

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation

**Southeast Europe:  
Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence**

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The Western Balkans were supposed to be a problem solved. Or at least a problem the Americans could hand off to the Europeans to finish the job of completing Europe. Sadly, that is not the case.

We can celebrate the fact that since the Yugoslav succession wars have ended, Slovenia and then Croatia earned both NATO and European Union membership, and Albania and now Montenegro have joined them in NATO. Recent developments however underscore the fragility of our investments in the region nearly 22 years after the Dayton Peace Accords, 18 years after the Kosovo air campaign, and 16 years after the Ohrid Accords stabilized Macedonia ending the last violent conflict in a bloodied region.

Over the past decade as Washington turned its attention elsewhere, and European Union (EU) strategy gave way to a bureaucratic process increasingly detached from political vision, the consensus in the region about its future has frayed. To those in the region, EU membership is a distant prospect, if viable and desirable at all. The short-term costs of reforms at home, including risking the forfeiture of patronage networks, outweigh the ambiguity of long-term benefits. Stagnation is giving way to backsliding.

This dynamic is exacerbated by the uncertainties at the heart of Europe and the transatlantic relationship itself. When there is trouble in our core transatlantic community, its periphery is vulnerable to centrifugal forces.

This lack of a North Star has opened a tempting new front for the Kremlin's efforts to rewrite the rules of the post-Cold War era.

Witness October 16, 2016 in Podgorica. On that election day, Montenegro's authorities disrupted a plan by Russian-backed Serbian nationalists to enter parliament dressed as Montenegrin security officers and then open fire on opposition supporters who they had orchestrated would gather outside parliament. The plan was to assassinate the Prime Minister, and declare the election invalid or orchestrate the Russian-financed opposition taking power.

This is not a plot line from a fictional spy novel. Montenegro's independent special prosecutor Milivoje Katnic has identified two Russian military intelligence officers, Eduard Sismakov and Vladimir Popov, as masterminds. These two individuals fled Serbia ten days after the failed coup attempt to return to Moscow just as Nikolai Patrushev, former head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and current head of Russia's Security Council, arrived in Belgrade.

This story, which Western authorities and open source information validate, illustrates the brazenness with which Russia is willing to operate in a region it once considered no longer core to its strategic interests.

Contrast this with October 2001 in Moscow. Then-President Boris Trajkovski of Macedonia was visiting Russia with the aim of informing President Putin that, having achieved peace in Macedonia, the nation would now pursue in earnest membership in NATO and the EU. According to Macedonians present, this was President Trajkovski's principal message, making him nervous about the encounter. But Putin replied, "Macedonia is not Ukraine," making it clear that Macedonia's pursuit of NATO membership did not concern him.

The contrast between Putin's ambivalence about a Balkan nation pursuing NATO membership more than 15 years ago and the Kremlin's willingness to back a coup attempt last October to derail Montenegro's path to NATO underscores how much the geopolitical situation has changed.

No doubt today the European Union is the major player in the region, committing far more resources, tools, human capital, and political attention to the region. For this, Americans should be grateful. There will be no bright future for Southeast Europe without EU leadership. However, the United States retains a special authority given how central its moral voice and hard power were to ending the fighting and stabilizing the region.

My central message is that continued American ambivalence today may engender a crisis tomorrow, which in turn would demand a far greater degree of American engagement than would be required to avoid any crisis in the first place.

Don't get me wrong; professional American diplomats continue to play a central role in resolving regional problems. In fact, Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) of State Hoyt Yee who will testify today, along with our ambassadors on the ground, have been central to recent political breakthroughs in Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia. Montenegro would not have entered NATO this month without the unrelenting efforts of Ambassadors and DAS-level officials over the past few years.

But that is not enough.

We need to give our frontline diplomats a bit of backup, given Russian mischief-making can easily exacerbate Balkan vulnerabilities and escalate into full-blown wild fires. After all, Moscow is not aiming to build anything in the region. Rather Moscow's objectives only require that it disrupt the region's integration into NATO and the EU.

This environment has fostered a sense of backsliding. And yet in the most Russia-friendly populations support for Europe remains strong. Even as the EU's fortunes have declined, Serbs opt 48 percent to 35 percent in favor of Serbia joining the EU. In past years, the margin of support for EU membership has been as large as 40 points in favor.

Similarly, the economic center of gravity for the region is clearly the EU. In Serbia, which has the largest proportion of trade with Russia, only 9.6 percent of its imports are from Russia compared to 62.5 percent from the EU. Serbia exports only 5.4 percent of exports to Russia compared to 65.8 percent to EU. These figures are even more lopsided in favor of the EU in the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro, according to figures from the European Commission and UNCTAD.

Yet Russia maintains strategic leverage through concerted disinformation and influence campaigns, and its ability to play the energy card. Bosnia and Macedonia consume 100 percent of their gas from Russian sources; the figure is 80 percent in Serbia, according to the International Energy Agency.

Indeed, Russia has used its leverage to advance its interests in the region. Russia has financed a campaign to turn public opinion against NATO in Montenegro, and Russian resources helped turn a fringe anti-NATO, pro-Moscow party into the leading opposition party. Russia has financed Milorad Dodik giving him the means to destabilize Bosnia's central government and advance the independence of Republika Srpska. In Macedonia, Russia cynically came to the defense of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in the wake of a massive wiretap scandal and contested elections, nudging the ethnically divided nation to the brink of conflict.

Russian intelligence services have been operating without restraint in Serbia, going so far as to plan the attempted coup in Montenegro last fall from Serbian territory and without the knowledge of Serbia's elected officials. Russia's influence is bolstered by the presence of a "humanitarian center" rapid-response base in southern Serbia, poised to threaten Kosovo and Macedonia. Even overwhelmingly pro-American Kosovo has been subjected to an onslaught of fake news and inflammatory antics aimed at stirring tensions between Albanians and ethnic Serbs in Kosovo's north.

Russia has gone on offense as it sensed that the United States was all but withdrawing from the field. Moscow saw a low-cost opportunity because of this strategic vacuum. But before considering how to counter these disruptive and dangerous tactics, it is critical to understand why it is in US interests to care in the first place.

Even the casual observer of European history understands that the continent's great power conflicts started with smaller conflicts, frequently in the Balkans, which metastasized, drawing in outside powers. Russia is stoking the flames of this historic pattern.

The dog that has not barked is the radicalization of the Muslim populations of the region. Yet it could become a serious security threat. These populations remain deeply pro-American, but over time, US disengagement and lack of opportunities at home could accelerate radicalization and grow the foreign fighters pipeline, sending disenchanting recruits into the civil wars of the Middle East with the potential to return home as security liabilities.

The Balkans have also been one of the leading routes for migrants and refugees to leave North Africa and the Middle East and enter Europe. The massive refugee flows have strained local security capacity and social services. Unmitigated population flows into European Union states which participate in the Visa Waiver Program pose threats to US security. We therefore have a strong interest in helping these nations secure their borders, and properly regulate refugee and migration flows.

Finally, the Western Balkans remain the unfinished business of a Europe whole and free. This concept has been at the heart of US strategy toward Europe, precisely because a whole, free Europe removes the continent as a conceivable future battleground and maximizes the likelihood that the United States will have the kind of capable, coherent partner we need to address global challenges. Instability in Europe's Southeast could deprive the United States of a strategic partner on facing challenges further afield.

Therefore, the United States should first help re-establish a clear, common vision for the region. Our message should be that as a result of reforms at home, all Balkan states can ultimately be part of a secure and prosperous transatlantic community. The United States needs to join with the European Union to re-establish clarity in our common goal at the political level.

Second, in the near-term, we must work to make Montenegro's NATO membership a success. This means working closely with our newest ally on a common security agenda, but also to help it accelerate domestic reforms, bolster the rule of law, advance its EU negotiations, and help foster a loyal opposition that takes its seats in parliament. With presidential elections in 2018, the Russians will look to leverage their success in creating the Democratic Front as an obstructionist political force by promoting an anti-NATO candidate for president.

Third, the United States should commit to an enduring US security presence in the region. Specifically, the United States should shift away from a mentality of progressively decreasing its security obligations to KFOR to help sustain peace in Kosovo to viewing our security presence in Kosovo as a stabilizing force and guarantor for the region. Much like the deployment of US and other NATO forces in Poland and other eastern flank allies serves as a deterrent to Russia, a permanent US military presence as part of a NATO force at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo could serve as a deterrent force in the Western Balkans, a rapid reaction force as need, and provide a regional capacity-building capability.

Fourth, any move to transform our security presence in the region should be coupled if not preceded by an effort to pursue an historic rapprochement with Serbia. Serbian politicians hedge between an assertive, unappealing Russia and an ambivalent, but appealing West. The legacy of the 1999 NATO air campaign shapes public perceptions. We should both compete for Serbia and its people, as well as make clear that hedging is a dangerous course. To do this, the United States would need to develop and pursue a consistent effort in concert with key European allies.

Fifth, the United States should assume a more prominent role in fostering reconciliation and reform in Macedonia in the wake of the most recent government formation, and in doing so become a leading stakeholder in resolving the name dispute with Greece. Restoring confidence in the central government, improving interethnic relations, and creating an investment environment attractive to Western investors would complement our efforts to restore the viability of Macedonia's NATO membership and ensure the long-term security and prosperity of the region.

Sixth, we need to take a bet on the people of the region, particularly the next generation and an independent, entrepreneurial class. We need to make it clear that our objective is not simply stability. Therefore, US policy must avoid reinforcing cozy, political patronage networks often run by nationalist forces like an organized crime racket. Working with our European Union partners, we should pursue a concerted effort to provide opportunities for youth and entrepreneurs to thrive outside traditional patronage networks, and use our leverage to create opportunities for them within their countries. Much like the United States has used public-private partnerships and modest public financing to attract larger

numbers of students from Latin America to study in the United States, we should do the same in this region.

These measures will help diminish nefarious Russian influence in the region, begin to tip Serbia into the European camp, and grow an independent constituency for a democratic, prosperous future across the region.

Once these measures take hold, the United States could join its European partners in considering more fundamental measures to ensure a unified Bosnia. Reopening Dayton would require a level of political, diplomatic, and security engagement which neither the United States nor the EU are yet prepared to provide however. We need momentum first before we tackle head on this complex task, and we need forces inside Bosnia to lead the charge.

In the coming years, the priority of the United States must be to firmly put an end to the drift. A relatively small show of commitment now will shore up an order painstakingly put together in response to the bloodletting of the 1990s. Locals need to be reassured that new ethnic hostilities are not around the corner, and that borders are not about to be redrawn right under their feet. In the same vein, Russia must be made to understand that there is no easy path for them to sow chaos in the region.

I have come to these conclusions through our work at the Atlantic Council, which over the past year has sent delegations to nearly all the countries in the region as part of our effort to help forge a renewed US strategy with and for the region. In the coming months, the Council intends to consult on and share its findings, and help galvanize a renewed push for reform at home and integration as desired into our transatlantic community.

Many members of this committee have visited Southeast Europe, and met with national political leaders, members of civil society, and entrepreneurs. This committee has a strong track record of spotlighting American interests in the region. I believe the US Senate has a unique opportunity to help drive a renewed American strategy toward the region, and we welcome the opportunity to support those efforts.

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