

Pobjeda Interview with TLN Chairman Dr. Michael Haltzel

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Pobjeda: *Do you think that the enlargement process of the European Union will continue, or do you think it has been completed? After the elections for the European parliament in May can we expect a more active and constructive role by the European Union in the Western Balkan region?*

MH: No, I do not think the enlargement process is over, but I believe that in the short-term the primary issues for the European Union (EU) will include minimizing the negative consequences of the expected Brexit; coming to grips with migration; meaningfully disciplining members that stray from “European values” of rule of law, democracy, and human rights (e.g. Hungary, Poland) or from fiscal norms (e.g. Italy); and making the unwieldy EU more transparent and relevant to its citizens. Without underrating the opposition in some quarters to further EU enlargement, I think a bigger obstacle is the absence of a “champion.” I don’t sense much enthusiasm any more for a “Europe whole and free,” which, at least unofficially, used to be a common policy of NATO, the EU, and the U.S. The EU’s prioritizing internal affairs, however, should not preclude its playing a constructive role in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, preferably in coordination with the U.S.

Pobjeda: *The influence of Russia in the region -- especially in Serbia, Macedonia, and Bosnia’s Republic Srpska -- is very strong. Montenegro is trying, as part of NATO, to do everything to stop any destabilization by Moscow. In the future can we expect something similar to what happened in October 2016 in Montenegro?*

MH: Moscow’s ongoing effort to destabilize countries lying between Russia and the EU is the oxygen of Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy. Grounded in Putin’s obsolete zero-sum view of international relations, his foreign adventurism also serves as a tactic to distract Russian citizens from the failure of his kleptocratic economic model. Having said that, I consider another Kremlin-instigated coup attempt in the Western Balkans along the lines of Montenegro in 2016 unlikely. I am more concerned by the possibility of expanded Russian military aggression against Ukraine, or even of an externally directed “soft coup” in Belarus. Podgorica certainly must resist Russian meddling through vigilant counter-intelligence measures, but more important is for Montenegro to continue strengthening its democracy, which is the foundation of the country’s EU candidacy.

Pobjeda: *Relations between Serbia and Montenegro are complicated. Strong words, especially from the Serbian side, are voiced almost every day. How do you see the relations between the two countries, and do you see Russian influence in this situation too?*

MH: Words have meaning – and influence – so I find the ongoing verbal mud-slinging between Belgrade and Podgorica extremely regrettable. Neither side is blameless, and neither one gains from this behavior. If both Serbia and Montenegro were members of the EU, not to mention of NATO, this animosity would quickly dissipate. Led by President Milo Đukanović, Montenegro has definitively cast its lot with western Euro-Atlantic institutions and is beginning to reap the benefits. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić continues to vacillate, counting on somehow being able to “square the circle” by eventually joining the EU while retaining a special relationship with Moscow. This belief will surely prove to be illusory, but I fear that until Belgrade realizes the futility of its balancing act, its maneuvering will contribute to tension in the region.

Pobjeda: *Does Washington see the Western Balkans as a problem? We still have a lot of unsolved issues, and the support of the U.S. is necessary. Sometimes it looks like we are not on Washington’s agenda any more. What is your opinion?*

MH: Donald Trump’s amateurish, impulsive, and authoritarian-friendly foreign policy, often carried out in direct opposition to his advisors’ recommendations, does not inspire much confidence. But in international relations there is usually more than meets the eye, and this is the case in the Western Balkans, which is still on Washington’s agenda. I applaud the recently disclosed back-channel American attempt at mediating the tariff dispute between Belgrade and Prishtina (maybe the word “tariff” inspired Trump to get involved). While I also hope that the U.S. joins Germany and other European allies in opposing a potentially explosive land-swap between Kosovo and Serbia (now less likely than last autumn), first things first. If the American mediation between Vučić and Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi enables a settlement of the tariff issue, thereby depriving Russia of leverage with Serbia, then the Trump administration will deserve credit, and the faltering U.S. reputation in the Western Balkans will receive a much needed boost. I hope the Kosovo mediation is an indication of a more coherent U.S. policy in the region, including a renewed involvement in Bosnia and Macedonia.