



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and the Western Balkans

Wednesday 13 December 2023

11.30 am

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Members present: Lord Stirrup (In the Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Coussins; Lord Soames of Fletching; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 44 - 59

Witnesses

[I](#): Air Chief Marshal the Lord Peach GBE KCB DL, Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the Western Balkans; Leo Docherty MP, Minister for Europe, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office; Victoria Billing, Director Europe, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Peach, Leo Docherty MP and Victoria Billing.

Q44 The Chair: Good morning and welcome to this evidence session of the International Relations and Defence Committee of the House of Lords. I am delighted to welcome our witnesses, Air Chief Marshal Lord Peach, Leo Docherty MP and, accompanying him, Victoria Billing, to assist us with our inquiry into the Western Balkans. This is a public session, so it is being broadcast live on the parliamentary intranet. There will be a transcript of the evidence session, which we will send to you for any corrections you wish to make if we have made any errors of fact. We will be publishing our report at some stage in the new year.

This is a follow-on to the committee's 2018 report on the Western Balkans. We are particularly keen to focus on what, if anything, has changed since then for the better or worse, or whether nothing has changed at all, and what the prospects are for the future. We are delighted to have you with us and are very grateful to you for sparing the time, so welcome.

One of the key things that has changed since 2018 is the increase in tensions in Kosovo between the Serbian minority and the ethnic Albanians. This has led to the reversal of the downward slope of the size of KFOR in the latter part of 2023. It has been reinforced from 3,700 to about 4,500 troops. Was that reinforcement a consequence of an operational appreciation that this was the number that was required—or was it just the number that was available and could be practically handled at the time?

What confidence do we have that it is the right number to address the security situation in Kosovo over the next year or two, assuming that there is no immediate political resolution which obviates the need for it entirely? Is there likely to be a requirement for more or fewer?

Lord Peach: Thank you for this opportunity. What has really changed is that there is an appreciation by the NATO command chain of the situation in Kosovo that has been undertaken and has delivered the reserves. There has always been a tiered reserve system for the mission. That was activated following the attacks against NATO peacekeepers in May. Those were serious attacks, and we continue to seek the appropriate legal recourse for them.

I assure the committee that there was a NATO-led military command process supported by the North Atlantic Council, very much NATO's business. The UK was in that tiered reserve system. As a national committee we should be proud of how the UK Armed Forces responded—at readiness, at speed and with the right capability. They were very effective during their deployment. They will be replaced by a sequence of other NATO forces.

It was in response to a changed situation following those attacks and it is catered for within NATO planning. The SACEUR continues to be seized of

the situation in Kosovo and will continue to discharge its duties through the North Atlantic Council. The UK's position and role has been enhanced. It demonstrates the impact of our defence and security offer in the region.

You also asked about the dialogue. The dialogue continues. Today is the Western Balkans summit in Brussels. It would be wrong for us to presume what will happen there, but the talks have continued between both sides and there has been some progress recently on long-standing issues. I can go into detail if the committee wishes.

The Chair: I appreciate that we are asking for a guess, albeit a well-informed guess, but would your assessment be that the reinforced number of KFOR troops will be required for some time yet. Is it likely to need to increase further? If so, are we still talking about a few hundred or larger numbers?

Lord Peach: That is for NATO, of course, and for the SACEUR and the NATO command chain, which goes through Joint Force Command Naples. It would be for them to determine both the numbers and the requirement, but the current situation of a deterrence and reassurance mission undertaken by the reserves is having the deterrent effect.

The Chair: Minister, would you like to add anything?

Leo Docherty MP: No, I agree entirely.

Q45 **Lord Wood of Anfield:** I want to ask about the relationship between Serbia and the violence in Kosovo that we have seen recently. What is your assessment of the direct role that the Serbian government or security forces have played in the arming and training of insurgents involved in the recent violence, in particular the monastery siege in September?

What are the UK and wider security coalitions doing to prevent the border between Serbia and Kosovo becoming very porous to new weapons and paramilitaries?

Leo Docherty MP: I was in Belgrade shortly after that incident. We expressed in strong terms to the Serbian government the need for justice and for those involved in the attack to be held accountable, and we continue to make that case. I will not speculate openly about what intelligence might say or otherwise, but it is clearly the case that opportunistically those who seek to increase tensions took this action. We will continue to make the case very strongly to the Serbian government that de-escalation is critical. We made that point to the Kosovans and though it is hard to see immediate progress, at least they are still talking. We will continue to urge de-escalation and normalisation along that border.

Lord Peach: Without speculating about who knew what and when, we have made our position clear, as the Minister suggests. I went to Belgrade and spoke to the President personally. We have made it very

clear to the Serbian authorities that they need to hold the perpetrators to account and that the border should be respected. Referring to Lord Stirrup's question, NATO is not responsible for border security but is supporting the Kosovo police in that role. We continue to seek legal recourse because, ultimately, it is a legal issue between Kosovo and Serbia.

As for the porous nature of the border, if you go there, you can see that it is a quite dense and complex terrain. Therefore, you can see why people would call it porous, but of course the people who live locally know how to move around. The area is renowned for that, particularly the northern area of Kosovo.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Is your sense that there is a problem with weapons being brought in on a large scale?

Lord Peach: I would say that there is a problem with weapons across the whole region. One of my principal concerns as special envoy is to do all we can working with allies and partners—and non-government if necessary as well—to reduce the number of weapons in the region. That applies equally to many of the other countries. That is partly a result of the conflict in the 1990s but not entirely. You may recall the terrible shootings in Serbia this year were followed by a weapon amnesty. The detail of what was handed in is quite shocking to western eyes.

Weapons are an issue and we need therefore to be vigilant. We point that out to governments and the wider multilateral community, so it is a worthy question of this committee.

Q46 **Lord Teverson:** Staying on Kosovo/Serbia, one can be terribly pessimistic about it, and probably realistically so, I do not know. In February, the EU drew up new proposals for normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia that looked quite reasonable and, with good will, could have been agreed, but they were not at the end of the day, or certainly were not implemented.

What is needed to persuade both Kosovo and Serbia to implement the agreement, and is that possible at all, or is it history now? I was interested to learn about the role of the Quint, which we are involved in. Should the Quint be tougher? Is it operating effectively? Is it a real player in the region now?

Leo Docherty MP: In terms of the broad situation regarding talks, clearly it is hard to see immediate progress. We continue to make the point to the leadership in the region—the Serbians and Prime Minister Kurti—that courageous leadership is needed. Risks will need to be taken in order to push forward for peace. All leaders carry a huge amount of personal baggage regarding the context of their political position and how they view the other side.

It will not be easy, but the peace dividend is such that the leadership on both sides knows that if normalisation can be achieved, to whatever degree, that possible dividend is real. Therefore, we must keep trying. At

least they are still talking. We will continue to use our diplomatic efforts to support and encourage. Part of that is institution-building to ensure that there is a better standard of policing, as Lord Peach refers to, and so on. We will keep trying.

In terms of the technical arrangements and how we channel our diplomatic efforts, I will let Lord Peach talk about our role via the Quint.

Lord Peach: Discussions are continuing. The lead negotiators have been in Brussels this week—Mr Petković from Serbia and Mr Bislimi from Kosovo. This is a live issue. The summit on the Western Balkans continues today. There is positive news that it looks like a long-standing issue around electricity payment and provision has been resolved. This might be under the radar for a committee like this, but it is a long-standing issue and this demonstrates some progress.

The other issue which, again, I would not normally raise in such a forum, is number plates to enable the freer movement of people across that troubled border. These are intractable issues, and that gives me some positive sense of momentum in the dialogue. We await the outcome of today's summit which will then fall into the European Council meeting tomorrow and on Friday. Those talks continue, demonstrating that sense of small steps and small progress.

I was in Kosovo two weeks ago and spoke to a number of Kosovo Serb groups about the reality on the ground of their situation, trying again to work through routes to normalisation through the Ohrid agreement, as it is known locally, from this year, and the Brussels agreement—I think you have already spoken to Baroness Ashton, who was the architect of that agreement in 2013. There are agreements in place, therefore, and it is the EU-facilitated dialogue—facilitated is the key word—led by the special representative, Mr Lajčák, whom I stay very close to.

I assure the committee that we work extremely hard in both capitals through our Ambassador to stay engaged with our Quint partners. Additionally, we stay engaged with our European Union partners.

Q47 The Chair: Before we leave this subject, another thing that has changed since 2018 is Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine and the wide repercussions of that. We have heard evidence that Russia has shown an increasing interest in involvement in the Western Balkan region. Clearly it has the potential to be a malign influence, particularly within Serbia. What effect do you think that the Russian dimension is having and particularly, given the likelihood of enduring hostility between Russia and the West, what impact is this likely to have in the years ahead?

Leo Docherty MP: That is a good question. Russia continues opportunistically to exploit regional tensions in a bid to deprive some of these countries of their ability to make institutional progress. Our response is to continue to support the resilience and institution-building in all these countries, particularly our NATO allies in the region, which are some of the newest and most vulnerable members of the NATO alliance.

That is the framework within which we operate. A huge amount of our programming work across all six countries focuses on countering disinformation, institutional resilience and capacity building. Victoria can talk in more detail about that.

We must be alive to the threat but confident in our ability to work in partnership with these countries to deter Russian malign influence. Lord Peach may want to say something about the NATO context.

Lord Peach: The Minister has made it very clear, and I agree with everything he has said.

What has changed because of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine is that there is a sense of heightened awareness, partly in terms of reaching for a history that was never really there. There is a lot of good, experienced academic support for the thought that the positive role of Russia in the region is exaggerated. Then there are the societal links, historic and real, through the church and others—a sensitive topic for a public session. Therefore, we have to deal with each society's understanding of Russia within their own history. It is quite a complicated subject.

Access for Russia since its invasion continues to be another response. There are a lot more Russians in the region. It is about trying to understand why they are there. Many of them are not there for any malign purposes; they have just moved from Russia. It is a different picture from that of 2018 and so a good topic for the committee to consider. Rest assured that we continue to think carefully with our Quint partners and others, and with the countries themselves.

However, I particularly support what the Minister said about misinformation. It is so prevalent every day as you drive around listening to people, particularly young people and particularly on social media. Telegram, the platform favoured by the Russians, is very active in the region. Therefore, I would urge both Houses to continue supporting these programmes to counter disinformation.

Victoria Billing: We have over £40 million of programming across the region for all six countries. Through that, we have a variety of projects which can strengthen democratic institutions such as electoral commissions or can increase the independence of the judiciary to make them more resilient to hostile state interference.

We have cyber programmes because we have seen across the region a series of cyberattacks from hostile state actors. Also, we work with the independent media, strengthening investigative journalists in particular. We are trying to support the institutions so that the countries themselves become stronger to resist external interference.

Beyond our programming, we have our diplomatic presence, our Ambassadors who themselves try to counter the disinformation and false narratives that are out there. We also have BBC Serbian, which relaunched in 2018 as an independent media voice in the region.

Q48 Lord Soames of Fletching: Turning to Bosnia and Herzegovina, how worried are you overall about the security and stability there? What steps are the Government taking to tackle the political impasse and the actions of the leadership of Republika Srpska?

I add to that the point that Lord Peach made about the sensitivity of talking about the church. Is that the Russian influence in the church?

Leo Docherty MP: We will come to that in a minute. You are right that the situation is worrying. We continue to work with the Bosnian government, to build their institutions, and there is a range of technical co-operation, for example with their military, to build institutions that are vital to their security.

Clearly, the secessionist rhetoric coming from Dodik is extremely worrying. We have sanctioned him, and we continue to make our position very clear. It is an important week for Bosnia with regard to its EU aspirations, and we will see what is announced by the Council in two days' time. We are energetic in our determination to continue to work to build Bosnian institutions slowly but surely.

One important factor is the detrimental scale of human flight. The number of young people leaving Bosnia is so significant that it is being denuded of its human capital at an alarming rate, which is a background factor, but we continue to work with the government there to help them to build institutions. Now we turn to the role of the church.

Lord Peach: The wider situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is exactly as you describe it; there is no point denying that. We work with the federal government, of course. It is important to lodge that there is some progress within that government, and that progress will be judged during the discussions in Brussels over the next three days. I was there recently, and it is true that there is tension—it would be wrong to deny it—but there are also people with experience of managing that tension in the right positions.

I highlight to the committee the real importance of the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina to be a balancing capability, which is of course multi-ethnic, so the UK's bilateral programme of support for the Bosnia and Herzegovina armed forces is important in helping to stabilise.

We must engage not just on Republika Srpska as a risk, which we do, as the Minister has made clear, but with the Federation to make sure that we are balanced in our approach across this quite complicated country. As the committee is well aware, Dayton was never meant to be in the position that it is in almost 30 years after the conflict. Managing the interpretation of Dayton and the whole Bosnia and Herzegovina situation remains a priority. As in the answer to the previous questions, the Quint matters. It is an important way in which we cannot just co-ordinate and cooperate, but also make it clear that we understand the latest position.

As for the church, it is important to note that we must not assume that the church is involved. For example, your earlier questions mentioned

monasteries but that does not imply that the church was involved. The people who perpetrated the act on 24 September used that monastery for their own purposes. We need to be respectful of that, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. You as a committee and we as a House know well the need to be mindful of the history but not driven by it. We need to understand that it is a complicated situation. We will do all we can to play our role. The highest impact remains in defence and security; there is cyber security along with that, as Victoria said; and tackling misinformation and disinformation, which is rife in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Q49 Lord Soames of Fletching: Does disinformation rank alongside corruption? This may sound a rather wild question, but are there any institutions that you can rely on, in the sense that we understand “relying on”, in Bosnia-Herzegovina at the moment?

Lord Peach: Yes. There are bits of the Government that work extremely bravely and well, and we support and encourage them. My wider point, having been there so many times over such a long period, is exactly the point that the Minister made: maybe because I have been going there a long time, I can see the gaps in society now. The flight of people is not just a recent phenomenon. We need to encourage the next generation to come into politics and, particularly women, to play a more active role in supporting the evolution of the country.

Leo Docherty MP: Victoria, is there a programming point about that?

Victoria Billing: About women or defence?

Leo Docherty MP: Both.

Victoria Billing: I will start with defence. Some £6 million of the programming that I mentioned before is for bilateral defence activities across the region, which are key in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, we had 1st Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment exercising there—at very short notice, I might say, because the company that was meant to be exercising was the one that went to Kosovo, which shows our agility—in October and November, and we also contributed £1 million to NATO’s defence capacity-building package earlier this year. We are really committed to supporting Bosnian defence capacity and its multi-ethnic state-level nature.

We have run a very good programme with them on women in the armed forces and women, peace and security. Across the region and across all our programming engagement we try to increase the involvement of women because there are not enough women in the institutions. We also try to tackle gender-based violence, which might come up in another question, as well as discrimination against women and girls and conflict-related sexual violence.

Lord Soames of Fletching: What about the judiciary? What are we doing to help there? On the point that Victoria Billing made about the cross programme, do we use Ditchley—actually, not Ditchley, but Wilton

Park and all that? Do we encourage a lot of va-et-vient to come here?

Victoria Billing: We have not done a Wilton Park conference for a while, although there are a lot of discussions on the Western Balkans and those specific issues. A conference is something that we have been thinking about, looking at the right time and where we would really add value.

On the judiciary, we have about 10 programmes working with different bits of the judiciary operating in different countries, whether that is strengthening the independence of the appointments process or working with them to help to tackle gender issues more effectively. It depends a lot on the country, but we work with the judiciary in each country.

Lord Peach: And we continue to support the Office of the High Representative, who still has an important stabilising role here.

Q50 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** How should we interpret the role of Serbia in Republika Srpska? What is the degree of support, and what in your judgment is the ultimate aim of President Vučić? Does he want to absorb it, or what?

Leo Docherty MP: I will comment briefly before allowing Lord Peach to speak. It is easy to assume at first glance that Serbia is somehow directing events in Republika Srpska but it is our judgment that that is not the case. It is much more nuanced than that, and the relationship between the two leaders involved is a much more complicated dynamic. Lord Peach has had a great deal of time with President Vučić recently so I will let him comment on that.

Lord Peach: Going back to the theme of the committee's inquiry, a lot has changed since 2018. The people-to-people links are strong and not necessarily malevolent. Political links are strained—I think that is a good way of putting the situation right now—but, other than some very remote fringe elements, no one is obviously talking about "Greater Serbia". Even if that was true five years ago, it is much less prevalent now. Of course there may be those who, influenced by Russia and others, who opportunistically push that. So it is a more normal relationship although people-to-people links remain strong, and the tensions are also there.

It is also true to say that there are politics in Republika Srpska. It is easy to focus on the leader, but the leader has an opposition that is strong and had a strong showing in the recent elections, and I do not see any reason why that will not continue. The situation has changed since 2018. If anything, Serbia is dealing with Serbia and is not trying to be that regional consumer of other states.

Q51 **Baroness Coussins:** Now that we are no longer an EU member, how is the UK managing to retain our influence in the region and making sure that we are not left out of the room when key negotiations are being held?

On the other hand, precisely because we are no longer in the EU, are there occasions and opportunities where the UK can be more flexible and

provide support to the Western Balkans in ways that the EU cannot. When some of us visited the region five years ago as part of our original inquiry, we were told by a number of witnesses how much they valued UK technical support, particularly in Kosovo, in helping to challenge the historical impunity over conflict sexual violence, which you have just mentioned, and the training that we were offering the judiciary, which was seen as very helpful as part of combating corruption and state capture.

Are we still doing any of that, or should it be stepped up? Is that part of what we could now be freer to be more flexible in offering?

Leo Docherty MP: It is. We are still doing that, and we are making use of the agility that our position gives us. You mentioned the various programmes. We also have hugely significant capacity in UK Export Finance to deploy, so we are in a position where we can use our agility to react to requirements on the ground, and we will continue to do that.

In terms of the formal structures, Lord Peach is on the phone all the time to Mr Lajčák. I do not know whether Lord Peach wants to comment on how anything has changed in recent years in the way we formally do our diplomacy, but the net result is a greater agility, of which we are making good use.

Lord Peach: The particular impact that the UK continues to make through our efforts is in defence and security and, as Victoria has indicated, in cyber and other more discreet activity. That complements the European Union. We work with the European Union, not against it, through the Quint and in other formats, and I am frequently in Brussels doing precisely that.

You make an excellent point about reconciliation. There is still scope for a bigger focus by governments across the region on reconciliation. If I may say so, it is time. It is almost 30 years after those wars, with so many other wars raging across the globe, so if there is something the committee can do to encourage further efforts on reconciliation across this region, we will take them.

I was recently in Srebrenica. For those who have not been there, it is a very moving experience. We need to be serious about making it clear that the British Government outside the European Union continues to abide by our values and encourage reconciliation, as they did inside the European Union, such as by working with the Imperial War Museum, which has a lot of expertise, and working with non-government organisations as well as other groups that we have been working with for a long time.

The more we encourage reconciliation, the more likely it is to take root. That is the real problem: making reconciliation take root and moving on from myths and memories.

Victoria Billing: On the Quint, not only do our Ambassadors meet their Quint colleagues weekly but between capitals we have a formal structure

that continues to meet just as often as it did when we were still members of the European Union. I meet my colleagues formally at least once a month. We were together in Bosnia and Herzegovina last week, for example, discussing how we could collectively use all our tools to try to move Bosnia and Herzegovina on to a better path. So I can reassure you that the Quint structures are still very much alive and working.

On what we can do differently, one thing is to apply sanctions through our own national sanctions regimes. That is how we have sanctioned people like Dodik in Republika Srpska. The EU has not managed to get consensus for its sanctions, so that is one area where we can be quicker and more agile.

I can absolutely reassure you that the kind of programming you heard about in Kosovo continues across the region. We are very proud of the work that we do to get justice for survivors of sexual violence in conflict and the work that we do to build capacity and reduce corruption.

The Chair: This might be a helpful moment to bring in Lord Anderson with his question on ODA, as it follows on naturally.

Q52 Lord Anderson of Swansea: Critics will surely point out the mismatch between the aspirations of the Government, which are admirable—reconciliation, women and girls, and dealing with civil society—and the actual resources that are devoted to them. They are certainly dwarfed by what is provided by the EU. What does the EU give to the region?

I notice that our ODA figures are pretty clear. It was £7.2 million in 2022-23. That fell to £5.7 million in the current year and will increase to £13 million in 2024-25. This is small beer compared with our aspirations. Can you comment on that mismatch? How successful can we be with such small resources?

Leo Docherty MP: If you take our investment in the whole, £47 million spent annually on a range of programming, that is significant. Of course there will be a mismatch, because the EU is a collection of 27 member states and we are one country. But if you look at the impact of our programming it is not small beer at all; it is very meaningful. Victoria, do you want to comment on that comparison or on the utility of our own spend?

Victoria Billing: Our spend is consistently around £40 million, and we are hoping that it will increase next year to nearer £50 million. That is a mixture of ODA and non-ODA. We can be really effective with that, because we can be very swift and very agile with our funding. One example is how we responded to the cyberattacks in Albania and Montenegro. We were able to get a programme on the ground within weeks to help the governments respond to those attacks.

I have just asked my colleagues, and the EU funds for the region are obviously significant; as the Minister says, it is 27 countries and we are one. I think the overall Growth Plan—I will need to check this—is 6 billion EUR for the region, but that is not all ODA. A lot of that is loans, not

grant in aid. In addition to our £40 million to £50 million of programme funds, we have the UK Export Finance envelope of £15 billion to support private sector investment in the region.

So when you look across the piece at what the UK can contribute, it is not at all insignificant. I would not argue that our contribution alone could make a difference, but working in co-ordination and co-operation with others—one of the things we do in our Quint format is to make sure that we are working collaboratively and not competitively as we try to support the region—we can have a significant impact.

The Chair: I want to be clear that I have got this right. I drew from what I think you said that you have given ODA and non-ODA funds sufficient consistency of funding to allow you to continue to support long-term projects, because that, of course, is always the great problem when you have funding levels going up and down.

Victoria Billing: That is correct. Over the last five years we have consistently been around £40 million—it obviously moves a bit up and down—which has enabled us to do multiyear programming and provide long-term support to partners.

The Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you very much.

Q53 **Lord Teverson:** Remaining on the EU theme, the UK was, quite proudly, one of the core parts of EU Operation ALTHEA, and the UN has renewed that mandate this year. We withdrew from it, although a number of non-EU participating states have been in that operation from its inception. Should we be back in that? Is it likely, particularly now that we are all friends following the Windsor Framework? Is this something that we should be a part of?

Leo Docherty MP: We are all friends. We support the EUFOR mission with resource and personnel, but the main thrust, the main energy, of our military presence goes into KFOR, and we have to be realistic about resource constraints, especially when it comes to reserve obligations.

We should be proud of what we contribute in military presence across the region. Victoria mentioned the very short notice deployment of 1st Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment. When we need to, we can employ resource and boots on the ground rapidly. The current disposition that we have and the current posture are sustainable, importantly, and very meaningful.

Lord Peach: I have visited most COM EUFOR since its inception. The first commander was a British officer who later became Black Rod. The point I am making is serious. We continue to support the mission where we can. I remind the committee that it is a Berlin Plus mission. It is important to put that in context because it enables NATO and the European Union to work together in the field in a very important way through the airfield at Butmir on the outskirts of Sarajevo and through logistics and communications support with a strong US presence in which the UK is

embedded. "We are not in the European Union Force but we are still in the mission" is how I would put it.

I emphasise the real impact—the visual impact and the countering-disinformation impact—of having a battalion-scale deployment bilaterally, not cap-badged EUFOR but demonstrating international presence, reassurance and deterrence.

It is a slightly more balanced approach and we continue to adopt that. I was with the command group in EUFOR again a couple of weeks ago. It very much welcomes our bilateral work with the Bosnian and Herzegovina armed forces and our wider support through Berlin Plus.

Lord Teverson: As I remember, this is the one operation where Turkey let it through the net to be Berlin Plus and did not exercise its veto. It is very important for that reason.

Lord Peach: I thank the Turks for their steadfast support for the mission. They are also leading KFOR. The Turkish contribution to both missions is significant.

Lord Teverson: Minister, I take it from your very positive answer that it is not very likely that UK forces will be part of this operation in the near future.

Leo Docherty MP: Correct.

Q54 **Lord Soames of Fletching:** If you are short of a Black Rod to deploy, you could send the current one out there. She would sort them out in about five minutes.

Further to the NATO side of it, Lord Peach, the Secretary-General said on 21 November that it was carrying out an assessment. I may have missed it in an answer, but do you know the conclusion of that yet?

Lord Peach: Not yet.

Lord Soames of Fletching: Do you know why it is taking so long?

Lord Peach: The Supreme Allied Commander has recently visited the region. That implies that NATO is taking it very seriously in accordance with the guidance from the Secretary-General, approved by the allies through the North Atlantic Council. That process continues and is very much for NATO to lead. The UK delegation will of course be in support of that process.

It demonstrates that the alliance is taking the security situation very seriously, which is the theme of this session. The Secretary-General, at a very busy time, spent almost a week in the region.

Q55 **The Chair:** Perhaps you could help us by drawing together some threads which we have already heard during the evidence session, to do with reform and democratisation across the countries of the Western Balkans. How would you judge this to have gone since 2018? Is it steady

improvement, is it not much, is there considerable variation between the different countries of the region? What has the UK done to support improvement in this area and what more could it do?

Leo Docherty MP: It is a mixed bag, with positives and negatives. I was recently with the leadership in Montenegro, which has been able to form a government. That is positive but this is a mixed picture. We have forthcoming elections in Serbia. We will do all we can institutionally to encourage a democratic environment, as difficult as that is.

Lord Peach: This is a topical question. It is the Serbian election this weekend. We have the results of the recent Montenegrin elections for the President and for Parliament, and we continue to work with the new government in Montenegro. We will see what the outcome of the election is in Serbia and will continue to work with them where appropriate.

We also continue, through the programmes that Victoria Billing has outlined, to support election monitoring. We continue to support the NGOs that do that work. It is important work. I was with one of them for many hours a couple of weeks ago in Belgrade, and they are impressive. So I would be positive that there has been more focus on elections since the committee last looked at the region, but I strongly agree with the Minister that this is a very country-specific picture, and we need to keep an eye on it everywhere in the region. We have tended to focus this morning on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Democratisation is more complex. The settled nature of ethnic balance in societies is a complicated issue. I will not dive into it, but it often plays out as a democratisation process. A wider thought for the committee is that, working through the layers of government between regional, local, national and federal, it is again a pretty mixed picture. Trying to get good local government working through as a national lesson for all is something that UK small programmes are doing. I was with the mayor in Sarajevo a couple of weeks ago. She is extremely impressive and delivering for all people, regardless of ethnic background or race. That is the sort of project that we should support. So we are doing a lot—again, with our partners. This is where the Quint co-operates not only on hard security stuff but on issues of reform and democratisation.

The negative since your last report would be continued corruption, so the one thing that perhaps we have not touched enough on is the work that the UK does on anti-corruption. All the countries since 2018 have focused on this, and we support those anti-corruption efforts with discrete small programmes. That is a way to improve prospects for the future.

The Chair: If I have understood this right, you would say that the area where the UK should perhaps increase its already considerable efforts in this regard is in countering corruption.

Leo Docherty MP: You are right. I have met HMRC and serious crime officials in countries like Montenegro. The good thing is that they want our help with this. It is not good for their economies to have corruption,

black market trade and so on, so it is very much a partnership. They are hungry for technical expertise. It is good for them, us and the region. It is important and an important component of our programming across the region.

Victoria Billing: One of our programmes under the CSSF is a serious organised crime prevention programme, which is run by the Home Office and has had some significant successes in the seizure of cigarettes in Montenegro and cocaine that has been brought into the UK by Western Balkans organised crime groups. We have been doing excellent partnership capacity building in Albania with its Special Prosecution Office. We do a lot on tackling corruption in the round and will continue to do so.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: Corruption has been prevalent in the region for many centuries, particularly from Italy with smuggling and so on. In answer to the question, Lord Peach said that it was a mixed bag on progress. The Minister called it a mixed picture. Overall, has there been a regression or an advancement?

Lord Peach: I am positive, because of the work that Victoria Billing has just outlined. We are making progress. There are small green shoots. We need to encourage brave people—men and women—to go into the anti-corruption role, which in those societies, as you can imagine, requires bravery. Those small but carefully targeted programmes on anti-corruption have positive effects.

The Chair: I am trying to make sure we have got the right sense of this. You pointed out the success that some of our programmes have had. Without wishing to diminish those at all, they have to be seen in the context of the whole. In co-operation with these countries, are we driving it back or are we nibbling at the edges?

Lord Peach: I would say that we are driving it back. Of course, I would be foolish if I thought that criminal groups would not find new ways of making crime pay, so we need to continue the effort. This is where we would definitely urge continued long-term investment in these small, focused anti-corruption efforts. People themselves are also—to use the vernacular—fed up with corruption locally; they all tell us that. So are supporting society.

Q56 **Lord Soames of Fletching:** Minister, have you noticed the growing diplomatic interest in investment in the region from other countries such as the Gulf States and China? What do you assess the impact of that to be?

Leo Docherty MP: It is very noticeable. You notice it through the scale of simple things like tourism—for example, the number of Gulf tourists when you walk around a capital like Sarajevo. It is important that they are open to investment. The free flow of capital is very important, and that, in tandem with the inevitable very high degree of investment from proximate countries, particularly Germany and Austria, is important for their economies. For it to be sustainable it needs to be underpinned by

institutional resilience and the ability of these governments to tackle corruption, but it is noticeable.

Lord Peach: Generally, I think it is benign. There is sometimes a tendency for somewhat sensational reporting, normally from another group looking across another border. There is an educational element in the various elements of Middle East investment through madrassas, but there is no evidence to suggest that there are training camps and all the other things that sometimes appear in the media.

Q57 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** Much of our work has been in the field of countering disinformation and helping the media. Perhaps you could comment on where the media threats are coming from. Presumably Russia and China, either through the states or through individuals, are behind much of this. What are we specifically doing to counter disinformation? I should applaud the Government in supporting the revival of the BBC Serbian service. Would you support a similar revival of a BBC Albanian service, given the greater salience of Albania to our country today?

Leo Docherty MP: You ask a good question. The landscape is one of virulent saturation by Russian-backed media against which it is difficult for competition to take place. That is why our programming is focused on sponsoring and supporting independent media. That will require constant vigilance and continued investment, but I think there is an organic desire for credible, reliable sources of information and news, which is why the BBC is particularly welcome. I do not know whether you want to mention the scale of that project, Victoria.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: And potentially an Albanian service?

Leo Docherty MP: There is potential.

Victoria Billing: Obviously we have finite resources, so we would have to look at that. We were pleased to be able to reopen the BBC Serbian-language service, which has provided much needed fact-based news. It was incredibly popular during the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, with a big increase of visitors to its site. I have outlined already some of our programming to support investigative journalists and independent media, which we continue to do across the region.

Lord Peach: There are real questions about media ownership, although not just in that region, and how they are connected, and I look at that with my other special envoy colleagues. Then there are questions about how the influence is generated for the next generation; each generation has a slightly different take. Again, small programmes that are very carefully targeted can have a big influence on the misinformation at the heart of your question.

I would not underestimate the softer side of UK influence through culture and education, not least UK universities. When Prime Minister Rama was here earlier in the year, I was privileged to sit in on a lively round-table discussion with major leading UK universities. So behind the scenes we

are continuing to encourage those links, including a chair in Albanian studies.

These are never headline-grabbing or sensational things, but they are very useful people-to-people links that give the next generation confidence that the UK has something to offer that is different from the saturation through other media outlets.

Leo Docherty MP: The importance of people-to-people links should not be underestimated, nor should educational links. We are very proud of the Chevening scholarship cohort from across the region, many of whom occupy very senior leadership positions in their respective countries. For the small scale of investment, that achieves a tremendously potent and useful outcome, so we will continue to do that.

Q58 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: I wonder if I could ask you about investment by China. Is any of that under the belt and road principle? As you know, the application of that principle frequently carries with it rather serious obligations if there is default. To what extent is the Chinese investment driven by commercial and perhaps also by political reasons?

Lord Peach: Again, it is a mixed picture. I keep using that phrase, but it is. There was a big Chinese road development in Montenegro that has struggled to achieve the effect promised. There have been Chinese investments in railways in Serbia that are achieving the effect promised. They are not necessarily declared as one belt, one road, but a glance at the map, which is always useful in the region by the way, would suggest that the central route through Serbia going south-east to north-west is very important.

I know we are constrained by time, but I make a brief plea for strategic infrastructure development for the region as a whole, and another brief plea for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development here in London, to bring a wider view than China can offer for the benefit of the region and the connectivity between the countries in the region, which has long been absent.

Do I see a political hand? Not personally. Some of the leaders in the region tend to balance between offers, but we have tools, not just the ones we have mentioned today but the ones through the European Union and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to bring the western offer together to make the wider point about the western offer's strength for democracy and everything that flows from it.

The Chair: Lord Campbell has a question on illegal migration.

Q59 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Migration is in the air today, of course, as it was yesterday. To what extent have the policies of the United Kingdom Government been influenced by illegal migration from the area in general, and to what extent have relations between the United Kingdom and individual countries perhaps been affected by modern migration? If they have been, has that been for better or for worse?

Leo Docherty MP: The challenge of illegal migration is something we face with countries in the region, and we work in partnership with them to overcome it, because it is not in their interests either to have criminal people, smuggling gangs, operating out of the Western Balkans. Of particular note is the joint communiqué with Albania, which is one-year old this week. It has had a very positive impact in deterring and reducing the flow of illegal migrants and the freedom of movement of illegal people smugglers. The Albanians themselves want it, because it is not good for their economy or their security.

So our response to this common challenge is to work in partnership with countries in the region. Albania is a great example of that, because the relationship between us and Prime Minister Rama has been positive and has allowed us to do that.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Has the relationship with any other countries been as effective as the one with Albania?

Victoria Billing: The Western Balkans is both a source and a transit route for illegal migration to the UK, and that is primarily Albania. So we have our partnership agreement with Albania, which is about deterring arrivals from Albania and returning those who have arrived illegally. As the Minister has said, it has been incredibly successful, reducing arrivals by 90% and doubling returns. We are also increasing our co-operation with all other countries in the region on sharing information on transit routes and tackling the porous borders which people who are not from the region pass through and head towards the UK. So our latest big focus is on increasing that co-operation.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Is there any evidence of trafficking?

Victoria Billing: Yes, sadly. I am not an expert on it, I am afraid, but there always is across the illegal migration routes.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem: Perhaps if there is more information, you might give us a note on that.

Victoria Billing: Yes. I would be happy to write.

Lord Anderson of Swansea: Are the countries of the region mainly transit countries or exodus countries for their own nationals?

Victoria Billing: For the UK they are all transit countries primarily, apart from Albania.

The Chair: This has been most interesting and very helpful, so we are enormously grateful. We could go on for quite some time yet, but I am afraid that we have used up all our time and are even a minute over. As I said at the outset, we will send you a draft transcript. Please check for errors of fact and let us know if there are any. Other than that, it just remains for me to thank our witnesses—Lord Peach, Leo Docherty MP and Victoria Billing—for an extremely useful session. We are enormously grateful.

