



**Statement by Congressman Alcee L. Hastings
Co-Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing entitled, “The Western Balkans: Challenges for U.S. and European Engagement”
April 2, 2009**

Today’s hearing of the United States Helsinki Commission, focusing on the Western Balkans, has been convened for two reasons.

First, I would like to know how each of the seven countries covered by this hearing is doing in regard to internal stability, democratic development, minority rights, anti-corruption efforts and the rule of law. Are these countries moving forward or moving backward, and what can we say about the region as a whole? It is important to examine the situation in OSCE countries on a regular basis and to raise concern about problems which may exist. Doing so constructively, as the Helsinki Commission has done for more than three decades now, is an important mechanism for encouraging countries to move forward.

Much attention has focused in recent years on Kosovo, and Serbia’s opposition to Kosovo’s independence. This situation, including internal developments in both Kosovo and Serbia, warrant continued attention. Recently, however, there has been growing concern about developments in Bosnia, and that country will likely receive much attention at this hearing today. Meanwhile, Macedonia and Montenegro have been holding elections, and Albania prepares for its parliamentary elections in June. We are encouraging all three countries to meet OSCE election standards, and I particularly want to wish the people of Macedonia a free and fair opportunity to vote in the second round of presidential and local elections this coming Sunday. Finally, Croatia’s forward movement is important for the whole region, as its integration in Europe will help guide others along the same path.

The second reason for convening this hearing is to look at international policy. I would like to know what role the international community is playing in the region. How well are the countries of the European Union doing in shaping overall policy? Should the United States play a more active role, or simply follow the European lead? Should the international community continue to downsize, or are trends in Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, a cause for maintaining or even expanding the presence and powers currently in place?

I do not believe that the international community should perpetuate a heavy presence in the region if it is no longer needed, but, as we saw in the Balkans in the 1990s, stepping back prematurely and hoping for the best can actually be counterproductive, requiring an even greater commitment of international resources.

With a new Administration here in Washington, now is a good time to take a fresh look at the Western Balkans. Giving a new impetus to international efforts there could go a long way to ensuring that there will be no return to the past. The Commission hopes to follow-up on this hearing by forwarding the concerns and recommendations made here today to the Administration for its consideration.

Our witnesses today are well qualified to provide insights on developments in the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as to provide recommendations for U.S. policy.

Paddy Ashdown, of course, is well known to us all as a prominent British politician but also as a representative of the international community in Bosnia, where he used his talents and prestige to give the people of that country a better future.

Our second panel includes people who have a very deep understanding on what is happening in the Balkans, both in terms of political developments but also in the lives of everyday people. Their biographies and other information can be found on the tables outside the hearing room and on our website, www.csce.gov.