

**Statement of Hon. Joseph H. DioGuardi
President, Albanian American Civic League**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats**

“Progress and Challenges in the Western Balkans”

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US foreign policy in the Balkans is failing once again. Without a just solution to the adversarial relationship that is still evident between Serbia and Kosova sixteen years after NATO airstrikes against Serbia ended the war, there will be no peace and stability in the Balkans. The future of the integration of Southeast Europe into the European Union is at stake.

Kosova

It has been two years since the Prishtina-Belgrade Agreement was signed by Kosova Prime Minister Hashim Thaci and Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic and this committee held a hearing about it. Then EU High Representative for Foreign Policy, Catherine Ashton, who brokered the agreement and called it historic, expected the implementation to take place within weeks of the signing on April 19, 2013. Instead, little of the 15-point agreement has been implemented. Most important, the de facto partition of northern Kosova by Serbia is still unresolved, and Serbia has yet to dismantle its parallel structures there.

Serbia is still demanding rights that go beyond the Ahtisaari Plan (formally the “Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement”)—on the basis of which Kosova’s parliament declared the independence of Kosova on February 17, 2008, and accepted international supervision. The Ahtisaari Plan, which focuses primarily on the protection of minority rights in Kosova, represented the maximum concession of the 92 percent Kosovar Albanian majority for the resolution of Kosova’s final status. Meanwhile, the Albanian majority in Southern Serbia—in Presheva, Medvegje, and Bujanovc—do not have anything like the rights that Kosova’s Serbian minority has.

Because of the Ahtisaari Plan and because of Serbia’s refusal to recognize Kosova’s sovereignty, Kosova is independent in name only. Kosova still does not have a seat at the United Nations or in other international bodies, which has also meant that there is little foreign investment. It is also the only country in the Western Balkans without visa-free travel. This has led to massive unemployment, especially among the young (the rate is 60 percent or more), many of whom are highly educated, but they are without jobs and a path to a future in Kosova. As a result, several thousand have left Kosova for Western Europe since December, most illegally. Many commentators have sighted the loosening of border restrictions via Serbia into Hungary.

But the real reason for the flight is the loss of belief in the West, which, as AACL Balkan Affairs Adviser Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi stated in her December 2014 article “Confronting the Roots of Kosova’s Downward Spiral” (that I am submitting for this hearing’s Congressional Record),

facilitated the return to power of the political elite that “has prevented Kosova from flourishing and prospering for the past decade.” Once the six-month stalemate, following Kosova’s general elections on June 8, 2014, was brought to an end by the break-up of the coalition that opposed the return of Hashim Thaci as Prime Minister and his ruling Democratic Party of Kosova (PDK), the loss of hope in Kosova has become staggering.

The Albanian political elite in Kosova have been getting richer and richer, while most of the Albanian people have been getting poorer and poorer. The State Department needs to take responsibility for propping up the Thaci government, which has become a racketeering enterprise. The loss of hope among Albanians, the most historically pro-Western, pro-American population in Europe, also is connected with the complicity of the EU and the United States in some of the most flagrant examples of the corruption that plagues Kosova. (One EU operative, a German national was convicted of stealing 4.3 million Euros from Kosova.) It is also time for the Administration to acknowledge the role that its former Ambassador to Kosova, Christopher Dell (2009-2012), played in pushing through a deal for the Bechtel Corporation to build a \$1 billion highway from Kosova to Albania (the cost of which rose to \$2 billion and that could have been built for far less money by local contractors) and then landing a senior position with Bechtel in Africa upon leaving his post in Kosova. The construction and its exorbitant cost occurred when Kosova was (and still is) a country unable to create jobs and political stability. This is totally unacceptable and should be investigated by the Inspector General of the US State Department.

Macedonia

In Macedonia, the deteriorating political situation and the relationships between ethnic groups—in the one country in the Western Balkans where no ethnicity has a majority—is acute, and yet both the US government and the European Union are failing to address the unfolding crisis. As Erwan Fouere, the former EU Special Representative in Macedonia from 2005 to 2011, has stated in his March 23, 2015, article in *Balkan Insight*, entitled “Gruevski Must Resign and Make Way for Transition Process,” which I am submitting for this hearing’s Congressional Record, “the extent of the alleged corruption and intimidation perpetrated by the prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, and his ruling party VMRO-DPMNE, has been brought out into the open” through the shocking revelations made available to the public by ethnic Macedonian opposition leader Zoran Zaev about the vast wire-tapping operation conducted by Gruevski. In another an April 2015 article, Fouere concluded that today Macedonia “is a country governed by fear and intimidation with a ruling party, whose ethno-nationalist and populist agenda has created new fault lines in an already fragile environment,” the most alarming of which are the reopening of deep tensions between the ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian communities.

Meanwhile, Ali Ahmeti, the leader of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the junior ethnic Albanian party in the ruling coalition, has played the nationalist card when he finds it politically expedient and has remained quiet about the wiretapping scandal, which apparently is the result of his party’s involvement in corruption with their senior coalition partner, VMRO-DPMNE, led by Prime Minister Gruevski, now accused publicly by the Macedonian opposition

party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, of a massive criminal political and economic agenda, especially against the large Albanian population in Macedonia.

When it comes to Macedonia, the key reality is that the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, which ended the armed conflict that year between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians and put forward a number of constitutional and legal changes designed to overturn a decade of discrimination against Albanians, has yet to be fully implemented.

The frustration and growing despair of the large Albanian population in Macedonia with the corrupt Gruevski government, including the complicit Albanian political parties led by Ali Ahmeti and Menduh Thaci, is a figurative bomb that can go off at any time, especially with an economy that produces only government jobs that go mostly to ethnic Macedonians and then only to those who vote for the corrupt Gruevski/Ahmeti partnership, which is enslaving the whole country politically and economically. Our State Department's Balkan strategy of status quo, which can now be "translated" into Balkan "peace and stability at all costs," has become a daily aspirin or cocktail for the Albanian people to make their pain subside for today while sowing the seeds for Balkan ethnic disintegration, not European integration.

Conclusion

In the end, nothing will be achieved in the Western Balkans without the strong involvement of the United States. The history of the region has shown this to be true. Regarding Kosova, all of the EU Members need to recognize the independence of Kosova and end the country's isolation through economic opportunities. Regarding Macedonia, Albanians need to be treated as an equal partner in a new Constitution of this now failing State, or we must face the option of federalization, which will allow the Albanian people administrative, social, and financial control over their own destiny as part of a Macedonian federation of ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. Macedonia is already an apartheid State, in which the major ethnic groups live separately, but not equally, and this must be corrected. Otherwise, Macedonia will not survive as a sovereign state that can be integrated into the European Union.