



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

At today's hearing, we will focus on developments in the countries of the Western Balkan region of Europe, as well as U.S. and European policy responses. While we all have recently focused our attentions on the critical situation in Ukraine – and the Helsinki Commission will certainly continue to do this as well as focus on human rights problems in Russia, the countries of Central Asia and elsewhere – we should also be proactive and focus on situations before they become, as the Western Balkan region once was, disturbing headline news.

The Helsinki Commission has focused its attention on specific countries in the Balkans many times in the past, but a regional overview is more important than ever before. Each country is at a different stage of achievement or preparedness in meeting their Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations, but they all share an interest in each other's advancement and stability.

The United States and Europe continue to have a vested interest in seeing this progress take place. While the Western Balkans is no longer the setting for violent conflict that it was two decades ago, we have had to devote considerable resources – financial, diplomatic and military – to restore peace and to encourage the democratic and other reforms necessary to sustain it. That job is not done. Having accomplished so much, we need to see the task of a stable, democratic and fully integrated Western Balkans completed.

These countries have also demonstrated a willingness to contribute to peace operations globally, and, if they are not already, they should soon be our newest allies in a stronger NATO Alliance. It is my view, at least, that their membership in NATO, if they choose to join, enhances our own security. More than that, as NATO allies and EU partners, the countries of the Western Balkans will be bound to each other's security and better able to find reconciliation among themselves, to strengthen their ties and to focus on their collective potential. Having gone through so much, the people of the region certainly deserve this brighter future.

In the past year, we have been particularly encouraged by Croatia's joining the European Union, the progress leading to the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, the beginning of negotiations for Serbia's EU accession, a smooth political transition in Albania that will hopefully pave the way for that country to begin soon its negotiations as well, and Montenegro's ongoing progress toward both NATO and EU membership. Kosovo has just celebrated six years of independent statehood. It still has a long way to go and must confront some undoubtedly major obstacles along the way, but it has demonstrated a very welcomed

commitment to moving forward.

While encouraged by these developments, we continue to worry that progress in the two most multi-ethnic states in the region – Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia - has stalled. In Bosnia, we have seen for some time that the political structures created by the Dayton Agreement, with their emphasis on ethnic balances rather than good governance, have become outdated, undemocratic and divisive, but we are now seeing the implications of trying to maintain the status quo in the form of popular unrest and a public demand for greater accountability. Macedonia, which had made considerable strides in its desire to join both NATO and the EU, today struggles to maintain its democratic credentials and internal cohesion while Greece's dispute with its name has put its aspirations effectively on hold.

Then, there are issues that pervade the region – official corruption, trafficking in persons, the plight of Roma, attacks on journalists and control of the media – which continue to be a concern. Many wounds of past conflict – wounds in the form of missing persons and unpunished war crimes – remain open and cannot be left unattended. Several countries in the region will hold elections this year, but conditions for a free and fair contest could use further improvement in at least some of them.

The Helsinki Commission emphasizes the need for governments to implement the commitments they have undertaken in the OSCE, especially those relating to human rights and democratic development, and I hope we focus on that here at this hearing. At the same time, given the tremendous role and influence the United States and Europe have in the region, we cannot ignore our own policies and whether they are actually encouraging the progress we expect. We need to look at whether mere promises of NATO or EU enlargement at some time in the future are sufficient leverage for change, and what we can do in the meantime to keep these countries on track.