

**Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar
House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe
Hearing on U.S. Engagement in the Balkans
July 18, 2023**

Chairman Kean, Ranking Member Keating, Members of the Committee, I appreciate your invitation to discuss the Biden Administration's Western Balkans policy.

Our policy in the Western Balkans is grounded on a simple principle: continued integration of the region into Euro-Atlantic structures. That integration strengthens Europe as a geostrategic partner; fortifies democratic governance and the rule of law; and makes the Western Balkan countries more secure and prosperous – and thus the region better security and trade partners for the United States.

We understand the obstacles to this process are formidable - including stalled progress on democratization, corruption, dependence on Russian energy, ethnonationalist politics, and harmful foreign influence and disinformation. Yet, they are not insurmountable; the Western Balkans must take the steps necessary to qualify for membership. Our engagement is helping them fight corrosive corruption and disinformation that feeds susceptibility to malign influence – from authoritarian states like Russia and the PRC, but also bad actors within. Our engagement is focused on resolving lingering tensions that threaten this path and greater regional stability.

Let me begin with the fraught relationship between **Kosovo and Serbia**. In February and March, the EU—with strong U.S. support—achieved a breakthrough Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations and an implementation annex that provide a framework through which both countries fulfill their independent obligations. A key element is fulfilling Kosovo's obligation since 2013 to establish an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities. The ASM would empower municipalities with shared interests, language, and culture to coordinate on common challenges in delivering some public services, including education, health care, and local economic development. Moreover, Kosovo and Serbia

agreed to recognize each other's documents and national symbols. And – importantly – under this agreement, Serbia will no longer lobby against Kosovo's membership in international organizations.

Since the parties reached these agreements, there have been serious provocations, escalating tensions, and unacceptable violence by Serb protestors against KFOR, police, and journalists in northern Kosovo. In response, NATO deployed reserve force elements to reinforce the mission; it maintains an enhanced posture in northern Kosovo to ensure a safe and secure environment in line with its UN mandate. With the EU, we have called for immediate de-escalation, to include holding new municipal and mayoral elections in four municipalities in northern Kosovo with the participation of ethnic Serbs, and a refocus implementing the agreement reached under the EU-facilitated Dialogue. Together with our European partners, we remain engaged with Kosovo and Serbia, urging both parties to fulfill *all* their obligations, which are essential to continued progress on *both* their European paths.

Regrettably, in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik remains focused on dismantling the Dayton Peace Agreement and the state constitution. Dodik's persistent, secessionist, and anti-democratic actions threaten the stability, security, and prosperity of the country and the wider region. We will continue to call out these actions and hold to account anyone who undermines the Dayton Peace Agreement or threatens the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and multi-ethnic character of the country. We will also continue intensive efforts to bolster the international community's commitment to uphold Dayton, including rallying support for the European Union's EUFOR ALTHEA mission. Further, we remain firm in supporting the Office of the High Representative's use of Bonn Powers to counter threats to the Dayton Agreement.

In **Montenegro**, we are seeing renewed momentum toward realizing its European future. Recent presidential and parliamentary elections were free, peaceful, and offered voters a wide choice. The outcome reinforced the people of Montenegro's desire to achieve EU integration and the reforms that will advance it.

Both **Albania and North Macedonia** have opened EU accession negotiations, both are solid partners in encouraging normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, and both are stalwart NATO Allies.

To further its EU aspirations, the government of North Macedonia has committed to enacting a constitutional change to recognize its Bulgarian minority. We strongly support this difficult but necessary step, and we are also engaged with the new government of Bulgaria to ensure it makes no new demands once North Macedonia fulfills its commitments under existing agreements.

Transatlantic and European integration is essential to reducing the harmful influence of actors, like Russia and the PRC but also corrupt local actors, that seek to destabilize the region and hinder this integration while expanding their own influence. Russia remains the exclusive natural gas provider to some Western Balkan countries, a serious threat to regional security. Even as it wages war on Ukraine, the Kremlin feeds disinformation – often through Serbian-language outlets – to sow division, distrust, and inter-ethnic and religious tensions. The PRC pairs insidious narratives undermining trust in the West with corrosive, entrapping investment. We offer alternatives to build resilience against these influences, align partners with EU standards for critical infrastructure procurements and foreign investments, counter disinformation, and develop clean, reliable, affordable, and diversified energy sources.

The citizens of the Western Balkans want a better future for their children – one where stronger, more transparent democracies and governments are held accountable, support for human rights is strong, and where all benefit from greater economic prosperity and security. Our engagement is helping to realize this dream, and continued bipartisan Congressional engagement remains key to its success.

Thank you for your time today. I welcome your questions.