

Erratic Ambiguity:
**The Impact of Trump's Unpredictable
Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans**

A DPC Policy Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The situation in the Western Balkans has been on a perilous trajectory for more than a decade, a point acknowledged on both sides of the Atlantic. President Donald J. Trump’s actions since assuming office have accelerated existing negative trends in the region – an increase in autocratic behavior and abuse of power by self-dealing regional leaders, and more assertive engagement of illiberal and undemocratic powers such as Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states, and China. The avowed goal of a majority of citizens of the Western Balkan countries – to become “normal countries” and join the EU (and, except for Serbia, also NATO) – looks less attainable now than any time since the prospect was formalized 14 years ago.

Trump has broken with almost seven decades of unwavering US commitment to Europe’s defense – to ensure a “Europe whole, free, and at peace” – by refusing to commit to NATO’s Article 5 – that an attack on one is an attack on all. The unreliability of that backstop will increase tensions and amplify the potential for continued escalation and dangerous miscalculation by Western Balkan actors. Doubt has crept into the transatlantic relationship from multiple directions, not least from the still murky, but highly disturbing, Trump-Russia relationship.

American officials and legislators – especially those Republicans willing to put the interests of country before party – must demonstrate steadfastness in the face of destructive and erratic ambiguity at the top. But EU leaders cannot afford to leave Europe’s interests and the future of the Western Balkans to chance. The EU has the potential leverage and the capability to reverse the negative dynamic in the Western Balkans, both for its own benefit and for that of the peoples of the region. But to do so, it must acknowledge the vacuum its policies have enabled – and act decisively to fill it. If ever there was a real “hour of Europe,” it is now.

In this context, DPC recommends the following (each detailed further in the report):

To Senior US Government Officials:

Shoring up deterrence against renewed violence and support for beleaguered advocates of liberal democratic values – both in terms of policy and programs – is essential to America’s immediate and longer-term interests. Senior US government officials must speak and act assertively in upholding the fundamental underpinnings of US foreign policy in the Western Balkans – support for the democratic process, rule of law, transparency, and civic initiative. When this proves impossible under this administration, or when actions or rhetoric from the White House fundamentally undercut such principles, senior officials should resign, highlighting the dangers of the Trump policy to both Congress and the public. This duty will fall most squarely on National Security Advisor Lt. General H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley.

To Members of the US Congress:

Congressmen and Senators whose commitment to liberal democratic values transcends partisanship must, both publicly and in private meetings with colleagues, consistently demonstrate this through active engagement such as the following:

- Advocate for active US promotion of democratic values and principles in the Western Balkans.
- Speak out in defense of US officials, at home and abroad, who actively support efforts to entrench democratic practice and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.
- Advocate for the development and funding of US State Department and USAID programs designed and calibrated to promote democratic principles and values in the region.
- Provide support to advocates of liberal democratic values and practice in the region, through public diplomacy aimed at a foreign audience and by applying pressure on their behalf when needed against governments that curtail civic space.

Where there is space between the White House and the legislative branch on these matters, legislators must explain to their own constituents and the citizenry at large why promotion of these values abroad secures American interests and security.

To the European Union (including member state leaders, officials, and legislators):

Limit Balkan politicians' options to employ fear and distribute patronage to insulate themselves from public dissatisfaction through the following:

- Guarantee the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Western Balkan countries, dedicating sufficient forces to that task, based on professional military assessments by DSACEUR.
- Follow reassurance of security with a strict application of financial conditionality to promote and defend democratic practice and rule of law, bilaterally and via the international financial institutions.
- Foster and politically support a *popular* and informed constituency for the EU and, most importantly, for its values.

To citizens' associations and activists working to build support for liberal values in local communities and beyond:

The struggle against populism and for rights-based values and the rule of law is increasingly global. While there seemingly are more challenges than ever, there are more allies than ever. Civic activists should undertake measures that will increase the possibility to speak out and be heard such as:

- Join forces with established civic partners in the West to more effectively lobby policy-makers in Brussels and European capitals to more assertively leverage support for liberal democratic policies and principles.
- Use the ongoing political crisis playing out in the US to underscore the importance of developing and maintaining robust checks and balances at home.
- Maintain efforts toward establishing good governance, inclusion, and rights-based social development while reaching out to a broader constituency aimed at members and partners, as opposed to donors.
- Develop and cultivate constituencies in the West who are aware and supportive of the challenges of activism in this turbulent period, to undergird policy demands to Western policymakers and legislators in the capitals and in EU representation offices, to ensure the megaphone is not dominated by the voice of a handful of officials.

1. Introduction

More than four months into the presidency of Donald J. Trump, US foreign policy remains amorphous, seemingly driven only by the whims and prejudices of the President himself. This has left alliances with fellow democracies deeply shaken, and buoyed adversaries and autocracies. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the transatlantic relationship. Painstaking efforts by Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Defense James Mattis to reassure NATO and EU allies were dramatically subverted by Trump's speech at the May 25 NATO summit, in which he both refused to commit to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which commits members to mutual defense, and harangued assembled leaders for alleged "debt" to the US.¹ In addition, European Council President Donald Tusk asserted that there was significant difference with Trump on Russia; a gap characterized by those with knowledge of the meeting as regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin's trustworthiness and intentions.² How this squares with Tusk's statement that Trump's views on Ukraine were congruent with the EU's remains unclear.

One region where this differential might assert itself dangerously is the Western Balkans. Just two months into Trump's presidency, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, made an extraordinary assertion to Pence: if the EU collapsed, war would re-erupt in the region.³ "If we leave them alone – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Albania, all those countries — we will have war again."⁴

Juncker's statement was the most hyperbolic of its kind, but in tune with a wider sense of growing urgency within the EU regarding the Western Balkans, where countries have formally had a "membership perspective" since 2003 (and informally since 1999). While some continue to define the regional dynamic as stalled or stagnant, there is increasing recognition that it is well into regression. One might conclude that the EU has been working proactively to meet the challenge. But the EU remains on bureaucratic autopilot. For a decade, the EU has prized a veneer of stability over the genuine cultivation of liberal democratic practice in the Western Balkans.⁵

¹ "At NATO, Trump calls out allies on unpaid dues while staying mum on joint defense pact," *PBS NewsHour*, May 25, 2017. Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/nato-trump-calls-allies-unpaid-dues-staying-mum-joint-defense-pact/>

² Ibid, see also Philip Rucker, Karen DeYoung, and Michael Birnbaum, "Trump chastises fellow NATO members, demands they meet payment obligations," *Washington Post*, May 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-told-in-brussels-that-west-should-focus-on-values-not-only-interests/2017/05/25/7aa1865c-40cd-11e7-9869-bac8b446820a_story.html?utm_term=.03dff42742f7&wpisrc=nl_most-draw5&wpmm=1

³ Lionel Barber, "Lunch with the FT: EU chief Juncker on the Brexit bill and the eroticism of power," *Financial Times*, March 24, 2017. His statement broke with years of the EU's assessments that conflict was not likely in the region – and therefore deterrence was not required.

⁴ Ibid. It is notable that Juncker listed the entity of Republika Srpska as a country, rather than an integral *part* of one, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵ DPC has highlighted the folly of this approach throughout the region for some time, as have numerous activists from the region. For example, see Kurt Bassuener, "Judy Asks: Is the EU Sleeping in the Balkans?," *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe*, May 13, 2015. Available at: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60069>, Kurt Bassuener, "The EU is Paying a Protection Racket in Bosnia," *BIRN*, March 26, 2015. Available at: http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/BDaily_The%20Eu%20is%20paying%20a%20protection%20racket%20in%20Bosnia_p.12-13.12-13.pdf and Ivana Jordanovska, "Time to Pull Out the Stick," *The Balkanist*, June 12, 2015. Available at: <http://balkanist.net/time-pull-stick/> More recently, a group of several other Balkan analysts have argued similarly. See Florian Bieber, "What is a Stabilitocracy?," *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, May 5, 2017. Available at: <http://www.biepag.eu/2017/05/05/what-is-a-stabilitocracy/>

As a result, openly autocratic, illiberal leaders have been emboldened. Today's volatile and deteriorating situation in the Western Balkans is the bitter fruit of a long-ineffective common European foreign and security policy. The US has more or less gone along for the ride since 2007, allowing the EU to set the tone for the common Western approach in the Western Balkans, albeit occasionally interceding to instill greater firmness.⁶ The effect has been to leave a region which just over a decade ago seemed inexorably on track to join the Euro-Atlantic mainstream open to geopolitical encroachment by illiberal, openly autocratic powers, such as Russia and Turkey, as well as other malign influences, including non-transparent and politically significant investments from the Gulf countries. The EU and US have only themselves to blame for allowing this vacuum to emerge and be filled by others.

Enter President Trump

Trump's foreign policy – just like his policies at home – is erratic, unpredictable, and incongruent with long-standing certainties. Most immediately, the now-unsettled relationship of the US with its NATO allies and with Putin's Russia is having a ripple effect throughout the world, but most acutely in the Western Balkans. From a longer term, normative perspective, the Trump administration's avowed spurning of democratization and development policies, in favor of a fixation on terrorism, major increases in military spending and militant commitment to force, and neo-mercantilism bodes ill for non-consolidated democracies everywhere. Trump's foreign policy thus far has been built on personal relationships and a tactical transactional calculus rather than on the pursuit of strategic goals or long-held values. It is highly significant, and alarming that Trump was visibly far more energized and positive during and after meetings with autocrats and their representatives – Egyptian President (General) Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and a coterie of Saudi royals – than with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, or British Prime Minister Theresa May. His meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron – and the ensuing battle of the handshakes, led to a post hoc explanation by Macron that Trump, Putin, and Erdoğan all saw relationships in terms of balance of power, and therefore had determined he would not “make concessions, even symbolic ones.”⁷

Since Trump's inauguration, it has become all too clear that while his personality and lust for the limelight remain consistent, his policies are shallowly rooted: his pronouncements could change in an instant, with a tweet. It is precisely this unpredictability, compounded by the long-standing security policy vacuum, that makes the situation – in the Western Balkans but also globally – potentially volatile. The uncertainty is heightened by the EU's consistent misreading of the region's politics. The EU's unwillingness to fully apply the conditionality it has grafted onto the enlargement mechanisms, as well as to use leverage

⁶ The application of personal sanctions to RS President Milorad Dodik in January 2017 was an overdue step which the EU refused to follow. In another example, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's visits to Macedonia during the long political crisis repeatedly reinforced an EU-led effort which frequently teetered on the brink of failure. See “US envoy ‘encouraged’ by talks on Macedonia crisis,” *Associated Press*, May 12, 2016. Available at: <https://townhall.com/news/politics-elections/2016/07/11/us-envoy-encouraged-by-talks-on-macedonia-crisis-n2191160>

⁷ Caroline Mortimer, “Emmanuel Macron says Trump is like Putin and Erdogan,” *The Independent*, May 29, 2017. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/emmanuel-macron-donald-trump-russia-turkey-diplomacy-public-abuse-g7-handshake-recep-tayyip-erdogan-a7761841.html>

beyond the *acquis*, has allowed it to squander its geopolitical clout in the region.⁸ The EU's fear of instability has allowed its enlargement tools to morph into a life support system for the status quo. Yet the EU and its members have eschewed directly confronting regional security dilemmas, since the stability and association process presumes those boxes will be somehow "checked." Ironically, the most predictable of all actors in this scenario are the region's domestic politicians, who have been reading from the same script for two and a half decades. Their actions can be reasonably predicted.

This policy note aims to do the following:

- Analyze what we know (or can surmise) and what we don't know about Trump's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy.
- Consider the impact of the Trump Administration on the Western Balkans, based on events since his election and an analysis of hard and soft power needs and potential.
- Demonstrate through three fictional scenarios the potential state of play in the administration, and potential provocations that could force reactions that are no longer grounded in certain assumptions.
- Recommend options for a more robust European-led reset of its policy in the region in the absence of reliable US engagement.

2. What We Know

The list of knowns, unknowns, and unknown unknowns – always difficult to fully define and grasp – has become even *less* clear since Trump took the oath of office. His team's willingness to project the image that everything is up for debate, and that nothing is sacred, contributes to international uncertainty, unsettling historically firm alliances at a time when stability and constancy are desperately needed. There are many aspects of political and economic policy that can have an impact on the Western Balkans; to date the Trump administration has not spoken clearly or directly on the region, with the exception of Secretary of Defense Mattis on maintaining KFOR.⁹ The policy toward the region remains on autopilot, managed at the bureaucratic level. While this has ensured a degree of continuity, the leverage of diplomats representing the US is dependent upon the presumption of their interlocutors that they speak for the President and Secretary of State. This is unclear. Furthermore, individual members of Congress closely associated with President Trump, in particular Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, have sharply questioned the long-standing US policy of supporting civil society and promoting liberal democracy in the region. This further adds to the confusion and uncertainty concerning US foreign policy and the role of values therein.¹⁰

⁸ One enlightening exception was the EU's will to compel compliance with the obligations attendant with membership of the Energy Union. This approach played to the EU's massive economic strength and effectively shut down Russia's South Stream project.

⁹ "New U.S. Defense Secretary's Kosovo Statement is Worrying." *B92*. January 30, 2017. Available at: http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=01&dd=30&nav_id=100365

¹⁰ See Isaac Arnsdorf, Andrew Hanna and Kenneth P. Vogel, "GOP Takes Up Russia-Aligned Attack on Soros," *Politico*, March 22, 2017. Interestingly, Republican House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy named both Rep. Rohrabacher and President Trump himself as people he thought Putin was paying. See Adam Entous, "House majority leader to colleagues in 2016: 'I think Putin

Three key aspects of Trump’s foreign policy – discerned thus far – can provide a framework for gleaming the potential impact of his administration on the Western Balkans.

2.1 Whither Euro-Atlanticism?

If there was any doubt that Trump is prepared to upend the NATO alliance, it was dispelled by his behavior and his comments at the NATO summit in Brussels on May 25. His long harangue to close US allies on the need for more defense spending and their alleged debt was offensive and condescending, stealing time from potentially constructive policy statements and affirmations. The tone and visuals of his interactions with the democratically accountable leaders of allied states stood in stark contrast to his visible delight at being feted by royals and dictators in Riyadh.

Trump’s behavior in Brussels followed months of speculation about his commitment to the alliance. The departure of National Security Advisor Michael Flynn and his replacement by General H.R. McMaster brought a more traditional security point of view to the National Security Council, which was appreciated by allies. He joined a few declared Atlanticists on Trump’s policy team, most notably Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Vice President Mike Pence, and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats.¹¹

While some Republican members of Congress have openly called for a break with previous US policy, adopting uncritically the talking points of regional leaders,¹² and some others have highlighted the dangers of the Trump foreign policy trajectory in the Western Balkans,¹³ most have kept quiet. This allows vested interests in Western Balkan countries to continue pruning back checks on their exercise of power and influence, such as in the media, legal arena, and in civil society. The resulting lack of transparency and accountability facilitates the further penetration into the region of illiberal and undemocratic actors, such as Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states, and China. Concern with this ought not be a partisan or ideological issue; Republican members cannot afford to accept the leadership of the White House on these issues. Yet very few – most notably Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham – have asserted themselves; the leadership continues to largely accept Trump’s policy as a *fait accompli*, or worse yet, an opportunity to pursue a radically illiberal agenda abroad. Support for America’s liberal democratic values – at home and abroad –

pays’ Trump,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/house-majority-leader-to-colleagues-in-2016-i-think-putin-pays-trump/2017/05/17/515f6f8a-3aff-11e7-8854-21f359183e8c_story.html?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.c10df89f02f5

¹¹ One of the very few comments on the Western Balkans was made during Mattis’ confirmation hearing when he was asked about Kosovo. Mattis commended the mission, noting “Kosovo is an example of what happens when the international community led by America, commits itself to the defense of its interest and values.” “New U.S. Defense Secretary’s Kosovo Statement is Worrying.” *B92*. January 30, 2017. Available at:

http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=01&dd=30&nav_id=100365

¹² Utah Senator Mike Lee was among the lead authors of a letter accusing US Ambassador Jess Baily of pursuing a leftist agenda in Macedonia. See “Lee Letter Seeks Accountability for US Ambassador in Macedonia,” Press Release, January 17, 2017. Available at: <https://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=09FD00EC-5CA9-4FD4-8A18-03EE674A592A> See also Lily Lynch, “What’s Going on with Members of Congress and Macedonia?,” *The Balkanist*, February 9, 2017. Available at: <http://balkanist.net/congress-and-macedonia/> It is noteworthy that the letter generated a profusion of references and echoes from rightist and pro-VMRO media. For example, see: “Top congressman wants to investigate partisanship in US Embassy in Macedonia, calls for removal of Ambassador Baily,” *Kurir.mk*, February 2, 2017.

¹³ Senator John McCain has been most vocal: “Senator John McCain on NATO and the Balkans,” *The Cipher Brief*, May 21, 2017. Available at: <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/senator-john-mccain-nato-balkans>

needs to transcend deference to a President who apparently deems these inconsequential or a constraint.

Illustrating his erratic behavior, Trump himself has blown hot and cold. When hosting NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the White House in April, Trump reaffirmed US commitment to the alliance, declaring the alliance is “no longer obsolete.”¹⁴ And the relationship between Trump and NATO cannot be analyzed without consideration of the relationship between Trump and Russia, which is still opaque. Trump did sign off on Montenegro’s membership in NATO, to the relief of many who had feared that Trump might delay it to appease Russian opposition, yet again sending mixed signals.

Relations between the US and NATO, and between the US and Russia, matter to the Western Balkans. Russian policy in the region is founded on both grievance related to the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, and a long-standing interest in Moscow to exert its influence in the region, particularly (but not solely) in areas inhabited by populations characterized as their “Slav (Orthodox) brothers.” While these ties should not be expected to go away, they will be far less damaging to the region if the counter-weight of NATO continues. Moscow can use the region as a testing ground not only for the resolve of the alliance, but also the fealty of partners and leaders in the region – most notably Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić,¹⁵ Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik,¹⁶ and Macedonia’s former Prime Minister, VMRO-DPMNE leader (and until 1 June *de facto* ruler) Nikola Gruevski.¹⁷ Russia’s so-called “emergency response” base in Niš in Serbia (which could yet acquire diplomatic status, long sought by Moscow) demonstrates Russia’s will to lay down markers to pursue “area denial” to NATO and the EU.¹⁸ Former senior Pentagon official on Russia Michael Carpenter said that the Western Balkans were “in the crosshairs of Russian influence operations” and a region for confrontation with NATO in a Congressional hearing on the Russian military threat in Europe in May 2017.¹⁹

The Defense Department decision to increase US military expenditure in Europe by \$1.4 billion – 41%²⁰ –

¹⁴ Ackerman, Spencer. “‘No Longer Obsolete’: Trump Backtracks on NATO with Russia Tensions Rising.” *The Guardian*. 12 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/12/trump-nato-meeting-russia-syria-missile-attack>

¹⁵ Serbia is participating in joint military exercises with Russia – including a provocative one near the Polish border. See “Russia, Serbia, Belarus hold ‘Slavic Brotherhood’ military drills,” *RFE/RL*, June 6, 2017. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/slavic-brotherhood-military-drills-russia-serbia-belarus/28531473.html>

¹⁶ Dodik recently invited Russian President Vladimir Putin for a visit to Banja Luka. See “Dodik invites Putin to visit Bosnia’s Serb entity,” *B-92*, June 5, 2017. Available at:

http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2017&mm=06&dd=05&nav_id=101458

¹⁷ The depth of Russian engagement from diplomatic posts in Macedonia, connected to a larger presence in Serbia, is detailed in Luke Harding, Audrey Belford, and Saska Cvetkovska, “Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say,” *The Guardian*, 4 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence>

¹⁸ The Niš airfield can accommodate the largest transports, allowing importation of any cargo without Serbian inspection “Lavrov to check Belgrade’s readiness to turn toward Moscow,” *Beta*, December 12, 2016. Available at:

http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=12&dd=12&nav_id=99932

¹⁹ See “The Growing Russian Military Threat in Europe,” *US Helsinki Commission Hearing*, May 17, 2017. Members from both the Democratic and Republican sides of the aisle asked questions – and got detailed responses from witnesses Michael Carpenter, Ambassador Steven Pifer, and Stephen Rademaker. The full hearing can be viewed at <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/growing-russian-military-threat-europe>

²⁰ Michael Birnbaum and Anthony Faiola, “As European leaders sit with Trump, relief that meetings are happening at all,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/as-european-leaders-sit-with-trump-relief-that-meetings-are-happening-at-all/2017/05/24/a258081a-3b19-11e7-a59b-26e0451a96fd_story.html?utm_term=.30a5b3784775

was a welcome move, indicating a willingness to act to create “facts on the ground” which are incongruent with President Trump’s pronouncements. The same principles apply to US State Department officials pressing Macedonian President Ivanov to allow the erstwhile opposition coalition to form a government.²¹ But the overarching impression allies have drawn is that despite the advice of the Atlanticists, Trump himself cannot be counted upon, qualifying whatever assurances and policies point in the direction of continuity.

2.2 Abandoning the Anchor of Full-Spectrum Leverage

America’s credibility in the Western Balkans was established through the use of military force in 1995 and 1999 and a deterrent policy to undergird the peace that followed the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This foundation – pronounced until roughly a decade ago – enabled a broad, full-spectrum US policy of democracy promotion and institution building in support of peace, human rights, and the rule of law – all seen as essential building blocks of a stable region which could be integrated into the EU and NATO. Hard power created a baseline for America’s full-spectrum credibility and leverage in the region, wedded to America’s considerable soft power as a democratic society and cultural power. The capital this combination afforded US policy served not only America’s interests, but those of the wider West and the peoples of the region – but depended upon collective will with the EU.

More than four months into the Trump administration, the Department of State remains woefully – and apparently intentionally – understaffed.²² There is no spokesperson and the administration has not put forward nominees for a host of positions; there have been no nominees for Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs or Assistant Secretaries – the regional bureau chiefs.²³ In addition, the proposed gutting of State Department’s and USAID’s budgets further weaken America’s diplomatic leverage.²⁴ In the absence of any depth, let alone breadth, American policy and the activities needed to implement such policy are in a holding pattern.

Further, whether by direction or personality, Secretary of State Tillerson has continued to believe he can run American foreign policy as he did Exxon Mobil, with a skeleton staff, few advisors, and little to no involvement or engagement with the press. His statement in which he explained his lack of press

²¹ Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Macedonian President Softens Stance After Meeting Yee,” *Balkan Insight*, 1 May 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-president-softens-position-after-meeting-yee-05-01-2017>

²² See “The State Department Deserves Better,” *New York Times* editorial, May 3, 2017. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/opinion/the-state-department-deserves-better.html?_r=0 See also Jessica Schulberg and Alissa Scheller, “Trump Gutted State Department and Half of Top Jobs are Still Unfilled,” *Huffington Post*, April 4, 2017. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/donald-trump-state-department-positions_us_58e3e8bee4b0f4a923b2ba5e

²³ The Deputy Secretary, John Sullivan, is performing both political and management Deputy Secretary roles. Sonam Sheth, “Trump says he ‘wants approvals’ of nominees – but he hasn’t nominated anyone for 79% of key positions,” *Business Insider*, June 5, 2017. Available at: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/trump-democrats-obstructionists-nominees-2017-6?r=US&IR=T> See also Drew Desilver, “Trump’s nominees have already faced a large number of cloture votes,” Pew Research Center, June 1, 2017. Available at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/01/trumps-nominees-have-already-faced-a-large-number-of-cloture-votes/> A full running tally of nominees and their progress is available here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-administration-appointee-tracker/database/?tid=a_inl

²⁴ Berman, Russell. “President Trump’s ‘Hard Power’ Budget.” *The Atlantic*. 16 March 2017. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/president-trumps-hard-power-budget/519702/>

engagement by saying “I’m not a big media press access person. I personally don’t need it” belied a worrying ignorance of basic transparency in a democracy and the value of public diplomacy²⁵ The meta-messaging from the Trump administration of capricious, personalized rule, non-transparency in decision-making, the blurring of personal and public interest, and the integration of family into the web of politics, all systematically diminish America’s cachet as an imperfect, but firmly established country of law and institutions. Blithely abandoning America’s hard-earned soft power also signals to other leaders that they, too, can dispense with the formalities of diplomacy and negotiation, and revert to postures based on brute force, a lesson that will all too willingly be absorbed by leaders in the Western Balkans who already have a disdain for soft power politics and governance by compromise.

The US posture in the Western Balkans has integrated force with diplomacy and liberal democratic development efforts since 1995. Hard power was used on two occasions: against Serb positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in early autumn 1995 aimed at forcing Serbs into negotiations to end that war, and then in 1999 in NATO’s bombing of Serbian targets in Serbia and Kosovo during the war in Kosovo. (This additionally explains Serbian affinity for Russia’s own anti-NATO and anti-US positions.) After years of European inaction in the Western Balkans, the use of military force signaled a long-term mission resolve, and like it or not, telegraphed the willingness to use power. Combined with a more robust soft power posture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the wider Western Balkans, particularly when compared to the EU, the Americans were for years viewed as the more credible player, and less easy to manipulate.

For over a decade, the US has been progressively reducing its engagement in the region, while supporting an EU leading role built around enlargement. This approach, however, has led to increasing concern in recent years that it is not only not working, but is leading to a reversal of hard-fought gains. The EU’s presumption that EU accession processes will either resolve or render obsolete the region’s fundamental political challenges is unfounded. In fact, the emergence of illiberal regimes such as those led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, suggests that the “successful” first-wave enlargement had much shallower roots than hoped.²⁶ Policy and reform in the Western Balkans have always been more effective when the transatlantic alliance has worked in concert to promote both structural reforms and liberal values. This link has been broken, and regional actors know it. The effect of this stale approach has emboldened regional actors seeking to pursue unfulfilled agendas and further consolidate political and economic power, and has also created a vacuum which has been progressively filled by external actors – an increasingly assertive Russia, a Turkey undergoing its own authoritarian evolution, and the Gulf states, which have varying interests in each of the countries in the region.

2.3 From Liberal Values to a Transactional Calculus

A third issue, which is related yet distinct from the hard/soft power calculus, is the role that the promotion abroad of liberal political and economic values plays as a component of US foreign policy strategy, based

²⁵ Yuhas, Alen. “Rex Tillerson Defends Blocking Reporters from Diplomatic Trip to Asia.” *The Guardian*. 18 March 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/18/rex-tillerson-blocks-press-travel-asia>

²⁶ Hanley, Sean and James Dawson, “Poland Was Never as Democratic As it Looked,” *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2017. Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/03/poland-was-never-as-democratic-as-it-looked-law-and-justice-hungary-orban/>

on the assumption that more liberal, democratic countries in the world will make the US more secure and more prosperous. Since the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy (admittedly unevenly and inconsistently) has been based on the premise that security is best achieved through comprehensive security and the incremental expansion of so-called western values related to liberal democratic governance.²⁷ This has shaped development and democratization strategies, often operationalized by giving voice to domestic citizens and non-governmental organizations striving to serve as a counter-balance against autocratic regimes.

That Trump specifically stated that “America will not impose its values” in his exceedingly grim and pessimistic inaugural address is deeply troubling.²⁸ This retreat from what had been baseline liberal internationalism was reiterated by British Prime Minister Theresa May in her appearance before Congressional Republicans in Philadelphia, at which she said that the “days of Britain and America intervening in sovereign countries in an attempt to remake the world in our own image are over.”²⁹ Trump repeated his disinterest in promoting democracy and freedom in his Riyadh speech.³⁰ The election of centrist Emmanuel Macron dealt a blow to nationalist, far-right political forces in France; but its effects on the trajectory of nationalist, far-right forces in Europe are likely to be limited.

The absence of meaningful values-based policy leadership in the West³¹ sends an encouraging message to autocrats everywhere, and a troubling signal to citizens who genuinely want a more democratic, participatory society based on the rule of law rather than on arbitrary force. Even more troubling is Trump’s lack of respect for the basic elements of liberal values in his own country. His labeling of the media as “the enemy of the people,” his dismissal of grassroots protests as being funded by political opponents, his refusal to abide by long-held norms and practices regarding conflicts of interest and nepotism, and his attacks on the judiciary not only threaten democratic pillars in the US but make it more difficult (if not impossible) to promote and support such values globally. His language eerily mirrors the anti-reform rhetoric of Putin, Orban and others; it has also strengthened anti-liberal forces who have demonized George Soros and his Open Society Foundations, belying a lack of understanding of the values of such initiatives, not in supporting left or center-left causes, but in ensuring a multiplicity of voices in a system that would otherwise be completely monopolized by the ruling government or party.³²

This trend is critically relevant to the Western Balkans, which desperately requires *more* commitment to liberal values such as accountable governance, the rule of law, and civic participation to progress and truly

²⁷ *Debating the Democratic Peace*. Brown, Michael E., Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller (eds.). The MIT Press, May 1996.

²⁸ Aaron Blake, “Trump’s full inauguration speech, annotated,” *The Fix*, Washington Post, January 20, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/20/donald-trumps-full-inauguration-speech-transcript-annotated/?utm_term=.54cc63ad6223

²⁹ “Theresa May opens Trump visit by attacking past foreign policy failures,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/26/theresa-may-donald-trump-visit-attacks-past-foreign-policy-philadelphia>

³⁰ “Transcript of Trump’s speech in Saudi Arabia,” *CNN Politics*, May 21, 2017. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/21/politics/trump-saudi-speech-transcript/index.html>

³¹ The most fulsome and comprehensive arguments of late for Western democratic values came from European Council President Donald Tusk, following his meeting with President Trump in Brussels, and Chancellor Angela Merkel in her NATO speech. But this has yet to manifest itself in a policy commensurate to the challenge.

³² “Public Enemy Number 1: George Soros runs the gauntlet,” *The Economist*, May 19, 2017. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21722176-attacked-politicians-washington-skopje-george-soros-runs-gauntlet>

stabilize. Citizens still want to join the Western democratic mainstream, represented by the EU (and for most, NATO as well) in some cases by overwhelming margins. But the lack of real progress toward adoption of Western democratic standards in governance, the EU's own enlargement fatigue, and a policy of renting social peace through financial infusions in the name of stability, have damaged the EU's – and the US's – credibility with citizens throughout the Western Balkans. Leaders and officials in the EU continue to believe, or pretend to believe, that the leaders with whom they negotiate enlargement reforms are genuinely accountable representatives of the people they purport to serve. They may have been elected, but the incentives for voters have often been tainted by the structural stranglehold of fear and patronage. The focus on technical checklists of promises rather than on meaningful implementation of reform, combined with a prioritization of economic reforms that, in the absence of transparency and the rule of law, further entrench oligarchs throughout society, has turned the enlargement process into a Balkan pantomime. The West has lost ground because it was unwilling to commit to sustained policies to confront entrenched elites and help democracy to organically take root in the region.

Unfortunately, in the Trump era, the lack of predictable US soft power influence is making it imperative that the EU exhibit a willingness to employ not only real and conditional soft power (its default option) but its own hard power as well.

2.4 Can't Buy Me Love: The EU's Failing Enlargement- and €-centric Policy

Europe has long taken American hard-power backup as a given. But following the frictions over the invasion of Iraq and the Union's 2004 "big bang" enlargement, a mindset took hold that the EU had no need of hard power or "sticks" in its own environs, as the leverage afforded by the enlargement process, predicated on "the pull of Brussels," would propel further democratic development and reform. The retrograde dynamic currently on display in the Western Balkans ought to end any doubts that this approach has definitively failed. The EU's lack of credible hard power leverage (and of a will to apply political and financial leverage) had already hamstrung its efforts in the region; uncertainty as to the solidity of American commitments casts this in an even more unforgiving light.

DPC has long documented the EU's unwillingness to employ appropriately strict conditionality in the Balkans³³ – not even on elements of the *acquis*³⁴ – because of the overarching will to demonstrate the "momentum" of the EU enlargement process. This has allowed regional elites to define deviancy down³⁵ for years. The current geopolitical environment has further devalued the EU's demand for adherence to

³³ For example, see Bodo Weber and Kurt Bassuener "The Western Balkans and the Ukraine Crisis – a Changed Game for EU and US Policies?," DPC Policy Paper, September 2014. Available at:

<http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC%20Policy%20Paper%20Western%20Balkans%20&%20Ukraine%20crisis.pdf>

³⁴ See Bodo Weber, "Analyzing the EC Serbia Progress Reports – Useful Tool or Tactical Whitewash?," DPC Policy Note #9, June 2015. Available at:

http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPCPolicy_Note_9_Analyzing_the_EC_Serbia_Progress_Reports.pdf

³⁵ Former Senator from New York and US Ambassador to the UN Daniel Patrick Moynihan coined this phrase in relation to rising crime, but the concept is that the more prevalent an erstwhile deviant behavior becomes in society, the less noteworthy it is perceived. See Jonathan Capehart, "How Trump is 'defining deviancy down' in presidential politics," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2015. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/11/23/how-trump-is-defining-deviancy-down-in-presidential-politics/?utm_term=.da15e6d7f643

commitments, as well as the notion of liberal democratic values.

The EU has the capability – and potential leverage – to reverse this dynamic. The EU holds far more allure to most in the Balkan public than other options. But this is not so for their leaders. Therefore, limiting their options to employ fear and distribute patronage to insulate themselves from deeply dissatisfied publics is essential. The policy responses required to ensure “area denial” to those Balkan politicians fall into three general groups, each of which is explained in brief here, all of which DPC has consistently advocated.

Security Guarantees

Despite 16 years of peace in the region, Balkan political actors continue to pursue unfulfilled territorial agendas, with the attendant certainty of violent responses. The fear thus generated helps diffuse popular and political resistance within their communities. The Western deterrent failure, evident for over a decade, has enabled this dynamic, once in abeyance, to reassert itself – and has given adversaries of Western democracies a welcome tool. The recent political turmoil in Macedonia, and hyperbolic assertions that the country’s unity was under threat, underscores both these vulnerabilities. The EU must therefore fill this deterrent void by offering guarantees of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Western Balkan nations which fall outside the NATO perimeter (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia – two of which have Western deterrent force mandates), with the willingness to dedicate forces to that task, based on professional military assessments by the EU military commander/DSACEUR. Within NATO, the EU should seek non-EU member support for these “Berlin plus” operations, affording them further assets and backup.

Application of Financial Conditionality for Democracy and Rule of Law

The Western Balkan leaders’ grip on power has relied both on their ability to maintain an ambient – and adjustable – level of fear and on their ability to buy social peace through patronage in public employment, tenders, insider privatization, and the like. Together with fear and lack of faith in institutions, this provides a potent combination. For example, if one doubts one’s vote is secret, and family members work in the public sector, will one vote against the powers that be? This approach to maintaining the social peace is another form of extortion.

The EU and the wider West – through international financial institutions – can disarm the recalcitrant elites of this vital tool. The economics of patronage are ultimately unsustainable without external infusions of cash – through pre-accession funds, loans, and development/infrastructure projects. European diplomats have openly stated their belief that continuing this flow is essential to maintaining stability. This community of interests with Balkan leaders has continually subverted the EU’s adherence to its own professed values. Citizens in the region know the nature of this transaction, and resent it. This is no way to develop a constituency, or to show a commitment to values in practice.

To change course would entail a much blunter application of conditionality – and far more values-based and confrontational outreach than practiced in the past. But the EU need not deviate from its current

standards. It need only explain that upholding them demands not financing governments which openly violate the public trust of their own constituents, as well as European taxpayers.

Expansion of – and Strategic Alliance with – the West’s Popular Constituency

A prevailing assumption of enlargement is that governments are representative of the popular will and accountable to it. Clearly, the governments of the region have failed in that regard. Yet the EU’s approach remains fixated on official relationships, despite evident bad faith, treating citizens as targets only for vacuous PR efforts for decisions already made. If the EU is to have real partners in the Western Balkans, this must begin with citizens, and ultimately be transmitted up to governments through representative and accountable politics. This model was not seen as necessary in previous countries with a membership prospect; its absence has made these countries vulnerable to illiberal state capture, as seen in Hungary and Poland. The democratic West has allies and partners throughout the region, but they often feel abandoned by Europe in favor of government leaders who demonstrate values and behavior antithetical to the EU’s norms. Until the EU demonstrates – both in its policies and its programs – that it knows who its friends are, it will continue to reinforce illiberal forces in the region, as well as continue losing ground to geopolitical adversaries. This will require not only a fundamental rethinking of EU policy in the region, but also of its approach to public diplomacy and the modalities of its development programs. Unorthodox though it may be, EU application of pressure from above – subversion of government’s ability to use fear and patronage – along with catalyzing pressure from below – active strategic alliance with mobilized citizens – is the policy with which the EU is most likely to succeed in fostering durable liberal democracy and peace in the Western Balkans.

Regional activists – some of whom enjoy long experience fighting the same malign forces now in bloom in the established democracies of the West – are the EU’s natural and necessary allies if the EU’s goal is to catalyze the democratic transformation, not just stabilization, of the Western Balkans. Together with established civic partners in the West, these activists need to more effectively lobby policy-makers in Brussels and European capitals to assertively use their leverage in support of liberal democratic policies and principles. At the same time, and using the current “stress test” on the American system of checks and balances, local activists can amplify their efforts in support of such checks and balances at home.

In addition, these regional activists and their global grassroots allies can develop and cultivate their own constituencies in the West, to undergird policy demands to Western policymakers and legislators in the capitals and in EU representation offices, to ensure the megaphone is not dominated by the voice of a handful of officials.

3. Illustrative Scenarios

While the direct impact of the Trump administration on the Western Balkans has yet to reveal itself, it is possible to use the broad policy postures outlined above to extrapolate possible trajectories under specified circumstances. Three such imagined, yet eminently possible, scenarios are sketched out below. Two specifically illustrate the need for clarity of response among NATO allies. The purpose is not to alarm

(more alarmist scenarios can be read in regional tabloids or overheard in cafes), but to reasonably inform and to encourage rational discussion and debate on the likelihood of such scenarios and the drivers, prevention mechanisms, and response options available, or required. They are each characterized by, and focused on, a plausible US posture and response.

Fictional Scenario 1: US Policy Continuity

After the provocative “Kosovo is Serbia” train in January was prevented from traversing Kosovo, state-supported Serbian *agent provocateurs* with intelligence service support, decide to try a different “freedom of navigation” exercise. They enter Kosovo in a series of nondescript cars and assemble in a convoy at a predesignated staging area in northern Kosovo to travel a similar route, with the same intention of provoking a reaction. The convoy produces the desired effect, prompting a violent reaction after crossing the Ibar and escalating to violent interethnic confrontations in Mitrovica and elsewhere. The Kosovo Police Service is overwhelmed and calls for KFOR backup. KFOR’s rapid reaction units quickly deploy to the hot spots, and COMKFOR calls for over-the-horizon backup. SACEUR, with full backing of Secretary of Defense Mattis, to whom President Trump defers on such matters, orders the deployment of a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, based in Vicenza, Italy, to reinforce KFOR, along with additional helicopter lift to enable the forces to react more quickly and not be impeded by roadblocks. The deployment is completed in a matter of days and the situation is brought under control. While the NATO KFOR commitment has been reaffirmed, it remains unclear how EU enlargement processes could be affected, or whether Belgrade-Prishtina talks will continue.

Fictional Scenario 2: Malign Neglect

A new coalition government in Macedonia, with a thin majority and a great deal of internal divergence, is targeted by VMRO (with Moscow’s encouragement and active fake news and “active measures” support) in a series of ethnically polarizing incidents, the aim of which is a) to split the SDSM from the Albanian parties, and/or b) to force the authorities into action against them, thereby proving their “anti-national” character, and/or c) to generate active inter-ethnic conflict, in the hope of co-opting the police (into which VMRO invested heavily in their decade in power) and the armed forces – none of which is mutually exclusive. The EU, consumed with its internal matters and difficulties with newer members in Central Europe, is slow to respond, simply calling for dialogue and offering to mediate. The US, which previously was instrumental in dissuading radical polarization, remains aloof, with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asking in-house what the US interest is in this snowballing crisis. In the absence of any pushback, and with insecurity increasing among the citizens in Macedonia, the situation escalates. Amidst rumors of unofficial Russian, Serbian, and Greek “security professionals” entering Macedonia to assist VMRO, vigilantes from Kosovo (many of whom have experience from the KLA and are now eager to present a hard posture in light of Kosovo’s own parliamentary party dynamics), cross the border to purportedly visit family but who are seen traveling in certain critical areas with visible weapons. The Albanian Prime Minister publicly calls for calm, but is reported to have been meeting with Kosovar and Macedonian Albanian leaders. As news reports beam images across Europe, and fake news and tabloid media inflame readers, Federica

Mogherini, the EU foreign policy chief, seeks clarity of commitment from Washington, but is unable to get a response. Tillerson dodges questions from US journalists, and is heard to mutter, “that’s Europe’s problem.”

Fictional Scenario 3: Actively Destructive

Croatia continues to suffer from internal political instability, with a sluggish economy and no solid government majority or program. Nationalism has increased salience as a substitute for progress at home; EU membership affords Croatia a certain insulation from criticism from other member states. President Grabar-Kitarović announces that she and HDZ BiH leader Dragan Čović have developed a new federal model for Bosnia and Herzegovina which she – and Croatian Foreign Minister Davor Stier – will actively advocate within the EU and in the region. The proposal enables the non-contiguous Croat-majority areas to self-govern, with full control of policing and the judiciary. The proposed arrangement is embraced enthusiastically by Republika Srpska (RS) President Dodik; his imprimatur is essential. The territorial rearrangement would break up the Bosniak-majority areas into numerous non-contiguous islands, and separate Una-Sana Canton from the other Bosniak-majority areas. The Croat-majority cantons – and municipalities in mixed cantons – unilaterally assert control, and cease VAT payments into the Single Account. A EUFOR LOT team reports seeing RS military police checkpoints at key areas along the IEBL (Dodik asserts these are a “temporary measure”). There are stories on social media about discussions in the Serb majority municipalities in the Federation to formally cease association with their cantons (1 and 10) and begin taking steps to unite with the RS. The Bosniak political elites are divided and in disarray; calls to return to the pre-war RBiH Constitution echo throughout Sarajevo-based media and social media. The High Representative protests that this move is anti-Dayton and a hostile act by a neighbor and Dayton signatory, but is ignored within and outside Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU is contorted by frictions within; short of active violence, some members are unwilling to contemplate even a diplomatic response. Some EU members publicly call for the US to clarify and demonstrate that the Dayton order will be defended. However, in an early-morning tweet prompted by a sensationalistic Fox News piece, President Trump writes: “EU in chaos already with invading Muslims. Bosnia? Terrible idea! Croatia and Serbia should just split it. Simple!” Knowing a green light when they see one, Presidents Grabar-Kitarević and Vučić decide to set aside their differences and meet in person to discuss a topic on which they agree. Rumors that Turkey will be the Bosniaks’ “proxy” in these talks sets off a broad alarm among non-aligned citizens and progressive civil society, particularly in Sarajevo and Tuzla, but their worries are disregarded by both domestic and international actors.

Each of these fictional scenarios is undesirable but conceivable, and based on observed and current dynamics and drivers. They demonstrate the varying potential outcomes, and the potential for events to spiral out of control in a region with few domestic safety valves. It is precisely because these possibilities are predictable, however, that it is possible to respond preventively and proactively to deter violence, change the incentives, and encourage genuine reforms.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In just a few months, the Trump presidency has managed to inflict damage on a collective Western posture in the Western Balkans which was already demonstrably ineffective. The uncertainty regarding what previously was taken as a given in that region – US willingness to apply force in the event of hostilities – flows directly from President Trump’s noncommittal stance on NATO’s Article 5 and his broader disdain for standing international commitments.

This uncertainty shakes the underpinnings of the full spectrum of American engagement in the region. American policy credibility across the board – including diplomacy and programmatic reflections of US priorities and values – is also deeply dented by Trump’s unpredictability and aggressive petulance.

The EU’s stubborn enlargement-centric approach to the Western Balkans has implicitly relied on the foundational confidence of US leadership and resolve. Its absence will have an impact on the Union’s own frayed regional credibility.

Regional political elites will surely vary in their personal reactions to this next big step in American disengagement. Whether they welcome it or find it alarming, all will react with political, legal, and existential self-preservation foremost on their minds. The self-inflicted reduction of collective Western power and credibility will give them wider latitude to seek other patrons, and allow them to engage more assertively in the extortionist arbitrage at which they excel.

Thankfully, there has not been a definitive about-face by the Trump administration on standing policies in the Western Balkans, providing diplomats in the field and senior officials who deal with the region from Washington the ability to continue to operate as before – as seen recently in Macedonia.³⁶ But with the recognition that no policy is safe or certain, America’s representatives will feel their leverage deflate – much as their British counterparts have experienced in the eleven months since the UK voted to leave the EU. The confluence of the US and UK, though not absolute, in threat perception and in their inclusion of hard power in the policy equation have been essential to the West’s collective credibility in the Western Balkans. That credibility is now undeniably diminished.

There is still time for the West – led by the EU, in concert with other engaged democracies such as Norway, Canada, Switzerland, and Japan, but possibly still including the US – to reverse over a decade of debilitating policy drift in the Western Balkans, despite the deeply troubling uncertainty generated from the White House and the malevolent efforts of autocrats in Moscow and now Ankara. But there is no time to waste on a continued “wait and see” posture.

The remaining EU members, particularly Germany and France, must assertively fill the void, seizing upon continental drift in the transatlantic relationship to undertake a long-overdue recalibration of Western policy toward the Western Balkans. The election of President Emmanuel Macron in France, who is not wedded to the previous bipartisan French arms-length approach to the region, provides a vector for this shift. The initiative for a change is more likely to emerge from Paris than Berlin, given that President

³⁶ Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Macedonian President Softens Stance After Meeting Yee,” *BIRN*, May 1, 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-president-softens-position-after-meeting-yee-05-01-2017>

Macron has no investment in the standing EU approach, while Germany has defined it.³⁷ Germany continues to date to base its policy toward the region on finances first, rather than leading with demands that EU aspirants conform to liberal democratic values. This must change.

The Western Balkans are the first front on which the EU can assert its own deterrent capability, to the benefit of both citizens of the region and of the entire EU. Summoning the will to do so would facilitate a wider policy turn which would finally establish the EU as a credible policy actor, as opposed to simply a deep-pockets donor and desirable address, in the Western Balkans. That suite of policies, in the order they must proceed, was described above and is reflected in the recommendations below.

Neither the EU, nor our other NATO allies, can count on the US under its current regime. Recognition of this reality is having a cascading effect on America's policy posture in the Western Balkans, which although distinct from the EU's, has been overwhelmingly supportive and enabling to date – even when that policy has been misguided.

Yet while US policy is not as clear or reliable as it was in the past, US partners should not completely discount their American counterparts, or write the US off. Rather, the EU and its member states now must – for their own interests and our own long-professed democratic values – support and enable their American partners, both in the field and in the public space, to the extent possible.³⁸ At a visible high level, this is already evident in the vocal support given to Vice President Mike Pence following his European tour, to Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and to Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has displayed a less bombastic and abrasive strain of ambivalence and inscrutability than President Trump. At present, America's bureaucratic autopilot (through lack of senior policy direction) works to preserve a certain consistency in US posture in the spectrum of Western policy. US diplomats in the field – and at headquarters – gain leverage through real and appreciated partnership with their EU and NATO colleagues.

The Trump administration, however long it lasts, will almost certainly remain a constant strain on the deep bonds forged across the Atlantic (and with Canada). While this poses a challenge for the West's effort of two decades in support of the full liberal democratization of the Western Balkans and their self-propelled integration into the EU and NATO, those two alliances of values can meet it – if their leaders and peoples are willing to confront the unpleasant realities head-on.

The EU has long deemed itself the rightful leader of the West in the Western Balkans. It must now demonstrate it has the political will and steady resolve to take on that responsibility and see it through. Only then can it finally establish itself as a credible policy actor in a challenging environment – at a time

³⁷ In his most recent policy pronouncement on the region on May 31, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel essentially deepened and extended Germany's default policy of Euro diplomacy, proposing greater funding for infrastructure and the like in the region. See http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_14502f8a1e5bf720a2cbc4c3262e9b9e/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2017/170531-BM-Aspen.html

³⁸ President Macron's English-language speech following Trump's announcement of US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement was one early example of efforts to directly engage the American people. See Henry Samuel, "Emmanuel Macron delivers unprecedented English address at Elysée to slam Donald Trump's withdrawal from Paris climate deal," *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2017. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/01/emmanuel-macron-delivers-unprecedented-english-address-elysee2/>

when it is more essential to be one than ever before. Should it demur, the EU will have effectively abandoned the field to allow fractious petty autocracies to take root, fertilized by its adversaries, with the bitter fruits of potential conflict, retrograde instability, and ever greater migration. Europe still has a choice. May it finally choose wisely.

To enable this overdue shift, DPC recommends the following:

To Senior US Government Officials:

Shoring up deterrence against renewed violence and support for beleaguered advocates of liberal democratic values – both in terms of policy and programs – is essential to America’s immediate and longer-term interests. Senior US government officials must speak and act assertively in upholding the fundamental underpinnings of US foreign policy in the Western Balkans – support for the democratic process, rule of law, transparency, and civic initiative. When this proves impossible under this administration, or when actions or rhetoric from the White House fundamentally undercut such principles, senior officials should resign, highlighting the dangers of the Trump policy to both Congress and the public. This duty will fall most squarely on National Security Advisor Lt. General H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley.

To Members of the US Congress:

Congressmen and Senators whose commitment to liberal democratic values transcends partisanship must, both publicly and in private meetings with colleagues, consistently demonstrate this through active engagement such as the following:

- Advocate for active US promotion of democratic values and principles in the Western Balkans.
- Speak out in defense of US officials, at home and abroad, who actively support efforts to entrench democratic practice and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.
- Advocate for the development and funding of US State Department and USAID programs designed and calibrated to promote democratic principles and values in the region.
- Provide support to advocates of liberal democratic values and practices in the region, through public diplomacy aimed at a foreign audience and by applying pressure on their behalf when needed against governments that curtail civic space.

Where there is space between the White House and the legislative branch on these matters, legislators must explain to their own constituents and the citizenry at large why promotion of these values abroad secures American interests and security.

To the European Union (including member state leaders, officials, and legislators):

Limit Balkan politicians' options to employ fear and distribute patronage to insulate themselves from public dissatisfaction through the following:

- Guarantee the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Western Balkan countries, dedicating sufficient forces to that task, based on professional military assessments by DSACEUR.
- Foster and politically support a *popular* and informed constituency for the EU and, most importantly, for its values.
- Follow reassurance of security with a strict application of financial conditionality to promote and defend democratic practice and rule of law, bilaterally and via the international financial institutions.

To citizens' associations and activists working to build support for liberal values in local communities and beyond:

The struggle against populism and for rights-based values and the rule of law is increasingly global. While there seemingly are more challenges than ever, there are more allies than ever. Take measures that will increase the possibility to speak out and be heard such as:

- Join forces with established civic partners in the West to more effectively lobby policy-makers in Brussels and European capitals to more assertively leverage support for liberal democratic policies and principles.
- Use the ongoing political crisis playing out in the US to underscore the importance of developing and maintaining robust checks and balances at home.
- Maintain efforts toward establishing good governance, inclusion, and rights-based social development while reaching out to a broader constituency aimed at members and partners, as opposed to donors.
- Develop and cultivate constituencies in the West who are aware and supportive of the challenges of activism in this turbulent period, to undergird policy demands to Western policymakers and legislators in the capitals and in EU representation offices, to ensure the megaphone is not dominated by the voice of a handful of officials.