



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and the Western Balkans

Wednesday 6 December 2023

10.30 am

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Stirrup (In the Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 28 - 43

Witness

I: The Rt Hon The Baroness Ashton of Upholland LG GCMG, former European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Examination of witness

Baroness Ashton of Upholland.

Q28 **The Chair:** Welcome to the committee's follow-up inquiry into the situation in the Western Balkans, looking at what has changed and developed since its report on that particular subject in 2018. We are very grateful to have you here. This is a public session. It is being televised and there will be a record of it.

Given your extensive experience in the whole area, if there is anything we do not cover that you think we need to cover, please set us straight on that score. I will get things going and ask a general question for openers. In what specific areas has the prospect of EU membership been a positive tool for driving reform in the Western Balkans? Where has it been successful, or perhaps less successful, and, in your view, what are the reasons for this? We would be very grateful if you could focus in particular on what has happened in the past five years and how the scene has shifted, if at all.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: It is very nice to be with the committee and to have a chance to talk about an area that I still find myself drawn to. As many of you will know, once you have been anywhere near the Western Balkans, there is a desire to engage because it is so important. If you helicopter over Europe, you can see its relevance and importance to the continent as well as specifically to the European Union. For 20 years it has been recognised that the Western Balkans nations should become part of the European Union, something of which this country, whether in or out of the EU, has been supportive of.

In that context, what has been especially important in the past years is an understanding that, to deal with corruption, organised crime and the rule of law, and to try to develop the economies of the Western Balkans, the pull factor of being part of the European Union remains a significant element in getting those changes made. Populations have wavered in their support for the EU, for reasons I will come on to, but there is still a recognition on both sides of the equation of the importance of making sure that the ultimate destination is to be part of the EU.

It is especially relevant in the context of the past years with what is happening in Ukraine and the strength of what Russia is trying to do in the region. You see that perhaps most obviously in countries like Serbia. None the less, it is a factor that we need to be mindful of, and one could argue that at a very dramatic and strategic level we are faced with a choice: that these countries move towards what we would recognise as the values and ideals that we share, or they move in a different direction.

Where it has been less successful is that it is a very difficult, long-term process, as countries that have joined the EU well know. This country was engaged, when I was a Minister, in supporting Romania and Bulgaria in their accession process. We had already been engaged for some time. It was very difficult, very challenging and very long, and requirements have

only got more over the years, so there is a sense that people get tired, fed up and do not believe it will ever happen.

Linked to that, everybody is aware that the EU itself is not always pushing for accession to happen. The most obvious case was what happened in North Macedonia in 2019 when the rather difficult challenge of changing the name was finally achieved. This was one of the most difficult and challenging things any country could conceivably do. Having been engaged with North Macedonia for a number of years as it tried to do this, it was extraordinary that it managed, but it did so in part because there was a promise of something of greater significance. When it did it, it was blocked, at least for some months. That sent a terrible signal to the Western Balkans.

There is a sense, with the less successful approach, of, "Will Europe actually want us when it comes to it?" That is still writ large, especially when this is now mingled with the accession of Ukraine, which is a huge country that will require significant changes, which I am sure we will come on to. I think that some of the smaller countries of the Western Balkans feel a little bit lost in that process.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that scene-setter. There are lots of strands in that which we will develop in more detail through the questioning as we go on.

Q29 Lord Anderson of Swansea: You must have found your negotiations somewhat depressing, but you still remain optimistic. The case for the opposition is pretty clear: that none of the countries will benefit in terms of money, and none is a net contributor. They all have severe internal problems. The pace of reform has been somewhat minimal, with quite a lot of backsliding, with many promises and little fulfilment. What is your judgment? Is it about stability? Are they better inside the tent than out? How do you counter those particularly in the European Parliament who question why they want to have more trouble? I have certainly spoken to MEPs who say that Michel was too optimistic about 2030 and there will be real problems in the European Parliament. Do you think such problems are likely to increase with probably a more populist and nationalist European Parliament after the June elections?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: There is always trouble in the European Parliament, in my experience. That is because it is a body that has the full range of political perspectives, including those who do not much admire the concept of the EU. One of its challenges will be how to manage the future of the European Union. I am not pessimistic.

One of your jobs if you are in office in the European Union is to be optimistic, to push forward with ideas and to be mindful of an overview of where Europe is going. From Charles Michel's perspective as President of the Council—I have not spoken to him and have no idea what was in his mind—my guess would be that he was trying to send a strong signal to member states, the Parliament and the Commission that it was important to think about the future of that region.

Again, put your helicopter up in the sky and look at it. Where is it going to go? It is a series of small countries that have been through the most terrible, tragic and horrific wars in our lifetime. It has suffered the loss of many young people who are moving away from the region. When I am in the region there is a lot of discussion about how people with education or abilities are going elsewhere for work, especially into other parts of the European Union, and may very well stay there. There is a real problem for the region in where it goes in the future, but it is on the borders; it is on the doorstep. The challenge is where it goes if it does not come into the European Union.

There are huge issues with backsliding, slowing down and not doing the work. I agree on all those problems, but that also rests with all of us who are committed to believing that that is where they ought to be, where they belong and where safety, security, peace and prosperity will be for them. Therefore, it is beholden on everyone to engage with it rather than think, "they're not going to get there, so let's not worry about them". We should worry about them quite a lot.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: Will that be the case in the new Parliament?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: We do not know what the make-up of the European Parliament will be yet, and you are right to consider that there may be more populism and nationalism and more of those who have a very different perspective on this. But, regardless of that, there is still likely to be a majority of people in the European Parliament who one would put within the framework of having a desire to see the European Union continue to grow, adapt, respond to challenges and so on. One issue that the European Parliament will have to confront is the consequences of what is happening in the war in Ukraine and what they mean for the European continent in the context of Russia as it now is, as opposed to the Russia many thought they were dealing with.

Q30 **The Chair:** We will come on to the impact of the Ukraine war in a moment. We are now very interested observers rather than participants, having left the EU, but the EU is already a very large organisation and unwieldy to a degree, certainly far more than the original concept, and it looks set to grow even larger. There must be a question about what the EU is like and what the principal purposes and drivers are. There has been some debate, not least in France, about all this. To what extent is that sort of existential discussion about the EU likely to play into the accession aspirations of countries in the Western Balkans?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: That is a really good question, and it is absolutely central. Having set up the first quasi-institution for 50 years, there was not much I did not learn about how the institutions functioned or, indeed, how to set one up. How it works is extraordinary, but there are inevitable challenges that result from bringing so many countries together. Without question, when you look at the countries that are likely to come in in the future, there is a big question mark about whether the structures and processes are fit for purpose for a much enlarged EU, not

just in numbers of countries but in population size. For example, do you continue to have one Commissioner per country, and what would they do?

Lord Teverson: We have been around that one a few times.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: We have all been round that one a few times, but it is still one that we will have to go round again. There is a question about how funding resources are divvied up and distributed. There will be questions about what that means for the number of MEPs, and so on. Lots of structural changes need to be thought about. These are never easy discussions. I am sure that colleagues who have had personal experience will know how difficult those conversations can be when you have such a big structure and so many interested parties. All these decisions require unanimity.

My humble experience in setting up the External Action Service was that, to get the money—the budget—and the staff I needed, I had to get unanimity from the then 27 member states, before Croatia, in the Commission and a majority in the Parliament. That was against a backdrop of an agreed decision about what we were trying to do. It was extremely challenging, and it will be much more challenging to start opening and looking at things, never mind if that means that you have to open the treaties. As legislators, you know that the opportunity to open a piece of law and play with it, or make changes that you want to make, is almost irresistible to lawmakers. It will be no different here.

Add to that the fact that there is always an election somewhere in the European Union. At any given moment somebody is about to have an election, has just had an election, is forming a coalition, and so on. So, at any given moment, when you are trying to make these changes, you will be dealing with different Governments coming in. As we have seen, they can be substantially different Governments or substantially different coalitions. One of the big challenges of coalition Governments in the EU is that in, say, the Foreign Affairs or General Affairs Council you will have one minister from one political party with one view, and the leader on the European Council may come from a completely different political party with a completely different set of views, and so it goes on. You have to try to marry those together in some way, often around subjects where, from a domestic point of view, they do not need to worry so much about whether they have the same views.

There are lots of challenges in what will need to be done in the EU. What is interesting is that discussions are already going on to start thinking about what that might look like, but I do not underestimate for a second how difficult it will be.

Q31 **Baroness Morris of Bolton:** That was a fascinating insight. Building on that and looking to your own personal experience of conducting negotiations with countries in the region, what recommendations might you make to the EU and to the UK to ensure that we have stability and security, and continue the push for reform? In that, where do you see

opportunities where the UK might work with the EU?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: The Western Balkans is an area where there is a lot of opportunity for the UK and the EU, as well as individual member states, to work together. I know you will be hearing from Lord Peach, with whom I talk very frequently. I am sure he will give you lots of insights into what he can do in that context, but it is an area where we are in agreement on the direction of travel and can therefore work together quite collaboratively. It is not always easy, but it is possible.

One general problem that I find in foreign policy is that we tackle a crisis or a problem and get to a sort of answer, and then we say, "Thank goodness we've done that", and move on to the next one. In the context of the Western Balkans, if you look at the Dayton agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the Brussels agreement, which I was honoured to help mediate and make happen, there is a sense not that we have abandoned them—there are plenty of good people, not least Miroslav Lajčák, the EU special representative, who is doing some extraordinary things and working closely with Lord Peach—but that there is no focus, because we have kind of resolved it but we did not.

So, first, you have to assume that, if crises and problems have been decades, or even longer, in the making, that is what it will take to try to resolve them. In the case of Serbia and Kosovo, there is a long history and sense of grievance—both parties would refer on occasion to the battle of Kosovo, which took place in 1389—and understandable concern about what has happened and the violence, terror and horror of the years that have gone before. We have to keep at it. So No. 1 is: you have to keep sustained action.

The second is that we have to be creative, because these problems cannot be solved by trying to take the whole problem and resolve it immediately. In the context of Serbia and Kosovo, we did not try to solve the ultimate problem of recognition of Kosovo by Serbia; we started by trying to make life better for a group of people who live in the north of Kosovo. Life is not a lot better in the north of Kosovo, as you will have seen. About two weeks ago, on behalf of the UN, I was with a group of people from the north of Kosovo in Thessalonica to talk about trust building with them.

There are issues where we need to think creatively about how we address the specific problems people face and break down the bigger problem into ways in which we can resolve it. The more we can do that the better. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this is particularly important in the context of the Dayton agreement and how you manage the way that Dayton—in my view—stopped the war but does not have all the answers for how you build the peace. How could it? It is not a criticism, but now we need to think creatively about that.

Creativity is a huge part of this. It is thinking outside the box, as we often say. It is about keeping going and not giving up, and being collaborative. For the UK, it is being absolutely joined up with the EU and

the US. The US has a huge role to play in parts of the region and the envoys currently operating there are doing a good job of this. I have great praise for what they are doing.

- Q32 **The Chair:** You mentioned the need for long-term engagement in these enduring problems, of which the Western Balkans is certainly one. Now that we are outside the EU, are there, in your view, sufficient and adequate mechanisms for us to engage at an appropriate level in that enduring way on these issues rather than just returning to them sporadically?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: By "us", do you mean the UK?

The Chair: Yes.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I think the disruption of Brexit on foreign policy left a gap between what had been seen very much as a UK issue in the EU, one in which the UK had played a prominent role for many years and where the UK was going to go on foreign policy, and a lack of certainty. I am not suggesting for a moment that the series of Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries we have had have not been interested or engaged, but there was a kind of disconnect in how it joins up. There was also a slightly inward-looking Britain, which had to think about its relationship with the outside world, so there was a bit of a gap.

We now need to approach it by being as joined up in our thinking as we can and trying to make it clear to all parties that, as a nation, we want to engage with this. I am in a slightly different position because of my history in the region and with the EU. It is perhaps much easier for me to go around the region saying, "You should be in the EU", than it would be necessarily for everybody from Britain to say that. It is quite important that we make clear that, although it is not for us and we have made that decision, we still think there is a case for them, because, without that, people do not take us seriously. With that, we have a chance to join up, but I would not underestimate that in certain parts of the EU they are not convinced yet that we have a strategic approach and a desire to be part of a team. They think that either we want to do it on our own, which we cannot, or we want to do it with the US on our own, which we cannot, rather than saying that this is an opportunity to join up.

There is an interesting opportunity in a way. Because we are not inside the EU, the countries do not have to treat us as the body they have to be nice to because we want to be part of it, so we may sometimes have a slight opportunity to have a conversation that perhaps the EU cannot have.

- Q33 **Baroness Coussins:** You began to cover this question already but, sticking with accession and the role of the UK, our original report five years ago into the Western Balkans recommended and stressed that the UK should continue to support the accession ambitions of the Western Balkan countries. How successful have we been over the past five years, and what have we done to try to implement that? In particular, now that

we are no longer an EU member state, how influential can we be with the five EU member states that still will not recognise Kosovo? You mentioned the UN, which is also very helpful, where there is no recognition of Kosovo. Can we do anything more there to influence that in order for Kosovo to get out of being locked into potential candidate status and get into accession status instead?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: That is a really interesting question. As you know, the reasons why the five do not recognise Kosovo do not have much to do with Kosovo; they are much more to do with other things. It is ever thus in the European Union that domestic and other considerations play big; they do with every country one way or another. I have never overly worried about that, because the moment of recognition that is most important is the point of accession.

My hope would be that Serbia and Kosovo would become members of the EU and that all the Western Balkan countries would come in as states. If you think about it, this is a group of states coming into the EU, not necessarily exactly at the same moment. There are also many challenges about staggering it, which I can come on to. Once there is recognition by the most important country to Kosovo, i.e. Serbia—or, rather, if there is recognition; I am not saying it will happen, but should it happen—and it is hard to see how Serbia could become a member state in the EU without it, some of the challenges of the five unrecognised states will disappear.

There are ways in which countries can manage challenging domestic situations that do not let them fall into the trap of their own domestic problems. Without knowing what governments will be in those countries at that particular time—there is always a balancing act to be done—it can be got round. I worry about it less, because the EU itself does not recognise countries; it is only the individual countries that do, and they are joining the EU. In the way that you can manage situations, if you simply think of it in that way—that they are joining an organisation that does not require recognition from the organisation itself—that is how I would start to manage it at the time.

Baroness Coussins: What about the UN?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: The UN is more complicated. With recognition, the General Assembly is fine, but there is the Security Council, which means that you have to get Moscow or Russia to agree. That is pretty unlikely at the present time. Without them, it is likely that the Chinese would abstain. I am not sure they would, but that is probable. That will require a lot more effort and work. For the moment, I see no prospect that we can change that. Again, you come back to the issues of Kosovo and Serbia. If Serbia—it is a big “if”—were to get to the point of recognising Kosovo, it would be more difficult for others to stand in the way.

Q34 **Lord Teverson:** You have answered most of the question I was going to ask. I always remember you saying about the External Action Service

that you had to fly it as you built it. It was an amazing task, and it has gone on to survive well since then. Baroness Coussins talked about the Kosovo side of it, but how do you see the role of the External Action Service in this area? It is separate from the Parliament, which will also have a big effect on the Commission that is selected after the European elections, not just on the European Parliament. Do you feel that it needs to up its game further? How has it been supplementary to making this process happen? I would be interested in your comments retrospectively, having driven it yourself.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I think my comment was that it was like flying a plane while trying to bolt the wings on at the same time in the middle of turbulence. It is exactly like that. It is the Commission that drives the enlargement agenda, not the External Action Service. As you know, there is a very clear distinction between the two. The resources, support, people and money—all those things—come from the Commission under the auspices of the Enlargement Commissioner, but I would describe the job of the External Action Service as being more about the politics of the region that underlie the challenges that countries face. So the energy and effort of the EAS would be focused on trying to persuade governments and ministers to look at issues in the context of whether you can find a political fix or solution to a problem.

In the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue it fell to my role to do the political discussions between the two Prime Ministers, the two Presidents at times, and other ministers. It was the responsibility of the Commission to look at what resources could be supplied and to do all the technical and practical pieces of work: the opening and closing of chapters, the stabilisation agreement—all those things. That is not to say that those are not incredibly challenging and important for the EAS's political wing. I think that was why High Representative Borrell appointed Miroslav Lajčák, who knows the region extremely well, to focus especially on Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and devote his energy and time to doing it. That is where the EAS comes into play, in trying to deal with the political questions and challenges that are faced in the north of Kosovo and elsewhere.

Lord Teverson: Going back to UK and EU co-operation, one area where we have participated is Macron's original vision of the European—I cannot remember what they call it now.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: The political association.

Lord Teverson: Yes. So we participated. I think we are hosting that in the near future. Is that area relevant to this? Should the Western Balkans be on the agenda in that meeting? Do you see it as an effective body at all without it? It does not even have a secretariat or anything.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: It is always useful to meet with your allies in any format you can think of. We have enough room in the world for meetings and alliances, whether they are formal or informal, particularly in a world where there are so many areas with levels of chaos

and tragedy, which require an international effort of a kind we have not seen for a long time. Anything that brings countries and leaders together and gives them the chance to talk, have conversations and work out ideas is to be welcomed.

From our perspective, finding ways to engage across Europe is a really good thing to do. Therefore, in the context of that, leaders from the Western Balkans have been invited to those meetings on occasion, as far as I know. It is a good place for us to meet those leaders. It is a good place for key European nations that are our allies, like France, to be able to drive an agenda that says there are bigger things beyond the European Union membership and big opportunities for us all to talk together. So lots more of it, please.

Lord Teverson: I think in its first meeting, outside Belarus and Russia obviously, it had more or less every European nation there.

Q35 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** I want to ask about Serbia. Is this a good time to ask about Serbia?

The Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Lord Wood of Anfield: There is a tendency sometimes in this debate to focus on the states with which Serbia has problems rather than on Serbia itself. What do you think our leverage over Serbia is now? I just looked it up and The President said that EU membership is much less attractive now. Only 10% of Serbians support NATO membership, and only 30% of Serbians support EU membership now. The allure of both those international organisations in Serbia is going down. And, obviously, you have the Ukraine conflict. We are outside the EU. Is there anything Britain can do to try to use the traditional tools of EU membership and other kinds of association with the West as a form of incentive for Serbia to become a good guy in international relations?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: Part of the reason why interest in Serbia in it becoming a member of the EU has gone down is this. It started with a great aspiration. When we had done the Brussels agreement and they opened talks, Aleksandar Vučić said that he wanted to complete within two years, which I think he realised was probably unlikely, for all the reasons I have given, such as how long it takes, and there was a lot to do in Serbia. When people realise that that is not going to happen, as there is growing Russian influence in the country and as the EU seems to be a bit more lukewarm about the whole project, people say, "Well, I don't want it anyway". So I think you can't read into the 30% that this would be where it would end.

We have an opportunity in Serbia to influence because there are strong links with Serbia in this country. There is a new Ambassador who has just gone, who is really good, and there is lots of work going on by the Foreign Office to look at how to build support for Serbia to become part of the EU. I have not been to Serbia for a while. I intend to go soon. It will be surprising if I do not find that the people who were keen in

government to get closer to the EU had changed their minds. I think they still want to do that. The challenge is harder, and some of the things that have happened in Serbia, including the way the media cannot be as free as it was by any means, are obvious signs of things moving in the wrong direction.

Britain should put a lot of effort into how we try to manage what is going on in Serbia, not least because the Serbia-Kosovo relationship and what has happened in the north of Kosovo—we have British troops out there—is really worrying. Having met with people from both communities recently, I did not come away feeling anything other than that we have a big job to do for the north of Kosovo in the context of those two communities.

- Q36 The Chair:** Mark Twain once said that history never repeats itself, but it does sometimes rhyme. Just to be slightly provocative, we all remember that Russian support for Serbia, not today but in 1914, did not have a particularly good outcome. The big thing that has changed since the committee's previous report, of course, is the war in Ukraine. However that goes, the long-term consequences seem to be fairly dire for East-West relations. Clearly, Russia has considerable influence in Serbia, and there have already been signs that it is seeking to use that influence. To what extent do you think this will be an increasingly divisive issue in the context of the Western Balkans and Serbia's relationships with its neighbours?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: It is going to be an increasingly divisive problem across all the Western Balkans. You can see it in the way that support is being given to those who do not toe the communal line. The obvious example of a place where we should be genuinely worried about how that is all going to come together is what is happening in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Dodik, who has always been a challenge.

The Chair: Donald will ask a question specifically about that.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I am sorry.

The Chair: Perhaps you can ask your question, Donald, and then we can continue in that wider vein.

- Q37 Lord Anderson of Swansea:** I have a question on Republika Srpska and the potential unravelling of Dayton. Dodik is sanctioned by the US and us. What is the position of the EU as such sanctioning Dodik? Since we are talking about Serbia generally, do you see in any way the hand of Vučić behind the problems in Republika Srpska? Is there any prospect or any move to seek to join the two or to have an even closer alignment?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I do not know what the EU thinks about it, because I do not have any contact with the EU specifically other than on very particular issues, so I do not know where it will go on sanctions. Sanctions are an important tool. I worry sometimes that we see them as an end, not a means. They are a means, not an end. They

have to be used with purpose in order to get something to happen. There is a whole question about how often we, as a generality, think of sanctions as being job done rather than the means to get a job done.

I am not close enough to know how far there are discussions between Republika Srpska and Serbia. There certainly used not to be any sort of strong relationship between the two in the years that I was most involved. I do not know whether that has changed.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: They both have a close link with Russia. I recall that Putin visited Belgrade a couple of years ago and had a very warm reception, and Dodik similarly has a warm relationship with Russia.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I agree that they both have warm relations with Russia. I do not know whether that means they have warm relations with each other. It does not always follow.

The Chair: Let us go back to the issue of Russian mischief-making in the area and the prospects for being able to counter that.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: What—by us?

The Chair: By us, by the EU, by us acting together with the international community.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: That is one reason why it is important that the international community does act together. There is a lot to do in understanding how pervasive influence from Russia has become, and how it is using media and using its contacts and connections. I used to describe the way Russia operated in areas as being a wedge. In Georgia, it is making sure that the country is not whole without having to waste lots of resources by creating more than that. In Moldova, there were real challenges. In Bosnia and with Republika Srpska, there is a wedge, kind of, that you could argue has Russian influence connected to it. These are ways in which you can stop countries moving forward in the direction they might wish to go in. It is very important that they are countered in all the similar ways that Russia is using—media in terms of connections and so on—as well as in helping governments to combat it in some ways.

One of the challenges in the Western Balkans is that, where we have governments who are interested and still trying to move in the direction of Europe, they get as much support as they can, because it is not easy for those small countries to feel the pressure and not be sure that we will be there to help them deal with that pressure. One of the things that you will hear in the region is, “We’re not part of the European Union. We’re certainly not in all cases part of NATO”. When there is that pressure, we have to find our own ways of managing it. Often, managing it rather than repelling it becomes the objective, and that, from our perspective, can very quickly look like or turn into much more pervasive engagement than we would like to see.

Q38 **Lord Teverson:** I want to go back to what we talked about originally. It seems to me that we have the ultimate international dilemma here. We

know, just from the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, that even trying to get that right after accession was a big problem. We have real urgency, with Russian influence, stability and everything else, to bring those countries into the mainstream of the European Union, while at the same time knowing all the difficulties and barriers to doing that.

The French vision was always one of concentric circles of different levels of membership, so I suppose one of the solutions—I am not advocating it—would be to have an intermediary stage or body that all these countries can enter into as a promised transition so that they get far more benefit and are not treated just individually with individual financial help or whatever. Could that fly, to try to get through this dilemma? I suspect one would whistle in the wind, but it seems to me that there is no other way forward.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: The concentric circles thing—or two-speed Europe, which was another version of the same thing—did not really fly, because it did not work for the countries that were in the slower speed. They were worried that the faster speed would go off somewhere else. However, if you look at some of the conversations that have been had about how to bring in Ukraine, there have been discussions about whether you could apply parts of the relationship, parts of the *acquis*, earlier to help that country to recover, to regroup and, in particular, to develop economically. I have no idea whether that is feasible without change and feasible in order to ensure that that did not just become a halfway house from which they never moved to the house. That is a problem; things get stuck. Everybody easily could say, “They’ve got that much. That’s enough”. There is a question, and you do the easy bits first.

I suspect it will have a greater level of interest as people start to look at the enormity of the numbers of countries—I think it is nine countries—that are now trying to get into the EU. The EU will need to change lots of things internally, so that will all have to happen simultaneously against the backdrop of a European Parliament with a make-up we do not know, European elections for new heads of the EU and for the ongoing problem, challenge or delight of elections somewhere, as I mentioned. If you put all that in the mixing bowl, you may well end up with a situation where to support, especially Ukraine, you then do that for the other countries.

In the past, we have seen that the EU can agree trade agreements, stabilisations, and apply them before they have been through the ratification process, because it takes so long to ratify everything. That does happen. So it is not inconceivable that you could come up with something that could do a bit more and could use some of the funding—structural funds and so on—in different ways, but it has to be in the context that the objective is membership, so that we do not get stuck. I can see lots of pitfalls for it, not least that leaders in those countries stop trying if they get the benefits that they think they want or, equally, that the EU says, “Enough”.

Q39 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** Do you detect different levels of

enthusiasm among existing members for enlargement depending on the effect on the moneys they receive from the European Union as we approach the budget negotiations shortly? Poland, for example, will become a net contributor following budget adjustments after enlargement and may well be less enthusiastic than some other countries. Will the differential effects on the EU budget affect very much their differing views on enlargement?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: As some of you will know, the budget negotiations are always extremely difficult. We have seen that the Constitutional Court decision in Germany has thrown off what the Germans were hoping to achieve, and that in itself is creating a lot of problems in the coalition in Germany and the challenges for Germany writ large. The budget discussions will not be easy.

Poland's economy is doing very well. Anyone who has been to Poland recently can see that. It will have a new Government, probably under Donald Tusk, who is a former President of the European Council, so we know which direction of travel he will be going in and the government will go with him. Poland will probably not be the challenge that it has been in the past, but it will still have issues such as the farmers' concern with agriculture with Ukraine and so on.

I do not think it is necessarily always the budget discussions that create the challenge. No European leader who walks into a European Council meeting takes off a rucksack marked "domestic problems" and leave it at the door and become a European. They carry this enormous burden of domestic issues with them, and those issues play into the agenda of how to collaborate with their European colleagues. We see it often writ large because the EU is such a public forum and a public place. Everybody gives a press conference on everything all the time, and it is for your domestic audience, but of course it is watched in other countries as well.

Without question, the issues of big enlargement play into domestic worries that people have. Migration will be one of those. Freedom of movement is always an issue and a challenge. The question of what happens to programmes like the common agricultural policy and issues for particular sectors in the economy will all play into the debate on enlargement, because it is all part of the broader debate about the domestic situation. With waves of populism sweeping through parts of Europe, we do not know what the make-up of major countries or smaller countries will be politically in five years' time.

I would argue that the European Council or the Commission are our guardians of the European Union. They do not own it, but they guard it and look after it until they hand it over to the next leaders in the future. Often, with the EU, timing is everything. It is about being able to move forward when you have that general perspective from leaders that this is the direction that they wish to go in. We see now the challenges to that, not least from countries like Hungary with Viktor Orbán and his raising of issues on Ukraine, which are also linked, of course, to his own domestic issues about withheld resources.

- Q40 **The Chair:** This inquiry is into the Western Balkans, but, of course, Western Balkans is just a geographical regional description. The constituent parts of the Western Balkans have some similar issues, but they also have considerable differences between them. Do we take enough account of the fact that these are different states and different countries with different problems? Do we treat them in their particular context enough, or do we group them too much?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: We have been fortunate as a country with our Ambassadors in the six countries in that they have focused very much on the specifics of the countries in which they serve, but they have also been prepared to come together as a team. You link that into the team in the Foreign Office and we have a pretty good sense as a country—it is also true in the EU—that there are substantial differences, either because governments change or because the historical make-up of groups within the country or the challenges that they currently face politically and economically are different.

It is still appropriate to think of it as a region when you think about where its future lies. We do not want half the Western Balkans to join the European Union; we want all of them to join. It does not help to have half; it needs to be a region. Its potential for greater economic stability and security, and the greatest potential to make sure that there is peace and stability in the region, lies in them being part of a discussion around a table rather than a series of challenges that can erupt. We see that now with what is happening in places like the north of Kosovo. These situations can become unstable quite quickly.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: Would enlargement be on a convoy principle? Would each country be regarded individually, or is there any prospect at all of a regional or subregional accession?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: There has always been a lot of resistance in the countries to be lumped together, because then they go into the slowest lane with the one that is least able, and they would quite like to get on with it if they can. It is good to keep them as individual nations but in the context of thinking of it as a region. It is a unanimous decision by the Council—amongst others, but I will just pick on the Council—to bring in a new country, so it has to be understood by those coming in from the region that we want the whole lot, not that three come in and then somebody says, “Actually, I’m having an argument with them, so I’m not going to let them in”. It has to be a broader context, but we should not hold them up because someone is slower.

- Q41 **The Chair:** We have had a lot of discussion this morning about what approach the EU might take and what the issues are in the EU, but, as I said earlier, we are just observers looking in. This report will be directed at our Government and our Government’s policy, so we ought to end with focusing on what we think the UK should be doing better, should be doing more of, or should be doing less of, in supporting the Western Balkans and the general aim of bringing them into the mainstream of western Europe. Interestingly, you have already touched on one, which is

extremely important, and that is helping those Governments to counter the Russian-backed narrative. It strikes me as something that we could do rather more of. There are, no doubt, many other strands, and I would be very interested in your views on that.

We tend to focus quite a lot on sectarian issues, nationality issues, border disputes, recognition of Kosovo, and all the rest of it, but it seems that at the heart of all this are the economies and the relative prosperity of the people in those countries. It has been even more difficult for western Europe to help in that regard in perhaps the way it could have done since the financial crisis of 2007 and everything that has followed from that, such as Covid and the Ukraine war. I would be particularly interested in what you think could be done better on the economic front.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: There are two or three specifics economically. The first is to help them to think through where they can best grow their economies—in other words, where the industries lie and what entrepreneurial activities can take place. As I have said, a lot of people leave these countries and go elsewhere, especially to Germany but not exclusively, and find work and jobs, and spend the vast majority of their careers outside the country. This is a problem that anyone going to any of the countries will be told about; they lose their full leadership, the potential of business people and so on. I know that the EBRD¹ and other organisations are really trying to help and support this as well in the region to try to build that entrepreneurial capacity.

There are two things. One is thinking about how far we can help to support foreign direct investment from the UK. How can we help the countries to make sure that businesses have the most important things that they always want: that the rule of law works—you cannot do a contract unless you know that it will be enforced—and the opportunities? This, again, links to organisations like the EBRD, which is headquartered here in Canary Wharf. How can we make sure that we are offering people opportunities to link up with our knowledge and expertise on trade, on how trade is done, on how they can get into consortiums, if that is appropriate?

How can we build links between different parts of the world of trade, whether industrial, building or whatever, where obvious links can be made? We can do it through trade delegations and people from trade associations talking to them about that, by finding opportunities for young people, by investing in a bit of activity around entrepreneurial work, and by linking up to the EBRD. There are other organisations, but the EBRD is particularly active in the region. All those things will make a difference to how we do it.

At a governmental level, government to government, it is about talking about the opportunities, not just for trade between Britain and those countries, but for the trade within the region. I know it is often used as an alternative thing—“We’ll have trade within the region, because we

¹ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

can't get anything from the EU"—but there is something to be said for making sure that trade can happen between those countries. Certainly, in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, every now and then when we had a particularly positive session, there would be lots of little discussions about what kind of trade could go on between the two, which is very important.

You hear talk of creating some kind of enterprise region, industrial region, whatever, that might cover parts of Serbia and Kosovo or, indeed, the wider Western Balkans. So we should be doing a lot of the things that we would normally think of with any country that needed support economically.

- Q42 **Baroness Coussins:** A number of witnesses from across the region told us five years ago how much they valued different kinds of technical support provided by the UK—for example, in helping to challenge sexual violence in conflict and training the judiciary partly in relation to sexual violence and partly in helping to mitigate the impact of corruption and state capture. Are we still doing any of that, or are there programmes that we should renew?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I do not know. As you know, I am not a representative of the UK Government, because I am just not, really.

The Chair: That is what makes your evidence all the more valuable.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: Lord Peach would be the one to tell you more about that.

- Q43 **Baroness Morris of Bolton:** Can I just take you back to trade? I declare an interest; I am one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys. I just looked this up quickly, because I cannot remember who does what. We have Martin Vickers as the trade envoy to all the six countries, which is great because it means it is treated as a whole, not each one individually. That is all about building long-term relationships. It is the soft power aspect of trade. We are not there to do the trade deals. That is for the people who know what they are doing. It is about building those relationships, and that is an important part of it. I was pleased to see that Martin was the trade envoy.

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: Apologies, I did not know he was.

Baroness Morris of Bolton: No, I did not either. I just suddenly thought that I had better see whether we had one. It is good that one has been appointed to the region.

The Chair: Are there any key issues or concerns that we have missed this morning?

Baroness Ashton of Upholland: I do not think so. I think you have covered quite a lot of ground. The only thing I would perhaps reinforce is that this is a region, and within it is a set of issues that fall to Europe, in the broader sense, to sort out. There is always a tendency even in this region to look across the Atlantic and say, "The Americans will come in".

The Americans are key allies in this, but it is a European set of issues, questions and challenges, so we should make this a bigger priority than I think it ever is for this country. Miroslav Lajčák is a dear friend and is doing a fabulous job. The more support you can give him, the better. The more support we can throw at this, the better in the end.

It is absolutely an area where we have real knowledge and expertise in the country, where we know the region, and where we have good Ambassadors who have been doing a great job. It is not about the Foreign Office and Foreign Secretaries, all of whom take an interest in this. If we cannot sort out what happens there, we will create greater problems for ourselves and for them in the future. Also, we could do with some successes, and here is an area where we could get some.

The Chair: It has been a most interesting and very useful morning. As I said at the outset, we will send you a transcript of the proceedings, which you can check for accuracy. Meanwhile, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, we are enormously grateful to you for coming this morning.