

**Deputy Assistant Secretary Daniel Lawton's Remarks to the
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Europe
September 15, 2026**

Chairman Self, Ranking Member Keating, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Europe, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on U.S. policy in the Western Balkans. This is an important region for U.S. interests, and we appreciate congressional attention and visits to the region, including Chairman Self's most recent visit in May.

The United States seeks a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Western Balkans that contributes to regional and global security. We are pursuing positive relations with key actors in the region to maintain stability, expand economic cooperation, and counter threats that directly affect the United States.

Last year, at the thirtieth anniversary commemoration of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Deputy Secretary Landau made clear that the era of externally-imposed nation-building is over. As the Deputy Secretary noted, "The United States is not offering unlimited means for undefined, uncertain, and unrealistic ends." Instead, we are urging local leaders to forge local solutions to local problems. We want leaders across the region to move beyond relitigating past disputes and focus instead on pragmatic initiatives that move their countries forward. This does not mean disengagement. The U.S. remains active in pursuing constructive outcomes that advance our interests and facilitate local actors in pursuing those local solutions. We remain ready to work with those prepared to move into the future, but have little interest in those who would undermine stability for selfish purposes, or who relitigate decades-old grievances.

U.S. policy rests on three pillars. The first is maintaining stability, a prerequisite for all our objectives. Second, we are advancing U.S. economic and commercial interests through private-sector-led growth and investment climates that welcome American business. We see these two pillars—stability and prosperity—as mutually reinforcing. Third, we are working with our partners to counter threats, including from Balkan transnational criminal organizations that directly cooperate with Western Hemisphere cartels that threaten the United States.

We pursue these objectives through sustained, high-level engagement and the use of all the tools at our disposal. Actors realize we have these additional tools enacted by Congress at our disposal.

We also expect European partners to carry a greater share of the region's security burden. For our Western Balkan NATO allies, this includes by modernizing their militaries and meeting NATO defense spending commitments to advance our shared vision of a more balanced and resilient NATO 3.0.

The United States remains committed to Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity and to the stability brought by the Dayton Agreement. Last year, U.S. diplomacy resolved a long-running crisis, preserving the country's legal cohesion and constitutional order, while securing the withdrawal of the Republika Srpska's most anti-Dayton legislation. Reduced tensions created space for progress on the Southern Interconnection gas pipeline with Croatia, which will diversify Bosnia's energy supply and security. It will also promote economic growth while creating opportunities for U.S. companies. Next month the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina will cast their ballots in elections, and we stand ready to work the new leadership on shared interests.

Similarly, the United States remains committed to Kosovo's independence and territorial integrity. We enjoy a broad, collaborative agenda with Kosovo, which unfortunately has been hindered by repeated elections, a prolonged caretaker government, and the delayed formation of the institutions required to advance our shared priorities. We have urged Kosovo's leaders to bring this process to conclusion in accordance with the Constitution and court rulings. We have also raised concerns about excessive legal scrutiny and policing of Kosovo's Serbian population. All of Kosovo's citizens should enjoy equal right and protection of the law if Kosovo is to preserve stability. The NATO-led Kosovo Force remains critical to maintaining a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and is supported by U.S. force contributions.

In Serbia, we are advocating for the United States as the partner of choice to counter adversarial influence. Our efforts are working, and our bilateral partnership is getting stronger. In July, we hosted the first-ever U.S.-Serbia Strategic Dialogue advancing energy, defense, security, and commercial cooperation. Engagement with this pivotal country in the regional balance will remain critical to safeguarding U.S. interests.

Normalization of relations, and the maintenance of peace, between Serbia and Kosovo is essential to regional stability. Significant progress has occurred since the 2020 Washington Agreement, which President Trump brokered during his first

term. Nevertheless, the EU-facilitated Dialogue has stalled because of insufficient political will on both sides. We continue to urge both Belgrade and Pristina to avoid provocations, uphold their commitments, and resume direct talks without preconditions.

We are working closely with our NATO ally Albania to dismantle transnational criminal organizations and expand market access for U.S. companies. A recently finalized Foreign Military Financing loan will help Albania meet its NATO defense spending commitments and increase the sale of U.S.-made equipment.

North Macedonia and Montenegro are both close NATO allies and security partners, each advancing strategic priorities and key projects that improve regional connectivity. North Macedonia is on a credible path to meet its NATO defense spending commitments and boost our defense cooperation. Sitting at a regional crossroads, North Macedonia is poised to receive and connect LGN exports from Greece to Serbia as well as develop north-south and east-west transportation infrastructure projects. The U.S.-North Macedonia Strategic Dialogue held in April reaffirmed both countries' commitment to working together to advance these strategic lines of effort. Similarly, the recently concluded U.S.-Montenegro Intergovernmental Agreement locks in a framework for cooperation, including on the Adriatic-Ionian corridor. These projects are vital to regional connectivity and expanding opportunities for U.S. companies in the region.

Our engagements in the Western Balkans are tied to achievable objectives and measurable results. Our focus is on supporting pragmatic, locally driven solutions, expanding economic and security cooperation, and advancing American interests.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.