



The Rt Hon the Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton
Secretary of State
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

25 January 2024

Dear David,

House of Lords inquiry into the UK and the Western Balkans

I am writing to you on behalf of the International Relations and Defence Committee of the House of Lords to set out our key findings following our short inquiry into the Western Balkans. We are publishing this long letter in lieu of a report.

We have been taking oral evidence since October 2023 on the UK's role in promoting prosperity, security, and stability in the Western Balkans. Our short inquiry is a follow-up to a previous report, *The UK and the future of the Western Balkans*, which found the region to be of significant national interest to the UK. In our view, this very much continues to be the case and the Committee welcomes your recent visit to Kosovo on 4 January, during which you underlined the UK's continued support to the region.

Since the publication of the 2018 report, there have been key developments which have impacted the UK's relationship with the region. Following our departure from the EU, the UK is now able to fashion an independent approach to the region while continuing to work with our European partners. We must do this in a European security context that has been reshaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has significant consequences for the countries of the Western Balkans. We are particularly concerned about the scale and nature of Russia's disinformation campaign in the region. Additionally, tensions within the region have recently escalated. There have been violent clashes in northern Kosovo and protests have been a common occurrence in Belgrade. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik (President of the entity Republika Srpska) has increased his use of secessionist rhetoric, putting at risk the hard-won inter-ethnic peace and cessation of hostilities achieved through the Dayton Agreement.

Witnesses were also concerned that the region was regressing in areas such as combatting corruption, embedding the rule of law, ensuring freedom of expression and the press, and safeguarding the rights of returnees.

With these developments in mind, the Committee believes that the UK Government should review its approach to the region. The Committee makes the following seven recommendations to the UK Government:



1. **Continue to press the leaderships of Serbia and Kosovo to implement the commitments set out in the Brussels and Ohrid agreements**, which they have verbally agreed to. This includes Serbia accepting Kosovo's accession to international and European institutions, and the establishment in Kosovo of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. It is vital that the UK, with its allies in the EU and the Quint (the US, UK, France, Germany and Italy), maintain co-ordinated and balanced diplomatic pressure to encourage both sides to normalise relations.
2. **Work closely with the EU and the Quint to make clear that secessionist rhetoric and actions by the entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina are unacceptable.** The UK should also continue to give strong support to the work of the High Representative.
3. **Re-evaluate the possibility of re-joining Operation Althea, the EU-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.** Re-joining Operation Althea would signal the UK Government's commitment to security and stability in the region.
4. **Provide funding for the creation of a BBC Albanian Service** equivalent to the BBC Serbian provision, which would help to counter the spread of disinformation in the region. The FCDO is already delivering successful programmes on supporting independent media in the region and believe that a BBC Albanian Service would complement this work.
5. **Employ longer-term funding instruments** for development programmes in the region. This would help ensure predictability for those delivering programmes, and help them plan for the longer term.
6. **Promote economic growth and combat corruption.** The UK Government should deepen its economic ties with the region to promote long-term growth, and complement the EU's efforts to stabilise the region and integrate it with Euro-Atlantic institutions. It should co-ordinate sanctions and anti-corruption programmes with its international partners to drive down kleptocracy.
7. **Continue its participation in the Quint** so that the UK can maintain its influence in the region, and co-ordinate and collaborate with its EU partners and the US on development, security, reform, and democratisation.

Our analysis of the evidence we received, on which these recommendations are based, can be found in Annex A to this letter. As this was a short inquiry, we focused on developments in Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—and there were policy areas such as trade and migration which we were only able to touch on in passing.



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We are very grateful to all those who contributed to this inquiry, including Lord Peach, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the region, and Leo Docherty MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Europe). A full list of witnesses to this inquiry can be found in Annex B.

We look forward to receiving a response to this letter ahead of your appearance before the Committee, expected before the Easter recess.

I am copying this letter to the Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Defence, and James Ward, Parliamentary Clerk at the Ministry of Defence.

Yours ever

Henry

The Rt Hon the Lord Ashton of Hyde

Chair of the International Relations and Defence Committee



ANNEX A

Security and military engagement

1. Since the publication of the Committee's 2018 report, *The UK and the future of the Western Balkans*, the security situation has deteriorated in several parts of the Western Balkans. We are particularly concerned by serious incidents of violence in Kosovo and a rise in tensions between Belgrade and Pristina. In the past year, there have been two instances of violent clashes in Kosovo involving heavily armed Serb insurgents, the Kosovo police, and the NATO peacekeeping mission (KFOR). In May 2023, 93 members of the KFOR mission were injured, some severely, in clashes with Serb protesters. In September, in an even more serious incident, paramilitaries armed with heavy weapons in armoured personnel carriers attacked Kosovo police in the town of Banjska, killing one police officer and injuring two others. These unprecedented events represent a worrying escalation in tensions and further complicate long-running efforts to normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia.
2. Several witnesses to our inquiry emphasised the important role that the UK plays as a security partner to Western Balkan countries. This was clearly illustrated by the UK's rapid response to the recent security crisis. The UK was the first country to deploy additional troops to Kosovo following NATO's decision to reinforce KFOR in October last year. We agree with Lord Peach, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to the Western Balkans, who told us that "we should be proud of how the UK Armed Forces responded—at readiness, at speed and with the right capability".¹
3. The decision to reinforce KFOR marks a regrettable but necessary reversal of the gradual drawdown of the peacekeeping mission over many years. That drawdown had reflected the improved security environment and the gradual transfer of peacekeeping responsibilities to the Kosovo authorities.
4. Lord Peach noted that the reinforcement, in which the UK has made a significant contribution, was having the desired deterrent effect.²
5. We asked the Minister for Europe and Lord Peach whether they were confident that KFOR now had enough troops to manage the current security situation, and for how long they anticipated these reinforcements would be required. Lord Peach told us that it was for the SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) and the NATO command chain in Joint Force Command Naples to determine both the numbers and the ongoing troop requirement.

¹ Q 44 (Lord Peach). *Q refers to question numbers in the published transcripts – see Annex A.*

² *Ibid.*



6. **Given that the UK is likely to continue to play a prominent role in KFOR's reassurance and deterrence mission, the UK Government will have formed its own view on the security situation in Kosovo and how long reserve deployments are likely to be required. While we understand the need for operational discretion, we request that the UK Government provide further details on its assessment of the current security situation and the ongoing need for a UK contribution to an enhanced KFOR presence in Kosovo.**
7. The unprecedented and severe violence in Kosovo in 2023 underlines the importance of the UK's continued commitment to regional stability and the EU-led peace negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. In this context, we welcome the UK Government's decision to appoint Lord Peach as Special Envoy to the Western Balkans as part of the UK's ongoing security and diplomatic commitment to the region. We welcome the Foreign Secretary's visit to Kosovo at the start of this month when he underlined the UK's commitment to the country and stability in the broader region.
8. External parties have a vital part to play in maintaining pressure on both Serbia and Kosovo to implement the commitments set out in the 2013 Brussels agreement and 2023 Ohrid agreement, to which both parties have verbally agreed.³
9. **While maintaining our strong support for Kosovo's sovereignty and independence, the UK should continue to push the Kosovo authorities to follow through on commitments to establish the association of Serb-majority municipalities, which would give Kosovo Serbs a degree of autonomy.** As Professor Jasna Dragovic-Soso noted in evidence to us, this would be an important step "to alleviate the fears and anxieties of the Kosovo Serbs and get them on board with any agreement".⁴
10. At the same time, the UK Government should continue to push back robustly against the inflammatory rhetoric of President Vučić of Serbia. The UK and its partners should continue to make clear to President Vučić that his administration's refusal to accept Kosovo's accession to international and European institutions, such as the Council of Europe, is in direct contravention of the agreements reached in Brussels and Ohrid.

³ Q 11 (Prof Dragović-Soso) and Q 31 (Baroness Ashton of Upholland). The 'First Agreement of Principles Governing Normalisation of Relations', known as the Brussels Agreement, was signed by Serbia and Kosovo in Brussels on 19 April 2013. As part of this agreement, Kosovo undertook to establish an "Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities" in Kosovo. The Association is intended to provide Kosovo Serbs with greater local autonomy, with powers over economic development, education, health, urban and rural planning. On 27 February 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti discussed the EU draft of the 'Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia' at a meeting in Brussels. This Agreement, also known as the Ohrid Agreement, is designed to normalise diplomatic relations between Kosovo and Serbia. On 18 March 2023, Vučić and Kurti met in Ohrid, North Macedonia, and verbally agreed to the terms of the Agreement.

⁴ Q 11 (Prof Dragović-Soso)



11. Our short inquiry also examined risks to stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in particular the implications of the secessionist rhetoric and actions of Milorad Dodik, the President of the entity of Republika Srpska. While recent tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have not involved serious violence of the kind that has taken place in Kosovo, Professor James Ker-Lindsay of the London School of Economics told us that Dodik's actions were "highly destabilising".⁵
12. Mr Dodik has introduced laws that undermine state-level institutions and in so doing has openly challenged the legitimacy of the international community's High Representative. Leo Docherty MP, Minister for Europe, told us that Mr Dodik's secessionist efforts were "extremely worrying".⁶ Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova of University College London told us that, "it is extremely dangerous, and steps have finally been taken for the legal secession of Republika Srpska. Laws have been passed that try, in essence, to return Republika Srpska to what some call 'original Dayton', which is the very stripped, state-level set of institutions with more powerful entity powers".⁷ This includes the adoption of a law by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska on 27 June 2023 to disapply decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On 1 July 2023, Christian Schmidt, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, used his powers to prevent the entry into force of this law, which "seriously undermines the civilian implementation of the General Framework Agreement for Peace [the Dayton Peace Agreement]".⁸
13. We agree with Professor Ker-Lindsay that the international community must send a strong signal that Dodik's secessionist actions will not be allowed to succeed.⁹ Dr Barton Hronesova told us that: "Dodik is quite clearly trying to stoke inter-ethnic, or intercommunity, tensions in Bosnia [...] we need to find ways to try to communicate, certainly to the Bosniak community, that this will not be allowed to succeed and that they should not rise to obviously provocative statements on his part, which are deliberately designed to create tensions".¹⁰
- 14. It is important that the UK continues to work closely with its allies in the EU and the Quint to make clear that Dodik's actions are unacceptable and give clear support to the work of the High Representative.**
15. We note that the threats to Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order have wider implications for regional stability. Ian Cliff, former UK Ambassador to Kosovo and

⁵ Q 13 (Prof Ker-Lindsay)

⁶ Q 48 (Leo Docherty MP)

⁷ Q 11 (Dr Barton Hronesova)

⁸ Office of the High Representative, 'Decision Preventing the Entry into Force of the Law on Non-application of Decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina' (1 July 2023): <https://www.ohr.int/decision-preventing-the-entry-into-force-of-the-law-on-non-application-%D0%BEf-decisions-of-the-constitutional-court-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina/> [accessed 16 January 2024]

⁹ Q 13 (Prof Ker-Lindsay)

¹⁰ Q 13 (Dr Barton Hronesova)



Bosnia and Herzegovina, told us that the leadership in Kosovo has resisted the creation of an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities because they fear it would create an entity akin to Republika Srpska that would challenge the authority of the central state.¹¹

16. From the perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina, progress on the Kosovo-Serbia normalisation process would send a strong signal that secessionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina has no prospect of success.
17. **The challenges facing Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are interlinked and need to be addressed in tandem by the international community.**
18. The EU Force Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR), also known as Operation Althea, is responsible for overseeing the military implementation of the Dayton Agreement. It was established under UN Mandate as the international peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking over from the NATO-led peacekeeping force. Its UN mandate means it can intervene without prior permission from the Bosnia and Herzegovina government.
19. Operation Althea is the only EU-led mission that operates on the basis of the “Berlin Plus” arrangements, which enable co-ordination and resource sharing between the EU and NATO. They allow the EU to make use of NATO staff, communications and support for operations, with NATO carrying out the operational command. We regard it as important that NATO and the EU keep under constant assessment the possibility of a more robust force to protect Dayton observance.
20. The UK helped to establish Operation Althea and prior to its withdrawal in late 2020 it was a leading contributor to the mission. The UK ended its participation in Operation Althea in December 2020 following its withdrawal from the European Union. This decision was a policy choice, as the mission is open to third-country participation.
21. Witnesses noted that the UK has played a positive role as a provider of security across the region and several expressed surprise at the UK Government’s decision to disengage from Operation Althea. Mr Cliff noted that our departure “has diminished our role a bit in Bosnia and Herzegovina”.¹²
22. The UK Government has emphasised that it regards Operation Althea as critical to the security of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region, and has led international efforts to secure the renewal of EUFOR’s UNSC mandate. In a letter to Alicia Kearns MP, the Chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, in July 2023, the then Foreign Secretary James Cleverly stated that “EUFOR, as the only mission with a

¹¹ Q 1 (Ian Cliff)

¹² Q 6 (Ian Cliff)



UN Mandate to operate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, continues to play a vital role in contributing to a safe and secure environment”.¹³

23. Former French Minister for European Affairs and current MEP, Nathalie Loiseau, has suggested in evidence to the House of Lords European Affairs Committee that the EU would be open to UK participation in the mission:

“There are many things on which we can do more together, such as CSDP [Common Security and Defence Policy] missions, even without building something complex [...] For no obvious reason, the UK withdrew from EU Althea. We all know that, right now, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is very tense and that, if something happens, it will have consequences for the whole of Europe. It is a pity that you no longer participate in EU Althea. You were replaced by Turkey, which has different priorities in terms of the way in which it looks at the situation”.¹⁴

24. We also heard from Christian Schmidt, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, that he would welcome the UK’s renewed participation in Operation Althea. He said that “on defence—again, this is my personal reflection—I would say that the possibility of implementing the Dayton achievements needs and depends on a reasonable and accepted EUFOR Althea mission [...] the United Kingdom, [as] one of the key players and most experienced militaries in Europe, should think about contributing”.¹⁵

25. Leo Docherty MP told us that the UK supports the EUFOR mission with resources and personnel, but the main focus of the UK’s security contribution in the region is KFOR. He noted that “we have to be realistic about resource constraints, especially when it comes to reserve obligations”.¹⁶

26. While we appreciate the wide range of demands on the UK Armed Forces, resource constraints did not prevent the UK from taking a leading role in Operation Althea while it was still an EU member. The UK’s decision not to participate, at a time of increased regional and internal tensions, could be interpreted as a downgrading of UK engagement in the region and may have a detrimental impact on UK influence. This appears inconsistent with the UK Government’s view that security in the Western Balkans is of

¹³ Letter from the Foreign Secretary to the Chair of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee relating to the Western Balkans, 31 July 2023:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41381/documents/203451/default/> [accessed 16 January 2024]

¹⁴ Oral evidence taken before the House of Lords European Affairs Committee, 19 September 2023 (Session 2022–23), Q 15 (Natalie Loiseau)

¹⁵ Q67 (High Representative Christian Schmidt)

¹⁶ Q 53 (Leo Docherty MP)



“vital importance to regional stability”, and the UK’s commitment in the Integrated Review Refresh to “step up engagement” with the region.¹⁷

27. Twenty-five non-EU states have already participated in CSDP operations. At present, five non-EU states participate in Operation Althea (Albania, Chile, Turkey, Switzerland, North Macedonia).¹⁸ As Operation Althea is aligned with UK interests and the collective interest of Europe, the Committee believes that the UK should re-join the mission, as long as it maintains the right level of strategic oversight.
28. **Witnesses to our inquiry made a persuasive case that the UK should re-evaluate the possibility of re-joining Operation Althea. The Minister for Europe made clear to us that the UK Government does not intend to re-join the peacekeeping mission at this time. The reasons for this are unclear. We call on the UK Government to set out in more detail why UK participation is either strategically undesirable, or operationally unfeasible.**

Countering disinformation

29. Several witnesses noted that Russian-backed disinformation campaigns are a serious problem within the Western Balkans. Dr Barton Hronesova said:

“The informational space in the region is extremely toxic and polarised. Serbia always tops the ranks of countries in the world where large amounts of the population believe in conspiracy theories, but it is not much dissimilar in Bosnia and Herzegovina”.¹⁹

30. Similarly, Lord Peach commented that disinformation “is so prevalent every day as you drive around listening to people, particularly young people and particularly on social media”.²⁰ This widespread disinformation often acts to undermine the role of Western allies in the region, as highlighted by Sian MacLeod, former British Ambassador to the Republic of Serbia, who said that “if you ask many Serbians, they will say that they get more help from Russia or China than they get from the EU, which of course is not the case”.²¹ Mr Schmidt told us that public understanding of his role and actions as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina was distorted by widespread misinformation and conspiracy theories.²²

¹⁷ Cabinet Office, Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world (13 March 2023), p 20: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world> [accessed 16 January 2024]

¹⁸ European Union External Action, ‘EUFOR Bosnia-Herzegovina Military Operation Althea’ (30 November 2020): [EUFOR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA Military Operation ALTHEA | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](https://eeas.europa.eu/eu-external-action/eu-external-action-action/eu-for-bosnia-herzegovina-military-operation-althea) [accessed: 24 January 2024]

¹⁹ Q 13 (Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova)

²⁰ Q 47 (Lord Peach)

²¹ Q 3 (Sian MacLeod)

²² Q 62 (High Representative Christian Schmidt)



31. As part of its £40 million per annum support package to the region, the UK Government already has programming which aims to counter disinformation, strengthen independent media, and support independent journalists. Outside of this programming, BBC Serbian was relaunched online in 2018.
32. Witnesses consistently welcomed the UK Government's existing efforts to counter disinformation in the region. Ms MacLeod noted that BBC Serbian had been particularly successful during the pandemic at combatting vaccine misinformation: "you noticed that most people were going to the BBC when they wanted facts—when they wanted to know about Covid and vaccinations".²³ Dr Tena Prelec praised the FCDO-funded project "Media for All". She said that it "managed to break through the noise and narrative capture that is often present in the Western Balkans and led by local leaders" and that supporting independent media "is an area in which the UK has been doing great work that is very important for the long-term democratisation of the region".²⁴
33. In the context of the success of BBC Serbian, and bearing in mind that Albanian is spoken in both Albania and Kosovo—and Albanians form the third largest diaspora in the world (about 30% of Albanians live outside the country's borders)²⁵—we believe that there is a strong case for relaunching the BBC Albanian service.²⁶ Ms MacLeod also suggested that this would help "counter disinformation, not just from Russia but local forms of disinformation and the growing influence of China as well".²⁷
34. When asked about the possibility of the revival of BBC Albanian, Leo Docherty MP stopped short of making any commitments, but said "I think there is an organic desire for credible, reliable sources of information and news [in the region], which is why the BBC is particularly welcome".²⁸
- 35. The UK Government should provide funding for the creation of a BBC Albanian service, equivalent to its BBC Serbian provision, to help counter the spread of disinformation in the region.**

Working with international partners

36. Outside the EU, the UK has an opportunity to act as an honest friend to countries in the region. Baroness Ashton of Upholland, former High Representative of the EU for

²³ Q 9 (Sian MacLeod)

²⁴ Q 23 (Dr Tena Prelec)

²⁵ Euractiv, *30% of Albanians live abroad amid increased migration woes*, (17 November 2022), [30% of Albanians live abroad amid increased migration woes – Euractiv](#) [accessed: 24 January 2024]

²⁶ In 2011, the BBC World Service ceased radio programming in Albanian, Macedonian, and Serbian citing financial constraints.

²⁷ Q 7 (Sian MacLeod)

²⁸ Q 57 (Leo Docherty MP)



Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, told us that “because we are not inside the EU, the countries do not have to treat us as the body they have to be nice to because we want to be part of it, so we may sometimes have a slight opportunity to have a conversation that perhaps the EU cannot have”.²⁹

37. Given that our interests align, joined-up collaboration with the EU on the Western Balkans is highly desirable, and Baroness Ashton noted that “there is a lot of opportunity for the UK and the EU, as well as individual member states, to work together”.³⁰
38. Despite slow progress being made on EU accession and some clear disappointment about this among the populations across the Western Balkans, the accession process remains the single main driver of reform in the region³¹ and we welcome that it has been given greater urgency in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
39. **Although the UK has left the EU, it is important that the UK Government supports the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU. The accession process remains a key driver of reform in the region and is therefore central to the region’s future stability and prosperity. The UK Government should also pro-actively seek out areas of collaboration with the EU to ensure its programmes are complementary and mutually reinforcing.**
40. Several witnesses, including the UK Government, stressed the importance of the UK utilising the Quint grouping to step up its influence in the region. Victoria Billing, FCDO Europe Director, explained that the Quint allowed the UK to work collaboratively and not competitively with others. She assured the Committee that “the Quint structures are still very much alive and working” with opportunities for the UK to meet its international partners occurring “just as often” as when the UK was an EU member.³²
41. Mr Schmidt encouraged the UK to use the Quint as a forum to engage with the EU on Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession and on upholding Dayton requirements.³³
42. Witnesses told us that British Ambassadors and the Prime Minister’s Envoy were doing an excellent job at strengthening international partnerships and bilateral relationships in the region. Maja Raicevic, Executive Director, Women’s Rights Center (Montenegro), said that the British Ambassador to Montenegro “appeared at our events strongly supporting what we do”.³⁴ Baroness Ashton praised British Ambassadors and said of the Western Balkans that “it is absolutely an area where we have real knowledge and

²⁹ Q 32 (Baroness Ashton)

³⁰ Q 31 (Baroness Ashton)

³¹ Q 9 (Sian MacLeod), Q25 (Christopher Levick), and Q28 (Baroness Ashton)

³² Q 51 (Victoria Billing)

³³ Q 67 (High Representative Christian Schmidt)

³⁴ Q 27 (Maja Raicevic)



expertise in the country, where we know the region, and where we have good Ambassadors who have been doing a great job”.³⁵

43. **The Quint has become the key forum through which the UK can continue to exert influence in the Western Balkans outside of the EU. The UK should continue its participation in the Quint to ensure that it maintains its visibility and influence in the region.**
44. **The UK is set to host the fourth European Political Community (EPC) summit this year. The EPC may provide an additional forum through which work on the Western Balkans could be discussed and co-ordinated with EU partners. We ask the UK Government to (1) confirm the date of the next EPC summit, and (2) set out what plans it has, if any, to discuss issues relating to the Western Balkans at the next meeting of the EPC.**
45. **In the light of the praise that we have heard for British diplomats, the UK Government should continue to invest in its diplomatic capabilities. We would welcome further information on what the UK Government is doing to support co-ordination among its defence attachés in the region.**

Promoting economic growth and tackling corruption

46. Supporting sustainable economic development and tackling corruption are crucial to building a region that is prosperous, secure, and integrated with its Central and Western European partners. Baroness Ashton told us that, “We tend to focus quite a lot on sectarian issues, nationality issues, border disputes, recognition of Kosovo [...] but it seems that at the heart of all this are the economies and the relative prosperity of the people in those countries”.³⁶ Baroness Ashton also noted that strengthening economic integration and trade within the Western Balkans region could support peacebuilding efforts and moves to strengthen inter-communal dialogue.
47. Low growth, weak public finances, poor public service provision, and entrenched corruption act as drivers of political instability. For example, Dr Barton Hronesova noted that the separatist actions of Mr Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina are in part a response to Republika Srpska’s debt crisis, which has led the entity to the verge of bankruptcy.³⁷
48. The UK Government’s *UK–Western Balkans region development partnership summary* (July 2023) states that UK Export Finance has “a role to play in developing His Majesty’s Government’s economic statecraft by deepening relationships between UK investors

³⁵ Q 43 (Baroness Ashton)

³⁶ Q 41 (Baroness Ashton)

³⁷ Q 11 (Dr Barton Hronesova)



and the business community in the Western Balkans”.³⁸ This includes the provision of export finance in support of the Morava Corridor Motorway, in Serbia.

49. However, the balance of evidence suggested that while the UK makes a valued contribution to the stabilisation of the region through its military presence and diplomatic engagement, the UK could do more to support its economic development.
50. Both Lord Peach and Baroness Ashton stressed the role that the UK could play, as the host of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), in developing an inclusive investment strategy that would help to foster sustainable, broad-based growth. Lord Peach noted that Western investment through multilateral financial institutions such as the EBRD could take a “wider view” than China and Russia of the infrastructure and connectivity needs of the region.³⁹ Baroness Ashton told us that the UK could provide additional technical support to the countries of the Western Balkans to build the rules-based regulatory environment in which businesses can operate and conclude contracts with confidence. She encouraged the UK Government to expand its trade delegations to the region, strengthen links with regional trade associations, provide additional support to entrepreneurs based in the Western Balkans, and “[to link] up to the EBRD”.⁴⁰
51. The EU remains the biggest investor in the Western Balkans, but many of the countries in the region are seeking to broaden their economic relationships with other partners, including China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf States. While it is broadly to be welcomed that the Western Balkans are diversifying the sources of foreign capital to help meet the region’s major investment needs, we heard from Dr Prelec that this can also leave the Western Balkan countries vulnerable to what she referred to as “so-called strategic corruption”.⁴¹ In these cases, external actors such as Russia and China use investment as a tool to “garner support among local leaders and populations”.⁴²
52. Lord Peach told us that the UK supports anti-corruption efforts through “discrete small programmes”.⁴³ Leo Docherty MP told us that he had met “HMRC and serious crime officials in countries like Montenegro”. He mentioned that the region was “hungry” for UK “technical expertise” in this area.⁴⁴

³⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ‘UK-Western Balkans region development partnership summary’ (17 July 2023): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-western-balkans-region-development-partnership-summary/uk-western-balkans-region-development-partnership-summary-july-2023#:~:text=UK%20Export%20Finance%20also%20has,Morava%20Corridor%20Motorway%2C%20in%20Serbia> [accessed 16 January 2024]

³⁹ Q 58 (Lord Peach)

⁴⁰ Q 41 (Baroness Ashton)

⁴¹ Q 20 (Dr Prelec)

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Q 54 (Lord Peach)

⁴⁴ Q 54 (Leo Docherty MP)



53. As the UK Government's *Economic Crime Plan 2023-2026* recognises, transnational corruption has a negative impact on the UK economy and the reputation of the UK's financial and professional services sectors, in addition to eroding transparency and accountability in the institutions of the region.⁴⁵ This makes it imperative that the UK Government takes a firm stance on combatting corruption in the Western Balkans.
54. Dr Prelec highlighted sanctions as a key tool that have had a positive impact in combatting corruption. She said that:
- “Sanctioning high-profile politicians who have been involved in crime, corruption, and human rights abuses sends a message that they are not suitable to stay in power for a long time [...] These are very important because, for instance, several European banks have accompanied state sanctions against individuals by stopping their ability to open bank accounts, which directly cracks down on their ability to deal with illicit financial flows. These are some examples that could be taken further”⁴⁶
55. Unless the UK takes action against the high level of corruption and illicit financial flows in the region, corruption will inhibit the efficacy of the UK's contribution towards economic development in the Western Balkans.
56. Promoting greater trade and investment in the Western Balkans would complement the UK's efforts to stabilise the region and integrate it with Euro-Atlantic institutions. We welcome the decision to appoint Martin Vickers MP as UK trade envoy to the Western Balkans in 2020 and acknowledge the financial and technical support that the UK has provided to support economic growth and trade in the region, including through the use of UK Export Finance.
57. **Nevertheless, the evidence from our inquiry is that the UK is currently punching below its weight in developing and deepening economic ties with the region. As the host of the EBRD, one of the biggest institutional investors in the Western Balkans, the UK is well-placed to take a leading role in shaping the investment strategy for the region and ensure that it promotes broad-based and inclusive long-term growth.**
58. **We ask the UK Government to provide more information on what it is currently doing to promote long-term economic growth in the region, outside of what is already outlined in the partnership summary.**
59. **It is strongly in the UK's interest to tackle the high levels of corruption in the region. Reducing corruption is imperative for promoting economic growth**

⁴⁵ UK Treasury, 'Economic crime plan 2023 to 2026' (30 March 2023): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642561b02fa8480013ec0f97/6.8300_HO_Economic_Crime_Plan_2_v6_Web.pdf [accessed 16 January 2024]

⁴⁶ Q 21 (Dr Prelec)



and political stability. Transnational corruption has a negative impact on the UK economy and the reputation of the UK's financial and professional services sectors. The UK Government should continue to support efforts to tackle corruption in the Western Balkans, through sanctioning individuals and promoting anti-corruption programmes in co-ordination with international partners.

Development and human rights

60. Despite receiving extensive aid support—with the UK providing a significant contribution alongside the US and the EU—the Western Balkans has suffered significant backsliding in recent years in terms of human rights. This suggests that aid alone is insufficient in driving progress in this area in the region.
61. Witnesses reported stalled progress on protecting and advancing women's rights in the region, in particular. Women remain under-represented at all levels of government⁴⁷ and women's rights organisations do not have the necessary support from decision-makers.⁴⁸ Ms Raicevic noted that there was “shrinking space for civil society and quite strong and well-financed anti-gender movements” in the region.⁴⁹ In her view, this has led to “higher femicide rates, declining access to justice and social and economic rights for women, increased hate speech, digital violence and threats against female politicians and human rights defenders—followed by a very weak institutional response”.⁵⁰
62. Supporting women's organisations also constitutes an important strand in peacebuilding efforts in the region. Ms Raicevic said “the worsening of the situation between Kosovo and Serbia is diminishing decades of peacebuilding work by women's civil society organisations and activists [...] there is a strong history of peacebuilding movements among women's organisations and there is a lot of mutual co-operation that might support those efforts in the future”.⁵¹
63. Ms Raicevic noted that international support was crucial in strengthening civil society in the Western Balkans, especially given that a “recent increase in hate speech in the digital sphere” is “seriously undermining the work of civil society” in the region.⁵² She said that her organisation found reports, particularly by the European Commission, useful for their advocacy work. She welcomed “any support in the form of fact-based information and reporting about what is going on in our countries” by the UK.⁵³

⁴⁷ Q 20 (Maja Raicevic) and Q24 (Chris Levick)

⁴⁸ Q 24 (Maja Raicevic)

⁴⁹ Q 20 (Maja Raicevic)

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Q 20 and Q 27 (Maja Raicevic)

⁵² Q 22 (Maja Raicevic)

⁵³ Q 23 (Maja Raicevic)



64. The UK Government runs specific projects aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and civil society organisations, increasing the independence of judiciaries, increasing women’s participation in politics, and tackling gender-based violence. On the FCDO’s current work on women’s rights in the region, Ms Billing said “across the region and across all our programming engagement we try to increase the involvement of women because there are not enough women in the institutions. We also try to tackle gender-based violence [...] as well as discrimination against women and girls and conflict-related sexual violence”.⁵⁴
65. However, the UK’s current funding instruments are often short term. For example, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy’s current UK-funded programming in the region is contracted for a period of less than two years (June 2023-March 2025).⁵⁵ This impacts their ability to deliver longer-term and sustained positive democratic change in the region.
66. The Committee welcomes the fact that UK aid spend in the region has been consistent at around £40 million per annum, and that there is a planned increase to nearer £50 million next year.⁵⁶ This consistent spending should provide an opportunity to invest in longer-term funding instruments.
67. The UK’s continued co-operation with international partners, alongside increased security provision and economic investment, in the region are necessary to the social development of the Western Balkans. Without these foundations, development programmes in the region will only be a sticking-plaster solution.
- 68. The UK Government should invest in longer-term funding instruments in the region—emulating US and Swiss agencies which employ stable funding rounds of 5+ years—to gain the maximum impact from its programmes.**
- 69. Civil society has a key role to play in peacebuilding and should be supported by the international community, particularly in view of the limited support from local decision-makers. We request that the UK Government provide us with more detailed information on the support it is providing to civil society organisations in the region, and women’s rights organisations in particular.**
70. We heard from several witnesses that progress on prosecuting cases of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has been very limited. Ms MacLeod and Mr Cliff noted that progress had been “painfully slow”.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Q 49 (Victoria Billing)

⁵⁵ Letter from Chris Levick to Lord Ashton of Hyde providing supplementary evidence and recommendations, dated 4 January 2024: committees.parliament.uk/publications/42730/documents/212627/default/

⁵⁶ Q 52 (Victoria Billing)

⁵⁷ Q 4 (Sian MacLeod)



71. Ms MacLeod further noted that “we continue to work closely and support the work of Chief Prosecutor Brammertz in all that he and his team at the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals continue to do to try to facilitate co-operation and progress across the whole region”.⁵⁸
72. While there is support available for the Western Balkan countries from the Mechanism, local institutions are not always adequately equipped to handle war crimes cases.
73. We heard that in Bosnia and Herzegovina the majority of CRSV cases are being dealt with locally, rather than through the Mechanism.⁵⁹ The most recent European Commission report on Bosnia and Herzegovina found that the country “still needs to address the August 2020 decision of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on providing all forms of redress to victims of wartime sexual violence. It further needs to accelerate the prosecution of crimes of sexual violence, secure witness protection and provide reparation to women victims of war crimes”.⁶⁰
74. On prosecuting CRSV in Kosovo, Mr Cliff said “there is quite an active committee” dealing with the issue which was set up with support from the UK Government. However, the first successful conviction for wartime rape in Kosovo only occurred in 2021.⁶¹ A 2023 European Commission report on Kosovo asserts that “despite the increase in assigned prosecutors (from three to four), the War Crimes Department of the Special Prosecution Office continues to struggle in processing the workload”.⁶²
75. Ms Billing noted that “we are very proud of the work that we do to get justice for survivors of sexual violence in conflict”⁶³, though did not expand further. The UK Government’s *UK–Western Balkans region development partnership summary* states:

⁵⁸ The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals is an international court established by the United Nations Security Council in 2010 to investigate and prosecute individuals responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. It replaced the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (“ICTR”) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (“ICTY”) following the completion of those tribunals’ respective mandates.

⁵⁹ Q 6 (Ian Cliff)

⁶⁰ European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report*, p 44: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_691%20Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20report.pdf [accessed 24 January 24]

⁶¹ Q 4 (Ian Cliff). Balkan Insight, *Kosovo Special Prosecutor: ‘Wartime Rape Victims Must Speak Out’* (8 July 2021), [Kosovo Special Prosecutor: ‘Wartime Rape Victims Must Speak Out’ | Balkan Insight](https://www.balkaninsight.com/en/news/kosovo-special-prosecutor-wartime-rape-victims-must-speak-out) [accessed: 24 January 2024]

⁶² European Commission, ‘Kosovo 2023 Report’, Commission Staff Working Document (8 November 2023) https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_692%20Kosovo%20report_0.pdf [accessed 16 January 2024]

⁶³ Q 51 (Victoria Billing)



“The UK has long supported efforts to address the legacy and combat the stigma of CRSV in the region, including through the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (PSVI) London Conference in 2014 and the 2022 conference, and ongoing support to CSOs working on the issue. We support sustainable assistance schemes for survivors of CRSV in BiH and work to address the long-term effects of sexual violence and ending stigmatisation of survivors of CRSV during the war in Kosovo”.⁶⁴

- 76. It is imperative that survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have access to justice. We ask the UK Government to provide us with further information on the programmes it is supporting to achieve justice for victims of CRSV, beyond the information already provided in the partnership document.**

⁶⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ‘UK-Western Balkans region development partnership summary’ (17 July 2023): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-western-balkans-region-development-partnership-summary/uk-western-balkans-region-development-partnership-summary-july-2023#:~:text=UK%20Export%20Finance%20also%20has,Morava%20Corridor%20Motorway%2C%20in%20Serbia> [accessed 16 January 2024]



ANNEX B

Witnesses to the Committee's short inquiry into the Western Balkans

Evidence is published online at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7956/the-uk-and-the-western-balkans/publications/oral-evidence/>. References to question numbers below refer to questions in the published transcripts.

Questions 1 - 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sian MacLeod, Former British Ambassador to the Republic of Serbia• Ian Cliff, Former British Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Kosovo
Questions 11 - 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professor Jasna Dragović-Soso, Professor of International Politics and History at Goldsmiths, University of London• Dr Jessie Barton Hronesova, Lecturer in Political Sociology, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London• Professor James Ker-Lindsay, Visiting Professor in Research on South-Eastern Europe, London School of Economics and Political Science
Questions 20 - 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christopher Levick, Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, Westminster Foundation for Democracy• Dr Tena Prelec, Assistant Professor, Centre for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe (CAS SEE), University of Rijeka and Research Associate, LSEE-Research on South Eastern Europe, LSE• Maja Raicevic, Executive Director, Women's Rights Center (Montenegro)
Questions 28 - 43	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Rt Hon the Baroness Ashton of Upholland LG GCMG, former European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Questions 44 - 59	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Air Chief Marshal the Lord Peach GBE KCB DL• Leo Docherty MP, Minister for Europe, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office• Victoria Billing, Director Europe, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
Questions 60 - 67	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christian Schmidt, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina