

THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS DURING TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY: TRAJECTORIES AND RECENT CHANGES

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The news about Donald Trump winning the presidential elections in the USA and becoming the 45th American president came as a surprise to the whole international public, as well as to the countries of the Western Balkans, which observed the presidential transition with mixed hopes. Many practitioners and observers from the Western Balkans expressed their expectations that this outcome would cause changes in the US foreign policy positions towards this region. This article aims to examine the place of the Western Balkans (WB) in the first two years of Trump's mandate and trace the (potential) deviations of the American Western Balkans policy matrix. The research consists of an analysis of political and diplomatic official public discourses, as well as studies exploring the nature of the US political and security requests imposed to the Western Balkan states. The long-term element of the US WB policy is a hegemonic position in its relations with small WB countries – with rulemaking and imposing key principles in their political and security interactions. Authors argue that David Lake's security relations models offered in his works on anarchy and hierarchy in international relations are a proper theoretical framework for observation of such asymmetric relations. Considering the security relations between the great powers and small, weak countries, David Lake outlines several types of their relations through alliance, protectorate, informal and formal version of an empire. American influence on the security of Western Balkans countries has elements of the protectorate and informal empire relations, so it could be best described as a hybrid relationship, relying on Lake's terminology. The results indicated that since Trump's arrival as President, there has been a change in the established matrix of the US foreign policy towards the Western Balkans. Although the change is most visible in the field of public discourse, the flexibility with which Trump's administration treats some of the urgent security issues in the region is evident. Considering the direction of Trump's foreign policy and his forthcoming successor, whether through elections or by impeachment, certain actors from the Western

Balkans have obtained a more independent position in their relations with the United States, temporarily deviating the patterns of behavior described in Lake's models.

Key words: *United States, foreign policy, Western Balkans, security*

INTRODUCTORY AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The influence of the great powers on weaker states can be perceived through various theoretical lenses, one of them representing realism as one of the oldest schools in international relations. In the light of recent global events, the contemporary crisis of liberal institutionalism calls for a more realistic approach towards newly arisen issues in the international politics, in order to better understand them. Since the general theme of the conference is state-centric, the theoretical approach of our work is duly adapted. The theoretical foundation of our paper is based upon the David's Lake conception of hierarchy in international relations. Bearing in mind that the title of this paper highlights the security and political aspects of American foreign policy towards the Balkans, during Trump's presidency, it underlines the main axial concept of Lake's theory. Considering the elements that influence the relations among states, which also determine the state's security dimension, selecting Lake's theory of hierarchical world order comes as a natural choice, upon which we can build the theoretical foundation of our work.

Before we can truly understand Lake's theoretical approach, it is of outmost importance that we undertake a thorough operationalization of the terms that are used in his work. The author defines security as an ability to use, invest or in some way employ national wealth in order to accomplish state interests and freedom, which seems to be appropriate to political will (Lake D. A., 1996, p. 5). This definition implies that the state will focus its efforts in order to sustain two forms of national freedom: the freedom of having national wealth, freedom of having territorial integrity over national territory, as well as the freedom of choosing the preferred form of government, which is reflected upon the independent constitutional right. From the afore-stated we can conclude that the security of one state is established as long as its national wealth is not threatened and can be used freely as the sovereign wishes.

Lake considers security as a complex social phenomenon, which can be fully perceived only through an interstate perspective, or states' mutual behavior that can potentially lead towards antagonistic relations or mutual alliances. This mutual behavior is conditioned by the intentions of the states, as well as by their military capacities. Such security relations between states can have an impact on their defensive efforts to change states' political preferences and to determine the future international environment. The state's defensive capabilities are determined by various factors, including global challenges such as risks, threats and maintenance costs of the state's overall military capabilities. The political will serves as the driving factor behind the idea of maintaining the state's defensive capacities, which hence links Lake's notion of security and politics.

The author's understanding of security relations can take various dyadic forms. The dyadic form of these relations is important to understand and differentiate the levels of hierarchy in states' relations (Lake D. A., 1996, p. 6). From the above mentioned, a state can have different forms of relations with other neighboring states based on current and historical circumstances. It is clear that Lake is trying to analyze the security aspects of the states based on their preferences, environment and overall structure that is present in a given time period. However, the author does not neglect the importance of national interest as an important aspect of every state politics, henceforth Lake's approach requires a two level analysis that can be done from the aspect of international politics, as well as from the angle of national state. The term "national state" in Lake's concept should be perceived as a unique nation based on traditional values such as territorial integrity, sovereignty and national interests, which are central to his idea. Furthermore, the security relations are defined by the level of hierarchy deriving from one or more sides. The security relations are also based upon some sort of agreement, either made voluntarily or by force. The agreements, directly or indirectly, state the conditions on which the integrated security efforts are delegated in terms of control or jurisdiction on some crucial segments. This kind of relationship allows the terms of agreement to be made clear from the start, while any issues can be solved along the way.

It is evident that the circumstances and the environment are important to Lake, which can also differentiate the states of anarchy and hierarchy in the international security relations. In anarchic security relations, there is a possibility that each country can write its own destiny, because in the "rule less" environment each unit goes its own way. According to the previous sentence, in conditions of anarchic security relations, the self-will of each component appears separately. Unlike anarchy, in hierarchically arranged relations, there is a dominating state that sets the rules, while others are in an inferior position. David Lake argues that establishing hierarchy or maintaining authority in a certain region requires the dominating state to produce a political order beneficial to the subordinates, even if the dominating state does not have an immediate interest to do so; secondly, the dominating state must discipline those who reject its rules or threaten to destabilize its authority; finally, the hegemon must commit not to misuse the authority it has been granted (Lake D. , 2009, p. 93). We can say that such state of relations is actually present in most of the classical realist thought. It is very important to mention the fact that the actual method of how a state approaches the agreement, willingly or by force, is essentially irrelevant (Lake D. A., 1996, p. 7).

The continuity of security relations, however, can be usurped by the changing character of international relations; basically, anarchy can over time transform into hierarchy. Since Lake underlines certain relations among states including alliance, protectorate, empire and unofficial empire, examining them briefly, we can establish which one is relevant for our current research. The alliance basically represents a military alliance which is best depicted through NATO. In this particular alliance, there was a transfer of responsibilities and rights

from its very beginnings, which had reflected the organizational changes in this structure. If we examine the Washington Treaty, which is the foundation of the Alliance, we can conclude that all security requirements have been met and are corresponding with Lake's concept. The empire represents an extreme in Lake's theory, positioned on the opposite side of the hierarchical scale, and it develops when one of the sides strives for a dominant position at the expense of the other. There are two more categories between the alliance and the empire, such as the protectorate and the unofficial empire. Protectorate implies that one dominating state controls the foreign politics of the weaker country. The unofficial empire functions indirectly and in a latent form and is therefore very hard to pinpoint accurately. In this case, a state controls the politics (especially foreign affairs) of the other state indirectly, usually through one official sovereign who is *de facto* a controlled subject. The main distinction between the empire and the unofficial empire is the hybrid nature of the latter. Lake underlines that the unofficial empire implies a strong desire for self acclamation of the subordinated state. A state that represents itself as a dominating factor, while continuously maintaining control on various aspects of life and politics, is also testing others' dependency and its own imperial control. Lake highlights the main point in his agreement approach through mechanisms which are used in the relations between states, and they are mostly manipulative and controversial in nature. David evidently reveals the negative side of contractually based relations, explaining them as tools for control over less powerful entities.

The problem with Lake's theory is the absence of relations that are not based upon agreements. In international relations, instruments of foreign affairs such as coercion, ultimatum and other more or less violent approaches are viable, and governed without the obligation of an agreement. Namely, it is a matter of foreign political mechanisms about certain issues, and the resolution of such issues involves the opposed states' interests. By considering events that are a result of particular interactions among states, we will try to observe and explain certain political and security tendencies. It is important to emphasize that due to the nature of the research subject as current topics, there was a restriction regarding the availability of literary and secondary sources of information. The research objective is formulated and defined with the intention to analyze and determine the character of contemporary US foreign politics in the Balkans, during Trump's administration. Based on the afore-stated theoretical framework, we can safely say that the unofficial empire is most probably the correct model. However, the empirical context of our research will exactly determine the applicability of the suggested theoretical model, which we deem relevant.

THE PECULIARITIES OF AMERICAN POLITICS TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

For political and security considerations of the previous impact of US foreign policy on the Western Balkans, it is necessary to proceed from several levels of analysis: theoretical, historical-political context, and the paradigm of liberal interventionism. The theoretical platform that enables the analysis presented in the previous section, is within the concept of hierarchical determinism created by David Lake. His theory can be assigned to the camp of the realist school of thought, for making an overview of the potential conflict through the state-centric focus and for taking into consideration the anarchic situation. However, institutionalism can be involved in this concept, bearing in mind that relations and indirect influence of the great powers on small states takes place thanks to regional and international institutions. The regional historical context of the political relations between the US and the Western Balkans is impossible to consider without accepting global contextualism, as well as the paradigm of liberal interventionism (Ružin, 2015, p. 152). During the nineties of the twentieth century, when there was a vigorous stirring of the great powers in the problems of the former Yugoslav countries, a visible global tendency emerged, shaped by the US domination and intervention for the sake of proclaimed democratic ideals. The wave of operations due to this tendency, such as those in Libya, Panama, the Philippines, Somalia, Liberia, Saudi Arabia and the war in Iraq preceded the American presence and influence during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The greatest impact of the US foreign and security policy in the Western Balkans region was made during the inter-ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. The former pretensions of Washington, or the administrations headed by George Herbert Walker Bush and Bill Clinton, were derived from the US global offensive strategy and the desire to impose the US as a world hegemon. In the afore-stated period, the United States had identified the opportunity to expand their already widely known liberal interventionism in the former Yugoslav countries and the Western Balkan region. This way of treatment, in addition to the US, was also inspired by their commitment to support stability and prevent armed conflicts when this region was at the brink of collapse. It is justified with the initial observations that a relevant impact cannot be considered without the historical-political context and liberal interventionism, as its dominant trend.

The most prominent and visible US political-military engagements in the Balkans during the turbulent decade at the end of the twentieth century was in the Bosnian war, and its consequent independence, as well as in Kosovo; the latter conflict is especially interesting since it still represents a contemporary political issue, not only for Serbia, but for the region as well. The Bosnian case became interesting after the inauguration of President Clinton whose administration regarded the conflict as a clear transgression made by the Serbian forces in an

attempt to conquer a pluralistic society. For the US administration, Bosnia and Herzegovina represented a society made up of various ethnicities, very similar in that sense to the United States. Although we can argue about the American material interests in Bosnia, in terms of the US engagement during the process of establishing the Croatian armed forces, the drive to engage in the war was primarily based on humanitarian reasons, as well as confirming and establishing the United States authority across WB (Mandelbaum, 2016, pp. 102-104). One of the segments of US foreign policy at that time, according to public political discourse, was related to the preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, some authors argue that the establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a democratic, modern and well-functioning state was more a desire than the target of the official US policy.

The NATO intervention in 1999 was somewhat similar, with respect to the fact that no clear material objectives had been sought. Though the intervention was launched on the basis of humanitarian rights, the main objective had been focused on overthrowing the "rogue" regime of Slobodan Milosevic, while the whole military endeavor was perceived as an auspicious opportunity to redefine NATO post-Cold War framework of operation. The US security interests in Yugoslavia at that time were relatively shallow. Despite being represented as a major concern, Milosevic and the Yugoslav armed forces did not have the intention, nor the needed capabilities to endanger the region or invade the neighboring states; while the economic interests for the US engagement were almost non-existent. However, Kosovo, similarly to Bosnia, served as a good pretext and a fine tool for the promotion of multiculturalism, just wars and the overall idea of liberalism that were otherwise implemented in the United States' global agenda (Kurth, 2001, pp. 68-76). One of the main goals of US policy in WB since the 90s of the twentieth century was creating the sovereign state of Kosovo and Metohija, although it is still today a highly debated issue which now produces significant political and security implications (which will be discussed later). According to the US interventionism policy at that time, 500 soldiers were sent to Macedonia, as a measure and attempt to restore stability and contribute towards creating desirable conditions for peaceful surrounding. Bearing in mind that Albania is one of the countries belonging to this region, it is important to point out that from its territory in 1997, the US withdrew their officials and citizens (Ćirić & Ivanji, 2011).

It is important to emphasize that the relations between the United States and the Republic of Serbia took similar direction. Although the relations between the two countries in the nineties were quite tense because of the bombing, their dialogue and cooperation were enhanced when the Republic of Serbia showed initiative that left behind the socialist legacy and established the values of liberal democracy. As one of the steps that contributed to the consolidation of interests, modernization and democratization was the admission of the Republic of Serbia into the Partnership for Peace Program in 2006.

Based on a brief review on the American impact on the Western Balkans heretofore, our conclusion indicates that the dominant model of influence was

conducting humanitarian interventions, which then switched to the requirements for the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes. As one of the reasons for the implementation of liberal interventionism in the Western Balkans is the integration of these countries into the collective security and defense structures, such as NATO and the European Union. The US strategic policy in the previous ten years was directed towards the Western Balkan region as a collectivity, and now the approach has been more particular, developing relations with each country individually. Hence, now every country in the Western Balkans has separate political relations with the United States. Thus, for example Macedonia, Serbia, and all countries that belong to the WB region, in communication and negotiation with this great world power, have their own particular and specific sets of challenges, goals and mutual expectations. The character and nature of these challenges that the countries are facing, determine their cooperation with the United States through reform of some institutional components: the judicial, economic, security and defense. The implementation of reforms and the negotiations must be tailored to the mutual national interests (Seroka, 2015, pp. 135-137). It seems that the influence of the United States in the region of the Balkan Peninsula was aimed to promote the establishment of liberal democratic values, at the expense of peace. Maintaining the assertive US foreign policy contributed to the creation of the commitment on the part of the former Yugoslav countries to adapt to the new European security and political architecture. In such conditions, authoritarianism and politicization of all ministries were no longer possible. All this is conducive to the fact that major powers like the US exert their impact on small countries (in this case WB), which corresponds to the hybrid/informal empire described by David Lake. The 90s of XX century was prevailed by the discourse and debate about direct instrumentalization of military forces. Later on, indirect influence created certain conciliation and acceptance by the supranational entities. Therefore, it can be said that the adoption and integration of certain standards by the small countries of the Western Balkans recurrently influenced the improvement of their cooperation with the United States. However, this does not diminish the spreading of the impact of the global hegemon, and its policy goals. On the contrary, making small countries get closer to joint action in regional platforms can exert pressure in a manner that justifies Lake`s model based on the positions of the dominant on the one side and the subordinate on the other.

GENERALITIES ABOUT THE FOREIGN POLICY OF TRUMP'S ADMINISTRATION

After the US presidential elections in 2016, the revolutionary character of Donald Trump, his promises and agenda affected the US foreign policy positions. The dynamic foreign policy of the new president is both a novelty and a challenge to the established patterns of behavior on the American political scene, as well as to their relations with the rest of the world. Using the benefits of modern communication, Trump, with his direct approach to foreign affairs, sometimes

described as a “destructive instinct” (Sullivan, 2018, p. 18), has succeeded to shake the world’s political scene. A transactional approach to foreign relations, oriented towards short-term gains rather than to maintaining long-term relationships, threatens to shake the complete liberal international order and the United States position of a liberal world leader, developed by generations of American politicians over past decades (Schweller, 2018, p. 134). Consequently, the political relations between the USA and the rest of the world are being assessed, and the other countries are interested either to go through the contemporary turbulences with the least possible damage, or to use the change in American foreign policy mood to profit and materialize their own interests.

“Illiberal hegemony” or “primacy without a purpose” (Possen, 2018, pp. 21-25), as its main characteristics has, on the one hand, insistence on the priority of the American national interests within the relations with allies and the obligations towards international institutions and regimes subordinated to it, while on the other, it rests on the hardcore unilateralism, which corresponds well with the superpower in realist understanding of international relations. Since insistence on the relative gains for the U.S. today is one of the primary determinants of its foreign policy, Trump’s administration is willing to act beyond basic principles of liberal trade, global responsibility and cooperation, all established with the main contribution of the US. Trump’s skepticism regarding the American mission to spread liberal values across the world is already widely known and well documented (Laderman & Simms, 2017, p. 124). Also, the pre-established patterns of American foreign policy behavior are affected by Trump’s reliance on bilateral rather than multilateral frameworks for cooperation, which, together with unilateralism and primacy of the American interests, makes the basic trajectory of the American approach to foreign policy today that can be best described as “unilateral bilateralism”.

This kind of approach will leave scars on most American relations with its allies, especially those in Europe, whose earlier relationship was primarily based on common interests and their membership to the same civilization circle, established on the basis of respect and promotion of liberal values and multilateralism. The unpredictable decisions of the US president antagonized his relations with NATO allies to the degree that many observers are worried for the very existence of the alliance which during the second half of the XX century had a decisive impact on shaping the global political architecture. The New York Times columnist, David Leonhardt, is one of those with the opinion that an American president with a secret agenda to destroy NATO would behave precisely as Trump does (Leonhardt, 2018). A firm foreign policy position seems like the most appropriate way to halt the erosion of American power in the world regions, where the U.S. faces “emboldened enemies, nervous allies and increasing disorder” (Kroening, 2017, p. 31). Insistence on the more equal share of burdens for common security, trade competition and political disputes made those relations of US and European allies for a moment look more like those in the period after World War I than the relations from the time of Trump’s predecessors. As a result, some European

countries today see the U.S. as a greater threat than Putin's Russia (Ikenberry, 2017, p. 8). Trump's foreign policy "pragmatism", on the other hand, is best being realized through the observation of his statements: "Both our friends and our enemies put their countries above ours and we, while being fair to them, must start doing the same" (Crowley, 2016).

In its specific foreign policy approach, Trump's administration is facing limitations coming from the nature of the U.S. political system and its principles of power separation. Trump and his collaborators encounter resistance from some parts of the bureaucracy towards the administration's directives as an influence of a "deep state" which resists the supremacy of elected government (Wolff, 2018). Bureaucratic opposition coming from the side of non-partisan, professional cadres is not coming from the "deep state", but simply from the state – "the large, complex hive of people and procedures that constitute the U.S. federal government" (Michaels, 2017, pp. 52-53). The autonomous State Department officials' praxis has a significant impact on the overall outcomes of US foreign policy, especially those oriented towards matters within their routine activities and relations with small countries.

US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS DURING TRUMP'S ERA

Like the rest of the world, many observers and interested statesmen from the Western Balkans expected that Trump's election would cause some changes in the American policy towards the region. Expectations were various, considering that the Western Balkan states had a different history of relations with the U.S., as well as the fact that some Trump's election promises were perceived differently in the states of this region. Led by their own interest, observers from the Balkans were not hiding their sympathies during the American presidential election process. Those interested in maintaining *status quo*, hoped for the victory of Hilary Clinton, while those wishing changes in American approach supported the Republican candidate, Donald Trump (B92, 2016). However, it turned out that the focus of the new American administration was not on this part of Europe, but instead on global trade and security issues, as well as on domestic political struggle. The biggest part of U.S. foreign policy business in the Western Balkans remained on the agenda of low or mid-level State Department officials. Depending on the importance of the political dispute, the Balkan countries have succeeded only a few times to get the attention of the top U.S. diplomacy. Although revolutionary changes in the US position in the Western Balkans have never occurred, there is a clear change of stance towards certain issues.

Discussing US foreign interests in WB should be a relatively simple subject, however, a recent upsurge in "disobedient" behavior among some of the countries coupled with the unorthodox politics of Trump's administration towards world politics requires a fresh perspective. Despite the potential changes in the US foreign politics and in the politics of some WB countries, we should, nevertheless

acknowledge, or rather establish some ground rules. First of all, NATO is now a deeply embedded structure in the Balkans, with the exceptions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia with its fragile concept of neutrality, which serves more as a political mantra than real state policy, all other states have decided on their future political-military allegiance and military development. Second, all WB countries, without exception, have a steadfast ambition of joining the EU. Even Serbia, that is somewhat considered an "odd child" mainly because of its historical-political sympathies towards Russia, has orientated its foreign politics towards European integration. The official web presentation of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs even states that "the EU is the primary and most important strategic and foreign policy objective for the Serbian Republic" (Politički odnosi Republike Srbije i Evropske Unije).

Although the political behavior represented by Washington may seem troublesome and reserved for some of the regional actors, it does not mean that the US is passive on all fronts. During the Trump administration, two Western Balkan states have joined NATO, despite the President's initial posture towards the Alliance. Montenegro, a long considered Russian outpost on the Adriatic, joined NATO in June 2017. With this, Montenegro agreed on further security cooperation with the Alliance, implementing an extensive defense and security sector reform and changes in civil emergency planning and scientific-security related research (NATO, 2017). Although Trump was personally reserved about NATO expanding in small WB countries, emphasizing the possible negative consequences of such an action, following the approval in U.S. Congress, Montenegro successfully completed its accession process (Guardian, 2018). After the accession, Montenegro got out of the focus of U.S. foreign policy.

In Macedonia, the USA continued their support for the consolidation of Macedonian society and state on its way to Euro-Atlantic integration. The State Department low and mid-rank officials have played a significant role in that direction. For example, Brian Hoyt Yee, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, had a significant role in overcoming the political crisis after the Macedonian elections, when only after serious pressure, Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov yielded and accepted to hand over the mandate to Zoran Zaev in order to form the Government (META.mk, 2018). The influence of American diplomacy was also visible during the negotiations between Skopje and Athens on the Macedonian name dispute, when American officials, like Vice-President Mike Pence, gave full support to Zaev's Government and their attempt to end decades-long dispute (Readout of the Vice President's Meeting with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev of the Republic of Macedonia, 2018). After Montenegro had joined the NATO, Macedonia quickly followed. In the summer of 2018, Macedonia managed to finally resolve the dispute with its neighbor Greece, over the name of the country, and quickly after join the accession talks with NATO (Emmot, 2019). Although the process could take a whole year, generally Macedonia has a clear ambition, as a small country, to secure its position by bandwagoning along other more powerful states. As with Montenegro, Macedonia was also seen as an

important blow toward Russian politics in the Balkans. Moreover, the strategic layout in the region clearly shows that the three last remaining countries, which also seek EU membership, are entirely encircled by the Alliance.

As we can see, American top diplomacy is engaging in the Western Balkans only in cases when the problem comes from a dispute with far-reaching regional implications or if the matters are significant for American vital national interests. Therefore, following their accession to NATO, Albania and Croatia are performing the largest part of their relations with the U.S. using the framework provided by the alliance. Allies are expected to give support to the American global role, like in the case of the sanctions against Iran. Similar inertia of American diplomacy after the Trump inauguration is visible in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this country had the highest concentration of fears and hopes related to Trump's election. In spite of the complexity of the Bosnian society, with the exception of the replacement of the U.S. Ambassador to Sarajevo, there were no significant political issues on the table.

The change in approach is most evident in the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, on their so-called dialogue to resolve the status of the disputed territory. Until Trump's inauguration, the political dialogue was a mostly one-way street, signaling that the liberal narrative on which the territory established its independence is still present. Serbia needs to come to terms with the loss of the territory if it wishes to successfully reach the end of the EU path of accession. However, after the change in Washington, the same liberal narrative seems to be less present in the talks. In the talks conducted in Brussels, Serbia apparently gained some kind of leverage that is evident in its posture towards the northern part of Kosovo, which by default does not fit with the discourse the Kosovo politicians are trying to establish or rather preserve. Unlike previous administrations, Trump's has expressed its readiness for consideration of "creative solutions" for the Kosovo dispute (Bolton Says U.S. Won't oppose Kosovo - Serbia Land Swap Deal, 2018). Leaving the firm positions of previous administrations according to which Serbia is supposed to simply "accept the reality" and recognize Kosovo's independence, clearly implies the flexibility of the new administration about this dispute. The recent change of Washington's attitudes led Serbian Foreign Minister, Ivica Dacic, to conclude that the US policy towards the region is "no more on autopilot" (Beta & FoNet, 2018).

The circumstances arising from the trade dispute between Belgrade and Prishtina have to a considerable extent eased the identification of the changes in the overall American attitude towards Kosovo dispute. On that note, U.S. officials urged Kosovo's Albanians multiple times to revoke the taxes on Serbian goods (US threatens withdrawal of troops from Kosovo if tax is not suspended, 2019). The recent taxes on Serbian products and Prishtina's stance that the taxes will hold despite the foreign pressure, tells us that Kosovo political elite is not satisfied with the current western politics towards Belgrade. Haradinaj's statements that "despite his love for America, the taxes will hold" (Haradinaj se izvinjava sad: "Ja volim Ameriku, ali taksa neće biti ukinuta, molim vas RAZUMITE NAS", 2019)

implicates that Prishtina still has high hopes for its foreign patron, albeit not with the current US administration. This attitude of the Albanians presents a novelty in their relations with the western ally, whose political support was crucial for the recent success of Kosovo's independence project. Also, it rather speaks about Prishtina's intention to delay solving the dispute until the international circumstances turn in their favor again. Due to the recent change of Washington's attitude towards this dispute, there is a wide notion in Serbian press that America has a plan "B" for Kosovo, and apparently, that does not imply an undeniable support to Prishtina. This is widely praised among Serbian politicians as a victory of Serbian diplomacy.

The previous US administration had played a major role in resolving conflicts and establishing some kind of political-regional framework of cooperation among the WB states. However, President Trump, evocating his seemingly isolationistic politics, creates an impression that the United States' commitment towards the region is in decline. The fear which stems from this notion is that with the Americans in "retreat", the potential political vacuum will be filled by the Russians. Though this could be a reasonable concern, Russia has a history in the region and WB is generally considered as the soft underbelly of the EU where foreign powers can test the Western resolve, the main issue is the American politics itself. In other words, the current US administration considers the Balkans as a region of lesser importance. Almost none of the higher officials of the current American administration is directly involved in the political issues regarding the WB states, with the exception of Kosovo and Macedonia disputes. This essentially means that the US politics towards the WB have gone into maintenance mode, and most probably will stay in that way at least until the duration of this administration. We can safely assume that radical shifts in the politics towards the WB states are highly unlikely, primarily because of the aforementioned reasons, however, this does not mean that certain variations are out of the question. The recent situation and newly arisen political tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina, the issues in Bosnia and even the Macedonian "rocky road" towards NATO, suggest that the politics of the region, although still EU-NATO orientated, might express certain deviations with respect to the current US administration politics.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

Although the limited nature of the essay did not allow us to delve deeper into Lake's theory, the concept, albeit questionable at the global level, works fine on the lower levels of world politics and regional politics analysis. When we look at Lake's theory of hierarchy, we can still see how authority is accomplished by a dominating power and maintained for a prolonged period of time. However, we cannot entirely explain certain deviations in terms of regional politics. It seems that a hegemon, such as the United States, can keep its presence and influence in a region that agreed to its authority, although political relations may vary from time to time. However, this is not influenced by the subordinate's politics as much as it

is a reflection of the hegemon's changing political posture. As Lake suggested, the dominating state must "earn" its authority. Although it is really hard to say that the United States lost any of its authority in the Balkans, on the contrary, it may have even bolstered it further with Montenegro and Macedonia joining NATO. This means that the US will exercise control over the countries of the Western Balkans, which are member states of the mentioned alliance. Giving the final word on decision making, this hegemon will confirm its dominant position through politics and the system of collective security. The theoretical framework, whose author is David Lake, proved to be appropriate for our consideration of the emergence of politics known as a *trumpism*. The controversial public discourse posted by Donald Trump, was one of the reasons that inspired us to reveal and analyze the nature and consequences of the current American foreign policy. Also, our desire was to highlight and present the possible changes in the US policy towards the Western Balkans during Trump's presidency. Through this brief research project we can conclude that the requirements for theoretical and empirical suitability were fulfilled.

In spite of some expectations, a revolutionary change in the U.S. foreign policy towards the Western Balkans has never occurred. The reasons for such inactivity can be found in Trump administration's preoccupation with the matters of global significance and the fact that the small Western Balkans countries are out of Washington's foreign policy focus. However, the change of attitude and rhetoric towards Kosovo dispute is evident, yet with no substantial progress. Observing the current situation and political relations of the regional political elites with the US political elites, we can conclude that some of the WB politicians were "betting on the wrong horse" in the last American elections. Lastly, we should keep in mind that the odd political behavior towards the current Washington establishment is only temporary in nature. It is probable that many still perceive Trump as an aberration of American politics and as soon as the elections hit next year, the situation will get back to the previous state. In other words, as soon as Trump is replaced, the regular discourse on which post-Yugoslav states had been built will again become *modus operandi* in regional politics.

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