



Select Committee on International Relations

Corrected oral evidence

Beyond Brexit: the UK and the Balkans

Wednesday 25 October 2017

10.40 am

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Members present: Lord Howell of Guildford (The Chairman); Lord Balfe; Baroness Coussins; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hilton of Eggardon; Lord Jopling; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 42 - 49

Witness

I: Mr Peter Van Der Auweraert, Western Balkans Sub-Regional Coordinator and Head, Land, Property and Reparations Division, International Organisation for Migration [video link].

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Examination of witness

Mr Peter Van Der Auweraert [video link].

Q42 **The Chairman:** Good morning, Mr Van Der Auweraert. We are extremely grateful to you for being with us. We are the House of Lords International Relations Committee, and we are conducting an inquiry into the situation in the western Balkans, the UK's role in the area, the developments and the dangers in the area and the prospects for the future. Obviously, history hangs over the whole area, and we have to think back and be realistic about the horrors of the past and whether they can be avoided in the future. We are focusing particularly on the area of your expert responsibilities—trafficking, migration, slavery and the other undesirable features which I am afraid have overshadowed the area too much in the past.

Against that background, we will start straight away with some questions. As Chairman, I will put the first question. Are our worries likely to diminish in the future? Is the importance of the western Balkans as a transit route into the EU closing down, or could we go back to the situation of only a couple of years ago where over three-quarters of a million detections of illegal border-crossing were on the cards? How do you see the overall situation, before we get down to some of the details?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: Thank you for asking me to speak to you. It is clear that the general situation is that the numbers have dropped dramatically. We have moved from a situation of a large transit population to a situation of much smaller numbers, many of whom are currently stranded migrants in the western Balkans. We traditionally say that the western Balkans route has closed, which is true, but the door remains open a little. I will explain what I mean by that.

When we look at the figures in Serbia, which is currently the country that has the highest number of stranded migrants—about 3,500 are currently in the country— while at the start of spring, there were about 8,000 people. The reduction from 8,000 to 3,500 is almost entirely due to irregular crossings from Serbia into the EU with smugglers. That is with a small exception: Hungary continues to allow 10 people a day to cross from Serbia into Hungary on a regular basis, where their asylum requests are then processed. It is therefore true that the western Balkans route is almost closed, but human smuggling activity remains prevalent in the region.

When we look at the countries in the western Balkans other than Serbia, we see smaller groups of migrants who are trying to transit from Bosnia Herzegovina through Montenegro and Albania; essentially, smugglers are trying to test out new routes. These numbers are very small. I was in Montenegro last week, where they have gone from about 80 migrants in the country a couple of months ago to 250 stranded in Montenegro today. These are small numbers, but they are a consequence of the closure of the traditional Macedonia-Serbia western Balkans route, and

they are smaller groups of migrants who are trying to test whether they can get into Europe through Montenegro.

Looking forward, a lot continues to hinge on whether the EU-Turkey agreement will hold. The numbers from Turkey into Greece, which was the main route along which people would arrive into the western Balkans, have reduced dramatically. Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen a slight increase; we have about 100 people a day arriving from Turkey and Greece. However, because of the Turkey-EU agreement, they generally stay on the islands and do not make it towards the mainland and into the western Balkans. Our prediction is that as long as the EU-Turkey agreement holds, we will not see a return to the situation in 2015 and 2016 that you described.

The Chairman: What are the outcomes of this change in volume? Does it mean that there are fewer boats coming across the Mediterranean? Are camps building up in areas they can get to? You mentioned some of the islands, or Greece itself. Are alternative tragedies developing as the actual numbers coming through the western Balkans have reduced? What are the consequences of all this?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: First, to talk about the positive consequences, the number of fatalities relating to sea crossings from Turkey to Greece has dropped enormously. As you know, that route was particularly risky, especially when the weather conditions were not good, so that is a pretty positive consequence: the number of people dying along the route from Turkey to Greece has gone down dramatically. In that sense, it is a genuine protection measure for migrants and refugees.

The downside is that the number of people who are staying on some of the Greek islands—I am sure you have seen the reports—is increasing and is straining the reception capacity that is available on the Greek islands. I think it is at least partially related to the slowness of the asylum process in Greece. That the process has to be accelerated to a greater degree so that solutions for people currently stuck on those islands can be found: either refugee status in Greece or a return to Turkey in accordance with the EU-Turkey agreement. The current main adverse burden of the EU-Turkey agreement is this build-up of people on the Greek islands.

When it comes to Turkey itself, the Turkish Government should be commended for having provided protection to so many Syrian refugees and for having taken measures with regard to, for example, access to education for children and access to the labour market for Syrian refugees on the territory of Turkey. The situation of Syrians in Turkey continues to improve. Of course, there are challenges, as there would be for any country that has to deal with a sudden influx of such large numbers of people. I was in Turkey some time ago, and there are towns where, until a few years ago, there were 10,000 inhabitants. Suddenly, now they have 20,000 to 25,000, which obviously puts strains on the schools, the labour market and the social services. That takes time to build up, but overall the situation has improved.

I also have to highlight with regard to the situation of the migrants and refugees that are currently on the Greek mainland - that conditions there have also improved considerably in terms of accommodation and support through cash grants, with the support of the European Union, to the point that we have seen some people—a very small number—trying to get back to Greece from Serbia because they realise that the situation has improved. Also, while the relocation from Greece to other European Union countries may be under the targets that were initially set, it has increased and provides a real solution to those people currently on the mainland in Greece.

- Q43 Lord Hannay of Chiswick:** I would like to switch to something quite different, which is the migration potential of the western Balkan countries themselves, which of course was very prevalent in the 1990s, at a time when there were hostilities in a number of west Balkan countries, and which led to massive outflows into the European Union, some of which have been reversed. Could you say something about the nature of migration currently? I understand that most European Union countries will not accept that you can claim that you are a refugee from one of those countries. Could you also address the potential if the stability of the western Balkans were to come into question again, not necessarily through actual hostilities but through some form of instability?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: You are quite right to highlight the fact that access to the European Union through asylum for western Balkan nationals is essentially closed. As you pointed out, no country accepts people from the western Balkans as refugees any more. There were attempts last year by Montenegro and other countries, where people tried to apply for asylum in Europe, but I think it is now clear in the region that it is not an option anymore.

Secondly, we are seeing a lot of educated young people—I am currently in Sarajevo, and I give the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina—moving to the EU in a regular way, such as through work permits to Germany, as their best future option. That does not have so much to do with political stability in the western Balkans and Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular as it has to do with the lack of economic opportunities for highly-educated young people such as doctors but even also for lesser-educated people who want to work in construction, for example. The brain drain from the western Balkans to the European Union is an important challenge for countries in the western Balkans. As with the rest of Europe, the population is ageing. There may be a scenario whereby western Balkans countries have spent money on people's education and subsequently lose trained people to the European Union through legal channels.

Thirdly, if you look at the situation in the western Balkans as a whole, while you cannot say that there is 100% political stability, there is no real fear that we will go back to the situation of the 1990s, with war and upheaval and people being forced to flee because of violence. It is not a scenario that anyone in the region regards as realistic. So I would not be worried about that part of the issue. In Macedonia, for example, while there was political instability for a certain period of time, there is now

something like a Macedonian spring, whereby through democratic and electoral means a change of Government has led to increased political stability for the moment.

It is very important for the EU, as well as the UK, to continue to engage politically and be a key actor to support the maintenance of that stability in the western Balkans. Of course there are challenges, but we do not foresee in the near future or even the medium term a risk of large refugee flows from the western Balkans to Europe. The key issue is more the brain drain of skilled people trying to get to the European Union to work in a legal way. That does not necessarily pose a challenge for recipient countries, because they get skilled people who can work as nurses and doctors and so on, but it poses a challenge for the western Balkan countries. For example, as an anecdote, if you want a good Bosnian heart surgeon you go not to a hospital in Sarajevo but to one in Berlin, Zurich or Geneva, because that is where they are being employed.

Q44 Lord Grocott: Picking up on that, as you know a key policy objective across the western Balkans is for the countries to join the European Union. I have two questions. Of course, we do not know the likely dates but, should it happen, what impact would it be likely to have on the brain drain that you have described from those countries into the EU? Secondly, what impact, if any, would it be likely to have on the movement of people from Turkey through Greece and into the EU?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: On the first question, it depends, of course, not only on the dates when some of those countries will enter but also on the terms under which they will enter, especially with regard to the free movement of people, whether it would be immediate or staggered. That is something that we cannot prejudge. However, if there were free movement of people, as with the Baltic states, Poland and Bulgaria—you in the UK are familiar with how many young and older people leave those countries to find work in the EU—I can only see an accelerated trend of a brain drain from the western Balkans into the European Union, were all these countries to join together and free movement of people would become immediately available. It highlights the need for the western Balkan countries to invest heavily not just in education but also in economic development and good governance to allow genuine opportunities for young people to emerge. There is, for example, the whole issue of how business-friendly those countries are in terms of start-ups and development of employment opportunities for lesser-skilled people. There are a lot of areas that western Balkan countries need to take a close look at, especially in the run-up to EU accession, to avoid the scenario whereby qualified and dynamic people leave.

As for flows from Turkey into the western Balkans, it is difficult to prejudge, especially as I do not think that there is a scenario in which western Balkan countries will join in the next two or three years. So we are talking longer-term predictions. The main question is what will happen in Iraq and Syria. If there is peace and stability there, that is one scenario; if there is continued instability in Syria and Iraq, whether it is an ongoing war or high levels of terrorism and insecurity, all those things

will have an impact on whether people will come from Turkey to Greece to go to the western Balkans.

I have to say, though, that even if the western Balkans were to join tomorrow, they are not considered to be very attractive destination countries by those leaving Iraq or Syria. I will give you an anecdote. When I was co-ordinating our response to the migration crisis, I spoke to a lot of Syrian doctors and engineers who were trying to reach Germany. I asked why they did not stay in Serbia, where they need doctors because a lot of Serbian doctors are working in Germany. Their answer was very clear; they said that they knew that, but the problem was that salaries in the western Balkans were so much lower than in Germany or Sweden, or even Syria, that there was no incentive for people to go there. So I doubt that the western Balkans per se are an attractive destination country for refugees, if there are still refugees at that time.

- Q45 **Lord Jopling:** You told us earlier that there were 3,500 stranded migrants in Serbia and 250 in Montenegro. For the record, could you just remind us which countries in the western Balkans have created the stranded situation? What is the attitude of Governments who have closed their borders to those stranded people? A year or two ago I was on the western border between Serbia and Croatia at a hotel that had been taken over for stranded people. Could you tell us whether, having closed their borders, presumably to act as a deterrent to more migrants coming in, they turn a blind eye to illegals? The place I went to in Serbia was adjacent to a very large overnight lorry park, which seemed like an invitation for them to jump on to lorries and cross into Croatia. What is the attitude of countries that have closed their borders to those stranded migrants, and how long they tend to stay there? There are 3,500 in Serbia, for instance. Are they being turned over, and new people coming and others going illegally? Could you enlarge on the position of stranded people?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: Regarding the question of the closure of the border, I think all countries have stepped up their border controls. Also, with the support of the European Union, there is what is called the special measures programme in Serbia and Macedonia, where EU border guards are deployed to support the Macedonian and Serbian border guards to monitor the borders. People get stranded in Serbia mostly because of the border closure or the increased border controls on the Croatian side, the Bulgarian side and, recently, on the Romanian side.

On the Governments' attitudes to the stranded migrants and how long they have been there, how long people have been in Serbia, to focus on that country, varies a lot. At the moment, few new people enter Serbia, also because of the increased border controls, specifically between Bulgaria and Serbia; we used to have people crossing between Bulgaria and Serbia, but that has reduced significantly. Most of the people who are currently in Serbia have been in the western Balkans for a while, and it is more of the fallout from the 2015 to 2016 large streams that we were seeing at the time.

Governments' attitudes across the western Balkans and specifically in Serbia have been to increase their migrant accommodation capacity. The Serbian Government in particular has to be commended for increasing capacity and for dealing with stranded migrants with full respect for their basic human rights and for taking a number of helpful measures. For example, despite the fact that they have irregular status, migrant children are increasingly allowed access to Serbian schools, so we are seeing the Government trying to deal with and change their systems from short-term humanitarian assistance to humanitarian assistance that is more adapted to a protracted migration situation.

Having said that, the challenges for Serbia and Montenegro, for example, of what to do with the 3,500 people and 250 people respectively are quite high. One challenge, as I explained earlier, is that people continue to move forward with smugglers and try to cross the borders irregularly. Smugglers are constantly adapting their tactics and strategies to deal with the increased border controls. For example, they have reduced the size of the groups with which they try to cross the border into Croatia. Where before they would have put 20 people together to cross, now they put three or four people together because they are more difficult to detect. Some of those people will continue to move forward. The Serbian Government are providing everyone who wants it with official accommodation, but we are seeing some people, for example, staying close to the border with Croatia because smugglers encourage them to do so, so that they can more easily take an opportunity that arises to cross irregularly.

With regards to the solutions beyond getting people to move forward on a regular basis, it is difficult. For example, there is a considerable number of Afghani migrants/refugees in Serbia, very few of whom, if any, have applied for asylum in Serbia and have no intention at all of doing so. Serbia cannot forcibly return those people to Afghanistan or return the Pakistanis to Pakistan because Serbia has no readmission agreements with those countries and does not have the political clout to put pressure on those countries to take their nationals back. I am sure you are familiar with the difficulties that even EU countries such as Germany have in getting countries of origin to accept their nationals back. It is very difficult.

The IOM is offering assisted voluntary return, which means that we can assist people to go back home voluntarily if they want to do so. We have sufficient funding to do so, but given that those migrants have spent a lot of money to get where they are, and as long as they see some friends or acquaintances managing to get into the EU irregularly, they do not have an incentive to go back at the moment.

We are, however, seeing individuals and families who are exhausted who say, "That's enough. We're going back home". Also, that sometimes poses a challenge in getting their documents. For example, the Afghan embassy in Bulgaria, which covers the western Balkans, has a lack of capacity to issue passports, so people have to wait quite a long time to

go back, even people who want to go back to Afghanistan, because they do not have the documents.

So finding a sustainable solution is complex. In Montenegro, for example, of about 250 people there are about 150 Algerian nationals, or people who are claiming to be Algerian nationals. Even if those people want to go back voluntarily, the Algerian Government have imposed a rule that their families back home have to go to the capital of Algeria to declare that they are indeed family members. Very few people do that, so even the people who want to do it voluntarily find it difficult to get access to documents for Algeria. Many of them do not want to go back because they want to stay in Montenegro to try to get into Europe.

We have seen cases of people having tried 14, 15 or 16 times to cross an EU border irregularly. The border guards know them by name by now, but they keep trying to get into the EU. Of course, the smugglers encourage them to do so, because each time they try they have to pay the smugglers money.

Lord Wood of Anfield: I have a very quick question about the brain drain and a specific question about Bosnia. Obviously Bosnian Croats are allowed to get Croatian passports and have immediate access to the EU. Do you have any statistics on the number of Bosnian Croats who have taken that up, particularly young people, and how severe a problem it is?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: I have statistics, but unfortunately I do not have them in front of me. I can certainly share them with you by email. I emphasise that it is a significant issue. When you drive through some of the areas in Bosnia where there are a lot of people of Croat origin you see whole villages that are empty or that have people who are 70 or 75 years-old and everybody else has gone. It is clearly a significant number.

Lord Wood of Anfield: Great. Thank you.

The Chairman: Before we leave this general question, you have painted a slightly improving picture. This Committee was told in an earlier inquiry by a consultant that there are, south of the Sahara, up to 60 million people who are dissatisfied with the situation and thinking of moving north into Europe. Do you regard the situation now as a permanent improvement, with the prospect of much-reduced traffic across the Mediterranean, or just as an intermission before very much bigger pressures suddenly mount on you and many others who are trying to manage these situations in the Mediterranean area?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: Before I answer that question, on the earlier question of the stranded migrants, one issue of concern that I should have highlighted is that we are seeing among the stranded migrants increased vulnerabilities such as mental health issues and vulnerability to trafficking. Certainly a country such as Serbia should receive more support for its mental health institutions, which are already stretched with regard to the local population, so that it can provide the necessary care. We have a UK-funded project in Serbia being implemented with the

Government on further improved protection and further improved mental health and other services to the migrants. That is one point.

On your last question, there is an important point to highlight, which is that the eastern Mediterranean route, which goes to Libya and Egypt to a certain degree and into Italy, is entirely separate from the western Balkans route and the central Mediterranean. We have so far seen no spill-over from that route into the western Balkans. So the western Balkans, when it comes to the situation that you described in certain parts of Africa, are not immediately concerned by that.

Of course, there is clearly a challenging situation at the borders of Europe in terms of a large young population and limited economic opportunities. The EU is doing the right thing by focusing on improving the situation at countries of origin and trying to address the main reasons why people are trying to emigrate from those countries. Investment needs to continue, because otherwise, obviously, these migration pressures will continue to rise. Having said that, we have seen an overall improvement as a result of the strengthening of border controls, and we are seeing a reduced number of people arriving from Libya into Italy. The investment in Libya to improve migrant reception capacity there is critical, and the IOM and UNHCR have been working on that with the EU and the different Libyan authorities to improve that. While improving, that situation remains problematic from a humanitarian and human rights point of view. We will need to continue to invest in those source countries and try to improve or help local Governments and local actors to improve the conditions there, otherwise pressures will remain. I do not think that we need to be alarmed about it, but we need to keep it in mind.

I have one final point to make on that. While increased control on irregular migration is important, we need to make sure that it does not come at the expense of access to asylum for people who really need it, as opposed to asylum as the sole route for people to get into Europe even if they do not fall under the 1951 Refugee Convention. We need to keep space for people who genuinely require international protection.

Finally, and I know that politically this is a very difficult issue, increasing legal avenues for migration into the EU, such as labour migration for sectors and areas where Europe needs it, is also a necessary way of reducing the pressures of irregular migration - the trade-off is stronger controls on irregular migration—stricter action against people who try to come to Europe or who are in Europe irregularly and do not qualify for refugee status and increased avenues for legal migration. So we need to look at areas where the European Union as a whole, and certain countries specifically, need more migration from a social and economic perspective, although I know it is easy for me, as an international civil servant, to say that, but more difficult for politicians to advocate this in the current political climate.

The Chairman: Baroness Coussins has just visited Macedonia and Kosovo and would like to ask a question.

Q46 Baroness Coussins: I want to switch from migration to people trafficking. Both, of course, are linked in some ways, but in other ways they are separate or different problems. Some of us visited Kosovo and Macedonia recently as part of this inquiry, and we met a number of NGOs that are working to identify and support victims of people trafficking and attempting to work with the authorities to clamp down on the perpetrators. They told us that both these countries are now transit corridors as well as destinations, but that the problem was quite significant. Obviously, women and children are the main victims. In Macedonia we heard that Roma children were particularly at risk and that large numbers of young girls are being trafficked into prostitution. What can you tell us about the trends and the changing trends in trafficking across the region?

We also heard that there is an overlap between those trafficking people and those trafficking drugs and arms. However, one of the problems the NGOs face is either an ignorance of the problem among judicial and political institutions or a reluctance among them to be willing or able to identify it, to identify traffickers and to recognise the difference between migration and trafficking. Could you describe what you see as the trends and, in so far as it is possible, the numbers in the main destination countries, and whether the UK figures in that? We heard a lot of requests from the NGOs for help from the UK with training as well for the judiciary and other law enforcement bodies. What are your thoughts on what help the UK might offer in this respect?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: We can confirm everything that you have just described. Unfortunately, trafficking in the western Balkans has remained the issue that it was before the migration crisis. While the migration crisis has had some impact, the main trends are what they were before. What you described with regard to transit and destination countries is correct. Kosovo may be more of a destination country than a transit country, but Macedonia is definitely also a transit country.

You rightly highlight the plight of Roma children in particular. The specific issue of forcing small children into begging has recently slipped a bit off the radar screen but remains a big issue. It is a big issue also in Macedonia. I am sure that when you drove around Skopje you could see it with your own eyes. You do not have to do any investigations—you just drive around and see kids begging on the streets.

Criminal gangs operate across the western Balkans, where kids are moved from one place to another to engage in begging or the sex industry, and often the same gangs send those people also into the EU.

As you rightly pointed out, sex trafficking also continues to be a big issue. It is a sub-regional or western Balkan issue and it is also a national issue—a rural-urban issue. Often with promises of marriage, kids, or rather young women from villages are lured to the cities, where they then are forced into the sex industry in their own country. That is very important. It is also an internal issue; it does not just have a sub-regional or regional component to it.

More investment is needed to work closer with the Roma communities, with parents and of course with the kids, to raise awareness and to work on cultural change. The saddest cases, which I am sure you have heard of, are of kids who have been trafficked by their own parents. It is just an anecdote, but we are currently working on the case of a Roma girl who was apprehended by the authorities in Hungary, and who had been trafficked by her own family from Bosnia-Herzegovina into Europe and had been in the sex industry in Hungary. What is the solution for a girl like that? You bring her to Bosnia-Herzegovina and then what? The risk is that you expose her to the same family that was the origin of the trafficking. So more work with poor Roma communities, without stigmatising them, is critical.

When it comes to the authorities, what you describe is correct. Generally speaking, the legal frameworks are there. Implementation remains the issue. There are a few different issues. The first, where certainly more support could be provided by the UK and others, is the complexity of investigations that involve criminal gangs who operate in multiple countries. That requires joint investigative teams, both within the western Balkans and between EU countries concerned and the western Balkans. More support for that is required. We had a big event a couple of weeks ago here in Bosnia-Herzegovina with all the prosecutors and it was made clear they require support to do this type of complex, multinational investigations.

When it comes to the criminal justice systems, it is true that even if there are successful prosecutions, they have a tendency to shy away from prosecuting for trafficking rather than for example prostitution, even though they could do so legally. The rules of evidence are easier for the crime of prostitution than they are for the crime of trafficking. So we are seeing across the region—this is another area where more investment is needed—the need for more capacity building and more awareness raising among the prosecution services and the judiciary on how to bring out this element of trafficking in the criminal prosecutions and the subsequent criminal judgments that are being produced.

There have been cases in Macedonia and Kosovo in which government officials and police have been prosecuted for complicity in human trafficking, having been bribed to facilitate the work of those criminal gangs. So investment in supporting this type of investigation against corrupt government officials and providing support for good governance programmes continues to be a priority that affects other areas of life in the western Balkans as well as trafficking.

Finally, there should be more support for institutions and NGOs working with victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors. Institutions need to improve their capacity and the conditions for dealing with kids like the Roma girl who I mentioned earlier. They need to have more capacity and better measures in place to provide a genuine path to a better life for those kids and provide them with genuine protection, sometimes even from their own parents.

For me, those are the key areas of engagement in improving the situation in the region. I cannot emphasise enough that the more support the UK can give for training and development and improving standard operating procedures that is targeted on the whole of the western Balkans, and the more we can harmonise that support not just for Macedonia and Kosovo but for the whole region the better it will be, because the circumstances are quite similar. The more we can further improve collaboration and alignment across the region through capacity building, the better.

There is one other area: improving information-sharing within the western Balkans but also between the western Balkans and the EU with regard to victims. When a Serbian girl, to use one example, is returned from Germany to Serbia, it is important that Serbia has access to information about what that girl suffered in Germany and what type of support she received there, so there can be continuity of care from Germany to Serbia. Then there is the exchange of information between European police authorities and prosecuting authorities in the Western Balkans. That is another area in which the UK and others could provide useful support.

Q47 Lord Grocott: You have talked quite extensively about support and help to deal with these issues in the western Balkans. We are talking about several different countries in the western Balkans and about several different kinds of problems that interrelate, whether it is trafficking, prostitution or modern slavery. What we are focusing on to a degree is what the UK might do to assist in combatting these evils. Can you give us any more focused recommendations as to which country is the most vulnerable, where the problems are the largest and which of the numerous areas of activity we should prioritise in tackling these problems?

Peter Van Der Auweraert: As you point out, this is a complex issue, and there is no easy or straightforward answer. Some of the challenges that I have outlined are across the western Balkans. If you want to focus on counter-trafficking, it is useful to work at a sub-regional level, and the authorities in the Balkans are willing to collaborate. So you can see interesting and problematic areas in which you can work across the region.

When you talk about supporting the western Balkans in dealing with stranded migrants in the region, there are two things to consider. First, the focus country-wise needs to be primarily on Serbia, because it is dealing with the largest case load. Supporting Serbia could also be done at the political level, by the UK or the EU, through assisting with the return of people to their countries of origin. To the extent to which the Serbian Government would be looking to receive that support, the UK and the EU could provide political support to negotiate with Pakistan and Algeria a system whereby they can return those people.

As for support to the authorities, ongoing support is needed to further improve the access to social services of migrants and supporting Serbian national institutions, such as on access to education. It is in the interests

of the European Union, because the more people have access to services in Serbia the less likely they are to choose the irregular routes to get into the EU. It is only fair that if Serbia is bearing the brunt of the closure of borders by EU countries, those countries would support it on issues related to assistance to the stranded migrants currently there with a focus on mental health issues and access to education, as well as on how to integrate those people into the labour market if some of them would eventually be allowed to stay.

A third area that I would prioritise, where we need to help, is how you improve support and protection for unaccompanied minors caught in these trafficking and irregular migration routes. Support and exchange of best practice between those countries and western Balkans countries could be very useful.

Another point is on a smaller problem. Two countries that require support with improving and increasing their migrant accommodation capacity are Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. The numbers there are small, but the capacity to accommodate migrants while they are in those countries is relatively limited. As I mentioned earlier, in Montenegro there is capacity for 80 or 90 migrants. Building up contingency capacity for 200 or 250 migrants in Montenegro would be useful, and if the numbers went up those countries might be able to accommodate more migrants. That, again, is not to be alarmist but to be better prepared. The model to follow is Macedonia's, which has increased its accommodation capacity for migrants with the assistance of the EU. Those are another two countries for which we should prioritise assistance.

Finally, across the border, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina and also Montenegro, further additional support to improving the capacity of border management authorities, including with equipment, would be welcome. I will give an example. I was at the border between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and spent the day with the border guards to see how they check trucks for irregular migrants. They do not even have scanners to detect body heat. Border guards are literally climbing on top of trucks, inside them and under them to verify the presence of irregular migrants. So support is required to provide technical equipment and training for that equipment for border guards in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Finally, it is important to ensure that support is co-ordinated. The EU is an important actor, and the US is still an important actor, in this region, so any support would need to be co-ordinated, obviously with the national Governments but also with other donors active here.

Q48 Lord Grocott: I have a specific question about modern slavery, which is a big issue for our own foreign policy. Can you give us a picture of its extent in the countries of the western Balkans? It is difficult to identify, as we know, but I am thinking in particular of the willingness, capacity and capability of Governments to deal with it.

Peter Van Der Auweraert: First, I know that the UK has passed the Modern Slavery Act. That concept per se is not often used in the western

Balkans, but the crimes covered there are covered also here under the legislation.

I have mentioned the issue of forced begging, which requires a lot more attention and resources and building awareness for families and parents in particular. A cultural change is required in some communities, as well as improving the capability of authorities to investigate, prosecute and provide assistance. That is very important to highlight. Forced labour is less of an issue in the western Balkans, as far as I know, beyond forced work in the sex industry, which, as I mentioned, remains a big issue.

More support is definitely required for identification and prosecution. The groups involved in this area are also involved in drugs and trafficking arms, and from the start of the 2015-2016 migration they immediately diversified into human smuggling. We hear from migrants and police officers that groups that used to specialise in smuggling drugs and weapons during the migration crisis have added a branch to their "business" and got involved in human smuggling, using the same routes, people and techniques that they used before. These are not amateurs; these are well-organised groups, and more collaboration between the EU and the UK and the western Balkan authorities is required to fight them. I do not know whether that answers your question or whether you have more specific questions on the issue of modern slavery.

The Chairman: Mr Van Der Auweraert, thank you. Lord Jopling, did you feel that the issue of outside help was covered adequately, or did you want to put it again?

Q49 **Lord Jopling:** Nearly all my question has been covered. You put a particular accent on the need and the problems, but how would you assess how the European Union and the UK have responded? We would enjoy hearing about that. We are told that the UK Government has provided £17 million in support over the last two years. You have not yet covered that aspect.

Peter Van Der Auweraert: I am glad that you have brought that up. There is always a danger with these sorts of questions that you bring up only negative things. It has to be said, and we do not repeat this often enough, that the EU and the UK have done a lot to support the western Balkan countries, Macedonia and Serbia in particular but also the other countries, in dealing with the migration crisis there. Funding has been at good levels. Overall, the European Union and the UK may have been slow to start that support—in all the humanitarian crises there is always a time lag between the crisis emerging and the support coming along—but the support has been there at a technical, political and financial level. I hope that it will continue for a certain time. It will be a different type of support, but it would be a mistake to let down our guard and not continue to support those countries in building systems to be better prepared if or when there is another migration crisis.

I entirely agree that the UK in particular—and I am not just saying that because I am talking to the House of Lords in the UK—has done very

innovative work in supporting Serbia through IOM, for example. It is an area that is not so easy, supporting the protection of irregular migrants and looking at improving access to social services. The UK support has been very much appreciated by the Governments in the region. It is a good point to bring up, because we need to underline that the Governments here have benefited from generous support from the EU and the UK, despite the fact that those countries are also struggling with responding internally to the challenges that they faced during the migration crisis. So thank you for bringing that up.

The Chairman: Mr Van Der Auweraert, we have taken an hour of your time, and you have answered our questions very fully and helpfully indeed. We are very grateful to you. There are still many challenges ahead, but you have painted a not entirely pessimistic picture. There are some good developments and hopes for the future. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and wisdom with us—we are most grateful to you.