



## SERBIA IN THE VORTEX OF GEOPOLITICAL CONFRONTATION

The geopolitical context, especially after Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections, is making Serbia's position increasingly complex on the international scene. President Aleksandar Vučić is trying to maintain "neutrality" by his intensive international engagement in all directions – from Asia and Africa to the United States and the European Union. However, it is increasingly likely that the new European Commission will be much more critical and determined when it comes to Belgrade's avoiding to align its foreign policy with that of the EU. The 2024 Serbia Report by the (previous) European Commission was critical and pointed to the areas requiring serious reform interventions, including specifically negotiating Chapters 23 and 24. These are precisely the chapters that threaten the position of the President as the sole supervisor of the country's political life.

Donald Trump's convincing victory surprised many of them due to the fact that the public opinion polls showed a very tight or undecided race between the two candidates. The interpretation of the defeat of



Bilboards in Belgrade city centre after the US elections, november 2024.

Democrats (their candidate Kamala Harris) will certainly be the topic of various analyses in the coming months. However, we can already speak about a broad global consensus that Trump's return to the White House will change the US foreign policy. Except for the fact that China, the Middle East and, to some extent, Russia will be given priority, the



most important changes, judging by Trump's statements, will happen in the US approach to Europe.

Trump's pre-election rhetoric will certainly clash with the new reality in which America is no longer omnipotent, although it is still the leading world power. He also announced a shift towards Africa, which will also greatly affect his relationship with the rest of the world, including the Western Balkans. Regardless of President Trump's unpredictable behaviour, Serbian elites believe that Serbs and Serbia have the reason to celebrate his victory and expect better days ahead for the realization of their rights and strategic interests.

Due to the current geopolitical circumstances, Belgrade has not yet declared itself in favour of the EU and Trump's victory has raised its expectations that it will "have a greater influence in the White House". Thus, certain expectations concerning its traditional claims have also increased.

The Belgrade regime has enthusiastically welcomed Donald Trump's victory. This is not a surprise if one bears in mind that Gallup's pre-election survey carried out in 43 countries around the world has revealed that Serbs support Trump the most (59 percent). Numerous analyses have emerged in support of the future administration. They have mostly been focused on the value system promoting traditional and family values or, better said, conservatism and authoritarianism. In the *Pečat* weekly, Milorad Vučelić emphasizes that Americans finally joined us after decades of moralizing because, as he points out, "with Trump's election the previously sinless Americans have come closer to us".<sup>1</sup>

1 Milorad Vučelić, "Donald Tramp", *Pečat*, 15 November 2024

However, the Biden Administration has also treated Serbia with great tolerance and the same is true of the EU. The Biden Administration has very closely approached the Vučić regime and has even supported its regional rise because, as it has explained, Serbia is the key factor of regional stability. After Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the "Banjska incident" American politics invested an enormous effort to turn Serbia economically and militarily towards the West.

The Serbian President is rather skillful at balancing among diverse international centres of power, while at the same time trying to quell a growing citizens' discontent at the internal level, which is especially due to increasingly frequent tragic events (the latest in the series of such events occurred in Novi Sad when 15 people were killed), as well as to make the opposition utterly meaningless.

## REACTIONS FROM BELGRADE AND BANJALUKA

The leaders of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska were among the first to speak out about Trump's victory, while President Vučić was allegedly among the first 15 leaders to speak with the President-elect. President Vučić, who has systematically invested in the relations with both political parties, especially the Republican Party,<sup>2</sup> has stated that "many of them in the region have said that he is a devil, but will declare him an angel now";<sup>3</sup> while Milorad Dodik has said: "This is the America

2 *Srpski telegraf*, "Vučić vizionar!", 8 November 2024. In the article it is also pointed out that Vučić presented a medal to Richard Grenell, that Robert Kennedy quotes the Serbian President and that Jared Kushner invests in Belgrade.

3 *Informer*, "Amerika opet ima pravog lidera", 7 November 2024.



we trust”<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump’s victory has been glorified on the covers of numerous tabloids: “Serbs Brought Victory to Trump”;<sup>5</sup> “The Golden Age Is Coming for America and the Rest of the World”;<sup>6</sup> “Trump’s Triumph, the Collapse of the Deep State”;<sup>7</sup> “Panic in the Region: Kurti Is Scared, Bosnia Is Awaiting Division and Croats Are Shivering”;<sup>8</sup> “Relations Based on Respect”;<sup>9</sup> “He Convincingly Defeated Kamala, the Indestructible”;<sup>10</sup> “Absolute Power: Trump Will Hold All Levers of Power in His Hands!”;<sup>11</sup> “Encouraging, Trump at the Head of America Is a Positive Outcome for Serbia”;<sup>12</sup> “Trump’s Big Comeback! Serbia’s Voice Will Be Heard Louder”;<sup>13</sup> “Trump’s Victory Is Great News for the Entire Planet”;<sup>14</sup> “Kurti Is Threatened with a Silken Rope by the White House”;<sup>15</sup> “Europe Is not Ready for Trumpagedon”;<sup>16</sup> “Trump Is Coming to Serbia!”;<sup>17</sup> “The Voice of Serbia Will Be Heard More Strongly in the White House”<sup>18</sup> and the like. The culmination has been the appearance of the posters appealing indirectly to Donald Trump and Elon Musk to create a “Greater Serbia”.

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4 Ibid

5 *Srpski telegraf*, 7 November 2024.

6 *Srpski telegraf*, “Zaustaviću sve ratove”, 7 November 2024

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 *Kurir*, 7 November 2024.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 *Alo!*, 7 November 2024.

14 *Večernje novosti*, 7 November 2024

15 Ibid.

16 *Blic*, 8 November 2024

17 *Informer*, 12 November 2024

18 *Večernje novosti*, 12 November 2024

Milorad Dodik has even thrown a cocktail party in the Palace of the Republic in Banjaluka. He has immediately radicalized his rhetoric and said to Bosniaks: “If Muslims are not prepared for a new agreement on Bosnia over the next six months, they won’t have any Bosnia”.<sup>19</sup> As for the EU, he has uttered a series of insults: “The Republic of Srpska has no reason now to take a step back from anyone. Europe has failed at everything. We have pursued the right policy, not they... The admission of those of us who had not been admitted to the EU has now become a geopolitical problem on the scene. Why are you telling us this? You have admitted Romania and Bulgaria and we are a spaceship compared to them. What is going on? To whom are you still giving lectures?”<sup>20</sup>

Analytical texts about Trump’s victory have appeared in all weekly newspapers and on more important portals; numerous TV debates have also been organized. In most analyses, including the one written by Vučelić (Pečat), there is a kind of rejoicing because “the leaders of Western Europe have lost their major stronghold” and that “Brussels bears a great historical responsibility for Europe being at a dead end”.<sup>21</sup>

It is expected that Trump will have more sympathy for Serbs, but many of them, like Ljuban Karan, believe that the expectations are unrealistic and that many Serbs who are now rejoicing will be more or less disappointed. A reversal in American politics is primarily expected due to the involvement of Richard Grenell, who is allegedly well acquainted

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19 [www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dodik-porucio-sarajevu-ako-ubrzo-ne-pocnete-da-molite-necete-dobiti-nista/241111125](http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/dodik-porucio-sarajevu-ako-ubrzo-ne-pocnete-da-molite-necete-dobiti-nista/241111125)

20 Ibid.

21 Milorad Vučelić, “Donald Tramp”, *Pečat*, 15 November 2024



with the situation in the Balkans.<sup>22</sup> During the past few years, he often visited Serbia and mediated in the conclusion of the deal with Trump's son-in-law Kushner giving away the site of the former General Staff and Defence Ministry building for the development of a hotel and luxury apartment complex.

There are many comments on Kosovo and the potential repercussions that may follow after Trump's victory. Although it is not expected that there will be any major change in the US policy towards Kosovo and Serbia, emphasis is still placed on the fact that Kosovo, namely Albin Kurti will be in a less favourable position, bearing in mind his evident support of the democratic presidential candidate.<sup>23</sup>

The Executive Director of the Pupin Initiative, Vuk Velebit, expects increased pressure on the Pristina Administration, but also points out that, due to the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, the Balkans will not be a priority to the new administration.<sup>24</sup>

Kosovo Serbs also reacted favourably to Trump's victory. The Serbian List believes and expects that the problems of the Serb people will be in focus and that their persecution will not be allowed. Zoran Milivojević, a former diplomat, believes that Trump's approach will be more direct and without an intermediary such as the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Ljuban Karan, "(ne)Realna očekivanja", *Pečat*, 15 November 2024

23 [www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/analize/kako-ce-povratak-trampa-u-belu-kucu-uticati-na-dijalog-beograda-i-pristine-7-11-2024](http://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/analize/kako-ce-povratak-trampa-u-belu-kucu-uticati-na-dijalog-beograda-i-pristine-7-11-2024)

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

Belgrade has the highest expectations from Richard Grenell, especially when it comes to Kosovo. It is calculated that, after "insulting and belittling" him in Pristina, it can be expected that the first unpleasant blows will come just from him.

Many analysts expect more advanced bilateral relations with the United States, because Serbia is much more important for their overall policy than small Kosovo. It is also held that it would be unacceptable for America to lose a bigger player because of a smaller one.<sup>26</sup>

Belgrade believes that Trump's re-election sends serious messages to Bosniaks and Kosovars. Namely, none of these communities enjoys the support of the great powers or can oppose Russia and it is now possible that the US will support Serbia and its regional ethnic allies. There are many speculations as to whether Trump's stance will contribute to the further distancing of the Republic of Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and whether Kosovo will be pressured to establish the Community of Serb Municipalities which would, in essence, undermine Kosovo's sovereignty.

Belgrade's expectations about Trump's greater affection for Serbia's interests and its open disregard for Bosniaks and Kosovars in the new constellation have provoked unfavourable reactions from Sarajevo. However, their analyses are more realistic and project the concerns and possible rising tension, especially if President Trump becomes prone to instant behaviours and disregards the existing international agreements, which may lead to the annulment of the Dayton Agreement.

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26 Ibid.



The possibility of completely ignoring Bosnia and Herzegovina is also mentioned.<sup>27</sup>

Banja Luka proceeds from the fact that Trump favours sovereignist movements which, due to the closeness of their value policies, can be used by the leaders of Serbia and the Republic of Srpska as the ground for their talk and better understanding.<sup>28</sup> Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska, also expects support from the sovereignist leaders in the EU, including the head of Hungarian diplomacy, Peter Szijarto. As Milorad Dodik claims that only Dayton-created and constitutional Bosnia and Herzegovina can be a part of the EU, he is fully supported by Hungary. He also expresses his astonishment at how “West European liberals and US democrats treat the Republic of Srpska”.<sup>29</sup>

Vlade Smović, who holds a PhD Political Science degree, believes that the Serbian side will take advantage of this opportunity because the Serbian leaders on both sides of the Drina have nothing to lose. They should provide the scope for economic cooperation, which could have a positive impact on the Serb area as a whole.<sup>30</sup>

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27 “Promene u Vašingtonu – nade i strepnje za Banjaluku i Sarajevo, *Politika*, 17 November 2024.

28 Ibid.

29 Dodik: “Ekonomija umesto ideologije”, *Politika*, 13 September 2024

30 Ibid.

## FOREIGN ANALYSTS ABOUT THE POSSIBLE ATTITUDE OF THE NEW ADMINISTRATION TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS

Many analysts agree that the Western Balkans will not be on Trump’s priority list. However, as emphasized by Janusz Bugajski, his transactional policy may threaten the fragile peace in the region. While President Biden has ceded too much terrain to Belgrade and has allowed it to disturb its neighbours, it can be even more likely that Trump will accept the dominant role of Serbia and reduce his support for the sovereignty of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.<sup>31</sup>

Although Russian media, like *Russia Today*, have a dose of distrust towards Trump, they still believe that Serbia should “trade” with Trump. It is believed that the Washington Agreement should certainly be the starting point provided that it is significantly updated, so that it can be revitalized.

This would imply resolving the Serbian issue in a broader context, the inclusion of the Republic of Srpska and Montenegro in the Agreement, beginning within the so-called mini Schengen, that is, the “Open Balkans”, the rehabilitation of all political prisoners of The Hague Tribunal and their release. And, above all else, the US derecognition of Kosovo’s independence.<sup>32</sup>

Russia’s Kommersant Balkan correspondent, Gennady Sissojev reported that the Serbian authorities took an important step by counting on

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31 [www.pobjeda.me/clanak/politika-trampa-moze-ugroziti-krhki-mir-u-regionu](http://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/politika-trampa-moze-ugroziti-krhki-mir-u-regionu)

32 [lat.rt.rs/opinion/aleksandar-lukic/119622-tramp-srbi/](http://lat.rt.rs/opinion/aleksandar-lukic/119622-tramp-srbi/)





the support of US President-elect Donald Trump. Namely, as he emphasizes, Vučić readily welcomed the Trumps. In May, the Government signed a free 99-year lease deal with a company owned by Trump's son-in-law for the redevelopment of the site of the former General Staff and Defence Ministry complex in the centre of Belgrade.<sup>33</sup>

On this occasion, the former Chief of the General Staff and now one of the opposition leaders, Zdravko Ponoš, accused the Serbian President of “investing in his political future”, while waiting to win Donald Trump's support.<sup>34</sup>

## THE EU AND DONALD TRUMP'S VICTORY

Most analysts agree that Trump's victory is a disaster for Europe. The British *Guardian* points out that Europeans stand to suffer strategically, economically and politically from his “America first” policy as well as his unpredictability and transactional approach to global issues. The undermining of NATO, encouraging of non-liberal nationalists everywhere, transatlantic trade war and fight over Europe's regulation of American social media platforms, artificial intelligence and cryptocurrencies are only some of the main risks of Trump's second term.<sup>35</sup>

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, one of the few strong centre-right leaders in the EU, stated that “the era of geopolitical outsourcing is

over”. According to him, Europe should finally grow up and believe in its own strength. He is not the only one who wants Trump's victory to encourage Europeans to do collectively more for their defence and strengthen NATO's European pillar. France has pleaded for such a “strategic autonomy” for a long time.<sup>36</sup>

And precisely this uncertainty over America's security umbrella forced Europeans to think about their future independently from the United States. In other words, this forced them to speed up militarization. In this connection, the European Commission's Executive Vice-President, Margrethe Vestager, said: “This is the first time we use the EU budget to support member states in commonly procuring defence products. We are investing 300 million euros in five projects addressing critical and urgent defence capability gaps. This will allow to provide for a better value for money for national defence budgets, improve the interoperability of European armed forces, strengthen our industry, and make Europe better prepared to face defence threats. Importantly, the selected projects will also increase our support for Ukraine, with additional defence equipment.”<sup>37</sup>

Hungary, which holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union (June-December 2024), tried to present Serbia as an important regional country that should be admitted to the EU. Hungarian President Orbán said that Europe “must understand that Serbia does not need the European Union, but that the Union needs Serbia”. He added

33 [www.danas.rs/svet/vucic-tramp-ruski-komersant/](http://www.danas.rs/svet/vucic-tramp-ruski-komersant/)

34 Ibid.

35 [www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/guardian-pobjeda-trumpa-je-katastrofa-za-europu/2614001.aspx](http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/guardian-pobjeda-trumpa-je-katastrofa-za-europu/2614001.aspx)

36 [www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/guardian-pobjeda-trumpa-je-katastrofa-za-europu/2614001.aspx](http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/guardian-pobjeda-trumpa-je-katastrofa-za-europu/2614001.aspx)

37 [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-boosts-defence-readinEess-first-ever-financial-support-common-defence-procurement-2024-11-14\\_en](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-boosts-defence-readinEess-first-ever-financial-support-common-defence-procurement-2024-11-14_en)



that “Europe had problems with growth and dynamics and that only new EU members, including Serbia as the best candidate, can lend it a new impetus. We will keep the interests of Serbia and the EU in mind”<sup>38</sup>

At the summit of the European Political Community in Budapest (6 November) Orban enabled President Vučić to deliver a speech. Encouraged by Donald Trump’s victory, he assumed a more confident stance and said that the EU should change its strategy for the entire Western Balkans, including Serbia, and make strategic enlargement decisions. His speech also had a blackmail tone, which was joined by Orban himself. However, there are no indications to suggest that Serbia has turned towards reform and it is becoming increasingly clear that Serbia is resorting to more repressive measures and the annihilation of democratic achievements no matter how small.

According to the latest European Commission progress report, Serbia made no progress on the core issues. Apart from a lack of progress in Chapters 23 and 24, Serbia’s relations with Russia and China, dialogue with Kosovo and snap elections are the key issues addressed in the progress report for Serbia. However, during her visit to Belgrade, Ursula von der Leyen praised Vučić for the progress in democracy and the rule of law, while the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, pointed out that Vučić promised that things would get better. Despite the criticism in this report, the EU representatives still keep the door open for Serbia.

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38 [n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-poslusao-vulina-sa-piculom-ce-razgovarati-tanja-miscevic/](https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-poslusao-vulina-sa-piculom-ce-razgovarati-tanja-miscevic/)

Oliver Varhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, presented the European Commission’s 2024 enlargement package to the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs. On this occasion, he also advocated the need for opening a new negotiation cluster with Serbia, because it showed the clear signs of its orientation towards the EU and that the Commission supported the opening of new clusters.<sup>39</sup> However, his request has not yet been supported, because Germany, the Netherlands, Croatia and the Baltic countries oppose it just because of the claims made in this Report.

At the same time, President Vučić reacted very negatively to the appointment of Croatian politician Tonino Picula as the new European Parliament’s rapporteur for Serbia. This only shows his resentment against one of the EU member states which has been going on since the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party to power (2012). When Tonino Picula sent condolence messages to the families of the victims in Novi Sad and asked for one minute of silence in the European Parliament, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin, who is known as Vučić’s highly trusted man, said a series of offensive statements against Picula such as: “When you appoint Ustasha scum as the European Parliament’s rapporteur for Serbia it is no surprise that every tragedy in Serbia is used to inflict even more pain on Serbia. The vulture could not keep quiet even when it comes to human lives. I don’t know what the European Parliament thinks Ustasha means in Serbia, but I do know that I will ask the President and the Prime Minister to ensure

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39 [www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/145931/varhelji-predstavio-paket-prosirenja-ek-za-2024-godinu-srbija-pokazala-jasne-znake-orijentacije-ka-eu/vest](https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/145931/varhelji-predstavio-paket-prosirenja-ek-za-2024-godinu-srbija-pokazala-jasne-znake-orijentacije-ka-eu/vest)



that this scam is not received by anyone in Serbia except for the minister who has to deal with such phenomena.”<sup>40</sup>

## THE NEW REALITY IN SERBIA

While the authorities are expecting that the international circumstances will continue to serve their interests, the internal situation is becoming increasingly fragile. The series of tragic events (the mass shooting at the Vladimir Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade and, one day later, the shooting spree in the villages around Mladenovac, 2023) assumed serious proportions, especially after the recent tragedy in Novi Sad (1 November 2024). There is also the great discontent about the lithium mining deal with foreign partners and numerous other non-transparent deals. The citizens hit the streets en masse against the corrupt and nonprofessional authorities that are responsible for the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy, killing 15 people – most of them young. The Novi Sad tragedy only exposed the character of the authorities which are ruthless when it comes to the realization of their interests, even if this implies a high cost to the entire society.

Vučić tried to use various manipulation tactics and control over the mainstream media in order to blur the scale of the tragedy, but he failed. Mass arrests of young protesters and their detention without legal grounds have further radicalized protesters. The fight in the parliament has served for the adoption of the budget without a debate and opposition members which, under the circumstances, threatens to block the work of parliament.

For the first time, students and universities have become massively involved, which instils hope that new politicians with new messages will be profiled. This is exactly what the regime fears the most, which explains its increasing repression against citizens. Goran Ješić, the former Vojvodina Government Vice-President in charge of agriculture, water management and forestry, stated that “there is the need for a new political party that will be clearly ideologically profiled and national and whose seat will be in Novi Sad. The first such political party in the history of Serbia’s multi-party system. We must also restore the ideology without which politics is based on money and populism. In that way, we have no chance against Vučić.”<sup>41</sup>

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40 [www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1429099/ustasko-djubre-nije-mogao-umukne-kada-pitanju-ljudski-zivoti-vulin-odgovorio-piculi](http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1429099/ustasko-djubre-nije-mogao-umukne-kada-pitanju-ljudski-zivoti-vulin-odgovorio-piculi)

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41 “Jasan je lanac odgovornosti u mafijaškoj piramidi”, *Vreme*, 28 November 2024





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Trump's victory revives the uncertainty of the future of NATO, while the relations between the United States and the European Union will be much less strategic and less comprehensive. America will certainly be focused on its own strategic interests, national security and economy and not on global efforts to support democratic processes in the world.

Belgrade recognizes America's abandonment of democratic values as the primary gain from Trump's victory, because it encourages nationalist, authoritarian and populist leaders like Vučić, Orban and Fico, and can radicalize the European right on many issues (gender issues and the weakening of European liberal values).

Starting from Trump's pre-election priorities, his victory has brought additional uncertainty and anxiety into the Western Balkans.

As the Western Balkans is destined to be linked to the EU, since all countries in the region declaratively want to become EU members, the EU is faced with the urgent question of its self-definition under new circumstances. Only the accelerated policy of EU enlargement to the

Western Balkans can be the guarantee that there will be no escalation in the region. At the same time, this would mean that Europe is turning towards itself.

Judging by the previous statements by the commissioners, especially those in charge of the Balkans and EU enlargement, the new EU Commission will have a much clearer position not only on enlargement but also on Russia, and will demand from Serbia to align its foreign policy with that of the EU.

The growing discontent of Serbian citizens opens up the prospects for new policies, but it will be necessary that the EU clearly recognizes its new partners on the political scene and in media. For it is hard to imagine changes without EU support. It must be borne in mind that the nationalist policy of the SNS (and Milošević's policy before it) has entirely destroyed institutions, made it impossible for the opposition to act regardless of its weakness, suppressed critical opinion, normalized war crimes and prevent any attempt to distance the society from Milošević's project.