

# Trump and the Balkan Princes: What Trump's presidency means for South East Europe

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Donald Trump's presidency has already raised a number of major questions about the United States' relationship with its key allies and neighbours. But what impact will his administration have on the Balkans? **Florian Bieber** outlines four reasons why Trump's presidency will matter for the region, building on his previous [article](#) 'Ten rules by a 21st-century Machiavelli for the Balkan Prince'.



**Niccolò Machiavelli, portrait by Santi di Tito. (CC0 Public domain)**

Ever since Donald Trump took office in the United States, commentators have been trying to make sense of his "rule". Some have compared him to [Venezuela's Hugo Chavez](#), others to [Vladimir Putin](#), [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#), [Slobodan Milošević](#), and even local chieftain [Milorad Dodik](#).

Some of these comparisons are insightful, while others are a stretch beyond reason. Yet, there is an irony here: If Trump claims to stand for "America first" and appeals to America's uniqueness, the comparisons with other autocrats have resulted in the US being contrasted with other states in public debates and commentary more than ever before. No longer does the US stand aloof, defined by its manifest destiny. It is ordinary, vulnerable and comparable.

Some scholars and commentators have evoked their East European experience in attempting to [think about](#) and [confront](#) Trump. I have wondered aloud as to how western reporting would talk about Trump if he were elected in fictitious [Balkan Syldavia](#). When I wrote my advice for the [Balkan Prince](#) two years ago, the world was a very different place. Today, many of the rules apply for Trump and other candidates around the world, as do [my rules](#) for

his opponents.

But how has the Trump presidency changed the Balkan princes? Some [princely media](#) have celebrated the election of Trump in the hope that he will come to their rescue. That might be overly optimistic. Trump has displayed little interest in foreign policy beyond walls, offending foreign leaders and bombing enemies. The Balkans, one might say luckily, so far appears beyond his horizon. Yet, his presidency will matter for at least four reasons.

### 1. **The return of geopolitics**

The shift of thinking, acting and writing about the Balkans from focusing on EU integration, democracy and norms to geopolitical influence, national interests and foreign actors began before Trump, but his presidency has accelerated it. The weakness of the EU has made individual member states broker deals, like Austria in closing the Western Balkan route in Macedonia for refugees, which have little to do with EU integration and more with “good old” national interest.

The emphasis on national interests over norms, shared ideas of democracy and rule of law is giving rise to dangerous pyromaniacs, like Timothy Less in [his piece](#) for Foreign Affairs arguing for a redrawing of the borders. Others have since [followed suit](#). They all appear to believe that with Trump in power, there is an opening for a grand redesign.

### 2. **The end of Euro-Atlantic integration**

The foundation of reform for the past quarter century in Central and South East Europe has been Euro-Atlantic integration, based on the pillar of NATO and EU membership. NATO is in jeopardy with Trump. While it might not be nixed by him, the credibility of the alliance is under threat. After all, the defensive alliance rests on deterrence by virtue of the credible claim to defend each member. With a Trump presidency, that credible deterrence is in doubt.

Second, EU integration and the EU's problem solving in the Western Balkans has always had silent (and sometimes more vocal) US backing. This kind of backing might dissipate (at best) or turn into an outright adversarial relationship. Balkan princes might try (and succeed) in playing the EU, its member states and the US off against each other, in addition to Turkey, Russia and others. With partners a la carte, the princes might be more tempted to push for outright authoritarianism.

### 3. **Bling-bling authoritarianism**

It is great to have Putin and Erdoğan as role models, but if you can just follow the US as a model, there is even more legitimacy. From his macho demeanour and the bling-bling of Trump tower, to the portrayal of the media as an enemy, and anti-Muslim rhetoric and measures, Trump makes for a great (the best) role model. If the US supported EU efforts in the past, it now presents a very different model to follow. Now Balkan princes can refer to Trump when they attack judges, the media or their political opponents.

### 4. **America first**

In recent years, Balkan princes have had to bet on European integration and talk of reform rather than nationalism. If they played with nationalism, it was part of the hot and cold with the EU, and was always quickly tempered (with the exception of Milorad Dodik, who has been rather unhinged in his nationalist rhetoric).

Nationalist rhetoric has been making a gradual return to the wider US and European public in recent years. Brexit and Trump have not only re-legitimised the principle of favouring one's own nation, but they have also reintroduced a style of jargon to the public debate that was once limited to the fringes of politics. When Informer and Kurir and other tabloids in the Balkans talk about ‘war’ and ‘traitors’ on a daily basis, they are not alone, they are in the company of the Daily Mail, Fox and Breitbart.

## The spirit of the times

**“So far, the Balkan princes have remained committed to the EU, but they are testing the waters.” – Florian Bieber**

The European Union – not only the organisation, but also the ideas behind it, the principles of consensus seeking, compromise, multi-national cooperation and all of the muddled complexity it involves – has been caught unprepared, despite the fact (or because of the fact) that it has already been in a state of crisis for several years. The EU has been able to hold the Balkan princes in check because there was no other credible alternative for Balkan states than hoping to join one day, and because citizens wanted it – they still do, despite everything.

Now, the EU has grown increasingly silent and other voices louder. So far, the Balkan princes have remained committed to the EU, at least in their words, but they are testing the waters. For years, they have been eroding their democracies and now they are probing the red lines of the EU. Today the EU still holds great sway in the Western Balkans, probably here more than anywhere. Yet, this is largely not due to the EU itself, but rather because some of its members remain influential and important – politically and economically – in the region. This gives hope that the princes might not gain too much inspiration from Trump, but US neglect at best or anti-EU positions in the region at worst, might convince the princes to be more “princely” and less democratic.

They might well heed [Machiavelli’s advice](#) on how to confront *fortuna*, the whims of coincidence: “he will be successful who directs his actions according to the spirit of the times, and that he whose actions do not accord with the times will not be successful.”

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. It is based on a recent talk by the author at South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX).*

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Florian Bieber is a Professor of Southeast European Studies and director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. He studied at Trinity College (USA), the University of Vienna and Central European University, and received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna. Between 2001 and 2006 he worked in Belgrade (Serbia) and Sarajevo (Bosnia & Hercegovina) for the European Centre for Minority Issues. He is a Visiting Professor at the Nationalism Studies Program at Central European University and has taught at the University of Kent, Cornell University, the University of Bologna and the University of Sarajevo.

