

Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Murphy, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you very much for holding this timely and important hearing on the challenges facing Southeast Europe. I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today on how to best respond to them. And on behalf of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), I would like to thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to the region.

With Congressional funding, NED has supported democratic development in Southeast Europe since the early 1990s, providing steadfast support to civil society organizations in their efforts to address difficult post-communist and post-conflict challenges, and advance the region's democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. Today, we work with over 80 civil society and media organizations across the region, from Croatia to Albania.

Thanks in great part to international support, the Western Balkans have made notable progress, especially during the first decade following the U.S.-led intervention to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The last ten years, however, have witnessed a democratic decline across the region. Despite the region's proximity to the European Union, and some noteworthy progress towards accession, the countries of the Western Balkans have moved away from democratic consolidation. The current situation – characterized by weak and compromised institutions, autocratic strongmen, growing media capture, lingering ethnic grievances, and worsening regional relations – is increasingly perilous.

Russia is exploiting these weaknesses in an effort to gain greater geopolitical influence. The Kremlin seeks to weaken democratic transitions in the region, curtail Euro-Atlantic integration, and undermine NATO and the EU. Other authoritarian actors with interests in the region – Iran, the Gulf States, and China – stand in the wings, though their political influence currently is marginal. Turkey is an exception: like Russia, it also is using a mix of investment, media influence, and direct support to like-minded political forces to increase its authority.

Still, Russia remains the single most concerning external threat in the region, having expanded its influence to a greater degree there than anywhere else in Europe, save Ukraine. It currently operates a so-called "humanitarian center" in southern Serbia, near the border with Kosovo; and there are rumors that it plans to establish another in the north. Russia may have been involved in

the attempted overthrow of the government in Montenegro last year. It recently began including Serbian children in paramilitary camps for youth, which include weapons training.

Just how far Russia's meddling in the region goes is best captured by the June 4 article in *The Guardian*, which was penned by several NED grantees. Based on leaked intelligence documents, the article alleges that Russia has carried out a decade-long campaign to "spread propaganda and stroke discord" in the region with the goal to "create a strip of militarily neutral countries" that would include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

Montenegro's successful NATO bid last week presents a major blow to this plan: immediately following the announcement of the transatlantic Alliance's new member state, the Russian Foreign Ministry's tweeted that, in response to Montenegro's "anti-Russian hysteria" and "hostile policy," Russia "reserves the right to take reciprocal measures."

Such brazen language emboldens illiberal elements and extremist radicals in the region to attack those advancing and defending democratic principles, including civil society groups and media supported by the Endowment.

In January this year, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) – one of the leading pro-democracy groups in the region and a long-time NED grantee – was attacked by a gang of six men, who plastered the group's Belgrade offices with messages of hate that labeled the group's activists "traitors" and "foreign mercenaries." At least two of the assailants were identified as being affiliated with a pro-Russian nationalist group and had fought in the Russia-fomented war in eastern Ukraine. This attack was preceded by a relentless campaign in the government-controlled media that portrayed the YIHR as a U.S.-funded group and smeared its leader, Anita Mitic.

Unfortunately, Anita is only one of the many brave individuals who have come under heavy attack for their work in promoting democracy and fundamental freedoms in their countries. Civic activists, human rights defenders, and journalists – including the NED grantees who contributed to *The Guardian* article – are being singled out as "foreign agents," threatened, and even physically attacked.

One of them, Stevan Dojcinovic, is editor-in-chief at Belgrade's Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) and a winner of the Global Shining Light Award for Investigative Journalism. Stevan is regularly vilified in the pro-government media and denounced for instigating instability with assistance from the West. Yet, it is precisely the type of groundbreaking investigative work which Stevan and his colleagues are doing that strengthens democracy and presents the best defense against disinformation and other malign foreign influence.

The ill-advised and dangerous approach by nationalist governments and their proxies not only threatens the activists themselves, but also damages real democracy and, consequently, any lasting stability in these countries. For without strong rule of law, fully transparent and accountable governments, guaranteed fundamental freedoms, and unrestricted political and civic participation, both the security of the region and the stability of Europe and transatlantic relationship will remain at risk.

Homegrown extremist groups are capitalizing on some of the same weaknesses as external actors, especially endemic corruption and a lack of economic prospects. While the number of foreign fighters recruited in the Balkans to fight in Syria and Iraq seems to have plateaued, any extended political crisis, economic downturn, or foreign meddling could easily push the region towards renewed radicalization and even conflict.

This, of course, is the worst case scenario. The large-scale, protracted warfare that the region witnessed in the 1990s is unlikely. However, even an isolated, short-term, or small-scale conflict is likely to spill across borders in region still riddled with post-war grievances.

Without greater Western attention, the best case scenario one could hope for is the preservation of an illiberal status quo, with increasingly autocratic leaders who continue to weaken democratic institutions, restrict media freedoms, and worsen ethnic tensions, while offering the international community short-term deliverables in the name of “maintaining stability”.

For far too long, “stability” has been the principal goal of Western policy in the post-conflict Balkans. Lowering the bar on democratic progress has weakened the transformational power of EU integration and accession. Looking the other way when alleged aspirants skirt difficult reforms and water down democratic institutions has only served to delegitimize the EU in the eyes of frustrated citizens across the Balkans. Together with U.S. disengagement, this policy of acquiescence has left a vacuum that other external players are eager to exploit.

Mr. Chairman, Western governments need to recognize the urgency of the situation and the potential costs of the crisis the region is facing. They should press for real democratic progress, which is the real key to regional security, long-term stability, and countering malign foreign influence. This can be done in several cost-effective ways:

- Demonstrate a strong and consistent dedication to democratic principles:
 - *Challenge undemocratic practices and trends in progress reports, public appearances and statements, and in direct communications with the region’s leaders.* Remember that those who are fighting for democracy can and do suffer from the West’s inconsistency and lack of political support. They deserve our solidarity and the unwavering support of the American people, for they defend not only their own, but also our, fundamental values.
 - *Adopt a more pluralistic approach to promoting reform processes, and empower reformers by reaching out to a broader, more diversified group of political, civic, and media actors.* Self-proclaimed ethnic leaders and “factors of stability” should not be allowed to monopolize and manipulate important reform processes. Pro-democratic opposition leaders, as well as civil society activists and independent journalists, should be recognized and encouraged for the contributions they are making, especially in important reform processes such as the security sector reform in Serbia or constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
 - *Insist on regional cooperation and a constructive approach to outstanding issues, especially by countries which are already EU and NATO members.* Civil society groups are leading the way in regional cooperation on sensitive but essential issues like transitional justice; governments should be encouraged to do the same. One important effort is an initiative by over 2,000 organizations and individuals to create the world’s first regional

truth and fact-finding commission – RECOM – an initiative that NED has been supporting since its 2008 launch. With the process of creating the intergovernmental body stalled by politicking, the NGO coalition has redoubled its effort to gather citizens' signatures in support of RECOM, collecting over 600,000 to date.

- *Continue to provide democracy support to civil society organizations, independent media, and moderate political parties.* This does not necessarily require increased assistance, but rather a rededication to the values that will help to achieve meaningful democratic progress.
- **Rebuild conditionality:**
 - *Offer incentives, where possible, such as through the NATO accession process and supporting countries' EU progress.* As NED grantee Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies argues in its upcoming report, "NATO can and should be the leading actor of a sustained and comprehensive process of the region's stabilization and democratization." Montenegro's NATO membership is an important signal – not just to external actors – that the region is safely anchored with the West. It also provides an incentive to others – especially ordinary citizens – to support sometimes painful reform processes for the benefits that integration can bring, including security and prosperity.
 - *Engage European partners to use "sticks" such as cuts in financial assistance or sanctions.* U.S. sanctions on Bosnian Serb nationalist leader Milorad Dodik for obstructing the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords had an immediate effect of tampering down his secessionist rhetoric. Similar mechanisms can ensure that those who endanger stability and breach fundamental rights and norms should not and cannot benefit from U.S. or EU assistance and cooperation.
- **Boost diplomatic engagement:**
 - *Forge a common policy for the region with the EU, and provide the necessary political and technical support to international partners.* It is often said that the Balkans are a "European problem." However, the U.S. still possesses important interests and unrivaled credibility in the region, and should endeavor to help its European partners to formulate a coherent strategy with the political will needed to see through indispensable reforms.
 - *Provide the Balkan portfolio a higher priority in the new U.S. Administration as an area of heightened strategic importance.* Increased attention to the region tends to have an immediate effect on the ground. This was recently demonstrated by Deputy Assistant Secretary Hoyt Yee's visit to Macedonia, which resulted in the country's president softening his stance on the formation of a new opposition-led government, thereby possibly paving the way for resolving a prolonged political crisis.
 - *Reinvigorate bipartisan support, which helped to end the conflicts of the 1990s, for the region's full democratic progress.* Such support leaves no room for interpretation regarding American values and, thus, no space for considering dangerous "alternatives" advocated from the East.