from coal and very limited renewable energy sources, the United States is supporting through the Millennium Challenge Corporation a Gas Sector Development Project that aims to give Kosovo access to efficient thermal energy option and support the energy transition.⁵⁰ There are already discussions initiated last year between Kosovo's government and the US and other parties to study the potential to connect through North Macedonia to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the construction of a Gas-fired power plant.⁵¹ But these energy projects would make a change in Kosovo's energy network together with the operationalization of the power grid between Kosovo and Albania, which has given the country full independence from the Serbian energy network. The MCC and DFC financing instruments will play an important role in Kosovo's energy future. This seems will link American political engagement to an economic incentives program, where now more agreed-upon programs can be better utilized in the future with political goals throughout the region not just in Kosovo.

Kosovo's challenges in the energy sector will be immense in the coming years. The main energy resource has been and remains coal and the whole discussion about the energy sector in Kosovo has been focused on the use of coal for energy production. In efforts to tackle

47 U.S. Department of State. (2021, April 26). U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>

48 New Europe.(2020, August 21). US, Greece to expand energy cooperation. Available at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/us-greece-to-expand-energy-cooperation/>

49 U.S. Department of State. (2021, April 09). Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act (PEESA), as Amended. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/protecting-europes-energy-security-act-peesa/>

50 Millennium Challenge Corporation. (2019, October 02). Congressional Notification. Available at: <https://assets.mcc.gov/content/uploads/Final-Kosovo-Compact-609g-CN-Tranche-II.pdf>

51 Interview, May 09, 2021.

climate change, G7 leaders have agreed to stop funding for coal-fired power stations, which will definitely affect Kosovo, that will have fewer financial options available to move forward with a future power plant project.⁵² In the past, the coal-fired power project “Kosovo C” has not passed without objections and after more than a decade of procedures and work the project has failed, creating a deep gap in energy production capacity in Kosovo. This makes a strategic debate about the country's energy future inevitable, where projects such as gas pipelines, which are also of geopolitical importance, will find a place. Kosovo's government has already stressed their focus be on clean energy, secure supply, and affordable prices but also showing the intention to ensure a national consensus on the necessary energy policies.⁵³

It is essential besides the discussion about the energy source to have a focus on the necessary infrastructure and its security. This ensures not only addressing energy challenges but also opens up opportunities for investments in critical infrastructure and creating new jobs. At the same time, the energy debate in Kosovo is essential to have in focus the options that are available and to ensure Kosovo's energy independence from the countries and projects that are not from the Euro-Atlantic sphere.

52 Reuters. (2021, May 21). In climate push, G7 agrees to stop international funding for coal. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/g7-countries-agree-stop-funding-coal-fired-power-2021-05-21/>

53 Kosovo Prime-Minister Office. (2021, May 05). Prime Minister Kurti meets the acting Chief Executive Officer of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Mahmoud Bah. Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/prime-minister-kurti-meets-the-acting-chief-executive-officer-of-the-millennium-challenge-corporation-mahmoud-bah/>

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE IN WESTERN BALKANS

The pandemic has posed a challenge to all countries in the region, where the economic impact and management of the pandemic to the provision of vaccines have challenged governments throughout Western Balkans. Vaccination has become an essential issue for any government. The effectiveness of governments and their political stability also depends on the provision of vaccines. In addition to pandemic-related health issues, this has led to an increased competition from different countries and actors to increase their influence in the region and provide access to aid and vaccines. The countries of the region have not cooperated in accessing jointly vaccines or addressing the challenges of the pandemic, on the contrary, perhaps the pandemic has shown how ineffective regional cooperation structures have been in a time of crisis for the whole region. Regional initiatives have been lacking, there has been more nationalization on the surface, while the only occasions when any regional action has been shown have been at the instigation of the EU or in limited cases the US.

At the same time, in addition to individual actions by countries in the region, some countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia or BiH have had high hopes for access to COVAX programs and EU donations, which have proved to be delaying and insufficient in numbers to provide enough vaccines. Today in the region there is a different mosaic of access to vaccines. Many countries such as Serbia have used Russian and Chinese produced vaccines, with other countries such as Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, and BiH taking a similar approach, except Kosovo. The vaccination mosaic is also shown in the vaccination number in addition to that of the vaccine origin, while in late of June progress is being made in access.

The Biden administration has announced a plan by which many countries will benefit from vaccines distribution by the US in which Kosovo from Western Balkans was included among the first countries,⁵⁴ while through G7 a more ambitious plan has been presented to offer 1 billion vaccines to Covax program, through which vaccines will be distributed to provide greater access, but also to counter the Chinese and Russian competition for vaccine distribution.⁵⁵ Such a move would increase vaccination capacity around the region, mostly in countries that have less access currently, but would also raise the American image in the region and the world, from an isolationist America during the Trump administration to a more open and cooperative America during the Biden administration, certainly offering new opportunities for actions on political difficulties.

54 The White House, (2021, June 03). FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Unveils Strategy for Global Vaccine Sharing, Announcing Allocation Plan for the First 25 Million Doses to be Shared Globally. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/03/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-unveils-strategy-for-global-vaccine-sharing-announcing-allocation-plan-for-the-first-25-million-doses-to-be-shared-globally/>

55 Reuters. (2021, June 13). G7 agrees 1 billion COVID vaccine donation - communique. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/g7-provides-1-billion-covid-vaccine-doses-will-work-give-more-communique-2021-06-13/>

CONCLUSIONS

Given Joe Biden's experience in the Western Balkans, the expectations are high that his administration will address the key political, economic, and security issues in the region. As it seems the expectations will not translate to immediate results, because of the pandemic, the decrease of US and European primacy in the region, and lack of actions from the EU on the enlargement process. The Biden administration faces challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans to close outstanding bilateral disputes and domestic challenges that are holding the region in status quo and providing chances for malign actors to penetrate.

The key issue remains to break Kosovo out of isolation and make progress in its international integration. This will require more coordination and joint-actions by Washington and Brussels and not lonely efforts, but with a clear agenda and time frame. It is very unlikely that Kosovo and Serbia will make progress in the dialogue soon, but Washington needs to help both sides, and especially Kosovo, to unblock the international and European isolation. Further delays will only draw away parties from the process, which already lacks credibility in Kosovo, and hold the societies hostage. While a hard issue to be resolved remains Bosnia and Herzegovina, maintaining a united BiH and safeguarding its territorial integrity and sovereignty is crucial for stability and peace in the region. Washington has the ability and power to oppose the secessionist tendencies and move on some constitutional reforms that would make the country more functioning. The current deadlock and unstable situation in BiH make it an easy target for Russian involvement to destabilize the region.

In addition to a need for clear policy on the traditional challenges, times have changed and clarity is required on topics essential to the region's future. How successful the Biden administration will be in the region by addressing these challenges depends very much on whether a transatlantic consensus can be reached that the prospect of NATO membership for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be open and whether the EU manages to break the deadlock over enlargement.

The coming years may be strategic in providing a more dynamic perspective for the region, while an inability to pull the region out of the current state of stagnation and a failure to close the outstanding bilateral disputes that aggravate political relations in the region, jeopardises the strategic goals of the United States and the EU. This requires linking the political engagement with an economic recovery agenda, thus highlighting the fight against corruption, strengthening of democratic institutions and multiethnic societies.

Aside from these key political issues, the Biden administration offer opportunities to work with the countries in the region to ensure stronger energy security and access to more diversification of the energy sector that would be helpful to the economies, but also supporting the economic recovery by decreasing Chinese and Russian penetration in key infrastructure and economic .

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