



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin

Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Today's hearing continues the Helsinki Commission's focus on the Western Balkans. In April, the Helsinki Commission held a hearing on the challenges facing the Western Balkans today. Expert witnesses brought to our attention disturbing trends, particularly in Bosnia but also in Kosovo and some neighboring countries.

In May, Vice-President Joe Biden and Secretary General of the European Council Javier Solana together visited Sarajevo. The Vice President gave a stirring speech to Bosnia's parliament, urging an end to nationalist rhetoric and forward movement on reforms.

Shortly thereafter, in June, a Commission-led delegation visited Sarajevo and met with Bosnia's political leaders. The delegation got an ample look at the wide and sometimes sharp divisions among the three peoples. Meeting some Bosnian students of all ethnicities later in the visit, the congressional delegation also saw a gap between young people who want to enjoy the opportunities of the 21st century, and their country's leaders who are mired in conflict and divisiveness.

The Obama Administration grasped right away that the situation in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia remains unsettled. This concern prompted the Vice President's mission to Sarajevo, Belgrade and Pristina. Unfortunately, since that visit, however, we have not seen Bosnia move forward with a vigorous constitutional reform effort. Instead, we learn of continued gridlock in the central government, with ethnic disputes over appointments, and hear charged rhetoric at the highest levels suggesting that Bosnia's very existence is in jeopardy. The Commission takes this continued slide very seriously.

Meanwhile, in Kosovo, there have been additional bilateral recognitions of independent statehood, but we do not hear of much other progress. Even with the deployment of the status-neutral EU Rule-of-Law Mission, EULEX, recent incidents suggest the need for more active and vigorous work to build institutions and foster dialogue.

Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia also have their own challenges, some related to Bosnia and Kosovo and some unique to their own internal dynamic. Even Croatia, which has made enormous strides in the last decade, still needs to contend with issues related to the earlier conflicts. We are encouraged by the recent breakthrough with Slovenia on border issues that hopefully will pave the way for Croatia to soon enter the European Union. EU and NATO accession remain the foundation of Western strategy for the entire region.

Our hearing today will touch on some of these problems but, most importantly, will focus on what the United States and the European Union are doing – or should be doing – in response. Is there a plan to break the continuing deadlock that threatens Bosnia's stability? Is it possible to make progress on badly needed constitutional reform? Will the High Representative remain

in place until the job is done? What is being done to overcome Kosovo's ethnic divide, particularly in the north, and to bring Albanians and Serbs together at least to find some common ground? Is the international presence there an effective deterrent to renewed violence?

These are just a few of the questions we would like to have answered here today. I hope our discussion today sends a strong signal to the Western Balkans that is positive and encouraging. Our two witnesses are key players in U.S. and EU policy development and coordination. First, we have Stuart Jones, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs and holder of the Department's Balkan portfolio. Our second witness will be Bjorn Lyrvall, the Director General for Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry of Sweden. Sweden currently holds the Presidency of the European Union and speaks collectively for its members.