



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Western Balkans, HC 641

Tuesday 19 March 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Dan Carden; Neil Coyle; Fabian Hamilton; Mr Ranil Jayawardena; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 61-101

Witnesses

[I](#): The Rt Hon. the Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT, 10th Secretary General of NATO from 1999-2004; Ian Cliff OBE, former British ambassador to Kosovo (2011-2015) and British ambassador to Croatia (2015-2016); and Dr Andi Hoxhaj, Lecturer in Law, University of London.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Ian Cliff and Dr Andi Hoxhaj.

Q61 **Chair:** Welcome to this hearing of the Foreign Affairs Committee on the situation in the Western Balkans. It is particularly fitting that this sitting is today, as Sunday is the 25th anniversary of the NATO involvement in Kosovo.

Thank you to our three guests who have come to give evidence. I would be grateful if you could each introduce yourselves. Lord Robertson, do you want to kick us off?

Lord Robertson: Thank you, Chair. It is a great pleasure to be giving evidence, for only the second time in my career, to a Select Committee of the House of Commons. My name is George Robertson. I was the Secretary-General of NATO from 1999 to the end of 2003, and I was the Secretary of State for Defence from 1997 to 1999, during the period of the air campaign on Kosovo. I do not think my previous parliamentary history as the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland is particularly relevant, but I have to say it put the Balkans into perspective.

Chair: I should hope so.

Ian Cliff: Thank you for having me, Chair. I am Ian Cliff. I was ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2001 to 2005, and then to Kosovo from 2011 to 2015. More recently, until two years ago, I was the Foreign Office research analyst on the Western Balkans.

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Hi. I am Andi Hoxhaj, a lecturer in law at University College London. I am an expert on the Western Balkans and I originally come from the Western Balkans, but the UK has been my home for more than 20 years.

Q62 **Chair:** Thank you all ever so much for coming today. I will start with a broad question for those who are less acquainted with the Western Balkans. What trends are we seeing across the Western Balkans—a number of countries that are very different and diverse in their peoples and their priorities? Dr Hoxhaj, would you kick us off?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: In the past 20 years, the Western Balkans have made quite a bit of progress when it comes to their level of democracy, and in particular their engagement with the west, which is the interest of this Committee. A number of them have opened accession talks with the European Union, and much of the conversation in the Western Balkans is about joining the EU, because that has been, and still is, seen as the golden standard that the countries should aspire to.

In the last 10 years, though, partly because the European Union is not in a position to show a clear road map for when these countries could join, or cannot give clear conditionalities for how they can reach that goal, we have seen stagnation. Democracy and participation have regressed in a



number of Western Balkans countries. Some have made progress on the rule of law, but some are very much still in certain phases and have stagnated.

Unfortunately, nationalism has risen in some of the countries, particularly Serbia and Bosnia. More specifically, we are now in a position, particularly this year, where we could see new violence and new threats, partly because we, the west—Britain, the United States and the EU, which are the three key partners, at least in the view of the majority of the Western Balkans—are in an election year. This will be a very challenging time. Those are more or less the broad trends, but I will be happy to go into more detail about the specific challenges that each country faces.

Q63 Chair: Thank you. Mr Cliff, are there any countries bucking those trends of state capture, corruption and nationalism? Do you agree that those are the trends? Is there anything else that you want to draw to our attention?

Ian Cliff: I think there are some countries that are moving in both directions at once. Take Montenegro, which is very small. I think most people would say that Montenegro is the country that is closest to reaching the aspiration of joining the EU. There has been quite a lot of progress in the fight against organised crime and corruption since the big change of Government three years ago. At the same time, however, there are huge worries about Montenegro's cryptocurrency situation. In fact, the current Prime Minister was involved in cryptocurrency trading, and he is proud of that fact. The latest EU report highlights the lack of regulation of cryptocurrency. You have a lot of people from both Russia and Ukraine buying land on the Adriatic coast with cryptocurrency.

I will also briefly highlight that Bosnia-Herzegovina faces some very particular challenges. Andi alluded to the growth of some forms of destructive nationalism. Because of the structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina post Dayton, in which each of the three constituent peoples effectively has a blocking power, we see the Bosnian Serb entity, for a variety of reasons, blocking progress towards the EU and particularly towards NATO. We also see the Bosnian Croats making huge difficulties from time to time.

Also, while there has been a lot of positive political change in Kosovo, the threat of immediate violence, as we have seen in the last year, is still particularly acute on the border between Kosovo and Serbia.

Q64 Chair: Before we move into particular UK interests, which I know Ranil wants to come in on, Lord Robertson, is there anything that you want to reflect on in terms of how the security climate in the Balkans has changed over the last 20 years, drawing on your experience? Will you also reflect on what might happen if we see a Trump presidency return? What might that mean for the Western Balkans?

Lord Robertson: That is a big question. First, I have to declare an interest: I am the patron of Labour Friends of Kosovo, which was created two weeks ago, and I chair a thing called the Ohrid Group, which is the friends of North Macedonia. Neither is a financial interest, but they are



probably quite important, and they have given me an indication of what is happening in the region as a whole.

The integrated review refresh is very clear that the Western Balkans are an area of concern to the United Kingdom. It says that the appointment of Air Chief Marshal Lord Peach was in recognition of the vital importance to regional stability; that is what the country has determined. We have a big stake in the area, and not only because we were leaders in the conflict there. Baroness Ashton, a Member of this Parliament and a former EU High Representative on foreign policy, negotiated the Serbia-Kosovo agreement. Another Member of Parliament, Lord Peach, is the special envoy. We have extremely good diplomatic representation in the area—ambassadors past and present are of very high quality indeed. We host the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in London, which gives us an advantage, and we also have the Westminster Foundation for Democracy—an organisation created way back in time of which I was the first deputy chairman, having persuaded the then Conservative Government that its creation was a good idea. Also, we are outside the EU and therefore not now bound by the consensus arrangements, which inhibit the European Union doing some of the things in the Western Balkans that it should be doing.

On your question “What if Donald Trump becomes President of the United States?” that is an if; there is no guarantee that he will become president, and he can only be there for four more years. That is an advantage over certain authoritarian regimes, such as the one where, last weekend, the president was elected for another six years on top of the 24 he has already served. If Trump were to undermine NATO—he cannot destroy NATO or withdraw the United States from it—that would inhibit its activities inside the Western Balkans, but it would not cripple it. The Europeans have taken on much more responsibility for the various countries in the Western Balkans, as indeed they should have done, so I see a Trump presidency having a minimal effect on our policy and European policy toward an area that has, in the past, created a spillover of enormous destructive consequence for the whole European continent.

Chair: I may bring us back to the US in a moment, but now Ranil has some questions.

Q65 **Mr Jayawardena:** Thank you, Chair. Lord Robertson, you have touched on regional stability and detailed our history in the Western Balkans. What is your assessment of Britain’s interests today and how they might evolve in the future?

Lord Robertson: Today, people in the region listen to us. When I was on the underground train yesterday, coming in from Paddington, a lady accosted me and said, “Can I just say thank you? I am alive today because of what you did in Kosovo in 1999.” That is very heartening; it doesn’t happen every day or in other parts of the country, but it is heartening because we have a stake—a recognised stake—in the region, which allows us to say sometimes uncomfortable things to people who should doing more than they are doing at the moment.



Take the situation between Serbia and Kosovo, for example. Our position allows us to say things that only friends can say in those two countries about their responsibilities for adhering to the two agreements—the Brussels agreement of 2013 and the Ohrid agreement in 2023. I think that gives us a degree of leverage. It also means that in terms of the economic development of the region, which ultimately will be the only guarantee of peace and reconciliation, we again have a role to play. I think we underdo that at the moment, but we could do much more in the future.

Q66 Mr Jayawardena: Mr Cliff, in the light of your experience of working in the region, what are your observations about where the future might take Britain's interests?

Ian Cliff: If I compare my periods in Kosovo and even in Bosnia with the present situation, there is obviously a huge difference in that we are no longer a member of the EU and the destination of these countries, as we still say, should be membership of the European Union. I take what Lord Robertson says about our not being bound by the consensus rules of the EU; that is very important in the context of Serbia-Kosovo, because one always has to bear in mind that there are five countries in the EU that do not recognise Kosovo, which really does hobble the EU effort. However, we still have not quite carved out a clearcut view of what our role should be.

We play a big role, for all the reasons that Lord Robertson set out. I would add that we have particular credibility with certain political parties. It has always struck me as surprising that we have a lot of credibility with the Kosovo Serbs. We also have a lot of credibility with the current Vetvendosje Government in Kosovo, because we always talked to them, even when they were engaged in throwing rotten bananas at people and the Americans and the Germans did not talk to them. We need to leverage those links to try to get the stability that is in our interest.

Q67 Mr Jayawardena: On that basis, with the current settlement that we find ourselves in, to the point that Lord Robertson made earlier, how do you suggest we best pursue those objectives and deliver on our own aims for the region?

Ian Cliff: First we should perhaps do a little more on trade and the economic side. As Lord Robertson mentioned, we are the host of the EBRD, and the EBRD has a Western Balkans summit in London every year. We ought to use that. Having worked on trade promotion at various points in my career, I am always disappointed that British companies still need a lot of encouragement to come into this region—they tend to assume it is all sewn up by the Germans, the Austrians, the Slovenes and so on—because if you want to root out some of the corruption, having companies from countries that insist on probity is a good way of doing that and moving your economy forward.

I still think we can do more on security. We have a lot of credibility, particularly because of the deployment of the extra 600 British troops to KFOR, but we are not in EUFOR Althea in Bosnia, because we choose not to ask the EU very kindly if we could stay in it when we left the EU. That



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was one of the mistakes we made at the time of Brexit; I think we would have been welcome to stay in Althea. There is also a lot we can do in terms of police training for people of all ethnicities.

We can be a bit more consistent about our project work in the region. There has been a lot of backing and filling. Obviously priorities changed with the war in Ukraine, but we should never forget that Western Balkans stability is very much a long-term interest of the UK.

Q68 Mr Jayawardena: Lord Robertson, is the Quint still a credible player in the region?

Lord Robertson: The Quint is extremely important, because that locks us into a diplomatic effort that is crucial in the region as a whole. We have to capitalise on that as well.

As Ian said, this point about leverage is important. If this area is as important as the integrated review suggests, we will have to pay a lot more attention to it than we have up to now. The great problem of the Western Balkans is that difficulties there very quickly spill over into other parts of the world. During the Kosovo conflict, I remember the ambassador of Switzerland, when I was appointed NATO Secretary-General, coming and saying, "We have a big interest in this: 40% of the people in our jails are coming from that region."

The spillover is huge, and in many ways that is how Germany abandoned its old principle about only UN helmets and not NATO helmets. They changed it because there was a degree of self-interest involved. There is huge self-interest in stabilising that region; otherwise, it will come back and bite us.

Q69 Chair: Can I quickly follow up on that, Lord Robertson? I agree with Ian that we should be rejoining EUFOR, but can it be that effective a force when Russia maintains a veto over its extension and Putin has such a close personal relationship with Dodik? Should there be a deployment specifically to Brčko District, given its sensitivities? If we are not going to rejoin EUFOR, as seems to be the current Government position, what can we be doing from outside EUFOR to contribute more to Bosnian stability in terms of military projection?

Lord Robertson: I think we can do that. The Foreign Secretary replied to the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee and basically said, "It can't be done, and why should we do it?" It seems self-evident to me that we should be doing it. The EU has a similar concept to NATO of contributing forces, so we would have our say if we were involved in that. That is one of the most obvious points.

I don't think we should take for granted the Russian connection with Republika Srpska; as Ian has said, our credibility among the Serbs is actually reasonable—I am not saying it is high. We were the force that went into Kosovo and protected the Kosovo Serbs at a time when the Albanians might naturally have regarded it almost as revenge for what had been done to them. Serbia as a whole respects strength and power, and



recognises that we have a lot of that. Using leverage and our diplomatic clout, we can have an effect.

Chair: Ian, do you agree?

Ian Cliff: Yes. One of the things we perhaps ought to look at a bit more is trying to work with the opposition. There is an opposition in Republika Srpska; it is not very strong and bits of it have been co-opted by Dodik and his SNSD party, but nevertheless we should be working to create more democratic space in Republika Srpska. We have been working on media freedom, and I was involved in an exercise on that just before covid.

Similarly, there is a huge problem with the Kosovo Serbs: all the air has been sucked out of their political system by Belgrade and by Vučić. We ought to look at ways that we, with the credibility we have, can work with media outlets that are not quite controlled by Belgrade, with NGOs that are not controlled by Belgrade. It is difficult, and people get threatened if they work with people who are not in line with the current thinking—

Chair: Even Christian Schmidt was threatened and told he was not allowed to come into Republika Srpska, otherwise he would be arrested.

Ian Cliff: Well, they do a lot of that sort of thing—I wonder whether they would really have done it. There is an atmosphere of fear, both in Republika Srpska and among the Kosovo Serbs, and we ought to try to use the leverage we have to try to counter that and to create some more space.

Lord Robertson: I think it's worth saying that the Kosovo Serbs do not have a close affinity to Belgrade. Belgrade treats them as downmarket, but it also tries to own them. There are opportunities there for us to insert ourselves. I was recently asked to go on the advisory board of a new NGO that has been created in Serbia—a sort of pro-Atlantic group—and I was very keen to do that. Any encouragement for a pro-EU, pro-Atlantic group to be formed in Serbia seems to be well worth it, and I sent a very strong message that appears on their website.

Q70 **Chair:** Dr Hoxhaj, just before we move on from the discussion of Bosnia, I am interested in your perception of the current way in which the Office of the High Representative is being deployed. Do you think that it is a positive force at the moment within Bosnia? Also, is it true that we can better separate Russia from Republika Srpska, or is that relationship becoming more entrenched? As we are going to move more deeply into Kosovo, what are your reflections on the relationship between Vučić and Dodik?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Thank you for your questions. I also want to pick up on some of the reflections from my fellow panellists. I think that the UK is not using the Berlin process effectively enough. The UK is part of the Berlin process and we were the host of the Western Balkans summit in 2018. The UK is actually a leader on the security cluster within the Berlin process and we take part in that specific summit every year. The Berlin process is



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very much led by the Home Office in the UK, so the Home Secretary is very much the lead. I think that we have not used it as effectively as one could do, in addition to all the other initiatives.

When it comes to some of the other initiatives that the UK has done and can be involved in, it was positive that the British Council has returned to the Western Balkans. I think it would be worthwhile to encourage the British Council to do a “Next Generation” report on all the Western Balkan countries. It recently published on Albania, and it is a really interesting study and concept because it sheds some light on the problems that young people have with their involvement in politics—their fears and so on. That would be really interesting to explore.

I totally agree with some of the scepticism of the media. The media landscape across the Western Balkans is very problematic, partially because of the way in which it is funded. That is where Russia comes into it, because it funds a lot of the space. We, the allies—by which I mean the UK, EU and so forth—have not done so well in countering all the Russian influence in the media. We recently opened a BBC service in Serbia, and it would also be wise to open the service in the Albanian language, because it could provide a different platform, and a space for modern discussion and conversation to take place. When it comes to the case of Bosnia and our position there, I absolutely agree that we should rejoin, but there does not really seem to be the appetite for that.

In closing, I would recommend that we seek for the leadership in Britain to take more visits to the Western Balkans, and to be more proactive and engaging. Last year, we had the Prime Minister of Albania, which was the first time the Government hosted a PM in 100 years, and the first time that a current Head of Government from the Balkans visited in more than a decade. In addition, we have not seen a UK Prime Minister visit the Balkans in a really long time. It is all positive that we have a special envoy, but such a visit would send a powerful message in terms of improving our influence in the Balkans and pushing for more leverage.

Finally, we are home to many of the diaspora communities from the Western Balkans, and we do not do enough to engage those that are actually here in London. They can be a really powerful voice in facilitating a more positive discussion, as well as increasing our influence in the region.

Q71 Fabian Hamilton: Dr Hoxhaj, what do you think of the prospects for a normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia occurring any time soon?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: I do not necessarily think that we will see any progress in this particular calendar year, partially because we are in an election year across the world and I cannot see an appetite for that to move forward. What is more important for us to discuss is: what has the EU-led dialogue achieved? In the last five years of the current Commission, we have not really seen a positive development. Yes, we have seen some technical issues being dealt with and some technical issues being set out,



but the substance has not really been sorted out. That is because there is a lack of initiatives and of incentives. In a nutshell, we are promising a lot of investment if they de facto recognise one another, and somehow they should move forward. Serbia has many ties and links with China, Russia and so on, so it does not really need our money. Of course, it uses the EU money to build a lot.

What we should come clear on—perhaps this is what the UK could do—is NATO countries that do not recognise Kosovo. We should have an honest discussion with them on whether they would recognise Kosovo and, if so, by when. What is the incentive for Kosovo to move forward if you are merely offering de facto recognition? That is the bigger question, and the elephant in the room. Those countries, by not recognising Kosovo or not coming up with a specific timeline for when that would happen, prevent Kosovo from integrating into the international community and coming in good faith. If you want to have a positive dialogue, you have to be in good faith. At the moment, I cannot see the current dialogue being in good faith as long as those countries are not clear when it comes to recognition.

A final point on the dialogue: unfortunately, at the moment the dialogue is churned in an internal political debate and at times is used to suppress civil society, opposition and so on if they question the leader that leads that dialogue. The efforts on the dialogue should go beyond the leadership. This should be a reconciliation process, and the ultimate goal should be mutual recognition, which would allow both of these countries to move forward. Without those guarantees, we will waste more time, and unfortunately there is evidence that 37% of the population of the Western Balkans has already left. If we go with the current trend, by 2030 nearly half the Western Balkans population will be living abroad, and by 2040 more than 60% will be living abroad and not in the Western Balkans. Could we then sit here and honestly say that we achieved something? That is why this is a matter of urgency.

Q72 Fabian Hamilton: Let me turn to you next, Lord Robertson. It is always good to see you. Why do you think it is in the UK's interests to support ongoing negotiations between Serbia, Kosovo and the EU? What tools do you think the British Government might use to do that? I will then come to Mr Cliff.

Lord Robertson: It is in the country's interests because we have declared that the stability of the Western Balkans is important generally. There is the question of spillover, and the fact that the Russians, the Chinese and others are using the Western Balkans as a sort of adventure playground while our attention is diverted elsewhere. It is because we have a degree of leverage that other countries do not have, because of the good will we have produced in the region. I was there last year, and I know just how warmly the older generation feel about our role 25 years ago and what we did at that time. That gives us a degree of influence that other people may not have, and that we should use.

If you read Cathy Ashton's book, "And Then What?"—I meant to bring my copy along today—she describes in graphic, granular detail the



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negotiations that took place in order to get to the agreements that she was responsible for. They are painful. Those of us who have been involved in international negotiations know just how painful a lot of those detailed negotiations can actually be, but it provided a foundation for progress to take place. Although an academic colleague says it is very difficult to see, and it is all bound up with local politics—perish the thought; we would never allow international events to be the casualty of domestic politics, would we?—you can still insert yourself into that.

When Prime Minister Kurti was over here a fortnight ago, it was an opportunity for the Government to express a view to him, as some of us outside of Government did. There is a parliamentary delegation from Kosovo in the Palace at the moment. In fact, they are appearing before the international affairs Committee of the House of Lords tomorrow when I will be temporarily in the Chair. We have opportunities for making a point of view known. It is so much in our interest that the Western Balkans are stabilised and become a normal part of mainstream Europe, therefore safeguarding our security and our prosperity at the same time.

Fabian Hamilton: Thank you. Mr Cliff?

Ian Cliff: I agree with all of that. When we look at the situation that erupted in the 1990s, we suffered because of the flow of refugees because, frankly, in Bosnia Herzegovina there was a perception that we were an obstacle to what was called lift and strike: the lifting of the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims and allowing air strikes against Serb positions. Because the stability of Europe is in our interest, the stability of the Balkans is in our interest. It is also in our interest to counter the influence of nefarious elements—I think I mentioned that before—such as Russia and also China in many ways. Also, coming out of Saudi Arabia and some other middle eastern countries are some radical forms of Islam, which I think is a worry among particularly Bosniak communities, not just in Bosnia.

What can we do about it? I think we need to perhaps leverage a bit more those links that Lord Robertson has been talking about. We do have a lot of credibility, and we can help push the negotiations forward. I would agree that perhaps in recent months, because it is an EU-led process and we are not in the EU, we have been pushed a little bit to one side, but we should use the fact that we are in the Quint to ensure that we understand what is going on and can support it.

I am a little bit more optimistic than perhaps Andi is about the prospects for an eventual solution. Like a lot of things, when the time is right, there is a possibility of reaching some sort of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo. A lot of it will depend on what Mr Vučić sees as being in his interest. I would not for a moment suggest that I can see into Mr Vučić's head, but he is a great one for playing different elements off against one another. I do not think one should assume that he is forever a plaything of Putin and Moscow. The relationship is more complex than that. He may at some point see it as in his interest to move in an EU direction, rather than a Moscow direction.



Q73 Fabian Hamilton: Your answer has conveniently taken me on to the next question: do you think that the UK has deprioritised or moved away from the Western Balkans as a region of engagement since we left the European Union? I know that you have already touched on that, but do you want to elaborate a little bit, and perhaps we can then ask Lord Robertson and Dr Hoxhaj?

Ian Cliff: To be honest, I think we have a bit. I think there have been other priorities, including Brexit itself, consuming a lot of the energy around Whitehall. But I think we have made a conscious effort not to lose sight of the region. Andi Hoxhaj made a very important point that we hosted the Berlin process summit in 2018. We have tried to keep in that process, even though we are not in the EU. But, yes, I think inevitably with the situation that we now face with Russia and Ukraine, and the questions in Gaza, it probably does not have the priority that someone like me, who is a dyed-in-the-wool Balkanist, would like to see.

Lord Robertson: I think undoubtedly we have deprioritised, and I think that is regrettable. I direct the attention of the Committee to the reply given to the international affairs Committee of the House of Lords. We did a short inquiry, but we did it in some detail and we gave a lot of attention to some of the issues that had derived from our previous report. I have here the reply from the Foreign Secretary: brief and not terribly informative. So I think if you want evidence about the deprioritisation, I am afraid that is that—despite the fact that the new Foreign Secretary had actually been to Kosovo on 4 January, so he felt it a priority. But we did not get a substantive argument back here.

I draw attention to what Dr Hoxhaj said in his last contribution: that, by 2040, 60% of the Western Balkans' population will have left. Where are they going to be? They are going to be here—they are going to be in Western Europe. They are not going to Russia, they are not going to China, and they are not going to Africa. They will be here. So if migration is a big issue in this country—it will continue to be, and a growing one—this is one of the reasons why, and we are beginning to see it. The lady on the tube yesterday who greeted me with affection is not the only Kosovar or Bosnian here in our capital city today. These demographic statistics should be something we focus on.

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Undoubtedly we have deprioritised the Western Balkans, partially because we left the European Union and much of our Balkan policy was tied into it. However, in the past two years I have seen some positive developments when it comes to our engagement, primarily in the space of the rule of law. This is partially because we have seen the Western Balkan route, which is particularly used by organised crime and migration to come to west Europe, as a problem, and our engagement has been in that space. The recent agreement that we have seen in the UK between the National Crime Agency and the Albanian anti-corruption structure is primarily to target organised crime networks that operate from the Western Balkans, the UK and Albania, and to disrupt some of those links.



Politically speaking, we could do more. Hosting another Western Balkans summit off the back of what we did in 2018 would not be such a bad idea, to re-establish and reassert ourselves, but I suppose that will not happen until we have our own election.

Q74 Henry Smith: Lord Robertson, what do you think should be the UK's policy objectives and priorities when it comes to Kosovo?

Lord Robertson: Well, it should be reconciliation between the two elements in Kosovo, and it should be helping to grow the economy. I think it is almost self-evident that prosperous societies tend not to be problematic societies. I think trade and industry are areas where we have some strengths, and we could deploy them to the area. But as Dr Hoxhaj says, in terms of organised crime, one of the instruments that Russia uses—if it succeeds in Ukraine, it will use it even more—is the encouragement of organised crime rings.

I have a very vivid memory, which I use regularly when I am in the region, of a man called Goran Svilanović, who was the first post-Milošević Foreign Minister of Yugoslavia. He stood at NATO headquarters, at the point de presse that we held there, and he said to the press, "Can you imagine, ladies and gentlemen, how prosperous the Balkans would be today if we politicians had the same degree of inter-ethnic co-operation as the criminals?" In a way, that sums up so much of what is happening in the Balkans.

Focusing on the corruption and criminality encouraged by outside players and helping with the industrial development of the region is going to be an important way in which we can bring about reconciliation, particularly in Kosovo and Serbia but in the wider region as well.

Q75 Henry Smith: Dr Hoxhaj, how do you feel the elections in December last year have emboldened Vučić's nationalist agenda and cause?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: The nationalist agenda was there even before the election, but the turnout and the events of the election have further embodied his nationalist agenda, partially because we saw quite openly how the elections in most parts of Serbia were interrupted. We have seen allegations of election fraud, and we have seen a lot of protests in the capital city. At the moment we are seeing that they are going to rethink holding elections in that space.

That is an element, but Vučić uses that nationalist card particularly when he is weak at home. If someone is comfortable in his skin, he will not intervene in an election. Over the weekend, we all saw the soldier entering the polls in Russia; we have seen similar things in the Western Balkans and particularly in Serbia, but maybe not to that extent. If someone were that comfortable, they would not be doing that.

The problem we have at the moment is that we cannot predict what Vučić is going to do next. We should not underestimate what happened in the northern part of Kosovo. Vučić and his cronies were not held accountable, and are still not being held accountable, for what happened. It became



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quite clear that the person who was behind it is still in Belgrade; he is still walking free. In a recent report, we saw that one of the companies he owns shares in received €8.5 million after the attack. That is quite clear evidence.

What is appalling and worrying is that we are not calling this out. If we allow this to go unaccounted for, I am afraid we will not see a very bright 2024. I wish I could be more optimistic, but we have to be truthful about some the conditions under which we are operating.

Q76 Henry Smith: Mr Cliff, could I turn to you with an add-on to that question about the election irregularities? What can the UK do to help to call out and expose how those irregularities have come about and have not been checked? Do we have any leverage in Serbia to do that?

Ian Cliff: We actually have the BBC's Serbian website, which is a web version of the BBC World Service. It is interesting that not very many people looked at it to start with, but during the covid pandemic people suddenly started looking at the BBC, because they got more accurate information from the BBC than from anyone else. That has continued, as we have seen with the protests against election fraud in Belgrade.

What can the UK do on its own? Probably it is a bit limited. As I say, I think we can work with more outward-looking elements in all these countries to strengthen their hand, but it is not very easy when you have an autocratic system supporting the existing Government. Also, we are a member of the OSCE, which observes the elections through ODIHR.

This is not the question you have asked me, but later this year there will be elections in Kosovo. I am assuming that in the Serb majority areas, we will again have election fraud and the bussing of people in support of Srpska lista. I think we should be encouraging the OSCE and the other election observation missions to call that out. There has been a tendency to sort of push it into the background.

Q77 Henry Smith: Apart from providing information, for example via the BBC website, should we be going further with sanctions or other measures like that?

Ian Cliff: We have sanctions against certain individuals. Mr Radoičić, who has admitted that he was behind the Banjska incident, is subject to sanctions. Dodik, of course, is subject to sanctions. It is a method of registering our displeasure and, in some cases, putting people in difficulties; just how much it pinches depends on whether they have money in London. But if you are asking whether we should be putting full-scale trade sanctions on Serbia, I think the answer is no. In fact, that would be cutting off our nose to spite our face, because we are trying to build up our trade for all the reasons that we discussed earlier. I do not think that that would be a particularly productive way forward.

Going back to a question that was asked earlier, I don't think Vučić is forever in the hands of Putin; I'm not even sure that Dodik is. I remember the days when Dodik was the darling of the west—the man who stood up



to Karadžić. These guys see where their interests lie, and they can flip-flop. I think it is a bit unlikely that Dodik is going to suddenly attach himself to the west, but you never know.

Q78 Henry Smith: I have a final question, if I may, Chair. Lord Robertson, I started by asking you what the British foreign policy objectives and priorities should be towards Kosovo. If I were to ask the same question towards Belgrade, do you think we should be a little tougher? Do you think we shouldn't necessarily accept the narrative that they are in the pockets of Moscow?

Lord Robertson: No, we should not assume that, but we should assume that there will be influence on them, and maybe a bit more attention by us would repay the effort, as Ian has said. They watch the way the wind is blowing, and they cannot have been terribly impressed by the lack of success by Putin in his adventure into Ukraine. There might therefore be opportunities for us to pay a bit more attention to what they are saying.

The Kosovo campaign, as you say, was 25 years ago, but it showed the Serbs that we were serious and that we were interested. They resented it, and they still make a lot of mileage out of some of the damage that was done during the air campaign. I went to speak at the general staff college in Belgrade in my last days in NATO, and you could not help but feel the degree of respect that there was. They were basically a defeated military at that time, but they respected the fact that they were up against some degree of strength. Given that they are transactional in the way they do things, I think a bit more attention paid there, especially on the defence side, might repay quite a bit of good will.

Q79 Chair: Can I ask about the elections in Serbia? We saw a great number of public protesters out on the streets bravely fighting against the restrictions on freedom of speech. In Serbia, we have an opposition who are very pro-EU and pro-democracy, but OSCE has been incredibly critical of the elections that took place in December.

There were reports of Bosnian Serbs being bussed into Belgrade to take part in the elections. There were also reports of Serbs from across Serbia being bussed into Belgrade from parts of Serbia where there were no municipal elections taking place. Are those reports credible, and is one of the solutions that, if there is a rerun of the election on 2 June, it should be in all municipalities across the whole of Serbia to reduce this bussing, or is that not a viable response?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Thank you for the question. I want to link them both, in a way. We should not underestimate Russia's influence at all in any case, because Serbia has reduced its alignment with EU foreign policy when it comes to sanctions in the last two years—it used to be 50% to 54%; now it is less than 50%—so we have to look at the statistics rather than what they say.

On the specific point on the election, the reports are quite credible. We saw Freedom House, which reports about the level of democracy in Serbia, actually called out by name by Vučić as being sort of a sponsor, and he



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was quite openly citing some of this misconduct. What is really frightening about this specific case is that the report will come out on 11 April and the President of Serbia was actually naming the author—who is supposed to be anonymous—two weeks before, partially because they were calling out the name. It is quite frightening in a way that any critical voice is being suppressed. We as the UK, but also the collective alliance of NATO and the EU, should support critical voices when they call out such acts.

Overall, within the OSCE, that should be strengthened. We sometimes, as a collective alliance, underestimate our role in some of these institutions. I have seen the OSCE give recommendations about electoral reform across the Western Balkans, but they are always very cosmetic. We never truly talk about substantial reform. One way that we can reduce autocracy in the Western Balkans is to have term limits, and we can use our institutions, our efforts and our influence within these institutions to put in these conditionalities. Of course, it might be viewed that we are influencing from the outside, but if we are using the conditionality system, that does not prevent us from asking to have fixed-term elections in some of these countries.

That would allow for different elites to circulate. At the moment, across the Western Balkans we have leaders that have been there for the last 30 years—I was a baby, grew up and am now giving evidence to Parliament while still seeing these figures. That is something that we can do, and we should not underestimate at all the influence that we have in these institutions.

Q80 Mr Jayawardena: We have kept touching on Russia through your evidence. How seriously should NATO take the threat of Serbia's increasingly close military-industrial ties with Russia?

Lord Robertson: We should take all of these things very, very seriously indeed. I am not sure whether Russia at the moment has the capacity to do very much on that connection, but they are there and they are influential.

One of the weaknesses we have in the west is that the weaponry that we produce is so sophisticated that we cannot share the technology and so expensive that nobody can afford to buy it. One of the reasons why the global south seems to be offside in terms of what is happening in Ukraine is that they depend on Russia and China for getting very cheap military equipment. We should really bear that in mind.

But the other thing in terms of Russian and Chinese influence is that getting a message over—getting signals over—of our interest and our involvement in the region is very important. There is no BBC Albanian service—that was one of the recommendations that was dismissed by the Foreign Office in their reply to the House of Lords—and we are not doing nearly enough.

During the cold war, we had a massive operation going on with the BBC World Service, Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe. We stretched



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ourselves to the very limit to break down the hegemony of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. We seem to have given that up now. In the British Council and in the BBC World Service we have two agencies owned and controlled by this country that have got massive reach and huge influence, especially in these regions where people are desperate for accurate information. Now, you can multiply their effect by social media, because the internet is not controlled in the way that the print media and the television media are.

The question really is: are we doing nearly enough to get over our message about democratic values and the way in which people in that region and others are being robbed? That is an area where, without expending huge amounts of extra money, we could do much more.

- Q81 **Mr Jayawardena:** In terms of your assessment of what we are doing, would it be fair to say that the appeasement of Serbia does not in any way appear to draw them away from their ties with Russia?

Lord Robertson: I would not use the word, “appeasement”—I think that is a bit of a loaded expression—but we are too relaxed about the way in which they are reaching out to Russia. A little bit more energy devoted to splitting them away would not be a very bad idea.

- Q82 **Mr Jayawardena:** Dr Hoxhaj, I want to get your views for the record, so that they are taken as part of our evidence—I have my own views on this, but it would be good to get yours. Why would you contend that Russia is exploiting Serbia and Kosovan sovereignty? Is this just another proxy for Russia against the West?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Thank you for the question. Again, undoubtedly, Russia has a huge influence in the Western Balkans, and it is not shying away from it. We have focused mostly on Serbia and Kosovo for the purposes of this Committee, but Russia has a massive influence across there, and we as the West underestimate its effort. We do not fully recognise as well as acknowledge that.

Think about other parts of the Western Balkans where we think that we have a lot of leverage, such as Albania, North Macedonia and so on. Because the UK and US have sanctioned a number of politicians and individuals in those countries, Russia has used that information to amplify the war against the west. At the moment, if you look across the Western Balkans, quite a lot of the support for the west has dropped, because Russian influence, particularly in the space of the media, has used that against the West.

Russia absolutely wants to use the Western Balkans as a proxy war. Primarily it wants to destabilise the region, and that is partially to move our efforts away at the moment from Ukraine. We should keep our focus on the Western Balkans. This is a really positive discussion today, because we are shedding some light. However, more must be done, because we seem to be losing that.



In terms of what we can do to counter that, I will add that Russia gives a lot of scholarships and works a lot on the culture element and the education space in the Western Balkans. I will give you an example. Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia in Albania, which is a NATO member, gave 50 scholarships, whereas we, with a Chevening scholarship, gave only four. The US, with the Fulbright, also gave four. That is with our massive GDP. That is a massive influence that Russia could employ, because if you have 50 people, you educate them and ensure that when they come back they get really good and important jobs in the Administration, that is influence—you are buying influence. We are not doing enough of that. I am quite hopeful that the Chevening scholarship for the Western Balkans has expanded in the last two years since the last time that I gave evidence. We have now also opened a new Chevening in the space of cyber-security. That is something that we can do.

My last point on the appeasement element is that we should be stronger and call it out, because we are not constrained any more through the EU dialogue. If we see something that is not within our values, we should call it out. We should engage more with other actors as well, not just purely with Governments. That way, we can also get more support on the ground from different actors.

Q83 Henry Smith: What is your take on reports in the last few days of a new or updated agreement between Russia and Serbia and some of the comments that Vučić has said off the back of that emboldening nationalistic speak against Kosovo? I do not know who might want to go with that.

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: I do not know the ins and outs of the new agreement, because usually any agreement between Putin and Vučić is non-transparent. Unfortunately, with any sort of autocrat, we mostly learn about them by the international media. However, the way that I see it is that Vučić is again not being shy about his ties with Russia, and the agreement is quite clearly showing the commitment to Serbian-Russian relations. We should take that very seriously; we should not underestimate any part of the new agreement.

I think we have underestimated, even in the light of the war in Ukraine, where Russia and Serbia, on the fringes of the UN General Assembly in New York, signed an agreement on co-operation on political matters, and we didn't see any response whatsoever in the West. However, the way I view this agreement is that Vučić is in a bad place, because of the alleged election fraud in Serbia, and would like to have some sort of support, and he is using this new agreement to put new threats towards the West. The problem is that he will exploit this, partly because we cannot make any decision-making process and partly because we are in an election year. In the EU, it is an election year and most likely the EU will have a new envoy when it comes to Serbia and Kosovo after the May election. However, that would be something to watch and we should really be careful.

Q84 Henry Smith: Do you think it signals some insecurity?



Dr Andi Hoxhaj: There are insecurities, but also it is more or less to threaten more the West that: “We don’t care. We are going to stick to our strongest ally.”

Q85 **Chair:** Before we move on to discuss the Banjska attack in more detail, there are lots of reports that essentially the north of Kosovo has been captured by criminal elements, whether it be crypto factories, cannabis factories or weapons stores being found—obviously, Srpska Lista and the way things are run there. Is that a fair assessment and is that situation sanctioned by Belgrade? Mr Cliff, perhaps you could kick off.

Ian Cliff: I think it is a very fair assessment. What we have seen over the last four or five years is every voice in north Kosovo that diverged from what Belgrade wanted has gradually been either silenced—we had the assassination of Oliver Ivanovic and still no light has been shed on that. Of course, Mr Radoičić, who was behind the Banjska incident, was at one time indicted in connection with the murder of Ivanovic, but that has been pushed back; it hasn’t been pursued.

Either people have been eliminated or they have been co-opted, and it is very difficult for non-governmental organisations, for example, that want to reach out to Pristina or to Western embassies to do so, because then the members of those NGOs find that their families are threatened—sometimes quite subtly. You know, auntie loses her job as a cleaner in a school; it is not always the heavy kind of pressure. But sometimes it is.

That is why I say that we ought to be looking at ways of trying to reopen the political space among the Kosovo Serbs, because there was a time when there were different political streams and I think we should try to get back to that.

Q86 **Chair:** Can I push you on that? How do we do that, because there are reports, as you say, of people losing their jobs, or of people finding a grenade on their doorstep, when it looks like they have worked with the Kosovan police rather than just relying on the local militia police? How do we genuinely open up a space so that the vast majority of Kosovo Serbs, who are peaceful and law-abiding but living in a state of fear, have that space?

Ian Cliff: It is difficult, but I think that there are ways of working with people behind the scenes. I know that there are contacts that take place, but they are not publicised, precisely because of the threat to people’s families. There are one or two projects that we can support in Mitrovica, which is the meeting-point between the two.

I don’t think we should give up, because there has been a tendency to give up on the grounds that the way to a settlement of the problems of the Kosovo Serbs or northern Kosovo lies through Belgrade, but time and time again we have seen that Belgrade doesn’t deliver. I think we need to work on that and work with our EU partners.

By the way, I think the EU has been extremely bad about getting its message across about the degree of support it gives to economic



development, young people and so on. Certainly, if you ask anyone in Serbia itself, or among the Kosovo Serbs or the Bosnian Serbs, they have a completely lopsided vision of how much support they get from Russia and how much they get from the EU.

Q87 Chair: That is really helpful. Dr Hoxhaj, to set the context, we often talk about Vučić's ambitions for Kosovo as if they are absolute, but I wonder whether there is some nuance that we perhaps do not understand when we look at it from London. We often talk about how autocrats tell us what they are going to do next, and too often in the West we ignore them and hope that it is not really true and that they are not going to do what they tell us. President Vučić said in a speech before the election that Serbia should learn from Azerbaijan's example in its conflict with Armenia; it waited 28 years for a special geopolitical circumstance. You can take from that what you will—I will ask you for your comment. Yesterday, Vučić said that the West must choose between Serbia and Kosovo, and if they choose Kosovo, Serbia will "wait for the best possible momentum, and we will seize our opportunity". How serious are these ambitions? Are they really just to play to a domestic interest to assure re-election?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: They are both. Primarily, it is to keep the internal audience at bay, and to bring in the Kosovo card, as they call it in Serbia, to keep his base tight. However, his ambitions are actually to have that influence and keep that instability. He has not been a good-faith partner when it comes to the negotiation process. He has used Serbs in Kosovo to incite violence, and they are not living well in that space. His ambitions are quite clear when it comes to destabilisation.

What we can do in this space is, first, take him seriously. We cannot continue with this appeasement because somehow he might have a change of heart and come closer to the West. We see example after example, and he is not held accountable. It is difficult to predict what any autocrat is going to do next, but the fact that we have not taken accountability measures against Vučić has emboldened him to push this agenda further.

We talk about the northern part of Kosovo. Kosovo has agreed that it is a multi-culture state and has tried to include minorities within the institutions. It should allow the ethnic minorities in Kosovo to be part of the Kosovo institutions, and by law that has been the case. Politically, it has tried to do that, but more efforts must be made to include them fairly, but without the influence of Vučić. At the moment, Vučić uses them as an instrument to sabotage the Government institutions and structures in Kosovo. He uses them to delay debates and so on.

From the UK's perspective, we should take that very seriously. More importantly, we should also make our allies take that very seriously. At the moment, the EU is not taking Vučić and his efforts very seriously, but we have seen all the steps that he has taken in the last year. I am afraid that if we continue down this path, it will embolden him even further.

Q88 Chair: Thank you. Mr Cliff, we hear a lot of criticism from the EU and the



US, but notably not from the UK, that Kurti is an unreliable partner, or that he is not listening or engaging in the process. There seems to be a lot of personal feeling in those descriptions, because when you ask for a meaningful breakdown of what has not been delivered, they struggle to deliver that long list. Can you tell me where the relationship has broken down between the Kosovan Government, the EU and the US?

Ian Cliff: The US has always been rather suspicious of Albin Kurti. There was this idea in the period just after independence that Kurti was really in favour of union with Albania because of one or two things that he said in that direction. There was this whole idea that he was a socialist who didn't want to pursue privatisation. Although things have changed a lot, you are quite right that you do get this message from the Americans a lot of the time. Of course, the Americans were instrumental in heaving him out the first time he was Prime Minister by putting pressure on the LDK to pull the plug on that coalition Government.

With the EU, it is more nuanced, but Albin Kurti would portray himself as a conviction politician. He is sometimes rather literal, which is how we got to this slightly absurd situation where you have four Albanian mayors in the north. However, I think we are also beginning to see some other elements of Albin Kurti's realism, particularly with regard to his latest pronouncement that the constitutional court decision from 2016 on the Decani land dispute, which sounds very obscure but which is very important for the Serbian Orthodox church, should be implemented. He has only done it because he is now able to say, "That is our route into the Council of Europe." But that gives the lie to the argument that you cannot deal with him.

One of the reasons why we have given him a lot of space is that he has really tried to fight corruption and end the state capture by the PDK, largely, which existed before. Curiously, I always found, even when I was in Kosovo, that the Americans and even the Germans did not quite see the way in which the other parties really had captured all those supposedly independent institutions. It is something where we—you ask what we can do and I think we can work on our partners to have a bit more trust in the present Government, while putting pressure on them over issues such as the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities. That is something we have not mentioned so far this afternoon, rather to my surprise.

Q89 **Chair:** Feel free to draw that in. I will move on to the Banjska attacks, because I think that is quite a decisive moment in the last year of increasing tensions. Lord Robertson, you are most certainly a military man—that would be to diminish your experience. We are led to believe by some that a disparate group broke into northern Kosovo and murdered a Kosovan police officer and that it was a lonely group acting of its own volition. Yet the group had access to rather serious and high-level equipment: mortar shells, armoured trucks, grenades and anti-tank mines. Some of those were as new as 2021—it was not old Yugoslav kit—and many had the serial numbers lining up, suggesting they have come as a group. Is that a credible position for some people to follow?



Lord Robertson: No. Dr Hoxhaj has already mentioned the fact that the evidence is pointing in a very clear and certain direction. Not a lot has been done about it until now, but it probably needs to be done. Somebody needs to be held to account for it. Police officers died in the process there. This is not a victimless crime. A lot needs to be done about it. The British forces brought in 600 extra people at that time, so the destabilisation of the country was very considerable.

Q90 **Chair:** Before we move on to that, Dr Hoxhaj, therefore how complicit is it assessed the Serbian Government are in what happened in Banjska?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: The evidence points towards them being quite closely linked to it. The very fact that they have normalised the situation, where after the attack they welcomed them home and called a number of them heroes, shows that they have normalised and that they are complicit. The fact that the state of Serbia has allocated and given €8.5 million for an unspecified arrangement or suspected purchase shows you that it is a handsome pay that they made to a company linked to Milan Radoičić; that is, it is behind it.

The evidence points there, but so far, we have not seen an investigation that has been done. Kosovo has conducted its own investigation and the US, as well as the UK, has believed that is a credible investigation done by the Kosovo authorities. However, we have not had the international communities actually confirming that. We had the Secretary of State, who came to this Committee earlier, actually acknowledge that there are serious problems and issues here that might link them there. A lesson has to be learned from this attack, and we have to call it what it is, because we need to prevent any potential threat; if we let this go unaccounted for, then who knows what might happen this year?

Q91 **Chair:** Forgive me, but we are now six months on from the Banjska attack. Why do you think there is such silence? You might argue, for example, that the Serbian regime are changing some of their behaviours, so it is important to perhaps hold back an investigation in order to see that change manifest; but per the recent statements of the Serbian President that I shared and the extreme dysfunction of the election that he held in December, there does not seem to be any sort of mitigation of the worst excesses of his behaviours, whether at home or abroad, so why is the international community silent?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: That is a really good question. The problem that I see is that Interpol has issued an arrest warrant for the perpetrators behind it, so why are the Serbian authorities not implementing that? The fact is that the international community are not calling it out because they are hoping that, somehow, Vučić will sit down and sign an agreement that they made one year ago, and that, somehow, it will be implemented. Of course, a number of interests across the EU want this before the election, because then it can be sold in their internal election as some sort of success. We saw that last time with the Trump presidency: he sat down with the Prime Minister and President of Kosovo and they used that in the election. This is my hunch as to why they are not calling it out, but it will only make the



problem worse, because if we are allowing this to be unaccounted for, who knows what is going to happen next? Vučić is very openly alluding to another confrontation.

Q92 **Chair:** Mr Cliff, what do you think we should be doing in response?

Ian Cliff: One thing I think we should be doing is asking our friends in the EU what they have done with the Kosovo Government report. As I understand it, the report was handed over to Brussels in January; here we are in the middle of March. What are they doing about it? I have not seen that report, but I presume that we have got it. I think we should be taking a very firm line. Radoičić, who admits he did it, had his passport taken away, but we are not sure that it hasn't been given back to him. He is supposed to be subject to some sort of legal process in Serbia, but it is put off and put off, so I think we should be asking some questions about that.

Q93 **Chair:** Would you be surprised if you were told that the US had done an investigation that has been presented to NATO?

Ian Cliff: Yes, I had not heard that.

Q94 **Chair:** That again has still not been presented to the world in any way, shape or form.

What is the lesson that Serbia will take from the fact that we have had what looks to be a state-sponsored terror attack on a neighbouring country, and there has been no response from the international community—silence—nor any investigations published? What does that say for deterrence in the Western Balkans, an area that, as Lord Robertson said, quickly spills over into others?

Lord Robertson: The lesson is that you do things in an election year. Unfortunately, that is the lesson that they will derive from that. It may be that, after the elections have taken place, people might be more re-energized, but the cynic would say that you do it when there are elections looming and people will put it to the side, hopefully temporarily.

Q95 **Chair:** Dr Hoxhaj, do you agree with that? This is an increasing pattern. Maybe we are overplaying Banjska in this discussion. We have had foreign electoral interference in Kosovan elections, then we had the mayors being imposed, then we had militia attacks on NATO soldiers, who lost their legs and will never walk again, then we had the kidnapping of police officers by Serbian forces, and then we had Banjska. Are we overplaying it? Is this just a pattern of normalised activity that is taking place?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: From what we read in an article, the US has said that it has done an investigation and that the security adviser to the US President has said that they are quite serious and they are going to use that for their negotiation with Serbia. It would be good to have more transparency there.

Q96 **Chair:** That is Jake Sullivan you are talking about?



Dr Andi Hoxhaj: Yes. In this very Committee, we are putting here a trend, and we are explaining not only Vučić's behaviour towards Kosovo but his aggression across the Western Balkans, because it is not only Kosovo. By not calling out some of these patterns, we are emboldening them, we are allowing this to happen in this space and to threaten instability in the region.

The Banjska attack was very visible and we all saw it, but as you alluded to, we have also seen election interference, and widespread disinformation and misinformation that even from the Balkans is having an impact on our own western elections. We have still not called out much of it—for example in the US in 2016. We are entering an election year, and I think we should be quite alert to any disinformation campaigns that might begin in the Western Balkans.

The lesson that we can learn from this is that we have to call it out at an early stage, and not hope that some of these autocrats will eventually become European. They have been around for a very long time and I cannot see them changing their behaviour. Vučić has been in power for more than 10 years; why on earth would he change his behaviour now, when he is quite clearly showing hostility?

Q97 **Chair:** Can I push you on that point? You hear a lot of people say, "Let's not push Vučić too far. He hasn't picked a side," although when the Foreign Secretary appeared before our Committee in January, he did say that Serbia was a proxy state of Russia. Why do people still have this view that Vučić will turn to us, when a lot of his actions seem to be directly opposed? He often laughs in the face of the EU, for example by saying that his hand is broken and he will never be able to sign an agreement, after promising he would do so. He does not fulfil any of the commitments made to the EU.

I struggle to understand this. When I was in Kosovo—I was kindly given the opportunity to travel as a result of the Government of Kosovo extending their hand—it was quite interesting to go to Kosovo Serb areas and meet and talk to Kosovo Serbs. They did not know that Vučić had ever been the Minister for propaganda under Milošević. They did not know about some of the actions he was taking or what he had done. Is this a disinformation issue? Do our ambassadors travel to Serbia and then suddenly believe that they have a personal relationship with Vučić, and that he is not who he appears to be or what his actions suggest?

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: There are two issues here. First, when we talk about the Western Balkans, it is very Belgrade-centric. We view Belgrade as a really important place in the Western Balkans and we want to cosy up because it might cause some instability. We forget that there are five other countries that are as important. Some of them are NATO members and our allies, and we have to build stronger ties.

When it comes to Vučić's behaviour, our links to the ambassadors and so on, you have to understand that autocrats do not operate like we in the west do. They very quickly develop personalised relations. In our system,



we go through the different routes of the system. Some of them cosy up, and some of them start to develop personal ties. That does cloud people's mind.

Misinformation and disinformation are a massive problem in the Western Balkans. The way things are spun is very problematic. That is something that we can perhaps work on by having a BBC Albanian service and strengthening the BBC Serbia service to counter some of the disinformation, try to inform the public and allow conversation to take place.

Q98 Chair: Mr Cliff, interestingly, you said in response to Mr Smith's question that you did not think sanctions were appropriate. When I talk to the EU, for example, they say that the one thing that Vučić wants to protect is that he gets 60% of the EU funds to come for Serbia—there is not an equal distribution across the Balkans countries—and that he seems very focused on the financials. He repeatedly argues, "Let me just have the funding, let me get the economy where it needs to be, and then I can turn to the EU and a more western perspective." Surely that is exactly where we should be targeting action, whether it be as a result of fake or completely broken elections, or something like Banjska.

Ian Cliff: Going back to something I was saying earlier, I do not entirely buy the argument that Vučić has not chosen which side to be on, but I do not think it is a given that he is completely in the pocket of Russia or China and is forever hostile to the EU. He is playing one off against the other. I would not totally rule out the possibility that, if he got a green light, or an amber light, from the EU, he might start to change his behaviour. I do not want to exaggerate that, because I think Vučić is the kind of autocrat who would not fit very comfortably into the EU—although we have already seen one or two EU leaders who leave quite a lot to be desired. Even if there is space possibly to work with Vučić, I do not think we should just be ignoring what happened in Banjska. I do not think that is the way to have traction with someone like Vučić. Rather like the Russians, the Serbs respect strength. They do not respect weakness or appeasement, so I think we should be taking a tough line with him on those things. At the same time, we should not take it as a given that he is simply a proxy of Putin. It is more complicated than that.

Q99 Chair: Lord Robertson, while the current tensions we see between Kosovo and Serbia are the result of activities of an entirely different nature, are there any comparisons or learnings you draw from the build-up to 1999?

Lord Robertson: I would not make that comparison. I think Milošević was a completely different sort of creature to Vučić. Ian Cliff is right—these guys are playing every end that they can. That may be in a Balkan tradition. I do not see any ambition by Serbia to drive the ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo, which was the obvious ambition of Milošević. It seems now to be completely restricted to hobbling Kosovo as an economic entity and keeping the enclave in the north, so I do not think we could recreate the previous situation. We have to put ourselves in a different position as well.



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What Ian has said is right: being tough with Serbia pays off. The people in this part of the world respect strength.

Q100 Chair: Have we shown any? This is the challenge. We talked about green lights, red lights and showing strength. I cannot think of an example in the last four years, while I have been in Parliament, where we have shown strength or given a red light to Serbia.

Lord Robertson: That is what we need to do. That is the message: we need to be strong. We can be flexible, connect and engage— we should especially engage with the opposition in Serbia—but we have to remain absolutely tough.

During the Bosnia conflict, I remember going to see Sir Fitzroy Maclean, one of the great heroes of the war in the Balkans—so much so that Tito gave him an island as a reward at the end of the war. I asked for his advice. The advice was wrong, because he said that if you put 100,000 troops into Bosnia, you will not stop the fighting; you will prevent it for a brief period, but then they will go back to fighting again. In fact, it took 65,000 troops and we did stop it; we created the Dayton agreement after that. His view was that people in that region were inured to violence. I think that was over-pessimistic, and it has been proved so.

As Dr Hoxhaj said, the Western Balkans is not just Kosovo and Serbia, and it is not just Bosnia. Albania is now a full member of NATO, and so is North Macedonia. Slovenia is part of the European Union and very much a mainstream country. The Western Balkans has promise as well as problems. If we know how to handle it well, it can be an area of prosperity. It can actually multiply security rather than being a permanent drain on it.

Q101 Chair: That is a very pertinent point, and exactly why so many of us feel so passionately about the Western Balkans. I should say that Richard Grenell, Trump's former special envoy to the Western Balkans, was due to give evidence to us this afternoon to ensure that we heard the US perspective—a view potentially very different from your own. Unfortunately, he pulled out on Sunday night ahead of the media reporting that was published on Monday on his relationships and interests in Serbia.

Before we conclude, could we hear some final comments from each of the three of you? What should the UK be doing that is tangible, effective and meaningful; and what should our long-term objectives that we want to achieve in the Western Balkans be?

Ian Cliff: Our long-term objective should be to do everything we can to pull these countries towards Euro-Atlantic integration. For the moment, Serbia says that it does not want to join NATO and Kosovo continues to have the problem that there are four non-recognisers in NATO; but that is the direction of travel.

As I think we said earlier, our objective should also be to try and promote prosperity in the region, and as part of that we should be trying to build



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relationships with young people across the ethnic divides. There is nothing very original in that; we were doing it in my time. Some of it has gone back and, sadly, some of the young people we got to work together from the different ethnic sides have ended up coming here—and then you are back to this question of migration.

I do not think we should be stopping migration, but we should be trying to create an environment where young and talented people remain. The people who have left are overwhelmingly the people who have got initiative and get-up-and-go, so there has been a degradation, if you like, of intellectual capital.

Lord Robertson: Getting that younger generation to go back to the Western Balkans would be one of the best objectives that we could achieve because they can contribute to the peace and security as well. As I say, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania are exemplars of what the Western Balkans could be. A little bit more attention shown to the problem areas, and a bit more commitment by this country to them, would pay enormous dividends.

Building prosperity is one the key elements; we need to see what their advantage is. We need to see where it is that they have got an economic advantage and then build on that. Utilising trade and economic assistance, by using the ERBD and the fact that it is in the UK, is one way of doing that. Additionally, using the unique instruments of soft power that we have in the British Council and the BBC World Service would be a major ingredient to helping that whole process of making them mainstream European countries.

Dr Andi Hoxhaj: To add to the comments and recommendations of my colleagues, one of the things we could do more of is help some of the rule of law and law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans that we feel are trusted and that can enforce the rule of law. We could share more data with some of these law enforcement agencies and police, especially to prevent any further attack. In particular, we should do so if we have credible evidence that something along those lines could happen.

Our policy could become a little bit clearer regarding where we stand on the Western Balkans; it is definitely much better now than it was after Brexit. Hosting another Western Balkans summit in the next two years might be a good idea. It would enable us to show our true commitments to the Western Balkans, and it could also help us to rethink our priorities in the region and re-energise our commitment and engagement with that part of Europe.

Chair: Brilliant. Thank you all very much for giving evidence this afternoon, it is very much appreciated. I now bring this session to a close.