



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings

Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Let me start, Chairman Cardin, by thanking you for convening this hearing today. Our April hearing on the Western Balkans featured the former High Representative in Bosnia, Paddy Ashdown, as well as a panel of experts based in the Balkans. Their presentations about the challenges facing the region revealed disturbing trends, particularly in Bosnia but also in Kosovo, and I concluded that hearing with a call for a Part 2. Today's hearing is that Part 2, keeping a focus on the current challenges but with an added emphasis on what the United States and Europe are doing in response.

I also want to thank our witnesses for being present today. I believe that, if asked, practically every diplomat would generally express a preference that parliamentarians go away and leave them alone. Deputy Assistant Secretary Jones and the State Department, however, understand not only the necessity but the advantages of partnership in foreign policy-making across the branches of government.

Over the years, it has also become clear that this bicameral and bipartisan Commission is perhaps the best example of that partnership in action. The goal of this hearing today is not to criticize policy but to share views and ideas on improving policy to the benefit of the people living in the countries of the Western Balkans. As one witness noted I April, the mere holding of a hearing in the U.S. Congress sends a signal of interest that, she felt, can have its own positive reverberations in the countries of concern. Let's hope that today's hearing will have that effect.

Finally, I want to thank our witness from the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Mr. Lyrvall, for being here today. Sweden currently holds the EU Presidency, and it must be a difficult task to speak for all 27 member states. It is important to have Europe's views on the Western Balkans, however, because U.S. policy in the region is so closely tied to that of the European Union. I want to express the Commission's particular appreciation that you responded to our invitation on fairly short notice, after some officials from Brussels declined our invitation to testify today. Your embassy here in Washington was very helpful in facilitating your presence here today.

I will refrain from discussing specific policy options right now, at the opening, but let me conclude by noting that I have traveled throughout the Balkans. I have not only met with senior officials but talked to citizens voting on election day, most recently in Albania. I have visited camps for displaced persons, such as those that still exist for Roma in Kosovo. I watched people scramble for cover when sniper fire opened in Sarajevo during the war. I met courageous human rights activists. The people of the Balkans are, regardless of their various ethnicities, some of the most sincere, hospitable and friendly people I have met, and as citizens of OSCE states that pledged to respect their rights and their dignity, they deserve to be treated as such by their leaders, and by the international community. I hope that, as we look at policy options to bring stability and encourage integration in the Balkans, the people of the region need to be our priority concern.