



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Honorable Chairman Mr. Cardin, distinguished members from the Senate and the House of Representatives, members from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce, other representatives of the staff, guests and invitees of the Helsinki Commission...

Good morning!

Thank you for inviting me to a hearing of this very prominent Commission. I am honored to talk to you in the times that are extremely important for the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

Even more so given the recent worrying developments in Ukraine which dominate our concerns to a great extent. It is necessary that we preserve peace in Ukraine and employ all our diplomatic means to stabilize the country, to build a united country with respect of its sovereignty and integrity and without further - even deeper - ethnic divisions. We have to engage ourselves through the political dialogue and answer the demands of people.

But at the same time, we must not lose our focus when it comes to engagement and interest in the developments in the Western Balkan.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year is crucial for future developments in the region!

First of all, my testimony will be based on my personal views. As you may already know, I have taken the leading role in the European Parliament in making visa liberalization for Western Balkans a reality and throughout my mandate I have been encouraging the governments both in the European Union and in the Western Balkans to engage more actively in pursuing the enlargement agenda.

Secondly, I will present my views on the developments in the region based on my experiences gained through the work in different parliamentary commissions and delegations for the Western Balkans, actively engaged in the democratic development and progress of the region. Based on its own experience, history and geography, my country Slovenia plays an active role in the Western Balkans, accommodating the challenges of the EU integration.

Thirdly, I will outline my recommendations regarding our policy in the Western Balkans,

particularly in the light of what should be expected in 2014. Challenges are enormous because of the European elections, on the hand, and national elections in several countries of the region, on the other hand. The US engagement has always been crucial in the past and it will remain equally important in the future. Without a common understanding of the situation, of the need to act in an appropriate, credible and unified way, without listening to the voices of people – as it was well illustrated in Bosnia and Herzegovina recently – we might jeopardize peace and stability in the entire region.

Before going into an in-depth analysis, allow me to share with you my personal experience as a Rapporteur of the European Parliament for visa free travel for the citizens of the Western Balkans. The abolishment of visas has been the most tangible achievement for the countries of the region on their European path. It has been a great and historical step in bringing down the walls of bloody wars. It has strengthened political and economic cooperation and, what is of immense importance, people to people contacts. We have to do our utmost to preserve this freedom of travel despite some nationalistic and populist attacks across Europe against these recently won freedoms.

We need to abolish visas for the last country in the Western Balkans which is still not under visa free regime – Kosovo –, once it meets the necessary conditions. Needless to say, visa free travel is crucial for ordinary citizens! Politicians and businessmen travel without waiting in front of the consulates. And criminals usually don't apply for visas. It is about citizens and especially about young people! They will get to know the European values and principles only by getting closer to Europe.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Let me start with the country I strongly believe we have to put on the very top of our agenda in the Western Balkans. It is still the most volatile, ethnically divided country. Dayton agreement ended the war but it did not provide the legal structure for a functional country. The February demonstrations were the most serious outburst of violence since the war in the nineties: People calling for change, unsatisfied with their political elites and their personal welfare. **Economic, political and social situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is more than worrying and it urges us to act now more then ever before!**

So far, our endeavors lacked political will to make a serious policy shift. We need clear messages and consistent policies. **We need an internal process, which will lead to a wide constitutional reform that can be accepted by the country and its people.** However it cannot be **(It must not be) externally imposed!**

The European Union has to act as a facilitator. The support of its international partners is hereby essential. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a custom made accession approach. We must not focus only on the Sejdic-Finci case; it should not block an EU application. We have spent countless hours trying to forge a compromise.

We should rethink our current policy. **We need to make use of the elections in October to**

develop a new, unified policy approach, with clear messages what kind of structural reforms Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to implement in order to join the EU.

I welcome the intentions of the European Commission to focus on better economic governance, on fight against corruption (there is no doubt about political elites in the country being increasingly corrupt) and better implementation of EU-funded projects through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) - without any additional cuts! But this is not enough. **We need to channel a social frustration in a positive direction - away from further ethnic divisions or state dissolution.** So far, the demonstrations showed no interethnic tensions at all, but a generally tense atmosphere ahead of the elections can easily set the stage for violence on a much larger scale. Therefore we need a tailored policy for the new government after the elections in October that would help Bosnia and Herzegovina to present the EU membership application as soon as possible! Preferably this year!

Serbia

The country has taken important steps towards the normalization of the relations with Kosovo. **The dialogue between Priština and Belgrade is extremely positive for their people** and it has opened the way for further steps in the European integration process. It is necessary that both sides maintain this constructive approach while working on the controversial and sensitive details that still need to be elaborated and agreed upon. There is still a need for greater transparency in communicating the outcomes of the dialogue and involving the parliaments and civil societies. The negotiators need to build better public trust.

A very positive outcome of the dialogue were the elections in Kosovo: For the first time they included northern Kosovo and for the first time they were in line with democratic norms.

Serbia started the EU accession talks in January this year and it is committed to continue with necessary reforms, notably in the area of the judiciary, fight against corruption, and the reform of the public sector.

There will be early elections on the 16th of March. But most likely the present coalition will remain in power. (Best case scenario for 2014: to close chapters 23 & 24 and open 32 and then 35 (the one on Kosovo)).

Given the progress it achieved in the recent past, Serbia has become an important player in the region in supporting and promoting EU-values.

Kosovo:

Because of the normalization of the relations with Serbia the EU launched negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Kosovo. Hopefully the Agreement will be signed this year although the authorities need to make further efforts to meet the challenges of the European Reform Agenda. It is expected that Kosovo will hold early elections in June. **In the European Parliament we have encouraged in the January resolution the remaining**

five EU Member States to proceed with the recognition of Kosovo and we have called on all EU Member States to do their utmost to facilitate economic and people to people contacts as well as social and political relations between their citizens and citizens of Kosovo.

I visited Priština two weeks ago and held a press conference in Brussels a day before yesterday. I re-emphasized the importance of the visa free travel for the people of Kosovo. There will be an expert mission in Kosovo next week, evaluating its readiness. I expect that the European Commission will publish its report without further delay.

Macedonia

Unfortunately, there is not much to say. The EU has decided for the fifth year not to open the accession negotiations with the country in spite of the positive recommendation of the Commission and the European Parliament in this respect. **There is growing frustration about the EU in the public opinion.**

I strongly support the idea that the bilateral issues between Macedonia and Greece should be resolved before the end of the accession process but they should not present an obstacle to the opening of the negotiations. A further delay poses a considerable risk to the regional stability. **I hope that Greece will use its EU-Presidency to create a positive environment.**

But still: it takes two to tango and it seems that no side is capable and ready to develop new initiatives (to overcome the current stalemate on the name issue). (I would cut the entire paragraph that follows: too detailed and without a clear message)

There will be the presidential elections in the country. It's difficult to believe that there will be a good atmosphere to find a solution. In any case, all the gestures, controversial actions and statements which could negatively impact on good neighborly relations should be avoided. **Good neighborly relations are essential, including a mutually acceptable solution under the UN auspices.**)

Montenegro

Montenegro seems to have least problems among the Western Balkans countries. It still shows broad enthusiasm for entering the European Union. Two chapters in the negotiations have been (provisionally) closed, fight against corruption and organized crime and judicial reform remain top priorities.

Nevertheless, I want to use this opportunity to once again express my deep shock and concern about at least two bomb attacks and around half a dozen physical attacks against journalists in the recent past. I have called the responsible authorities in the country several times to protect journalists and adequately investigate and prosecute all these attacks and threats.

Albania

Albania has a new government after the June Parliamentary elections and it has improved its reputation significantly after the orderly conducted and peaceful transfer of power.

This new government has an ambitious European agenda and significant progress has already been made in the first 100 days of its functioning. Therefore **I do expect that the EU Council in June will grant Albania a candidate status.**

It is also true that the political climate in the country must be improved. But delaying the granting of candidate status would mean to risk the momentum for further progress and democratic development of the country. We must not forget that the country has been the most isolated country of the Western Balkans in the past. There still exists blood revenge today. Two main parties run the country and corruption is a serious problem.

We need to support the country and its current government on its European path. It is important, especially for Albanian youth, which is ambitious, well-educated and open minded, as well as willing to push for further EU integration.

Ladies and gentlemen: Let me conclude with a few final remarks:

1. Despite the economic and social crisis in Europe, the enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans countries must remain a priority. The political situation in the region is still very fragile. In particular Bosnia and Herzegovina show worrying signs of instability! Peace and stability of the region is our strategic interest.
2. With the support of the USA and its international partners the EU must lead a unified, comprehensive policy approach towards the Western Balkans; we must be capable to shift our policy approach when needed.
3. The economic crisis has hit the Western Balkans very hard. Europe and the USA should seek opportunities for more investments in the Western Balkans.
4. EU institutions and EU governments need to make use of this year – the year of European elections – to fight nationalism and extremism in the region; otherwise it will jeopardize the European integration process.
5. Credible EU policy towards the Western Balkans demands in-depth understanding of the history of these countries, different political and economic situations, involvement of local authorities, NGO's, experts and the civil society.
6. Brdo Process, launched by Slovenia and Croatia, has the potential to become a strong engine of political and overall development in the region. The July Summit of Brdo Process with French Prime Minister Hollande was a historical event for the region, which set the fundamentals for a fruitful common initiative and a successful story of the region. The next summit of Brdo process will take place in Croatia in July with Chancellor Merkel already confirmed the participation.