

Today’s hearing focuses on the countries of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

From a Helsinki Commission viewpoint, these countries are far from the worst human rights violators among the OSCE States, and they are not the least democratic. In fact, 15 years after the Dayton Agreement ending the Bosnian conflict and a decade since Milosevic was ousted in Belgrade, the region has made enormous progress. We nevertheless want to maintain our focus on them, because the United States, the EU and the international community as a whole has invested so much time, attention and resources to achieving this progress. We must make sure the job is complete, and we cannot afford to see backtracking.

In addition, to varying degrees these countries are all on the path of Euro-Atlantic and European integration, and they are about as attentive to the opinions of Washington and Brussels as counties will likely ever get. As a result, while U.S. foreign policy priorities may be elsewhere and the European Union grapples with its internal developments, a little time and attention can go a long way in promoting positive change.

If the international community hopes to capitalize on these and perhaps other positive developments in the region in 2011, or to overcome the stagnation that still exists, I think that clarity needs to be a key characteristic of U.S. and EU policies. These countries need a concrete sense of direction.

As I look back at my own, recent experiences in the region, I often think of the playful Romani children I encountered in Kosovo, who were living in very poor and unhealthy camps for displaced persons in the north. I also think of the elderly voter being assisted at the polling station by her grandson in Albania, a woman who had seen a lot happen in her country over the decades. Because I was in Albania observing elections, I was not in Sarajevo last year, but I did hear the reports of other members of this Commission regarding their lunch with university students who no longer wished to be limited by an ethnic label when they, as individuals, are defined by so much more.

As we discuss U.S. policy toward the region with the State Department today, I believe we must be mindful of the fact that our primary goal should be to give the people of the region a better life and to give their children a brighter future.

It is, of course, ultimately the responsibility of their elected leaders to take the actions necessary to make these things happen, but we can and should play a role in making sure that citizens have the means to hold their politicians accountable, including not only good electoral practices but also a free media and active civil society. I think our democracy-building assistance – through OSCE field missions or through the efforts of the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and others – has helped tremendously in this regard. I also believe that increased travel which EU visa liberalization will make possible can also make the average citizen more aware of what opportunities and benefits they can have if they do make their politicians more accountable to them.

In addition to these efforts of direct benefit to the people, there are some broader goals we should be highlighting.

First, we must make renewed conflict in the Balkans an inconceivable possibility, not only with as robust an international presence as is necessary but also by taking on anybody who foments ethnic tensions or threatens to change borders unilaterally.

Second, we must confirm that the future of the region is clearly in Europe. The doors of both NATO and the EU should be clearly open to them; the only questions should be their actual preparedness and their own choice as a sovereign state.

Third, we must combat the organized crime and official corruption which pervades the Western Balkans and saps the economies of the region of their ability to become more competitive and attractive to investment. They also work in tandem to make trafficking in persons, a subject of great concern to this Commission over the years, a continuing problem.

Finally, we must make sure that we and our European partners understand that our policies to affect lives in the Balkans, and this is not a place to experiment, to coordinate for the sake of coordination, or to play other diplomatic games. I do not want active U.S. engagement to legitimize the European Union's approach to the Balkans if it does not also make the EU approach more substantive and more constructive in the process.