

The Discursive Construction of Images and Identities: Public Statements on the Balkans of the Trump Administration (2017-2018)

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Abstract In the era of post-truth politics, in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”, it is worth exploring how the political elite legitimizes in public discourse its behaviour, decisions, actions. The digital forms of public communication and official statements of major political leaders contribute to setting patterns of thought and to promoting certain values and norms. These developments have largely determined the choice of the topic of this piece of research - policy implications of the statements of top US officials on the Balkans.

Keywords: image, identity, Balkanism, critical discourse analysis, foreign policy

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the era of post-truth politics, in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” [1], it is worth exploring how the political elite legitimizes in public discourse its behaviour, decisions, actions. The refugee crisis and global terrorism, Donald Trump's election, Brexit, two-speed Europe have prompted political analysts and researchers to assume that a new world order has been established. Today's information society and technology-driven economy have given rise to virtual communities and a netocracy. The digital forms of public communication and the traditional (now largely digitalized) mass media, among other newly emerged non-state players, contribute to setting patterns of thought and to promoting certain values and norms. These developments have largely determined the choice of the topic of this piece of research - policy implications of the statements of top US officials on the Balkans, a region that is dependent on the external environment in terms of its perception and conceptualization as “the Other”.

This paper's analytical focus is directed not merely at what the Balkans' image is, but at the linguistic, discourse and cognitive mechanisms employed for its construction. It aims to apply the method of critical cognitive-pragmatic discourse analysis that incorporates the theoretical premises and categories of the branches of modern linguistics. To this effect, the major research objectives pertain to showing how the Balkans' image is constructed, on the one hand, and how the analysis of language and speech patterns exposes the political identity and governance style of examined leaders, on the other.

With this background in mind, we come to three central questions this paper addresses:

First, what is the constructed image of the Balkans and has its “Balkanist” image changed over time in the statements of Trump administration?

Second, what do the analyzed statements suggest about the political identity and governance style of the US President and of his close aids – Vice President Mike Pence and former Defence Secretary Jim Mattis?

Third, how does critical cognitive-pragmatic discourse analysis help explore policy in general, in particular the US foreign policy with regard to the Balkans? Or, to put it more succinctly, where is the Balkans placed within Trump's foreign policy doctrine and strategy?

Answers to the questions formulated above will be primarily sought within the political discourse communicated through public statements of US officials about the Balkans. The specific object of research comprises the available statements since Donald Trump took office in January 2017. The empirical data draw on public statements made across traditional and social media, including US leaders' interviews and tweets. The research topic pertains to the connection between language and identity: the discursive construction of the Balkans' image and of the leaders' self-identity.

This paper holds the view that the dominant patterns of exclusion typical of Western discourse on the Balkans have not been completely eradicated and a deeply rooted stereotype about the region has been reaffirmed. Another held assumption is that the analyzed statements expose the differences between the three top US officials, in terms of political behavior and governance style. The third assumption is that the study shows that the Balkans do not rate high on the foreign policy radar of the Trump administration.

II. EMPIRICAL DATA AND SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The empirical data was selected given the relevance of their content: foreign policy priorities and the Balkans. Given the vast amount of media coverage and televised speaking events throughout Donald Trump's official visits abroad, a small but representative subset of statements has been selected: three statements made during or in the wake of Trump's European tour in July 2018. This paper does not aim to discuss in detail Trump's foreign policy. Considering that the research interest is focused on the text and talk

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produced by leading US politicians, the scope of this study does not include official US documents and strategies.

In terms of methodology, this paper relies on the discourse approach, the major assumption underlying it being that “all language use is grounded in and simultaneously creates multiple layers of social context” (Sclafani, 2018, p. 10). The study of social identity construction in discourse is part of sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) and linguistic anthropology (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg, 2006; Tannen, 2007; Newmann, 2006). It is positioned within the mass mediated realm of political discourse, integrating the ethnographic understanding of the connection between language and politics (Wodak, 2009, 2015). According to Laclau and Mouffe, “a discursive structure is not only a ‘cognitive’ or ‘contemplative’ entity but an articulation practice that establishes and organizes social relations” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 81).

In this context, an approach which covers an investigation area broad enough to encompass the research domain outlined above is the one of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As van Dijk maintains, CDA “typically goes beyond a classical study of the structural properties of text or talk, and relates these structures to social structures” (van Dijk, 2017, p. 26). CDA carries out investigations placing their object of study within so broad a socio-political context as to be able to explain why texts exist in society the way they do. The way mental representations (e.g. knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, etc.) have become part of Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS) analyses is through their role as mediators between conventionalized social structures and actual discursive performances. As van Dijk writes,

“Thus, whereas most CDS studies describe and explain discourse in terms of its social and political contexts, SCDS goes one crucial step further and includes a cognitive interface between discourse and society. It claims that there is no direct link between such different structures as those of discourse and society, and that social or political structures can only affect text and talk through the minds of language users. This is possible because social members represent both social structures as well as discourse structures in their minds, and thus are able to relate these mentally before expressing them in actual text and talk.” (van Dijk, 2017, p. 26).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Balkans and Balkanism

Research on the Balkans conducted within the humanities and social sciences during the past few decades has been focused on the mechanisms through which the Balkans, or South-eastern Europe, have been transforming into an “internal Other” within the European imagination. The studies conducted by Larry Wolf (1994), Vesna Goldsworthy (1998), Maria Todorova (2009), to mention but a few, established the basis for the deconstruction of western discourses through which Balkan societies were

orientalized or, to resort to Todorova’s theoretical concept, balkanized.

Many researchers place the mechanisms of discursive shaping of the Balkan Other within the analytical frame of Orientalism (Hammond 2004, 2006). Acknowledging the important place of Said’s concept in the academic criticism of discursive shaping of the Other and otherness, Maria Todorova argues that “there is overlap and complementarity” between the rhetoric about the Orient and the Balkans; the two are seemingly identical but in effect similar phenomena (Todorova 1997, 11). Todorova introduces the term Balkanism to refer to the discourse on the relationship between the Balkans and the West. In linguistics, the term denotes “characteristics such as the phonetical, morphological, and syntactic, characteristics that define Balkan linguistic union; only occasionally has it had a pejorative meaning” (ibid., p. 193). Furthermore, Todorova identifies the differences between Orientalism and Balkanism: while the Orient is historically and geographically elusive and undefined, the Balkans is a firmly defined entity. The elusive nature of the Orient gives rise to the constructed image of a dream country, a symbol of freedom and wealth and to the idea about flight from civilization. “The Balkans, on the other hand, with their unimaginative concreteness, and almost total lack of wealth, induced a straightforward attitude, usually negative, but rarely nuanced” (Todorova 1997, 14). In Todorova’s opinion, the Orient is the unambiguous Other, while “the Balkans are Europe, are part of Europe, although, admittedly, for the past several centuries its provincial part or periphery... Unlike orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity” (ibid., p. 17).

Ever since its conception in *Imagining the Balkans*, the notion of Balkanism has been central to academic debate pertaining to the relationship between the Balkans and the West and conditioned the shaping of a new critical academic tradition within Balkan Studies. Andrew Hammond (2006) draws attention to the similarities between the discourse of 19C British travel writers’ narratives on the Balkans and the one through which Great Britain constructed the image of its colonies. The researcher exposed the continuity between the latter and the discourse related to EU enlargement – the two “share a sense of the Balkans as a borderland that requires Western supervision” (Hammond 2006, p. 8). In her study of the representations of the Balkans in British literature, Vesna Goldsworthy argues that “the process of literary colonisation, in its stages and consequences, is not unlike real colonization” (Goldsworthy 1998, p. 2), conceding that the images of the Balkans in the English-speaking world largely precipitated the region’s perception elsewhere around the world. “The current, predominantly right-wing perception is of the Balkans as a contagious disease, an infectious sore in the soft underbelly of Europe, best left to fester in isolation. The opposing, mainly left-wing – but unconsciously neo-colonial – notion is of Balkan conflicts as revolting departures from the ideal of cosmopolitanism which could and should – to everyone’s benefit – be solved by mature

and responsible powers wielding a big stick and a few small carrots” (ibid., xi).

Donald Trump’s language and speech patterns

The language and rhetorical style of the 45th US President Donald Trump has been given unprecedented attention by political analysts, academia and media. Trump’s language has been the subject of much debate, both in terms of the rhetorical style in which he has delivered criticism of various individuals and groups, and what some have referred to as his “general oratorical lack of coherence and substance” (Sclafani, 2018, p. 1). Scholars of language and gender have weighed in on the sexism and misogyny (Lakoff, 2016; Tannen, 2016) prevalent in his speech. His language has been examined by Robin Lakoff in the context of what she refers to as “the privatization of public discourse” - attributed to the rise of infotainment in the mass media and also with the ascension of women in the public sphere in the late 20th century (Sclafani, 2018, p.7). What is more, the 45th President of the United States has been widely known as one who “has a proclivity for tweeting, typos and trenchant nicknames” [2].

Among typical Trumpisms are two-word expressions such as ‘Great people’, ‘Not good’, whole sentences such as ‘make America great again,’ ‘build the wall’, or even single words – ‘win,’ ‘sad,’ ‘great.’ In her study of Trump’s language of populism, Susan Hunston (2017) concedes Trump’s language is unusual for the president of a major power. People typically expect the President to sound much more educated, smarter and refined than the average American. John MacWhorter (2017) argues that the President is linguistically unadorned and “never leaves the realm of the casual when he speaks in formal circumstances, which is unlike even say indigenous societies where there’s no such thing as reading or writing, there’s always a high way of talking and a low way of talking”. As the researcher suggests, in his public statements Trump as President should have a more responsible sense of truth “than when you’re just engaged in casual talk with your pals”. The president is “numb to the artful, he has a rather narcotic dual way in dismissal and belittlement rather than building and decorating,” and should consider “truth conditions in linguistics”. This analysis, according to the journalist, is in fact “the intersection between narcissism and linguistics.”

According to linguistics professor Jennifer Sclafani¹ (2018), Trump has used language to “create a brand” as a politician. He creates “a spectacle in the way that he speaks: a feeling of strength for the nation, a sense of determination, a sense that he can get the job done through his use of hyperbole and directness.” (ibid.)

Donald Trump’s foreign policy

There has been research on the aspects of Trump’s foreign policy. In his attempt to trace the line of continuity in US foreign policy, J. R. Haines² lays down the major assumption held among political analysts and researchers that “Trump may be an innovator in style, but not in substance”, given that his “foreign policy centers around the idea that the USA is essentially self-sufficient, secure behind its oceanic ramparts, and can choose when and where to engage with the world.” (ibid.). The researcher further argues that “Trump may have stated his case with a unique combination of vehemence and historical ignorance, but his is essentially the same message proclaimed by every successful presidential aspirant since 1992”. (ibid.) Even though Trump may claim to break with all traditions, the President “has straddled a line between rejecting all previous policy and claiming to manage it more effectively. That tension is reflected in both style and substance, which veers between extreme rhetoric and practical continuity, and also between claiming to base foreign policy purely on material interests and transactions and asserting some sort of shared values.” (ibid.)

In his “musings on the Trump doctrine”, J. R. Haines (2016) coins detached primacy as a neologism for Donald Trump’s “view of America’s place in a complex world”. Quoting M.T. Owens (2009), the analyst defines primacy versus unilateralism - “a ‘go-it-alone’ approach in which the United States intimidates both friends and allies, wields power unilaterally, and ignores international institutions.” The so-called Bush Doctrine is arguably a “‘benevolent’ primacy,” characterized as “an approach in keeping with the liberal traditions of the United States but which recognizes the world as a dangerous place in which a just peace is maintained only by the strong.” (ibid.) Owens warns against confusing unilateralism and isolationism:

“Unilateralism, which accepted the need for international cooperation in the form of treaties but rejected alliances as an unnecessary limit on American action, has often been confused with isolationism.” (ibid, p. 14).

According to Haines, Trump “might be said to advocate a second and distinct variation on unilateralism, ... which recognizes the world as a dangerous place but rejects the United States’ role as a hegemonic stabilizer” [3] (Haines, 2018). This is the conclusion Haines arrives at:

“Detached primacy, like all iterations of unilateralism, accepts the need for international cooperation in the form of treaties and rejects alliances. However, whereas benevolent primacy rejects alliances solely because they impose an unnecessary limit on American action, Trump-esque detached primacy adds two more reasons. The first is that alliances are said to impose an unsustainable economic burden on the United States, in part because of free-riding allies... The second detached primacy-specific reason to reject alliances is that they risk entangling the United States in regional conflicts that pose no direct threat to American national interests.” (ibid.)

¹ Author of the book *Talking Donald Trump: A Sociolinguistic Study of Style, Metadiscourse, and Political Identity*, who has been studying the president’s language since he first announced his campaign in 2015

² Co-chair of the Eurasia Program, Executive Director of the Princeton Committee, member of the Board of Trustees at the Foreign Policy Research Institute

Arguing that Americans “are especially fond of boldness and quickly embrace leaders who promise swift and decisive strokes that will change the game completely, whether those strokes come from the right or the left” and that Americans believe that “engagement with the wider world is optional and can be turned on and off at American convenience”, Ronald J. Granieri³ (2018) suggests that contemporary US foreign policy bears resemblance to “the Jacksonian persuasion in foreign affairs, which has experienced such a resurgence in the aftermath of American global over-commitment”. The political analyst makes the following conclusion:

“After nearly seven decades of managing a world system tailored to American policy preferences, American voters have elected presidents who promised to reduce those commitments and reorganize relationships.” (ibid.)

Upon this summary of some typical aspects of Trump’s foreign policy, what follows next are the public statements on the Balkans.

The Balkans in the public statements of top US officials from the Trump administration

After the end of the Cold War, the Balkans was at the center of US attention – the region where the United States proved its leadership and supremacy in the international area. In 1995, it was the United States that pressurized the Serbs into withdrawing from and recognizing Bosnia and Herzegovina as an independent country, and it was the NATO that executed a bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, to stop the ethnic cleansing and repression against Albanian people in Kosovo.

Montenegro

Part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for the bulk of the 20th century, the people of Montenegro won the country’s independence in a referendum held in 2006, while the Montenegrin nation took shape amid war back in 1992.

President Trump appeared to be unhappy with the idea of NATO defending Montenegro under Article 5 of the alliance treaty, which commits members to collective. President Trump’s comment to Fox News’ Tucker Carlson about Montenegro, NATO’s newest member, is alarming. Earlier on, at Trump’s first NATO summit in 2017, he shoved aside Montenegro’s prime minister, Duško Marković, during the so-called family photo that brings together the leaders of the alliance’s member states in order to get a more prominent position in the picture [4]. Taking a question as to why, if Montenegro is attacked, his son should go to war to defend it under NATO’s Article 5 (invoked only once in the wake of 9/11), Trump replied in the following manner. “I’ve asked the same question,” adding an offensive quip about Montenegro’s small size and “very aggressive people,” which he linked with the idea that it could possibly start World War III. “Montenegro is a tiny

country with very strong people ... They’re very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you’re in world war three.” (The Guardian, 19 July 2018).

It was only a year earlier that Vice President Mike Pence made his speech at the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica[5]. Addressing the meeting, Pence says as follows:

“The Adriatic Charter has played a leading role in bringing the Western Balkans into unity with Europe and alliance with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And under President Trump, the United States of America will continue to support each of you as you pursue this future together.”

The Vice President goes on to say that “and by bringing the Adriatic ever closer to the Atlantic, we can ensure a brighter future not only for the Western Balkans, but for the West itself.” However, he does not miss the chance to condescendingly suggest that the countries from the Western Balkans “have the opportunity to settle grievances of the past and bring people of different backgrounds and beliefs together in pursuit of the common good.” This can in turn “strengthen the economies and open the pathway to prosperity for your people through tax and regulatory reform”, “tackle corruption and build accountable and transparent governments which will deliver on the highest aspirations of your people and build confidence among those who would invest in the prosperity of your future.”

As becomes evident from the above-quoted passages from Pence’s speech, a dual movement is constructed which shows the Balkan countries as moving away from the fringes of Europe and away from past violence towards European peace, the EU being the ultimate endpoint for other Balkan countries.

In his address to leaders at the Adriatic Charter Summit meeting, the Vice President described Russia as an “unpredictable country that casts a shadow from the east.”

“Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force,” and “has worked to destabilize the region, undermine your democracies and divide you from each other and from the rest of Europe.” In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia’s destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region, of which Montenegro is a poignant example.

Macedonia

In the context of NATO’s invitation to Macedonia to begin accession talks on the condition that the country amend its constitution and adopt a new name and of the EU’s commitment to setting a date for Macedonian accession talks, pending implementation of the name deal, President Trump has made no official statements. On the occasion of Vice President Pence meeting with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in September 2018, the former congratulated Zaev on the Macedonian-Greek Prespa Agreement to resolve the long-standing name issue between the two countries, expressing his conviction that, once implemented, it “will lead to greater security and prosperity for the entire region”. Pence further voiced his support for

³ Executive Director of the Center for the Study of America and the West, and Host of Geopolitics with Granieri at the Foreign Policy Research Institute

the country as it “moves forward to membership in NATO and the EU”.

The recently resigned Defense Secretary Jim Mattis came up with a statement to the press during his first visit to Macedonia [6]. Explicitly stating that the US-Macedonia “defense relationship is very strong and is getting stronger every day, bolstered by the democratic values that we share”, Mattis describes Macedonia as “a reliable security partner and a valued contributor to global peace and security, serving as a leader in regional security initiatives”⁴. The defense secretary highlights the importance of the Prespa Agreement, which, “alongside key reforms you are implementing under your strategic defense review, unlocks your NATO accession process and allows you, our Macedonian friends, to determine your own future in institutions made up of like-minded countries”. He goes on to quote NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg on the benefits of accession to the alliance, which spurs economic prosperity, increases foreign investment, and strengthens security, where “countries large and small work together to uphold shared principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom from coercion, while others seek to diminish these very values, sowing discord from Syria to Ukraine.” [7]

Kosovo and Serbia deal

Guerrillas from Kosovo’s ethnic Albanian majority fought a war in the late 1990s to break away from Serbia, a war ending with NATO’s bombing intervention against Serbia in 1999. Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and was recognized by more than 100 countries, including the United States and most EU members, which Serbia, together with Russia, China and five EU member states, refused to do. Leaders of Serbia and Kosovo have been engaged in years-long EU-backed talks to seal a permanent peace deal, which would open the path to eventual EU membership for both countries. Prospects of a deal seemed to rise in August 2018, when Presidents Hashim Thaçi and Aleksandar Vučić appeared together at a conference in Austria. Yet the leaders also raised the possibility of changing borders, which provoked strong opposition in Kosovo and split Western powers.

In this context and in a surprise intervention in faltering talks between the two Balkan states, President Trump sent letters to the leaders of the two countries, calling on them to seize the chance to seal a permanent peace deal. “I urge you and the leaders of Kosovo to seize this unique moment, speak with a unified voice during the peace talks, and refrain from actions that would make an agreement more difficult to achieve,” Trump wrote in his letter to Thaçi dated 14 December 2018, which the Kosovan president published on his Facebook page. Trump’s words were allegedly aimed at the Kosovan government under Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, who has criticized Thaçi’s approach to the talks and has taken a harder line with Serbia, including imposing 100 percent tariffs on Serbian

goods. US President further noted that “Failure to capitalize on this opportunity would be a tragic setback, as another chance for a comprehensive peace is unlikely to occur again soon. We stand ready to assist your efforts to reach an agreement that balances the interests of both Kosovo and Serbia. I look forward to hosting you and President Aleksandar Vucic at the White House to celebrate what would be an historic accord” (Politico, 18 December 2018).

The examined statements show that the three countries are incorporated into a wide picture of the Balkans as a region of anxiety. The public statements of the quoted US officials reproduce the image of the Balkans to varying degrees but, more importantly, they operationalise this representation to make the case for the further expansion of Western institutions (NATO and the EU). There is a confluence of rising pressures in the Balkans.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The paper drew attention to what is, to my conviction, an important issue at stake in international affairs – the image discursively constructed in the public statements made by the incumbent political elite in the United States. A major objective was to expose whether the region’s Balkanist image has changed over time in this specific type of political discourse. The findings suggest that it has not. All public statements analyzed in this investigation invoke the image of the Balkans as a place of anxiety on Europe’s edges. For all the positive assessments of the three countries, the Balkans is conceptualized as “the other”, or in Todorova’s terms the “other within” (Todorova, 1997, p. 390). That the region is discursively constructed as stuck in time is further emphasized by the need for substantial reform, considering that the countries in focus lack mature governance and are rife with corruption and division. This conceptualization is much in tune with Hansen’s notion of a “Balkanization discourse”, in which the Balkans are “incapable of transformation, and are to be isolated and deterred” (Hansen, 2006, p. 42). Furthermore, the region is prone to Russian influence. Hence the discursive construction of the region’s image closely resembles its historical image as “the continent’s powder keg.” (Galsworthy, 2002, p. 27).

Another major objective of this study was to demonstrate that in their public appearances, political leaders construct their own identity or self-image. This piece of research largely confirms the findings of researchers in the field of Trump’s language and political rhetoric, which is largely seen as inappropriate for a President. Interestingly, the analysis suggests that Mike Pence “wears his loyalty to Donald Trump like a blank mask”, since “there is no Trump provocation that the vice-president cannot explain away: usually in tones of mild, head-shaking disappointment, as if others lack the good sense to trust his boss” (The Economist, 17 August 2018). Mr. Pence also strains to present Trump’s America as a benevolent superpower, not tempted by isolationism. Yet again the Vice President resorts to a line that he “uses often to explain Trumpian foreign policy”: “America First does

⁴ Such as the US-Adriatic Charter, the Balkan Medical Task Force, EU peacekeeping, UN and NATO operations

not mean America alone” (ibid.) In his attempts “to present the world with the most constructive version of his boss”, Pence does “selective editing” and this reveals his belief in core principles of openness in foreign policy (ibid.) The same applies to Jim Mattis.

Another objective of the study was to spot the place the Balkan countries presumably take in US foreign policy. As the present line of argumentation demonstrated, the Balkans do not rate high among the US foreign policy priorities. Furthermore, the Balkans is at the crossroads of geopolitical interests: Russia the EU, and the United States. Hence, the struggle for influence in the Western Balkans fits into a broader geopolitical context. Russia is perceived as a threat to stability in the Balkans and a more deliberate, serious and coordinated Russian campaign in the Western Balkans may be expected.

Finally, a major objective of this study was to illustrate that CDA, its socio-cognitive variant in particular, provides an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for the study of the discursive construction of images of nations and identities of the political elite, be it global or domestic. It is my conviction that CDA can ensure the useful analytical tools to carry out a follow-up research – on the real policy implications of the statements of top US policymakers for the Balkan countries that were the object of this investigation and for the region in general.

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