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Event Analysis

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# Donald Trump and American Leverage in the Balkans

John Hulsey\*

Now almost six months after the inauguration of Donald Trump, it is still very unclear how his foreign policy will deviate from the foreign policy of previous presidents. So far, Trump's actions have been more symbolic than concrete, as his most important actions have been policy statements or executive orders, such as his immigration ban, which have been held up in court.<sup>1</sup> While symbolic, Trump's foreign policy statements to the this point represent a dramatic departure from the way previous US presidents have talked about the world and the relationship with US allies. While Trump delayed reaffirmation of the United States' commitment to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty cast doubt on the United States' reliability as an ally,<sup>2</sup> he has not yet had the opportunity to show how the United States would act in a crisis.

The Trump administration's symbolic changes to US foreign policy fit a theme from his campaign of refusing to pay even lip service to the tenets of the liberal democratic order at home or abroad. NATO is the security cornerstone of cooperation between the United States and Europe, yet his relationship with leaders of these countries seems strained in comparison with his embrace of leaders of less liberal states. Trump's statements removing the US from the Paris climate agreement and shifting the United States away from using diplomacy to encourage liberal democratic norms<sup>3</sup> are the foreign policy expression of Trump's general rejection of what he and the right calls "political correctness." In the domestic context, "political correctness" involves using language to explicitly include groups who have historically been implicitly or explicitly excluded. Rejection of such language opens the possibility that women and minorities could again be excluded from political life in the United

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Gardiner / Shear Michael D. and Ron Nixon. 2017. Administration Moves to Carry Out Partial Travel Ban. *The New York Times*, 28. June 2017 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Shear, Michael D. / Landler, Mark and James Kanter. 2017. In NATO Speech, Trump is Vague About Mutual Defense Pledge. *The New York Times*, 25. May 2017; Baker, Peter. 2017. Trump Commits United States to Defending NATO Nations. *The New York Times*, 9. June 2017 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Phillip, Abby, and David Nakamura. 2017. Autocrats Hear a Clear Message During Trump Trip: U.S. Will Not 'lecture' on Human Rights. *Washington Post* 22. May 2017 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

States. In the foreign policy realm, it is not groups in society who are potentially excluded. Rather, the result of Trump's symbolic politics is to widen the range of possible stances and actions of the United States, including by excluding the interests of allies. As a result, even five months after the inauguration, we have not learned much about what kind of president Trump will be with regard to foreign policy, but the range of possible outcomes is much wider than with any previous president<sup>4</sup>.

This uncertainty is clear in the contributions to this panel on the impact of the Trump Administration on the Balkans. First is the uncertainty about the extent to which the United States will continue to seek to be "a shining city upon a hill" or whether the actions of the American electorate and the Trump administration will diminish the real and symbolic power of the American example. This maps on to Vachudová's idea of passive and active leverage.<sup>5</sup> Under passive leverage, the example and practices of the United States influence other countries even without an explicit attempt to exert leverage through practices like conditionality. Valery Perry describes ways in which the negative example of the United States is already undermining the impact of democracy promotion by calling into question the strength of US institutions and best practices. Florian Bieber is also concerned not only with the degree to which Trump's actions undermine the US example but also with the ways in which his rejection of democratic norms of behavior provides encouragement for those in the Balkans who are already working to undermine freedom of the press and judicial independence in their own states.

In terms of active leverage, whereby states use inducements, threats and rewards in order to create incentives for target countries to take certain actions, Tanya Domi notes US foreign policy's explicit turn away from values-based action in favor of a raw transactional approach. The Trump administration appears to see foreign allies largely as a limit on US freedom of action and power rather than as a means to magnify US power. Alongside the loss of US influence connected to the rejection of relational power through allies is the ongoing gutting of the State Department as an organization through the purge of senior non-political leadership and the failure or unwillingness to fill political posts.<sup>6</sup> In short, the United States' ability to promote its interests is weakened by both the administrations' refusal to pursue policy based on traditional US ideology as well as the simple loss of human capital in the State Department.

A second major theme is grounded in a geopolitical perspective that considers the Balkans as a region that is influenced by the United States, Europe, the Middle East and Russia. There is one key question: will the weakening of US and European influence create opportunities for others or does the heightened

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<sup>4</sup> Bassuener, Kurt and Valery Perry. 2017. Erratic Ambiguity: The Impact of Trump's Unpredictable Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans. *Democratization Policy Council*.

<sup>5</sup> Vachudová, Milada Anna. 2005. *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration After Communism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Gearan, Anne. 2017. Diplomats in Limbo at a State Department Where Most Leadership is Temporary. *Washington Post*, 1. June 2017 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

potential for armed conflict increase risks for a broader conflict to play out in the Balkans? Michael Rossi most explicitly takes up this question by arguing that ongoing US disengagement from the Balkans – continuing throughout the Obama administration – in fact minimizes the potential negative impact of the Trump Administration, as disengagement has already been underway. A decrease in active leverage is not of great concern as long as the US is doing little to exert leverage. However, if this stance were to change, the direction of US active leverage is uncertain and the ability of the US to use non-military inducements is reduced.

With regard to the Balkans, this wider range of outcomes may take the form either of inaction, whereby the United States cannot be relied upon to support policies and allies it has supported in the past, or of action, whereby the Trump administration pushes US policy in an activist direction that represents a significant departure from what the United States has pursued in the past. Given the lack of focus of the United States on the Balkans in recent years, as well as the Trump's apparent preference for isolationism, impacts in the form of inaction seem much more likely, but nevertheless potentially very damaging when taken alongside the ongoing crisis of the European Union.

Part of the added uncertainty brought about by the election of Donald Trump and his conduct in office is the consideration of unlikely but truly disastrous outcomes, including a fundamental change in the United States political regime and what that could mean for global politics and the Balkans. Alongside scholars of post-communism and Eastern Europe,<sup>7</sup> writers and scholars from the Balkans have pointed out the threat that nationalism and racism play not only to the values of the United States but to the US democratic regime itself. While the rise of fascism and the crimes of the Nazis hold a much more prominent place in the American political consciousness, the example of the fall of Yugoslavia also has a lot to teach us about the ways in which previously stable societies, if not democracies, collapse. The power of the Nazi example is tempered by its ubiquity as a historical touchstone and bringing in additional examples throws light on the aspects of the example that are essential for the turn toward violence and which are isolated to the German case. For example, political paramilitaries, scapegoating of minorities, and media attacks show up in both cases. Émigrés from the Balkans like Aleksander Hemon<sup>8</sup> and Jasmin Mujanovic<sup>9</sup> have played prominent roles in highlighting these connections.

So far, the clearest impact of Trump's election is to deeply call into question both the reliability of the current administration and the reliability of the country that elected a candidate so willing to at least verbally toss away the commitments that form the foundation of US alliances worldwide and particularly its role in joint US-European projects like the stabilization of the

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<sup>7</sup> Snyder, Timothy. 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Crown/Archetype.

<sup>8</sup> Hemon, Aleksandar. 2016. *Trump: A War Criminal in the Making*. *Rolling Stone*, 29. February 2016 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Mujanovic, Jasmin. 2016. *Before Trump And Brexit, Milosevic – OpEd*. *Eurasia Review*, 15. November 2016 (accessed: 12. July 2017).

Balkans. The change in US approach exacerbates the ongoing crisis of the European Union and reinforces existing negative trends in the Balkans away from democracy and liberalism. Every indication is that Trump's actions, direct and indirect will lead to greater US disengagement.

Inevitably, either through the actions of the erratic Trump administration or not, there will be a crisis which in the past would have been addressed through American leadership and cooperation with allies. Only then will the depth of the damage done by Trump's rhetoric be known.

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