

**What does a second Obama term mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkan region?**

**Sarajevo, November 2012.**

## **Executive Summary**

The 2012 US presidential elections had Europe on its toes, hoping that US citizens chose a candidate that would surely win if the rest of the world had a vote. But Bosnians had little to go on, they've only known Obama to be the hands off sort, leaving the region to the expertise of Biden and Clinton and their deputies. It is hard for Bosnians to know what the election results would mean if Romney were elected. The European Union was largely absent from presidential discussions, so why would the Balkan region and enlargement countries be a topic of discussion?

Regional policy has been an exercise in cooperation with the European Union, taking a backseat to the Accession process and contributing with aid and missions that focus on assisting Bosnia and Herzegovina in fulfilling NATO accession conditions. As a result, the US gets to play good cop, while the EU works, so far fruitlessly, to tackle corruption, constitutional reform and other hot button topics that cast the EU as bad cop. The appointment of the next US Secretary of State is the latest topic of conversation making headlines in the US. However, US-Bosnian relations and their engagement in the region is unlikely to see any major changes. Either way, the US may decide that it better serve Bosnians and its constituents at home by losing the good cop act and put tangible pressure on politicians.

## **Background: Obama first term**

The US first developed its regional policies in the Balkans following President Clinton's intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the renewed role of NATO on the continent as a peace keeping mission in BiH and work in Kosovo. These conflicts were widely considered to be "Europe's problem" and following de facto intervention of US forces under NATO auspices, the brunt of responsibility was transferred to a dual system of international governance with the European Union. Steadily decreasing US engagement is partially explained by this transfer. However, arguments can be made that this shift followed failed attempts at constitutional reform in 2005, also known as the April Package, and further engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

President Obama's first term in office offered few changes from the Bush administration's approach to the region. The US continued to fund projects and its mission in BiH and the region to encourage stability and peace. However, the Obama administration had much more experience with the region with the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. Her previous experience in the region afforded through her husband's presidency was not overlooked. She and vice-President Joe Biden travelled multiple times to Sarajevo and the message is constant: Bosnia and Herzegovina needs reform, fast. Clinton said, "These reforms are needed for their own sake, but they are also needed if your country is to fulfill the goal of becoming part of the European Union and NATO." If you want the reward, you must do the work. Biden used a silver lining approach by pointing out the potential for the current structure, with the state integrating into EU institutions "with two vibrant entities." While the United States keeps an eye on the political developments in the region, their attention has shifted to other instabilities where their involvement demands greater attention, as demonstrated by their focus in Kosovo.

Meanwhile, the European Union has engaged with Western Balkan governments in the accession process, which has proven particularly difficult and stagnant in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It has been up

to representatives of the institutions in Brussels like Catherine Ashton, or the head of Delegation, Peter Sorenson to deliver demands for reform and change that go largely unanswered. So while the EU bears the brunt of the criticisms for the international community's presence in BiH, the United States delivers messages filled with silver-lining, simply reiterating the same message they've delivered for almost a decade. This has created a good cop/ bad cop scenario, where the US is perceived as delivering and fostering successful missions while the EU has publicly tackled the reforms and negotiations with the Bosnian government.

### **Background: Obama Second term, what to expect**

Two term limits have a purpose—to focus politicians enough to make decisions without the fear of loss in the next election. Now that Obama is in a second term, many hope that he will make good on campaign promises from his first term and second campaign. The second term will be different from the first as his cabinet will get a shake up with the resignation of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. The European community was surprised by the lack of consideration in the election for relations with the EU. While Obama maintained that the EU and the countries within are the most important partners for the US, both candidates prioritized Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern relations.

As a result, it is difficult for anyone to tell what policy in the continent will look like. One aspect is certain, governments are looking to cut budgets and reduce deficits where ever possible and as the aid to BiH has decreased steadily for some time, it is fair to say both the EU and the US are looking to get more bang for their buck.

Therefore, BiH and other enlargement countries in the region can understand that the developments in the relationship between the EU and the US will have an impact on the region. In addition, it is possible that the US pursues that same track it has for the last four years provided conditions do not deteriorate, particularly in the relations between Republika Srpska and the Federation. However, the state of stagnation cannot persist forever. Therefore, Bosnian officials should prepare for the very real possibility that the EU and subsequently the US becomes more restrictive and adamant regarding funding conditions. In return, the EU and the US should prepare for the Bosnian government to entertain attention and support from other regional powers like Turkey or the historically constant, even if inconsistent, influence of Russia. Short term gains from these relations may overshadow the long term perspective of EU membership.

One possibility is that the nature of the US mission does change in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the traditional role of the US and NATO presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in assistance of NATO accession criteria, they have the same incentive to work toward anti-corruption as well as constitutional reform. However, the EU and the US are not to the point where they are prepared to give Bosnia and Herzegovina the ultimatum of sink or swim. The EU is hopeful that its new financial instruments and sector approach strategy will bring about broader reform and allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to better understand what is expected from the government and citizens to meet accession criteria. Regardless, the US will continue to support and promote the messages it has for the past four years: constitutional reform is crucial and EU and NATO membership is vital and to an large extent, non-negotiable.

## Recommendations

1. Fully align with the European Union on regional issues. This relationship and collaboration has been the most successful between the US and the EU to speak of and it would be beneficial for the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to present full support. In addition, it would be beneficial for US mission objectives to shift into the same realms of reform to combat within the NATO context. For example, the fight against corruption and the continued training and reform of the police and military.
2. Use influence in the push for constitutional reform. The most important reform that the US and the EU can agree on is the need for constitutional reform and the US could do more to pressure Bosnian politicians to that end. Actions need to reflect their message if the international community's presence is going to work. The US has always spoken strongly against the extreme nationalist party of Dodik and this message will continue, however with enough pressure, and support to the citizenry, they can demand reform from the main Serb representative party.
3. Regional cooperation is a mainstay of the EU integration process for Western Balkan countries. It provides peace and stability, which are the main aims and justifications for the continued presence of the US mission. As such, the US should also tailor its messages towards Serbia and Croatia about supporting and agitating nationalist rhetoric and action within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international community has spoken directly to these actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and conveyed that they will not allow an independent Republika Srpska. As Serbia's own accession is in the balance, it would do them well to distance themselves from the extreme rhetoric of Dodik without completely alienating the population that looks to Serbia for support. Keeping a major focus on Kosovo, may be a message to RS that their shouts are not being heard anymore as American reports suggest confidence that Bosnia and Herzegovina is stable and conflict is not likely to reoccur.
4. Civil Society Organizations are a positive force in Bosnian public sector and have proven to be productive partners to the state government and the international community. The latest enlargement strategy expresses the EU's aim to support and promote the inclusion of CSOs in the development and reform of Bosnian institutions, when previous strategies to engage directly and primarily with Bosnian government institutions yielded little success. The US mission has aimed to support and build up civil society since the onset, and their investment has not been a waste. Continued support and encouragement of CSOs to create bottom-up pressure to compliment the top-down strategy of formal diplomatic relations could be the best strategy to force movement in formal government institutions.

This is the reflection, analysis and opinion of Heidi Hullinger, MSc European Public Policy, University College London, during her internship at the CSS. These opinions are not expressed on behalf of CSS.

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