

**Testimony for Counselor Derek H. Chollet
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on U.S. Engagement in the Balkans
May 18, 2023**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the Biden Administration's Western Balkans policy. I also thank the Committee for the strong, bipartisan Congressional engagement and support for the region.

The future of the Western Balkans is a priority for the Biden Administration. The President has been a leader on these issues since his time on this Committee, and Secretary Blinken, USAID Administrator Power who was in Kosovo and Serbia last week, and many of us have been engaged on these issues since Yugoslavia's violent dissolution.

Our policy is grounded on a simple principle: a Europe whole, free, prosperous, and at peace is in our national security interest and the Western Balkans region remains a missing piece of the puzzle.

European integration has not been easy. The obstacles are formidable: anti-democratic leaders, corruption, weak rule of law, lack of independent institutions, cyberattacks, under-developed infrastructure, economic barriers, willful dependence on Russian energy, ethnonationalist politics, , emigration, harmful foreign influence, and disinformation.

Nevertheless, the countries of the Western Balkans have come a long way since the wars a quarter of a century ago – and they have tremendous potential for greater prosperity. But they need our help to overcome still considerable obstacles. The most pressing are the unresolved issues between Serbia and Kosovo.

Kosovo is a sovereign, independent, democratic country. It is one of our closest friends and partners. The United States supports Kosovo's full

integration into international structures, including the United Nations, and we look forward to seeing it join NATO and the European Union.

The immediate reality is that the European aspirations of both **Kosovo** and **Serbia** will not happen until they resolve their differences. We strongly support the EU-facilitated Dialogue - which remains their best path to that Euro-Atlantic future and durable peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans.

The recent agreement lays out a path to normalization in which both countries fulfill their independent obligations. My colleague, Special Representative Escobar, has been an active participant in these talks and can speak to them in greater detail.

Kosovo reaffirmed its commitment to establish an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, an action we have urged them to take expeditiously, formalize the Serbian Orthodox Church's status, and provide strong protections for Serbian religious and cultural heritage sites.

Kosovo and Serbia will also recognize each other's documents and national symbols. And Serbia will no longer lobby against Kosovo's membership in international organizations.

This agreement represents a significant breakthrough in overcoming the cycle of crises that has characterized the relationship between these two countries for far too long. But a lot of hard work remains. These decisions are not easy. We will continue to work with both parties so that they fulfill their mutual commitments.

At the same time, we are committed to deepening our partnership with Serbia and developing closer ties to the Serbian people. We do so with our eyes open – Serbia has significant challenges from corruption to harmful Russian influence, including disinformation. Our history has been difficult, and our relationship has not always been easy. Yet it is in our interest to

help Serbia realize its full potential and come closer to the Euro-Atlantic community.

To be clear, progress must be earned. Serbia must deliver on commitments to build constructive relations with *all* its neighbors, and strong, sustainable democracy at home to achieve this vision.

We also are focused on the challenges in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. Its pervasive corruption, democratic backsliding, and increasingly inflammatory rhetoric by ethno-nationalist leaders are deeply troubling. Threats of Republika Srpska entity secession, attempts to limit civil society and media freedoms, and efforts to undermine state institutions are destabilizing and attack the foundations of the Dayton Peace Agreement. We have made clear that we oppose such actions and will impose consequences. We remain unequivocally committed to Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and sovereignty, its Euro-Atlantic integration, and the full implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. We continue to support the Office of the High Representative and the use of Bonn Powers when necessary.

And in **Montenegro**, we are optimistic that this NATO Ally's recent presidential election is a signal that Montenegrins are ready to overcome their differences, advance their EU membership prospects, and secure a better future. We urge the new leadership to focus on reforms, particularly to strengthen rule of law and combat corruption and organized crime.

Finally, we strongly support the further European integration of North Macedonia and Albania. They are terrific NATO Allies. Last July, **North Macedonia** and **Albania** opened their own EU accession negotiations.

North Macedonia ably hosted the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue in March, contributing greatly to its success, and it has adroitly chaired the OSCE even as Russia has repeatedly sought to block its work.

Albania is a strong partner on the UN Security Council and is honoring its tradition of hospitality by helping resettle Afghans at risk.

The Western Balkans is Europe's inner courtyard; completing its transatlantic integration contributes to a stronger Europe -- and a stronger Transatlantic family. It is also essential to reducing the harmful influence from actors such as Russia and the PRC that seek to destabilize the region and our Alliance. Among our goals for Western Balkan countries is helping them to develop stronger, more transparent democracies where engaged citizens hold their governments accountable, there is strong support for shared values, and where everyone can benefit from the growth and opportunity that comes with greater economic prosperity.

Progress on all these issues, and the success of our work to strengthen U.S. national security, depends on continued bipartisan close coordination with Congress. I look forward to your questions.

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