

Flashpoint: A Path Toward Stability in the Western Balkans

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WITNESS STATEMENT

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Chairman Self, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Europe,

Thank you for this opportunity to examine flashpoints in the Balkans – and to discuss how the US can seize a *rare opportunity for a **breakthrough*** towards lasting stability. Taking advantage of this fleeting chance will require fortitude and imagination from the Trump Administration, grounded in a strategic understanding of American interests in the region and why it has been so difficult to achieve them.

Tackling the region's flashpoints does not require elaborate nation building. To ensure peace and stability – the stated priority of the Administration in the Balkans – the United States must remain actively engaged, working with domestic and international partners, and utilizing the unique credibility of US when needed. Going back to the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990's, American disengagement has only led to greater involvement from Washington at far greater cost.

Through a dozen years on the ground -- including during the wars in all conflict countries, as well as in post-conflict implementation – I have encountered the ethno-national divisions synonymous with the Balkans. Following war-time service in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia with the UN, I deployed as a US Army officer with NATO IFOR shortly after the signing of the Dayton Agreement.

Among other assignments across the region, I served as Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, where I negotiated the eleventh-hour agreement with Belgrade and Pristina in 2012 to hold Serbian national elections in independent Republic of Kosovo.

That unique, OSCE-led model drew praise from both sides, and served the [Kosovo Serb](#) community for a decade, until Prime Minister Albin Kurti encouraged Parliament to [terminate](#) it in 2022.

I remain engaged in the Balkans through my teaching, convening and research position at Johns Hopkins SAIS. It is my honor to offer perspectives on achieving lasting progress in the region.

The Overarching Question for the Balkans

The fact that this Subcommittee must hold today's timely and important hearing – 35 years after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia began, 30 years after the Dayton Agreement ended the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a quarter century after the NATO air campaign over Kosovo, and two decades after the Ohrid Agreement stopped a brewing conflict in then-Macedonia – begs one overarching question: ***why is this region -- in which the US, EU and NATO hold commanding leverage – still unstable?***

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine sharpens the question: with the US and its allies and partners stronger and more unified since February, 2022 – and Russia weaker and more isolated – how is it that the Balkans have mostly deteriorated in that time-span?

While no single actor, local or international, is wholly responsible for the protracted tensions and persistent malaise, one prerequisite for stability remains unfulfilled: ***Serbia's acceptance of the Western order for the region.***

Like Newton's laws of physics, the Balkans will not achieve long-overdue, democratic consolidation as long as the largest of the Western Balkans Six countries remains a conflicted and conflictual power, antagonistic to its neighbors and burdened by the recent past. The US and allied struggle against malign Russian and Chinese influence in the region will not prevail as long as those revisionist powers have a revisionist [“strategic partner”](#) in Belgrade, eager to promote shared destructive narratives and objectives.

By no means is Serbia the only contributor to instability. This Administration and its predecessor rightly and repeatedly criticized Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti. However justifiable and popular among Kosovar Albanians, the Kurti government's series of actions in the north of Kosovo were uncoordinated and provocative, and deeply alienating to the Kosovo Serb community.

Serbia -- unaligned with the US, EU and NATO, and actively partnering with Moscow and Beijing -- represents an altogether more formidable challenge.

The country's dominant size – nearly as populous as its five neighbors put together, with a GDP equal to their joint output – and its irredentist links to neighboring Serb populations impose a standing check on progress and impediment to US objectives. In short, as long as Serbia promotes 'Serb World' in the region, polarization at home, and double-dealing abroad, the region will fester.

Serbia – and the United States – at a Crossroads

The moment for change may have arrived. Last week, the US Embassy Chargé in Belgrade made an important observation, stating that when it comes to choosing its strategic partners – Russia and China or the Euro-Atlantic community – “Serbia is at a [crossroads](#).”

And so is the United States. We can continue to expend energy on crisis management on Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina; we can continue to bolster Montenegro from the internal and external saboteurs of its EU aspirations. And we can continue to reward the duplicity, faux reforms and repression of the Serbian government with a premature Serbian-American Strategic Dialogue – repeating the mistakes of the Biden Administration and the European Union.

Alternatively, the US can ask – not force – the Serbian government to finally decide its strategic orientation, ending the manipulation of Western partners who want to see Serbia succeed, and opening the path to prosperity and comity that Serbians and their neighbors deserve.

Fortunately, internal, regional and geopolitical developments put the Administration in a strong position to pose this question. The year-long mass protests by Serbian citizens – demanding government accountability in the wake of the fatal collapse at the Novi Sad train station in 2024 -- have removed the aura of invincibility and fear of the regime led by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Recognition by Washington of the widespread, home-grown demand to restore Serbian democracy is not ‘imposing a certain model of governance’; it is a practical measure to protect American interests and US investors.

To be clear, the US need not take sides or express preferences in this standoff, or act on judgements about the political viability of various actors.

Rather, it is the unnecessary and untimely support for a Serbian government contemptuous of its citizens – as the US Embassy in Belgrade provided shortly after disputed [elections](#) in December, 2023 – that constitutes ‘interference in the internal affairs of a country.’

Instead, the US should build a broader foundation for Serbian-American partnership, in which accountability to agreed standards propels mutually beneficial transactions. At a minimum, US officials should remind the public of a glaring omission from the charged debate: the inherent responsibility that [Chinese firms](#) also bear as general contractors for the Novi Sad rail project – part of Beijing’s Belt and Road strategy and part of Serbia’s [escalating](#) strategic partnership with China.

The Illusion and Risks of Transactional Policy with Belgrade

The European Union is belatedly grasping the mistake of trading principles for profits. The EU’s ballyhooed 2024 [Strategic Partnership](#) with Serbia on Raw Materials has gone nowhere in the face of determined citizen protest and environmental concerns. Last week, the mining concessionaire, Rio Tinto, [shelved](#) the Jadar Project, putting the lithium mine on “care and maintenance status” due to the inability to secure permits and wasted expenditure.

The same fate may await the controversial project to demolish the General Staff and Ministry of Defense building (in order to construct a Trump-branded hotel-residential complex.) Like the EU, the developers have signed a contract with the government. Last month, Parliament passed a ‘[Lex Specialis](#)’ to bypass laws on cultural heritage and other obstacles. (A prior bid to remove the building from the cultural heritage register blew up in scandal.)

Facing a broad spectrum of [opposition](#) to demolishing the structure – which has a heritage dating back well before the 1999 NATO bombing of the site – it is hard to envision how the embattled government could deliver. As anyone who has walked the property knows, construction cranes erected at this historic location in downtown Belgrade – directly across from the main government building -- would be a permanent magnet for protests.

Wisely, US diplomats have linked American investment in Serbia to “predictability and the rule of law.” The Serbian government is not listening. Last month, Sweden halted substantial assistance to Belgrade citing “growing [corruption](#)” and stating that “developments in Serbia have gone in the wrong direction.” Foreign direct [investment](#) has dropped sharply in 2025, as the crackdown on protests and the media mounts.

Leading a political party that has four times held [early elections](#), President Vučić now ignores calls to let the Serbian people settle the crisis by choosing leaders in whom they have confidence.

In short, with Serbia now led by a weakened strongman, there is little rationale for entering into cost-free (for Belgrade) transactions with a government that may be unable to fulfill them.

Nor is there any reason to hold the Serbian President to lower standards than the Trump Administration and its predecessor have correctly demanded of his neighbor, Kosovo (caretaker) Prime Minister Kurti, as well as other figures in the region.

Continuing to hold only Pristina accountable for provocations – as the Biden Administration largely did – could again embolden Belgrade, threatening the peace and stability that US officials say is their top priority.

Indeed, the Trump Administration should consider the security risks of advancing the Strategic Dialogue with Serbia after having suspended the Strategic Dialogue with Kosovo in September. As this Subcommittee knows, alleged incidents have continued inside or near the Kosovo-Serbia border. The alleged ringleader of the September, 2023 paramilitary operation in Banjska (in the north of Kosovo) – a heavily-armed and planned revolt likely constituting a grave violation of Belgrade’s formal agreement with NATO -- has yet to face justice in Serbia. The clear lesson of the Biden experience is that imbalanced rhetoric and policy towards these two antagonists, Kosovo and Serbia, leads to instability.

A New Path Opened by the Trump Administration

Encouragingly, the Trump Administration appears to be departing from its predecessor’s excessive deference to the Serbian government. Serbia has received no special treatment on tariffs, imposed due to Belgrade’s own, steep obstacles to US exporters. Nor has Washington attempted to revive the Belgrade-centric, ‘Open Balkans’ proposition of the Biden Administration (and the first Trump Administration.) Open Balkans succeeded mainly in unifying Bosniaks, Croats, Kosovar Albanians, and Montenegrins in opposition to feared Serbian economic hegemony.

The relative success of the Berlin Process (over Open Balkans) in fostering regional economic cooperation is a reminder that countries of the region prioritize their national security and sovereignty, and their EU orientation, over uncertain, regional-only economic ventures. US officials should take note and cease labeling Serbia, “the leader (or potential leader) in the region.” Stability and prosperity rest on equal respect for sovereignty across the WB6.

Seizing the Opportunity to Oust Russia from NIS (and Serbia)

Crucially, the Trump Administration -- so far – has insisted on strict compliance with OFAC sanctions on the Serbian national oil company, NIS (Naftna Industrija Srbije), imposed by the Biden Administration shortly before it left office.

In contrast to the recent, hasty and unwise lifting of all sanctions on Milorad Dodik (former President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina and a chronic threat to stability), the Administration has reportedly made it clear to Belgrade that sanctions, potentially affecting the Serbian banking system, will remain in place until the Russian majority owners exit NIS.

The US should not fall for Serbian or Russian ploys to buy time, supposedly for Gazprom Neft to ‘find a buyer’ when, as President Vučić himself has noted, Moscow could have offered the sale to Belgrade. The [Russians](#) are likely gaming either:

- to retain NIS outright (if the US lifts its recently-imposed energy sanctions on Russia); or
- to retain de facto control of NIS by selling to apparently ‘clean’ foreign parties who will allow Gazprom Neft to still call the shots.

A sale to non-European buyers, potentially in the United Arab Emirates, will see the sale proceeds go directly to Gazprom Neft, avoiding deposit into frozen Russian accounts.

It is vital – for American interests in the Balkans, Ukraine and Europe -- that the Administration insist on full, complete and swift removal of Russian ownership from NIS. The breakthrough cited above could advance if the Administration accelerates the timeline for compliance, setting the stage for Serbia to ***nationalize the state oil company*** (*with due compensation*), that was sold for a song to Gazprom Neft in 2008. Political aims (engaging Russia in the struggle against Kosovo’s independence) originally prompted the fire sale of NIS to Moscow; reversing this transaction would yield major political and financial benefits.

If this is the Administration’s vision, members of Congress should reinforce this uncompromising message about the Russians and NIS when meeting with Serbian officials.

Four Concrete Steps to Widen the Breach between Belgrade and Moscow

If it is not doing so already, the Administration should work with Belgrade both to devise urgent alternatives to Russian gas (on which Serbia is dependent, albeit for only a small slice of its energy requirements) – and counter-measures that could dissuade Moscow from a wholesale cut-off of gas or a sharp hike in prices. These steps could include:

- Immediate closure of Russian media outlets, RT and Sputnik, now hosted by Serbia in defiance of EU sanctions.
- Imposition of EU sanctions on Russia, as Serbia has refused to impose in contrast to all of its WB6 neighbors.

- Closure of the Russian “Humanitarian Center” in the south of Serbia (widely suspected as an intelligence gathering site.)
- Upgrading Serbia’s relations with the US military and with NATO

The technical details and opaque nature of the NIS-Russia-Serbia issue should not obscure its importance. The fact that Belgrade has not responded to US pressure on NIS by threatening to curtail (highly [lucrative](#)) [ammunition](#) sales destined for Ukraine is striking. This omission suggests that Washington can pursue all the above steps as part of a strategy to widen Serbia’s breach from Russia.

Tackling the Serbia-Kosovo Standoff through NATO

Of course, a full break of Belgrade’s destructive ties with Moscow will require tackling the standoff over Kosovo. Belgrade relies on Russian (and Chinese) staunch opposition to Kosovo’s membership in the UN, to advance Serbia’s own isolation of its former province. Resolution lies not with the EU (which leads the dormant Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo) but with NATO. As set out in a recent [SAIS Review](#) paper, President Trump can advance settlement of this oldest, most intractable dispute in the Balkans by offering a [pathway to NATO membership](#) to both Kosovo and Serbia.

A major pre-condition will be the formal establishment by Pristina of the ‘[Association of Serb Majority Municipalities](#)’, as long demanded by Belgrade. A US offer to pave the way for Kosovo to join NATO will readily convince any Prime Minister in Pristina, including Kurti, to sign the EU draft statute for the ‘Association.’

This breakthrough could result in Greek recognition of Kosovo, easing the way for the other three non-recognizers (Romania, Slovakia and Spain) to approve a Washington-backed path to NATO membership. Once the North Atlantic Council approves the path for Kosovo to join NATO, it will be challenging for any Serbian leader – despite longstanding anti-NATO animus – to refuse an American offer for the same, historic opportunity to join the Alliance.

Serbia’s acceptance of a path to NATO would be transformative for the entire region, and a significant blow to President Putin -- yielding [additional leverage](#) to President Trump as he tries to settle the war in [Ukraine](#). Granting Kosovo a path to membership in NATO – which is far more important for Pristina than joining the UN – would instantly diminish the Security Council [leverage](#) that Russia (and China) wield over Belgrade.

In the meantime, the US should advance bilateral defense and security cooperation with Kosovo. This would strengthen deterrence, ease the security burden on the KFOR peacekeeping force (and the US troop contingent) and advance Pristina’s prospects to join NATO.

Open US Investment Opportunities in Bosnia-Herzegovina by Working with the High Representative

Reflecting the Administration's stance on ousting Russia from NIS (and Serbia), the US Embassy Chargé in **Bosnia-Herzegovina** last week broke (at least initially) the impasse over the Southern Interconnector project that would alleviate Bosnia's dependence on Russian gas. The introduction, through effective US diplomacy, of American investors to build and manage the pipeline from Croatia is a reminder of the continuing need for selective, outside intervention.

The Embassy's role is also a reminder of the risks Washington would take on by prematurely shuttering the Office of the High Representative. Terminating OHR before the clear, stated conditions are met is an invitation to disorder, not local ownership. Officials soon regretted the premature decision to surrender the High Representative's powers in 2006, launching the steady descent into crisis that mires Bosnia-Herzegovina today.

To the contrary, the Trump Administration should work with the High Representative to finally break the deadlock over State and Defense Property – one of the seminal obstacles to progress -- driving economic cooperation among the parties and unleashing opportunities for US investors.

The Administration will also accept unnecessary risk if Milorad Dodik continues to be a political factor in Republika Srpska. President Trump is well-placed to make it clear to Dodik that his retirement will be comfortable as long as the Bosnian Serb malefactor leaves policy making in Republika Srpska in the hands of those now elected to represent voters in that entity. As in Serbia, there are signs of public mobilization across ethnic lines in Bosnia-Herzegovina -- welcome evidence of citizen agency after years of dejected outmigration (a dangerous trend mirrored across the WB6.)

The October Judgement of the full European Court of Human Rights in the landmark Kovačević case reminded citizens that changing the country's Constitution will require dialogue and consensus. In the end, neither threats to secede nor threats to impose a certain model of reform can succeed in BiH.

Insulate Montenegro from Saboteurs of its EU Accession

Montenegro has made significant strides towards closing out its EU accession requirements. The country's EU membership, as soon as 2028, would be a major milestone for the region – and, unfortunately, an embarrassment to the current government in Serbia.

Serb nationalists in Montenegro and Serbia – still seeing Montenegro as fundamentally Serbian – pose a complicating factor to Podgorica’s EU aspirations. US and EU officials in Belgrade and Podgorica should remain vigilant, including on subversive media campaigns.

Coordinated Western messages to keep ‘hands off’ of Montenegro -- and focus on Serbia’s own, laggard EU reforms -- could resonate in Belgrade.

Support the Macedonian Search for Guarantees Against Further Identity Demands

North Macedonia faces a different bully from Serbia, one located next door in Bulgaria. Skopje’s long-delayed EU accession has been blocked by Sofia which harbors similar historical pretensions as Belgrade presents to Podgorica, and Moscow presents to Kyiv.

The dominant VMRO-DPMNE party has the votes to pass the Constitutional amendments (inserting Bulgarians into the Constitution) that Sofia and Brussels demand, and that the prior SDSM-led government in Skopje accepted. Having changed its name and Constitution (several times), and demonstrated its fidelity as a NATO ally in Afghanistan and now on Ukraine, North Macedonia deserves and requires strong US support.

Working with like-minded EU partners, the Administration should back reasonable Macedonian efforts to guarantee an end to identity and history demands -- as long as the country acts in good faith and abides by the stipulated EU process. One solution, which the US should consider, is including a provision in the Constitutional amendments automatically suspending operative force if the EU halts the country’s accession process due to new Bulgarian demands.

Albania Warrants Support – and Monitoring

Finally decoupled by Brussels from North Macedonia’s arduous EU accession path, **Albania** is making impressive strides towards membership. Rule of law remains an overarching requirement. The United States and leading EU states have long supported efforts to build an independent, credible and efficient judiciary in Albania. Data suggest a ballooning backlog of cases, leaving citizens waiting years for a final ruling. These delays undermine public trust and the right to due process.

The OSCE/ODIHR election observation report on the May elections identified an array of interference in the electoral process. ODIHR cited reports of intimidation, misuse of public resources and pressure on public employees, instances of intimidation and vote buying, and problems with ballot secrecy.

As the US continues its close cooperation with Tirana, a loyal NATO ally and US partner, Washington should raise questions about rule of law, judicial integrity and efficiency, arrests, and prosecution of opposition leaders, and declining political pluralism.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, finding the path to stability in the region lies in clear-eyed understanding of the primary obstacle. The US will continue to contend with flashpoints as long as the center of gravity in the region remains wedded to a domestic and foreign agenda aligned with our principal adversaries.

Reorienting Serbia towards the Western order is a precondition for enduring progress in the Balkans. With fundamental change in Belgrade, the natural attraction and proximity of the EU and the leverage of the US and NATO will methodically overcome the ethno-national disputes, corruption, and weak institutions, and arrest the outmigration, that plague the region.

The United States has every interest to see Serbia succeed, as a full-partner and member of the Euro-Atlantic Community. Just as Belgrade has the right to make its sovereign choices, so Washington has the right and duty to set the terms for its engagement with Serbia. The time has come for each party to make fundamental decisions.

