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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Commissioners, thank you for inviting me to testify today before the Helsinki Commission, which, for nearly 40 years, has played a vital role in fostering democracy, human rights and security across Europe and beyond. Given your keen interest in the western Balkans, I am particularly honored to have an opportunity to provide an assessment of democratic developments and prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration in the region, and I look forward to discussing how we and our European partners can best encourage further progress.

The appeal of EU and NATO membership has been a positive force for the political and economic transformation of the western Balkans, and I'm pleased to say we have some successes to report. In the past year, Croatia became the 28th member of the European Union. Montenegro progressed toward EU accession. Albania had the best democratic transition in that country's history. And, perhaps most remarkably, Serbia and Kosovo signed a historic agreement to normalize relations, a move that spurred the European Council to begin negotiating a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Pristina in October and to open EU accession talks with Belgrade in January.

These advances and other positive developments in the region are especially encouraging because they are, in large part, a result of sustained American engagement and assistance, which includes providing \$315 million in development aid over the past two years. For more than 20 years, U.S. engagement has been driven by a desire to support the aspiration of western Balkan states to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This has been the top policy objective of Republican and Democratic administrations alike because it is the best means of ensuring long-term peace, stability and prosperity in a region that is a critical part of Europe – historically, geographically and culturally. Recent progress, however, has not blinded us to the fact that there are still many challenges that must be overcome before Euro-Atlantic aspirations are fully realized.

As we have seen time and again, progress comes most rapidly when political leaders and other actors break from how things were done in the past. When people are no longer mired in the past, but inspired by the future, they start thinking realistically about what needs to be done to improve their countries and begin making the tough decisions to get there. We saw this in

Croatia, where successive governments stuck to an overarching goal – EU membership – and they committed the resources and relentlessly pursued the reforms needed to achieve it. The payoff came last July when Croatia became the newest EU member, demonstrating to the entire region that the door to EU integration is still open. In order to enter, however, states must display the same level of commitment and ability to institute needed reforms. We are very pleased to see that Zagreb is now sharing lessons it learned with its neighbors who aspire to join the EU and NATO.

Serbia and Kosovo

We're greatly encouraged by the ongoing dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, brokered by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, which has already yielded many successful breakthroughs. The United States supported the EU's tireless efforts to build a framework for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. This EU-facilitated dialogue became a space in which the two sides tackled seemingly intractable differences that have prevented them from moving forward on their respective paths of European integration and improving the lives of their citizens. Last April, this dialogue produced a landmark First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations between the two countries. The so-called April 19th agreement has been followed by regular high-level and working-level meetings aimed at translating those principles into functional reality on the ground.

Full implementation of the April 19th agreement will not be easy, and the United States must remain engaged with Pristina, Belgrade, and the EU over the long term to ensure progress continues. Both countries will face numerous politically difficult decisions in the coming months and years. We can expect to see occasional backpedaling, delays, or attempts to reopen or reinterpret what was agreed. However, I'm confident that both Serbia and Kosovo will remain committed to normalizing relations, because it is indivisible from their aspirations for EU membership. The very same mechanisms the EU has in place to guide both countries forward on their EU paths will serve to systematically measure their progress toward normalization. Normalization and EU accession progress will also provide important economic benefits for both countries.

Serbia's performance in the Dialogue reflects its current leaders' pragmatic approach to invigorating Serbia's standing in the world, and this progress also makes it possible to deepen the U.S. bilateral relationship. Serbia's 2012 election produced a government that committed itself to reforms and to growing relationships with the EU and the United States. Serbian officials recognize the need to enact economic and legal reforms that will be difficult, but necessary as part of the EU accession process and for economic revitalization. We expect that Serbia's March 16 elections will produce a government that continues along the path that the current government has charted. The United States continues to urge Serbia to bring to justice those responsible for the murder of the Bytyqi brothers and the 2008 burning of the U.S. embassy.

Kosovo celebrated the sixth anniversary of its independence on February 17th. Still the youngest country in Europe, it has made tremendous progress in its development as a fully sovereign, independent state and in building modern, multiethnic, and inclusive democratic

institutions. The signing of the normalization agreement with Serbia and the launch of Stabilization and Association Agreement talks with the EU last year were significant achievements. The end of supervised independence in 2012 was another milestone reflecting Kosovo's accomplishments toward realizing the principles enshrined in its declaration of independence and constitution. In law enforcement, the Kosovo Police is integrating ethnic Serb officers who had previously served in parallel police forces under *de facto* Serbian control in the north, and Kosovo is cooperating with EULEX and its Special Investigative Task Force looking into the very serious allegations contained in the 2010 Council of Europe report (the "Marty Report") on organ trafficking and other serious crimes. In the security sector, NATO declared "full operational capability" for the Kosovo Security Force, and the KSF has made impressive efforts to recruit Kosovo Serbs. A soon to be released security sector review, which the U.S. Defense Department has helped facilitate for the past two years, is aimed at developing Kosovo's security institutions in a way that deepens Kosovo's relationships with Euro-Atlantic institutions and contributes to regional stability.

We know that Kosovo faces many challenges. National elections this year must sustain the positive momentum of last year's well-organized municipal elections. Further strengthening rule of law and tackling corruption; ensuring the rights of minorities including returnees are fully protected in practice, expanding economic opportunities, and building on the already 105 countries around the world that recognize independent Kosovo remain among the central tasks Kosovo's current and future leaders and citizens face. The United States remains committed to helping them with this, as we support Kosovo's progress toward full Euro-Atlantic integration.

Albania

Albania has also enjoyed a year of strong progress, highlighted by the success of last June's parliamentary elections, which marked the country's smoothest democratic transfer of power without violence or allegations of vote rigging. The new government took office in September, and like its predecessor, continues to hold Albania's strong partnership with the United States as a key strategic priority. We have been strengthening our military-to-military relationship with Albania, a process that has been enhanced by some welcome reforms and innovative programs undertaken by the new defense minister. For example, Albania enjoys close partnership with the state of New Jersey and this year will start sending new Albanian officers to train at the state's National Guard officer candidate school (OCS) alongside American officer candidates. That said, much work still lies ahead for Albania.

Despite the European Commission's recommendation that Albania be granted candidate status, the European Council decided in December to hold off and give Tirana six months to demonstrate additional progress under the new government, in particular in fighting corruption and organized crime. Albania must convert the initial steps it has taken to improve the efficiency of investigations and prosecutions into tangible results. We are encouraging the government and opposition to work together to develop a track record by the time Council meets in June to reconsider whether to grant candidate status. Time is short, so Albania will need to act quickly.

Montenegro

Montenegro, which began accession talks last June, recently opened the two most challenging EU *acquis* chapters, ones addressing rule of law, judicial transparency, and corruption. To close these chapters, it, too, will need to establish a track record of fighting organized crime and high-level corruption. Government officials are motivated to make needed reforms not only by their desire to follow Croatia into the EU but also by their aspirations to join NATO. In his annual report issued in late January, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen noted that “good progress” has been made in meeting NATO standards, but Montenegro still needs to do more to fight corruption, reform its intelligence apparatus, and modernize its defense. We are also concerned about the relatively low level of Montenegrin public support for NATO membership, which largely stems from misconceptions about the responsibilities and benefits of membership. To bolster support, the government has launched a public awareness campaign, and our Embassy in Podgorica last month provided grants to nine governmental and non-governmental organizations to aid this effort, and we are encouraged to see some positive results from these efforts.

We and other Allies continue to review Montenegro’s reform progress and readiness for membership. The prime minister and other top officials assured me during a recent trip to Montenegro that they are committed to the process of implementing the reforms needed to demonstrate full readiness to join NATO. Some Allies would like NATO to take up enlargement at the September summit in Wales, a position several members of this commission endorsed in a recent letter to Secretary Kerry. At Washington’s suggestion, the NATO International Staff was tasked in December with assessing each aspirant nation’s progress toward NATO membership and providing a summary of their findings by June. At that time, we will review the report in light of the upcoming summit.

Macedonia

Macedonia’s integration into the EU and NATO remains vital for lasting peace and stability in the region. However, the name dispute with Athens continues to stymie progress toward this goal. Both sides in that dispute should be motivated by the desire to seek a solution that ensures the democratic and prosperous development of the Balkan neighborhood.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

We are deeply disappointed that the basic conditions to move Bosnia and Herzegovina ahead on its EU and NATO paths remain unfulfilled despite constant encouragement and support from U.S. and EU officials. Bosnia and Herzegovina has yet to comply with the 2009 European Court of Human Rights ruling in the Sejdic-Finci case, which found the Bosnian constitution is discriminatory because the tripartite presidency and seats in the upper house of parliament can only be held by Serbs, Croats, or Bosniaks. To date, politicians have been unable to muster the political will to agree on a new constitutional formula to comply with the ruling, despite numerous pledges to do so, nor have they resolved the immovable defense

property issue, which the Alliance established as a prerequisite for activating the country's NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic aspirations will remain stalled as long as its political leaders remain focused on parochial, short-term political interests rather than the long-term welfare of the people they were elected to represent. This unwillingness to compromise for a better future was on full display when EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule convened the leaders of the seven main political parties two weeks ago in an effort to push forward on implementing Sejdic-Finci. Nine hours of negotiations ended in yet another failure as no leader was willing to budge, leading Fule to abandon his facilitation efforts. Recent protests that swept the country are expressions of citizens frustrated by self-serving politicians, bad governance and poor economic conditions. The protests underscore the need for the international community to review its engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina and see if a new approach might be warranted. We also urge Bosnian voters to take their frustrations to the ballot box in next October's elections and vote for political leaders who will be serious about breaking the political logjam.

Organized Crime and Corruption

Bosnian protestors have voiced particular frustration with the country's intolerable level of corruption. Bosnia and Herzegovina is not alone, however. Official corruption is a daily fact of life across the region, and it is preventing democratic and economic reforms from taking firm root. Tackling this pervasive problem is a first step toward meeting the standards of EU and NATO membership, but that should not be the sole incentive. Combatting corruption, and its close cousin organized crime, is vital for ensuring brighter futures for all Balkans countries and should be pursued vigorously in its own right.

For too long, the fight against organized crime and corruption consisted of little more than those in power complaining about and targeting their predecessors. Governments across the region are implementing anti-corruption and judicial reform strategies needed for proactive investigations and prosecutions. Now that police and prosecutors are being given the necessary tools, we would like to see these tools put to use in a consistent and even-handed manner. Political leaders must make it clear that no target is off limits.

Organized crime and corruption cannot be curbed without enhancing cross-border cooperation, which is a primary objective of our rule of law assistance and training in the region. When countries put aside longstanding differences and cooperatively address a common challenge the results can be impressive, as we saw last December when Montenegrin and Serbian law enforcement officials smashed a human smuggling ring. Twenty-two members of known criminal groups were arrested and charged with smuggling some 500 asylum seekers from Africa and Asia to the EU via Montenegro and Serbia. The smuggling route also reportedly included Greece, Albania, and Kosovo.

Trafficking in Persons

Enhanced cross-border cooperation is also needed to better address trafficking in persons (TIP), another pressing problem fueled by corruption and organized crime. We applaud Albania's Minister of Interior for recently proposing to his Italian and Greek counterparts that a joint maritime security area be created to tackle human trafficking, and we urge Rome and Athens to respond affirmatively. Nevertheless, we are dismayed that countries in the region have not made greater headway in addressing this scourge. In fact, the State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report found that some countries are losing ground. In 2013, Albania fell from Tier 2 to the Tier 2 Watch List and Croatia slipped from Tier 1 to Tier 2, while all other countries maintained the previous year's rankings.

All our diplomatic posts in the region are deeply committed to encouraging their host government to confront and eliminate trafficking, and they push for improved performance regardless of tier ranking. Last January in Macedonia, a Tier 1 Country, one of our political officers and his local assistants visited 15 different towns and cities, meeting more than 600 students, local officials, and concerned citizens to educate them about TIP and how they can prevent it. Although this effort was conducted in support of President Obama's proclamation of January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, I can assure you U.S. embassies across the region engage in robust anti-TIP efforts year round.

Press Freedom

Realizing the full democratic and economic potential of the region is also predicated on the existence of a free press. Although many countries can boast of vibrant and diverse media, limits on media freedom, including direct intimidation, are still a problem. Progress is being made, as witnessed by the January arrest of two former members of Serbia's security services for the murder of Slavko Curuvija, a courageous journalist who was killed in 1999 – not long after testifying before this commission – for challenging the Milosevic regime. We were also pleased to see Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, and Albania improve their standing in the latest Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

The recent series of attacks against journalists and media outlets in Montenegro and the precipitous drop in Macedonia's media freedom ratings underscore that much more still needs to be done. Even in Croatia, which is fully integrated into NATO and the EU, there is considerable room for improvement. During the EU accession process, Croatia amended its constitution to include specific reference to media freedom and the right of access to information. However, parliament adopted other changes empowering itself to appoint the director general of Croatia Radio-Television (HRT), as well as members of the state-run broadcaster's program council and monitoring committee. This effectively gave the ruling political party control over HRT's broadcast content.

Tolerating Ethnic and Religious Diversity

Perhaps the greatest challenge governments in the region face is how to better promote and protect social diversity, especially the accommodation of ethnic and religious minorities. Given the Balkans' long history of inter-ethnic tensions leading to instability, we warmly welcome efforts such as those of the Albanian officials responsible for the recent opening of a Serbian-language school in the village of Hamil. This is but a small step; greater strides must still be made. Evidence of the need to do more to create an environment that fosters inter-ethnic tolerance is overwhelming. In January, for example, graffiti mocking the mass killings in Srebrenica and promoting Serb nationalism appeared in the town center of Pljevlja, Montenegro. There were bitter protests in the Croatian town of Vukovar late last year, sparked by the government's efforts to comply with minority protection laws by installing dual Latin and Cyrillic signs in areas with large Serb populations. A leading Croat soccer player also chanted fascist slogans at an international game.

Of all the ethnic minorities facing discrimination, none is more vulnerable than the Roma. Living on the margins of society – often in abject poverty – Roma across the region routinely experience discrimination and violence. Serbian Roma activist and musician Olah Vince, for instance, was attacked by six unknown assailants as he and his wife were walking near their home in Novi Sad on Orthodox Christmas this year. Vince said he had received a series of anonymous threatening telephone calls and text messages that started soon after he publicly accused city officials of corruption and discrimination.

Fostering social integration is the best means of preventing attacks such as this and other maltreatment, and our embassies in Belgrade and elsewhere are actively engaged in efforts to move Roma from the margins to the mainstream. One particularly successful effort has been the USAID-supported Roman youth education project in Macedonia, a \$4.5-million initiative that has aided more than 2,500 Roma students over the past 10 years. The project has markedly improved access, retention, and school performance at all levels from pre-school to university, and, perhaps even more importantly, had a catalytic role in attracting interest in the donor community and from the host government.

Governments generally respect religious freedom, but they are frequently accused of giving preferential treatment to a favored religious group and selectively enforcing the legal rights of others. It is not uncommon for minority religious groups' property to be the target of theft, vandalism or desecration, as we have seen with Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo and Croatia. Restitution of religious properties expropriated during World War II and the communist era is moving forward slowly, where it is moving at all.

Over the past year in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a number of political and religious leaders took positive steps to promote much-needed inter-faith dialogue. In November, Montenegro's first provisional synagogue opened in Podgorica, two years after the government granted the Jewish community official minority status, and construction of a proper synagogue is expected to be completed in 2015.

Conclusion

What I have laid out are just a few of the numerous challenges western Balkans countries face in strengthening the protection of human rights, opening new opportunities for growth and development, and building multi-ethnic democracies. The United States and its European partners will continue to assist these countries in any way that we can to implement the reforms necessary to tackle these challenges, particularly those impeding progress on their Euro-Atlantic paths. While our commitment to helping create a brighter future is unwavering, it should be clear to all that the ultimate responsibility for adhering to the path of reform and integration rests with the region's elected leaders, and civil societies must be prepared to hold their governments accountable when they stray from the path or stall along the way.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Commission