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Michael Haltzel interview with *Pobjeda*

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POBJEDA: Our region had numerous problems before the pandemic. But it is now best seen that this part of Europe still does not have firm guidelines on where to go. The Serbian president used the pandemic to prove that China and Russia are his main partners. Could such leadership of Serbia again cloud the European perspective of the Western Balkans?

MICHAEL HALTZEL: You are right; this is a very difficult period with established guidelines seeming to fade. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that the only future for the Western Balkans is the European Union. Certainly the EU is facing major decisions in its internal governance. The governments of Poland and especially Hungary are openly flouting democratic norms, and so far the EU has not disciplined them in an effective, meaningful way. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Italy and Spain particularly hard, has added to the EU's woes. Although it has made much-needed emergency funding available, because of opposition from northern countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Finland and others the EU has refused to issue "corona bonds" or "Eurobonds" to spread the long-term burden among all the members. There are good arguments on both sides of this issue, but until it is solved satisfactorily the north-south divide within the EU will continue to widen.

However difficult it may be, I am confident that the EU will meet these challenges. In any case, what are the real-life choices? What are alternative models for the Western Balkans? Certainly not the autocratic government of Russia, a failing country. Nor of China, whose economic success has been accompanied by ever more technologically intrusive, Orwellian state control.

You mention that the President of Serbia now sees those two repressive countries -- Russia and China -- as his main partners. Perhaps that's not surprising, since as popular protest demonstrations attest, the Serbian government has itself become increasingly authoritarian. Yet Serbia remains officially committed to EU accession. I have long maintained that Serbia, with its well-educated and talented population, cannot sit between two chairs -- the EU and Russia (and now China). A few years ago a senior American diplomat was criticized for saying just that. As a friend of the Serbian people, I would advise its government to definitively cast its future with the democratic European Union.



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POBJEDA: It is clear that it is very difficult to anticipate in this moment, but do you think that the enlargement process has survived and that, regardless of the challenges ahead, member states will not give up on this EU project?

MH: The decision of the European Council to begin accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was a welcome development. The President of France had angered many people by his insistence on structural reform of the accession process as a precondition for moving forward. In theory there's nothing wrong with structural reform if it is truly necessary and not just an excuse for "slow-walking" the enlargement process to death. The newly enacted reforms, plus the Council's decision, indicate that he, and the EU, are serious about continuing the enlargement process.

Ultimately the remaining enlargement skeptics within the EU will, I believe, come to see that the longstanding American formulation -- a "Europe Whole, Free, and at Peace" -- is the only viable future for the continent and can only be achieved by incorporating fully qualified candidates into the Union. And it goes without saying that Montenegro, which is the candidate farthest advanced toward membership, has both a special opportunity and a special responsibility, to continue actively to pursue its reform efforts.

POBJEDA: The situation in USA is very complicated. Do you think that this health crisis has proven that America needs new leadership? Can the COVID-19 pandemic help Joe Biden to get into the White House?

MH: This question, which demands a lengthy response, is painful for me to answer. I'm a proud American who has been accused -- probably correctly -- of being a "flag-waver." In our democracy patriotism means loyalty to the Constitution.

In that connection I think Donald Trump must rank as the worst president in modern American history. Despite having taken an oath to "support and defend" the Constitution, Trump has consistently shown that his primary loyalty is to himself -- his personal, financial, and political interests. For Trump securing re-election is his overriding goal. To win re-election he



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consciously tries to exploit existing divisions among Americans – economic, cultural, ethnic, racial, or religious – rather than to unite the population as a normal president would.

One day Trump asserts that the president has absolute power, which, of course, would be completely illegal. The next day he makes a 180-degree turn, saying he's turning over combatting the COVID-19 pandemic to the state governors. He's obviously trying to have it both ways: satisfying his populist base on the one hand, and preparing the ground for blaming the governors when the pandemic's toll gets higher.

It's perfectly ridiculous to think the federal government shouldn't play a leading role in fighting the pandemic. The 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and five territories shouldn't have to compete with each other for medical equipment, protective gear, masks, even swabs for testing. The Governor of Maryland, a Republican, asked his wife – a Korean-American – to speak in the Korean language with South Korea's ambassador in order to facilitate a shipment of half a million coronavirus test kits from Seoul to Maryland!

President Trump's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been an epic failure. He had numerous warnings but preferred to play politics with the issue, repeatedly assuring the American people that everything was under control. South Korea and the United States announced their first deaths from COVID-19 on the same day. South Korea immediately instituted widespread testing and contact tracing. Trump waited six weeks, and even after that failed to create a coherent national policy. Since February the infection curve in South Korea has flattened out, and deaths from COVID-19 are declining. Meanwhile, the United States has by far the highest number of infections and COVID-19 deaths in the world, and President Trump bizarrely seems to advocate citizens' self-injecting laundry detergent as a "miracle cure."

Will Trump's pathetic performance regarding COVID-19 help Joe Biden in the election? Nothing in this world is certain, and many other issues will emerge between now and November. But I do believe that millions of voters will remember Trump's pandemic fiasco and vote for Biden.