



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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Testimony :: Kurt Volker

Executive Director - the McCain Institute for International Leadership

Thank you Chairman Cardin, Co-Chairman Smith, and all the distinguished Members here today, for the opportunity to testify about the Balkans region.

As you know, I had the privilege of serving as US Ambassador to NATO in 2008-2009, and served in several other senior positions at the State Department, the National Security Council, and the office of the NATO Secretary General. I worked on issues dealing directly with the Balkans region at several points in my career, and have continued to remain engaged in my post-government career.

The starting point for any discussion of the Balkans today begins not with Sarajevo, or Pristina, but with Crimea.

What is happening in Ukraine today – with Russia deploying military forces to occupy Crimea – represents the most serious challenge to freedom, democracy, and security in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

For 25 years, we have worked to support the rights of people throughout Central and Eastern Europe, as they sought to build free, prosperous, stable, and secure societies. The results have been nothing short of remarkable. A dozen countries, representing over 100 million people, have built modern, democratic societies and long-term security for the future, after a horrific past. To be sure, there have been and remain challenges within this transformation, but the major trend-line is clear.

Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia was a bellwether. Borders in Europe were changed by force of invasion by a neighboring country. Russia's occupation of parts of Georgia and Moldova is a continuing grave concern.

But the insertion of Russian forces into Ukraine in the past week in order to take over Crimea and challenge authorities in Kiev should be a wake-up call for all of us. The post-cold-war order of people having the right to choose their own government and political orientation democratically, the inviolability of borders, and the rejection of the notion that military force can be used to dominate neighbors are all under threat.

A strong U.S. and European response – to support the rights of all Ukrainians to determine

their own future, and to support the principles of the post-cold-war peace in Europe – is absolutely essential.

There is no excuse for the excesses of the Yanukovich government in Ukraine. Yet at the same time, a contributing factor to the situation in Ukraine today was a relatively disengaged, complacent attitude in Europe and the United States. By failing to continue to press forward with the development of a Europe whole, free and at peace, working actively with those Ukrainians seeking to implement reforms and build a better society, we helped create a vacuum filled by the worst elements of Ukrainian politics, and now by Russia.

That same attitude of minimal engagement, complacency, and lack of commitment to creating a Europe whole, free, and at peace, for all the peoples of Europe, is how I would characterize policy toward the western Balkans over the past several years. As in Ukraine, in the Western Balkans we have seen darker elements fill the void. And as in Ukraine, the risks of more catastrophic failure are real, despite the genuine progress that has been made.

The reasons for such a minimalist Western approach to the Balkans are perfectly understandable. The need to tackle more pressing challenges in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Middle East. The financial crisis. The Euro-zone debt crisis. Recession. Public fatigue with difficult foreign engagements. Perceptions, however dubious, that EU enlargement has led to mass immigration, loss of jobs, and diminished prosperity in Western Europe.

It is easy, in this context, to justify a minimalist engagement, and to point a finger at leaders in the Western Balkans themselves for failing to strengthen their own societies better. But as Ukraine now reminds us, we in the democratic, prosperous, and secure part of the transatlantic community have a clear responsibility as well.

Despite our own difficulties, we must recognize that the costs of reversing the progress already made are far greater than the costs of a proactive, affirmative policy of promoting democratic development and completing a Europe whole, free and at peace.

In this context, let me offer the following policy observations and suggestions:

- There has been no forward movement on NATO enlargement since the Bucharest Summit of 2008, when Croatia and Albania were invited to join NATO. Montenegro still has work to do in key areas – but so did other nations when they were invited to join NATO. Especially in the current context, it is important symbolically to renew momentum in the Balkans, by offering NATO membership for Montenegro at the 2014 Summit in Wales, in exchange for completion of a few remaining reforms.

- Likewise, it is time to press for a settlement on the name issue and an invitation for Macedonia to join NATO as well. Macedonia should be a vibrant crossroads of the Balkans – linking Greece to the north and linking the Western Balkans to Greece and the Mediterranean. The current stalemate on this issue serves no one's interests. It harms Greek economic interests by retarding development in the Balkans more generally. It prevents Macedonia from taking a proper place in European and transatlantic institutions. And it

creates a political limbo in which ethnic rivalries in the Western Balkans could again resurface – which again would damage Greek interests as much as anyone else’s.

I believe there is a framework for a settlement that can be seen as a win-win for both Greece and Macedonia. I suspect both sides know this, and are ready to reach such an agreement. But context is important. The United States and key European allies should play an active role in seeking such a genuine agreement, providing support and guarantees as needed, and on that basis proceed with an invitation for Macedonia to join NATO at the 2014 Summit.

- Developments in Bosnia continue to be held back by the dysfunctional governing arrangements put in place by the Dayton Accords. Essential to end a war nearly two decades ago, those arrangements are now preventing Bosnia from moving forward. They reinforce ethnic divisions, rather than overcome them. They establish political structures that promote deadlock. And they reward politicians with narrow ethnic agendas, rather than inclusive, national, developmental goals. It is long past time to open a “Dayton Two” negotiation on new government arrangements. Such arrangements can only be agreed by Bosnians themselves – but they can only do so in the context of a wider, transatlantic framework led by the United States and European Union.

- The progress in relations between Belgrade and Pristina is the main bright spot in the region over recent years. We should commend both governments, as well as the European Union High Representative, Catherine Ashton, for their work in this area. In this case, it is probably not possible to press for more of a permanent solution at this time, but we should continue to press forward with concrete, practical steps, in the context of a wider region that is settling old issues and moving toward full transatlantic integration.

I would add one final word about democracy and reform: NATO and EU membership is not an end-point in itself, but an extremely powerful tool for building good societies – societies that respect the human rights of all citizens, respect minorities, treat political opposition fairly, promote market-driven economic growth, contribute to greater security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole.

There are plenty of examples in countries that have already joined one or both institutions, where democracy, and democratic institutions, should be strengthened. This fact should not lead to a conclusion that including those countries in NATO or the EU – even long established NATO and EU members have their own challenges – and neither should it be used to raise the bar or prevent others from joining NATO or the EU.

Especially in the context of Ukraine today, we should remember that it is far easier to deal with these challenges proactively, and within the institutional frameworks we have created. We should not wait, and risk darker forces rising to fill the vacuum.

Europe has made extraordinary progress since the world wars of the last century. But millions of people in Europe’s South and East, including in Russia, are still not living in free, prosperous, secure stable societies. Europe remains divided – though in different ways and across different lines than in the past.

The success of Europe will never be complete, and never 100 percent secure, until all of Europe shares in the dream of a Europe whole, free and at peace. American and European leaders need to keep to keep that vision on the front burner, and continue working toward it. And America should play a key leadership role in that effort, alongside Europe, as it has for the past 60-plus years.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Co-Chairman, for the opportunity to raise these views before this Committee.