

International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and the Western Balkans

Wednesday 25 October 2023

11.40 am

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Members present: Lord Ashton of Hyde (The Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Coussins; Baroness Morris of Bolton; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Lord Soames of Fletching; Lord Stirrup; Baroness Sugg; Lord Wood of Anfield; Baroness Helic.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 11 – 19

Witnesses

I: Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso, Professor of International Politics and History at Goldsmiths, University of London; Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova, Lecturer in Political Sociology, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London; Professor James Ker-Lindsay, Visiting Professor in Research on South-Eastern Europe, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso, Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova and Professor James Ker-Lindsay.

Q11 The Chair: Welcome to our witnesses. We are trying to get Lady Helic on the line, but she appeared and then disappeared, so we will work on getting her back. Thank you very much for coming. This is our first public session in our short inquiry into the Western Balkans. It is being recorded, and we will send you a copy of the transcript afterwards. We have quite a lot to go through in a very short time, so if you do not feel the need to add anything, do not worry. If you can keep your answers reasonably brief, we can get through the session in time, but I appreciate that that is a tall order.

I will start by asking you about the recent escalation of hostilities between Serbia and Kosovo, and the instability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. What are the prime reasons for that, and has anything changed recently, as opposed to the long-standing issues?

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: Thank you very much for inviting me. I am Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso from Goldsmiths University. I am very pleased that you are having this inquiry because I am quite concerned about the region and I think it is important that the attention of the House of Lords, the Select Committee and the UK Government remains focused on the region.

What do I think is dangerous about this situation? Three aspects are very dangerous and have essentially characterised the recent escalation. One that has been mentioned previously and which I need to discuss briefly is the increase in the number of violent incidents, and their severity, between Serb armed insurgents in Kosovo, the Kosovo authorities and KFOR. The most serious of these was the recent one, on 24 September, when, as you heard, there was a stand-off between Serb gunmen and the Kosovo police in the monastery of Banjska, leading to several deaths, and the amassing of Serbia's troops on the border with Kosovo and the heightened risk of a possible conflagration, although it needs to be said that Serbia withdrew its troops quite quickly at the urging of the United States and the EU.

The investigation is ongoing, as you know, but it seems to be pointing to certain links between the armed groups and elements within Serbia's security forces and army, as well as organised crime in the region, something that needs to be borne in mind when it comes to non-state actors.

Responsibility has been claimed by a man called Milan Radoičić, until recently the deputy leader of the main Kosovo Serb party, the Srpska Lista. He has been sanctioned by the UK under the UK's Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regulations and by the US Treasury for corruption and serious human rights violations.

Most of the analysts I have spoken to do not believe that President Vučić is directly implicated. In fact, some thought that he was taken by surprise, although his role is also being investigated. The Serbian state has been supporting the Srpska Lista and its intransigence, and there are strong indications that elements in the Serbian security establishment have been involved in arming and training the insurgents. There is also, as was mentioned, an alarming amount of military equipment and arms and no shortage of disaffected young men. These are all ingredients for an explosive situation. That is one point.

The second point has to do with the intransigent stance of the Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, and his heavy-handed efforts to subdue the Serb resistance to Kosovo's efforts at state building. The state has not sought accommodation with the local Serbs in the way it perhaps should have. It has been resisting the 2023 Brussels and Ohrid agreements and, of course, the 2013 agreement. Kosovo's main concession is to allow the establishment of the association of Serb-majority municipalities, which would give the Kosovo Serbs a degree of autonomy. It is not just a quid pro quo in negotiations; this is a really important step to alleviate the fears and anxieties of the Kosovo Serbs and get them on board with any agreement.

The third point that is really concerning is President Vučić's non-respect of the Brussels and Ohrid agreements and his inflammatory rhetoric, which has also been mentioned, and support of Kosovo Serb intransigence. For Serbia, the most important concession—the de facto, though not de jure, recognition of certain aspects of Kosovo statehood—goes against President Vučić's domestic rhetoric and policy and would probably be highly dangerous to him in terms of his own constituency and ability to stay in power. Serbia's continued refusal to accept Kosovo's accession to international and European institutions, such as the Council of Europe, is in direct contravention of what was agreed in Brussels and Ohrid.

Basically, both leaders are acting as spoilers of the very agreements that they had verbally agreed to, and unless both leaders are forced, in effect, by the EU and the US—the Quint—with British support, to implement this agreement, and unless there is a genuine effort in place, with a variety of methods, to try to deradicalise the Kosovo Serbs, to give them autonomy and to try to work against those who are arming and radicalising them, we will see more incidents and the situation will remain explosive.

On Bosnia, I will hand over to Jessie, because I have already spoken for quite a long time.

Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova: Thank you very much. I will just briefly introduce myself. I am Jessie Barton Hronesova, I am a lecturer at University College London. Thank you for the invitation to this session, and for conducting this inquiry. It is really important to talk about the Western Balkans, for a variety of reasons that have already been mentioned.

I will focus my remarks on Bosnia, and I fully endorse what has already been said about Kosovo. I support that analysis of the events that have just happened, so I do not need to say more about that.

In Bosnia, we have seen an escalation that has been building up for a few years, so what is happening right now is not really that surprising to anyone following Bosnian politics. It is extremely worrying and dangerous. Potentially in contrast with what was said in the previous session, I see Bosnia-Herzegovina as the most complex case in the Western Balkans, for a variety of reasons.

I believe that if a path forward is found on the Serbia-Kosovo issue, some things will fall into place regarding Bosnia—namely, the secession and secessionist efforts, because the view from Banja Luka, from the Republika Srpska entity, is that it is all about the recognition of Kosovo, “We’re going to follow the path of semi-independence”, and the like, so parallels are always made. We always need to bear in mind when we look at Bosnia-Herzegovina that this is a regional issue.

I would also include the role of Serbia and Croatia, which at times in recent years have been acting as spoilers—in the case of Serbia, sometimes deradicalising and defusing the situation, depending on the relations at the time between Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, who is the leader of the Republika Srpska entity.

There are fundamentally three issues on the table regarding the current situation in Bosnia. The first, which I do not want to go into any detail on, because much has been written about it and I am sure you are all aware of it, is the deadlock regarding any constitutional reforms and the need to move away from the Dayton constitution, which was passed in 1995, and the fact that the whole state operates on the basis of group-based rights.

Ethnicity has, in a way, been locked into the very structure of Bosnia, so it is no surprise that local actors are using and abusing it. The good will and intention to co-operate across ethnic lines, which was built as an assumption into the constitution, has only rarely been developed in places. There have been some paths forward and some attempts to unlock reform, but, simply, the interests of the three actors—and multiple others—have not been in place to do so.

The second thing that has changed is that there was a period after 2006, when the approach to Bosnia was very much on local ownership. Local ownership essentially failed in Bosnia and has only exacerbated the group-based dynamics of the politics that I was talking about a moment ago. There has been an absence of any clear vision beyond EU accession, which, as we know and we will discuss, has not moved forward heavily. So then we—as international actors, so to speak—provided scope for the local actors to increase the tensions and to try to increase their power base, which is what we have seen in Republika Srpska in particular.

The role of the last two High Representatives is extremely controversial. The first was an absent international leader, who, only on the eve of his

departure, introduced a legal amendment—a so-called genocide denial law—which, in a way, unleashed the furore in Banja Luka. Obviously, that is only symbolic; everyone who analysed the law was quite aware that the implementation of it will be very difficult, as the facts on the ground have also proven.

Then there was the accession of the new High Representative, whose active approach to Bosnia is welcomed by many people—but the direction of the interventions was welcomed less so. For example, one of the domestic issues has always been about a third entity of Bosnian Croats, and the High Representative, for various reasons, has been seen as catering to the wishes of the Bosnian Croat community, such as by changing an electoral law once polls closed—which happened in Bosnia—to increase the number of Croat, and other, deputies. This has only undermined the levels of confidence in the democratic system that Bosnia is supposed to be.

I stress that I see a role for international actors. Unfortunately, until the first issue of constitutional reform is dealt with, there is a role for international actors, because Bosnia is not a sovereign state, as we are.

The third thing—I will mention it briefly, as I know that we will probably return to what can be done about it—is the secession threats regarding Republika Srpska. First, it is extremely dangerous, and steps have finally been taken for the legal secession of Republika Srpska. Laws have been passed that try, in essence, to return Republika Srpska to what some call “original Dayton”, which is the very stripped, state-level set of institutions with more powerful entity powers. The facts on the ground are that Republika Srpska would be territorially unviable, but that still does not take away from the threat of a potential legal disassociation and a complete paralysis in the governance of the state.

It is important to understand why Milorad Dodik is doing what he is doing. His power base is at threat. Republika Srpska finds itself on the verge of bankruptcy. It needs to return around €500 million to its creditors, which is clearly not there. That is why we see Milorad Dodik touring the Middle East, Turkey, Russia and, in particular, China, trying to get those credits, and why we see him relying on Hungarian symbolic, and sometimes financial, support. For Dodik, this strategy of secessionism and these heightened tensions are a strategy of survival. He sees nationalism as the only card with which he can keep winning—and he is winning in Republika Srpska, despite the fact that his popularity has dropped.

In the last elections, there was a recount of the vote, because it was not clear whether he had won it or not. He is faced with opposition. Some of the opposition is, for example, criticising him for not seceding, and there are small pockets of democratic opposition too. The situation was worsened through the Covid pandemic, which was led absolutely atrociously in Republika Srpska in particular, as well as across the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The public is obviously extremely disgruntled

about the state of the economy and the complete failure to deliver basic services.

I know we will return to this, so I will leave my comments here. Maybe I will be able to speak later about the current investigations into Milorad Dodik.

- Q12 **Baroness Sugg:** Focusing on Serbia and Kosovo, we heard about the escalation of violence there, as well as the lack of delivery on previous agreements. How realistic do you think is the prospect of the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo? What do we need to do to achieve that?

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: I am a research associate at the London School of Economics, where I have a long-standing attachment to the research unit on south-east Europe. I have also written extensively on issues of secession, recognition, state creation and international relations, all of which come together in the case of Kosovo, especially. Many apologies for not being able to join the Committee in person; I have just moved to another long-standing trouble spot: Cyprus.

We need to see some sort of process of normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. I will preface my comments by saying that I have long supported the idea of an independent Kosovo from a practical perspective—it would be a much healthier state of affairs for both Serbia and Kosovo. However—and it is a huge “however”—from an international legal standpoint, and the standpoint of what would usually happen in these cases, Kosovo was very much the exception. The problem is that this has created a deep-seated sense of resentment in Serbia, which has been encouraged by political leaders. It has also been exacerbated in recent years by events we have seen in Ukraine. There is a deep sense that Serbia is looking around at the moment and thinking, “Why was Azerbaijan able to retake Nagorno-Karabakh, which was a rebel area, but when we did the same, we had it taken away from us?”.

In many ways, Kosovo is a unique case in international relations, not because I believe in unique cases—I do not; I think it is very problematic—but because Serbia will say, “We were treated in a way that no other country has been treated”. We do not often take that into account when we consider how Serbs view this problem. This is a very deep-rooted and sensitive area for them. It is not as significant for Serbia as some people like to make out—although it has its religious sites, it was always a very impoverished part of Yugoslavia—so that aspect has to be taken into account.

It has been built up in this way, and I think there are two sets of problems. One is the popular level in Serbia that makes it much more difficult—indeed, it has become a lot more difficult. I was much more confident a decade ago than I am today that we would have seen progress in normalisation, partly because there are wider international factors.

The second reason it is so problematic is that this has given Moscow the absolutely ideal opportunity to extend its influence over Belgrade over the past 16 years. The fact that Serbia has been determined to prevent Kosovo being able to join the United Nations means that it is utterly reliant on Moscow's veto in the Security Council. You could argue that China also stands behind it, a lot less obviously, but there is that ability—and Moscow knows it and has played on it incredibly effectively over the past decade and a half. A lot of the Serbian energy sector is controlled by Russia, precisely because the political favour that Belgrade offers Moscow.

All this is to say that, sometimes, we take a very one-dimensional view of this problem and ask, "Why can't Serbia just recognise Kosovo? It just has to get over it".

As I often say, if in the 1970s, for example, at the height of the problems in Northern Ireland, the UN had decided that the only solution was unification, you can bet that it would still be a huge issue for Britain to this day. We sometimes need to bear that in mind. But, ultimately, we have to find a way for Serbia and Kosovo to coexist as separate independent states within the Western Balkans.

The problem we are facing at the moment, as has been said, is that we have two very different leaderships. I am particularly concerned at the moment because, as was identified, the leader of Kosovo, Prime Minister Albin Kurti, has made it very clear that he has no intention of trying to introduce this association of Serbian municipalities, which most observers now feel has to be the very first step towards some sort of meaningful resolution of this problem. This is an incredibly important factor to take into account. Again, apologies for a rather long preface to this, but it is sometimes important to bear in mind how the creation of Kosovo has created the problems that we face today.

- Q13 Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** We have generally agreed that the problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina have a lot to do with Republika Srpska and its unwillingness to accept the institutions laid down by the Dayton agreement. The question that this committee wants to consider is: what can the United Kingdom do to tackle this problem of secessionism, specifically in Bosnia-Herzegovina? The Prime Minister has appointed a special envoy, former Air Chief Marshal Stuart Peach—Lord Peach. It was a brilliant, inspired idea to get somebody who was the chairman of the NATO military committee to be the special envoy, and he spends a lot of time in the region. However, beyond that, what do you think the United Kingdom can do outside the constraints of the European Union—because we were always constrained by the unanimity agreements inside the European Union, so we should have a degree of flexibility—to deal with this secessionism that is going on inside Bosnia?

Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova: As a preface to answering that question, the UK has lost quite a lot of its soft power as well, unfortunately. That is related to Brexit itself but also simply to the domestic situation of the United Kingdom, which local populations and local leaders are aware of

and watching. As someone said in the previous session, the message is blunted by domestic problems when we are trying to address democratic issues in another country. So, focusing also on the domestic situation in the UK might be one way to restore a little bit of faith.

I still think that, despite the fact that the UK has left the European Union, as you said, there might be opportunities for potentially different policies and ways to alleviate the situation at least a little. First, the UK should be playing a supportive role in de-escalating. For example, EUFOR¹, which we have already heard about, is an obvious avenue forward, and the United Kingdom should join forces again with it. That is primarily because the United Kingdom has always been seen, if anything, as a security provider and has been looked up to regarding its security, its intelligence sharing and its capacity building in security issues in general. Joining EUFOR is an obvious short-term step to take if we are serious about these secessionist efforts.

We should also talk a little about NATO. The UK should support Bosnia to join NATO. However, that is ultimately a Bosnian domestic issue. We have heard about that a little, but it is linked to property issues, which are domestic and being blocked by Republika Srpska, and which need to be dealt with. However, again, on the sidelines the UK can act towards unlocking that situation. The property issue in the case of Republika Srpska is again linked to what I was saying about the economic issues that Republika Srpska has. It is essentially trying to claim authority over state properties as its own because Milorad Dodik needs quite a lot of that property to, basically, cover the debt that the entity is in. In general, this could also signal that the UK is led by principle politics rather than strategic interests, not being, so to speak, held hostage—those are the wrong words but nothing better comes to mind—to some of the steps that the EU has to take in terms of the reform process and so on.

There are a series of other interventions which the UK could look at from a medium-term perspective. We could also be working more closely with the High Representative; with some of the intervention, the current High Representative has duplicated some of the legislation that was there and which was not enforced and implemented. So, instead of focusing on the enforcement and implementation, we see duplication of legislation and undermining of some of the institutions that already exist. The UK's role should be as a watchdog, just to try to navigate that a little more.

Overall, from a medium-term perspective the UK simply needs to work on restoring its credibility in the region after the domestic political upheavals that the UK has been through and restoring its position outside the EU framework so that it is seen as a credible actor and friend.

There have been a series of other issues mentioned from a long-term perspective. The programmatic focus of the United Kingdom can certainly be on a variety of conflict-prevention programmes and projects. Some of

¹ EUFOR is the EU military deployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, overseeing continued compliance with the Dayton Agreement.

those have been abandoned for a variety of financial and budgetary reasons, but they worked in the past, and sometimes we seem to be reinventing the wheel in Bosnia when we already know what has worked in the past. We know the youth projects and the peacebuilding work that worked. We know that teacher training and the like work, as well as media training and media literacy. The informational space in the region is extremely toxic and polarised. Serbia always tops the ranks of countries in the world where large amounts of the population believe in conspiracy theories, but it is not much dissimilar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is all to do with a lack of trust in institutions, so the United Kingdom can also work on those programmatically.

Finally, as I said, the regional approach is important. Trying to assist with the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and to help North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro to finally get into the European Union is extremely important. That would be a good signal and would restore our credibility.

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: We have to keep a very close eye on developments in Bosnia. I echo the points made earlier. To my mind, sorting out Kosovo is a very important step towards dealing with Bosnia, but we all have to accept that Bosnia is the most problematic situation in the Balkans. It is much more difficult to address and much more deeply rooted. We also have to recognise that when it comes to questions of secession and recognition, what Milorad Dodik is doing at the moment is highly destabilising—there is absolutely no doubt about that. We need to get across that that cannot succeed: that a declaration of independence by Republika Srpska is not going to go anywhere and will not lead to the creation of a new state. We would see all the boundaries being closed off and we would have to act very firmly with Serbia.

I know there are people in Serbia and Belgrade who will absolutely in any circumstances just believe the worst but all the indications are that there is a significant body of people in Serbia who really and truly understand the implications of a declaration of independence by Republika Srpska and how utterly disastrous it would be for Serbia to be seen to be aiding and abetting that, let alone recognising it. I have often felt that part of the problem would be if the effects of that got blown out of proportion. We need to be very clear and help people to understand that this is not going to happen, that this is not going to lead to the creation of a Bosnian Serb international state, and that it cannot and will not succeed, and we need to try to calm those tensions.

Dodik is quite clearly trying to stoke inter-ethnic, or intercommunity, tensions in Bosnia. This is all part of the game plan. He delights in doing this, and we need to find ways to try to communicate, certainly to the Bosniak community, that this will not be allowed to succeed and that they should not rise to obviously provocative statements on his part, which are deliberately designed to create tensions.

Q14 **Lord Stirrup:** Bearing in mind that our focus is on what has changed since our 2018 report, we have heard from Professor Ker-Lindsay of the deep-seated challenges facing any attempts to bring about political

normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. What avenues could and should the EU be pursuing now, given the events of the last five years or so, to help bring that about? What could the UK do to support those EU efforts? Is there anything the UK could do outwith the EU or should we focus all our efforts on supporting its initiatives?

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: I see basically a two-pronged policy being put in place after the events of 24 September. On the one hand, there are the Brussels and Ohrid agreements, which the EU has picked up with greater fervour, let us put it that way. The recent visits to Pristina and Belgrade over the weekend by the Quint are a signal of that, as are the upcoming deliberations tomorrow and Friday. There is a renewed push to get this agreement finally implemented and pressure put on both sides to follow through. That is to be welcomed. The UK should support this. As mentioned, it does not have a place at the table, but it should not do anything to undermine this effort.

On the other hand, there is the ongoing investigation into the events of 24 September. I have no insight into this investigation—I am just following media sources in the region and speaking to analysts—but it seems to point to structures involved in this action linking local Kosovo Serb leaders, businessmen and organised crime with networks in Serbia in state security and possibly in the army, and possibly with international networks.

This is a very precarious situation. I know that some analysts are thinking back to 2003, when similar shady structures were beginning to be investigated. That led to the assassination of Serbia's reformist Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić. I am not saying that Vučić is a reformist President, but he is in a precarious position because of what is being disclosed about this. Treading carefully is probably an important aspect of the way that the UK can support the EU. Visits to the region and supporting one side over the other are not called for at this time.

The main way in which the UK has contributed, and continues to contribute, is in security and intelligence. As was mentioned earlier, the increased contribution to KFOR and the sharing of intelligence about informal networks and these kinds of structures are really important aspects of the UK's role.

Lord Stirrup: I do not know whether Professor Ker-Lindsay wants to comment quickly.

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: No. Professor Dragović has covered the points that I would make.

- Q15 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** There are different levels of support for EU membership among the different countries. Can you say something about that? Obviously, there are many challenges from the EU point of view, not least corruption, human rights problems, and the effect on the EU itself—not least the budget, as Poland will have to become a net payer into it. Equally, there are problems for the structure of the EU with that

number of countries. What are the prospects for the dynamic between the EU and the Balkan countries being a potential stabilising factor?

Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova: The EU can be a stabilising factor if it restores its credibility. A lot of our discussion today has been about the credibility of western actors, simply because of international events over the past few years—the rise of populism around the world and the internal issues that the EU is having. Messages to people across the Western Balkans from Paris or The Hague are heard—that we are not welcome; we are orientalised. A lot of the time, the message around Albania is that we would bring in criminals, which is what the Dutch government have often said. These narratives are really not helpful and we are misunderstanding the differing motivations to join across the region and within countries. That has a lot to do with the political problems we have been talking about.

Overall, what has changed since the committee last discussed this issue is that there has been a drop in confidence in the European Union and western institutions in general. Sometimes when I talk to my interlocutors in Bosnia, Serbia or Kosovo, they say “We would love to join but that is a joke to us right now”. It is simply not seen as credible. That does not mean that the EU is not seen as the only path forward. There are differences, which I will speak about in a minute, but across the board it is still seen as the only option on the table, mainly because of economic security and as a way of finally doing away with corruption. It needs to be stated that there is corruption in these states on a daily basis; party membership defines where people work, how much they prosper and whether they leave the country. It is important and the EU is seen as the only way forward.

We also have to be honest and open that, for a lot of people, it is just a ticket out of there. A lot of the youth polling simply says, “How much do I care about what is happening here? The moment I graduate, I’m out of here. I have a job in Germany anyway”. We need to be very cognisant that these factors on the ground are extremely difficult to navigate, especially for young people.

There are different levels of support. In Serbia, where Kosovo has been seen as EU blackmail for a while, the popularity of the European Union has dropped. The polls very much differ. As we know, polls are not the greatest indicator, but now many of them drop below 50%, which is a warning sign that the popularity of the European Union has dropped in Serbia, mainly because of the Kosovo issue. Since Kurti came to government, tensions have heightened, and the EU’s popularity rates have dropped. That has a knock-on effect on how the Serb population in Montenegro, or those who identify as Serb there, see the European Union. It is the same in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Otherwise, there are consistently high levels of popularity or a wish to join the European Union across the Albanian populations. I apologise for ethnicising the region; I hate doing that, but it is the simplest way to

conduct polling. In Albania, usually 96% want to join. In Kosovo it is 95%, and similar there with regard to NATO.

There is a more complex situation in North Macedonia. There, the EU's popularity has dropped the most because of the obvious issues with name recognition and Bulgaria's problems, but it is still at around 80%—it is still very high. It is around 75% in Bosnia, because of Republika Srpska. In Montenegro, for the same reason, it is around 75% or 76%. As I said, Serbia is at the bottom. Although polls differ, that is to do with the fact that between half and 60% of the population simply do not want to recognise Kosovo and they see that as the only way towards the EU. Uncoupling these two things, at least rhetorically, might unlock some of this.

I still want to reiterate the message that the EU is the only game in town right now. Obviously, there are other partners—Serbia is now looking to China for investment, and Republika Srpska is looking to other economic partners too, because it feels that it has to play the game on multiple sides—but the EU remains the only way forward from my perspective and that of quite a lot of the analysts in the region.

- Q16 **Baroness Coussins:** You briefly mentioned corruption. Have any of the Western Balkan states made more decisive progress on tackling individual and institutional corruption than others? It is one of the major barriers to the prospects of EU membership. If that is the case, what is bringing that about and what are they doing that perhaps should be more widespread across the region?

Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova: There have been some cases where corruption has been lowered, but it is still deeply problematic. That is certainly not the case in Bosnia—I can tell you that straight away.

Kosovo has made some progress, so, despite all the criticism of Albin Kurti and his government, which I think is well placed, corruption has dropped, at least according to the indicators we have. The same was the case in North Macedonia and Montenegro, where we have seen changes in government, meaning that some levels of corruption have dropped. But that is, in a way, natural: when you replace entrenched actors who have performed state capture with new actors, obviously you will see a drop in corruption. Nevertheless, there have been some reforms, especially in North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo—and partially in Albania too, although it is a lot more problematic there. That is absolutely not the case in Bosnia, where the situation is only worse.

- Q17 **Lord Campbell of Pittenweem:** This is quite a large question, but this is a large discussion: what is Russia's strategy in the region? Is there a strategy or is Russia simply being opportunistic?

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: I will give that a shot. I should caveat this by saying that I do not work on Russian foreign policy, so these are just impressions. There is a bit of both. Strategically, Russia has stepped up its interest and involvement in the region over a number of years,

certainly since 2014. The main motivation behind that is preventing NATO's enlargement—that is the medium-term threat.

As we have heard before, what Russia can actually do, considering that it does not have a contiguous border with the Western Balkans, is quite opportunistic. For example, on promoting secessionism in Republika Srpska, how would it support such a secession—what would it actually do? The practical possibilities are quite limited. Sanctions-busting is one aspect of what is going on. From what I have seen in the last year, there has been a huge rise in Russian companies opening up in Republika Srpska and Serbia. There is also the media capture, where there is a lot of pro-Russian sentiment, which plays into electoral politics. President Vučić has called an election for 17 December, so he is hostage to the rhetoric that he has helped fan pro-Russian sentiments.

What was mentioned earlier about an opportunistic strategy is probably right: it seems to me that Russia is too preoccupied with its own war in Ukraine to put a lot of resources into supporting secessionism elsewhere.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Is the enthusiasm for NATO continuing, or has it dripped away—as, has been suggested, the enthusiasm for the European Union has dripped away?

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: It depends on where. Enthusiasm for NATO was never very high in Serbia because of the historical legacies of 1999.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: I agree.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Lord Robertson knows a lot about it.

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: I am sure. Enthusiasm for NATO varies across the region, as has always been the case.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: North Macedonia was successfully absorbed into NATO. Are there others of a similar mind?

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: For a long time, I always cautioned against putting too much emphasis on the Russia factor, especially in Serbia. It was very easy to say that Serbs are pro-Russian and that was the weak point, but it was always a much more complex relationship than that.

One story I always like to tell, and which will resonate with at least one of your number, is that many years ago a Café Putin opened in Novi Sad, the second city of Serbia. That got a lot of media fanfare and attention. I know Novi Sad quite well as I have been many times, so I had to go to see that place. It was tiny—barely a doorway—and very cheap, with maybe one fridge with a few soft drinks. What was not reported was that, 200 metres down the road, was one of the nicest restaurants in Novi Sad, which is called Churchill.

I always said that we have to be a little more careful about how we understand this relationship, as it is a lot more complicated. It has been affected by Kosovo, but, like a lot of people, I have become a lot more worried that the ability of many Serbs to separate out Russian political support from support for Russia, if you see what I mean, has become blurred. We have seen this with Ukraine.

In many ways, the government of Serbia have become a prisoner of a lot of the rhetoric that they put forward, which I do not think that many of them necessarily believed. The point made was that Serbia—and certainly its government under Vučić—ultimately understands that the economic future of the country relies on the European Union. As one of the senior people close to him said to me many years ago, “We know that the EU is where the investment will come from and where our economic progress lies”. This is very much about approaching the European Union, but, again, I have become very worried about this over the course of the war in Ukraine and about the way this has been presented. Although the government are now trying to take a more moderate position on this—we have heard the suggestions that Serbia has been supplying weapons to Ukraine, as it still has a significant arms industry—it is very problematic at a popular level.

That ties in with the point about NATO. It is quite telling that, if you looked at the polling on Serbian NATO membership, it was significantly up 10 years ago on where it is today. This is a really interesting story to tell, because I would like to think, as someone who knows Serbia well and has spent a lot of time there, that eventually it will join the European Union and NATO. I know that there are many in Serbia, especially in certain parts of society, who see an advantage to doing so. It would lead to a modernisation of the armed forces, and they see this as the natural alliance to be part of.

However, it ties in with so many current world events and how they are feeding through into popular opinion, so we have seen a massive turning against NATO, to the point that it is certainly not feasible to open up this discussion at the moment, whereas a decade ago I thought that we could potentially get a solution on Kosovo and then, fairly soon, start opening up a discussion on not only EU membership but NATO membership.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Thank you both for those answers.

Q18 Lord Anderson of Swansea: You have spoken about the widespread pro-Russian sympathies in a number of countries. If we were in the EU and NATO on the intelligence and security side, how concerned should we be about those who come as officials into those organisations?

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: That is a huge question mark. It was a very big issue when Montenegro joined NATO, and it is an important point. The point made in the previous session was that, especially because of a lot of this discussion is centred on Serbia, a lot of co-operation is already going on. Parts of the Serbian armed forces are co-operating with National Guard units in the United States and joint

exercises are taking place, so we are seeing links developing behind the scenes which are much more positive and productive than perhaps we see on the outside.

As I say, I get a sense that the government are also trying to tread a more moderate line now, but in many ways they have become a hostage to all the pro-Russian sentiment that was expressed prior to the start of the war in Ukraine, which has now snowballed as people have not been able to separate these issues in their minds. You are absolutely right that this will be an important point in any discussion but, as I said, unfortunately we are currently a long way off from that.

Q19 Lord Soames of Fletching: Is British policy working in the Balkans?

Professor James Ker-Lindsay: If I am to speak very honestly and frankly, we have at points lost our way. We needed to be more balanced in our approach. A lot of the problems that we deal with in the Balkans are to do with people who are absolutely obsessive about fighting the conflicts of the 1990s rather than trying to look at the issues of the 2020s. I am always very depressed when conversations about the Balkans are still about whether you are pro-Albanian or pro-Serbian rather than whether you are pro-European integration for the region or trying to perpetuate these differences and these problems. We see far too much of it coming in, which is tremendously depressing. There is a whole range of reasons why that is the case, partly because people who came up through the ranks, not just in government but in media, cut their teeth on the wars of the 1990s. That was a defining conflict; I do not wish to minimise how brutal these wars were in the region. However, as I say, there is still too much fixation on partisanship rather than trying to look at how we can try to find the most effective ways to work with those forces that want to emulate the process of European integration.

Again, we come back to this thing that the European Union was driven by a sense of mission and purpose after the Second World War between long-standing enemies who wanted to put that behind them and progress in a very different way. We really need to try to think about how we do that in the Balkans and marginalise not only the internal but the external voices which seem determined to keep the region trapped in a mindset from 30 years ago.

Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso: British policy has not been a failure when it comes to some of the soft power issues. In the previous session, it was mentioned that there was support from Britain for some projects, which, yes, are not on the level of high politics but which are helpful for peacebuilding in the region. Continuing those projects and continuing along those lines is one way that Britain has contributed and could contribute in the future.

Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova: It is a mixed picture. I was delivering some of these projects funded by the FCDO in the region, so I could see how some of them were working well and others not so much. However, I also see the British role as simply understanding and empathising with

the region. A lot of really misguided analyses are always published when tensions are upped that are very simplistic and which quickly lay the blame on one party without really looking at the interests and without doing any conflict and political economy analysis of what is happening on the ground. Not only to have inquiries like this happen more often but simply having empathy and understanding for the region would be huge, because not many countries around the world see the region not through the orientalisng lens, which is what we have seen time and again.

The Chair: Thank you for your answers on that, particularly the last question, which was a bit of a googly, to use a cricketing analogy. We thank you very much for all your input. I remind you that we will send you a transcript, which you can look at and review, and many renewed thanks.