



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 037

Tuesday, June 2, 2026

Chair: Ahmed Hussen



Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Tuesday, June 2, 2026

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 37 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, the committee commences its study of the security situation in the Balkans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room, and others are joining us remotely using the Zoom application.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

We have, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Jessica Blitt, ambassador of Canada to Croatia and Kosovo; Michelle Cameron, ambassador of Canada to Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia; Gallit Dobner, director general, Arctic, Eurasian and European affairs; and François Lafrenière, ambassador of Canada to Hungary, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is joining us by video conference.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions from members of the committee.

I now invite Ms. Dobner to make an opening statement of no more than five minutes.

Welcome and thank you.

Gallit Dobner (Director General, Arctic, Eurasian and European Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear here before you today on the security situation in the western Balkans.

My remarks will cover three elements: first, the security situation; second, the role of NATO and the European Union; and third, Canada's contribution to regional peace and security.

On security, while there has been important progress, the western Balkans remain structurally fragile. The region continues to be affected by unresolved ethnic disputes, weak institutions, corruption, organized crime and malign external influences, particularly Russia, which seeks to exploit divisions and slow Euro-Atlantic integration.

A possible flashpoint remains the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Priština has lost momentum, and tensions in northern Kosovo remain unresolved. Although the current situation is relatively calm, serious incidents in recent years, including, as you will have noted, the September 2023 attack in Banjska, demonstrate how quickly the security situation can shift.

In Serbia, there have been growing internal strains over the last 18 months. The Novi Sad rail station tragedy in November 2024 triggered a sustained protest movement over accountability, corruption and democratic governance. This is relevant not only as a domestic issue but also because instability can weaken regional resilience.

[Translation]

Kosovo's persistent inability to form a stable government, which has now lasted a year and a half, has led to a serious political crisis, marked by repeated elections—the next one will take place on June 7—and a continued reliance on interim governments. This institutional paralysis has increased the risk of instability at the national and regional levels.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most fragile post-conflict state in the region. The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed 30 years ago, remains the foundation of peace, sovereignty and the multi-ethnic character of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the country is vulnerable to secessionist rhetoric, interethnic tensions, institutional paralysis and challenges to its constitutional order. International oversight remains essential, particularly through the High Representative and the Peace Implementation Council, in which Canada plays an active role.

In contrast, Albania remains a relative beacon of stability in the region.

North Macedonia remains generally stable, but its path to the European Union continues to be hampered by disputes with Bulgaria.

Montenegro remains the most advanced candidate for European Union membership in the western Balkans, but it continues to face challenges related to organized crime, corruption and public safety.

• (1535)

[English]

Turning to the role of NATO and the European Union, both remain indispensable to regional stability. NATO provides the region's most visible, hard security architecture. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are all fellow NATO allies. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are partners, and Kosovo continues to aspire to deeper Euro-Atlantic integration, albeit with uneven progress.

NATO's KFOR mission remains central to maintaining a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and freedom of movement for all communities. It currently numbers around 4,600 troops from allied and partner countries, and its continued presence reflects the reality that normalization is still incomplete.

The European Union is equally important here as both a security actor and the region's main long-term anchor for enlargement reforms. It promotes stability through diplomatic engagements, mediation and rule-of-law instruments. It leads the Belgrade-Priština dialogue. It runs EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina to maintain a safe and secure environment. It also deploys its rule-of-law mission EULEX in Kosovo. That said, slow or uneven progress towards accession reforms can create frustration and can leave space for destabilizing actors.

Finally, on Canada's contribution, our engagement in the western Balkans is long-standing and I'm sure well known and appreciated by everyone here. Canada played a major role in the region during and after the conflicts of the 1990s, with 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces personnel serving in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the broader region and with 23 Canadians losing their lives in the cause of peace.

Today, Canada continues to contribute in practical and targeted ways. In Kosovo, we've had a presence in KFOR and support defence capacity building through training and advisory co-operation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada remains active through the Peace Implementation Council steering board, and we support programming there on rule of law, governance and resilience to foreign interference. In Albania, Canada supports defence and security co-operation through NATO engagement, demining and stockpile reduction efforts, and broader programming on democracy, cybersecurity and public sector professionalization.

The central point is this. The western Balkans are more stable than in the past, but the stability cannot be taken for granted. The region still faces unresolved political disputes, democratic fragility, organized crime and foreign interference. Continued engagement by NATO, the European Union and partners like Canada is essential to preventing backsliding, strengthening institutions and advancing a more secure and durable peace.

Thank you very much. We look forward to answering your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for your statement.

We'll now open the floor for questions, and we'll begin with MP Michael Chong.

You have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills North, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

You mentioned foreign interference in your opening comments. Could you speak to that and the role that the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China may play in foreign interference activities?

Secondly, can you speak more broadly to the role that both of those states are playing in the region?

Gallit Dobner: On foreign interference, the Russians are doing in the western Balkans what the Russians do everywhere. They have a playbook. That playbook includes things like disinformation right down the spectrum to hybrid techniques. They're using the same tactics and techniques in the western Balkans that they use elsewhere. They obviously do not support transatlantic integration and don't want to see the countries of the western Balkans accede to the European Union. Their goals are quite clear, and evolving as they do, their tactics are also well known to us.

In terms of the roles they play in the region, China obviously has very clear security and economic interests in the western Balkans, as it does throughout the world, and it's pursuing those interests aggressively. It is quite clear how the belt and road initiative is playing out.

In terms of Russia, we have seen a dependence on Russian energy over time. That is something we are working with the western Balkans to try to shift. We'd like to see that shift, and I think there's a lot of commitment there to change the dependence in the relationship.

• (1540)

Hon. Michael Chong: On the issue of Russia, I understand that Serbia is quite reliant on Russian oil and gas. Can you speak a bit about what measures are being taken by the government and by other western governments to shift Serbia's reliance away from Russian oil and gas?

Gallit Dobner: Maybe I will turn to my colleague, the Canadian ambassador to Serbia, for a response.

Her Excellency Michelle Cameron (Ambassador of Canada to Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Particularly since the U.S. enacted sanctions against Gazprom and Gazprom Neft, which own 56% of Serbia's oil and gas company, a year and a half ago in January, Serbia, Canada and its western partners have really put a concerted effort—even more so now, as there's a lot more willingness—into looking at divesting from the dependence on Russian oil and gas.

Hon. Michael Chong: Is there any discussion from the Canadian side about taking advantage of new LNG facilities that are coming online? There's recent news about Germany in discussions with Canada.

Michelle Cameron: To be quite frank, we have had the discussions. The issue is getting the LNG from some of the ports up into Serbia. They're working really hard and diligently on building their infrastructure, but that could be a barrier to having an LNG port and then transporting it to Serbia.

We have been talking about all kinds of clean and green energies—solar panels, Slice and a bit on LNG. We've also connected Serbia with Canada's nuclear industry. We're looking at the breadth. The EU is also looking at some more temporary and medium-term measures. We're all banding together to help Serbia reduce and eliminate its dependency on Russian oil and gas, which quite frankly is a lever that can be used.

Hon. Michael Chong: I understand that Montenegro has taken on a significant amount of debt from the People's Republic of China related to infrastructure development. Can you speak a bit about that and about what concerns Canada has about it?

Michelle Cameron: I think Canada's concerns are the same as those of the EU and Montenegro itself, quite frankly. Montenegro, as it's grown, has taken on a lot of Chinese debt. I think at the end of 2024, between 15% and 16% of its external debt was to China. That was mostly used to do infrastructure projects so that it could also join up with the EU quite quickly.

Hon. Michael Chong: Are those infrastructure projects viewed as part of the BRI?

Michelle Cameron: Slightly, yes—most of them. There are a lot of nuances there, but yes, more or less. A lot of those infrastructure projects were won competitively. These were launched by international development banks, the Government of Montenegro or others. They were won competitively.

Hon. Michael Chong: Do you suspect that the PRC sold below market prices in order to win the bid?

Michelle Cameron: I'm not privy to the internal bidding.

Hon. Michael Chong: What concerns do EU member states, the EU and Canada have more broadly about the BRI or this issue of Montenegro and its—

Michelle Cameron: Any time we see one country beholden to another in debt fashion, we have concerns. That's a lever that can be used. You can leverage that into activities that we're not aligned with, perhaps, or that we don't think are in the best interests of another country. This is just another example of that.

Hon. Michael Chong: Going back to the Russian Federation, I'd say that in Canada, the threat coming from the Russian Federation is primarily or almost exclusively in the form of disinformation operations. That clearly is the case in the Balkans as well.

Ms. Dobner, you made a reference to the full spectrum. Maybe you could speak a bit about what Russia is doing in the Baltics in terms of other forms of foreign interference.

Gallit Dobner: Just to clarify what I was saying, I think Russia has a clear playbook, and it uses that playbook around the world. That's what we've seen.

It depends on the moment. We're seeing right now, as a result of Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, how the Russians are taking advantage of that and using hybrid techniques to respond. I don't think the Balkans sit outside of that activity.

● (1545)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have MP Vandenbeld.

You have six minutes.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here and for your testimony. As you may know, this is a topic that's of significant interest to me.

I want to start with Ms. Dobner.

You talked about the fact that while things are relatively stable right now, we cannot take that stability for granted. I'm thinking particularly about Kosovo and Bosnia. I realize we're in an era where there is increasing geopolitical competition and strife in a region that is literally a fault line along that geopolitical influence, especially with Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and increasing aggression.

You mentioned our peacekeepers—civilian peacekeepers—and democracy. Historically, there was a tremendous amount of Canadian involvement, and about 15 to 20 years ago, there was a decision. As Canada was looking at targeting where it could have the best influence geographically, it was decided that this area was really Europe's backyard and that Europe was able to handle it. We moved from OSCE primarily to the EU missions.

Things have changed. We are now looking at much greater Euro-Atlantic integration. The Prime Minister has made it clear that we want to have greater security and economic ties with Europe, yet in the region, our presence in the last decade or so has not been significant. One of the reasons—you mentioned NATO—is the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which has field missions all around the region. It has people present in place, and it targets economic and security issues, but there are no senior Canadians because, as far as I understand, when the OSCE hires people, the institution pays the per diem but the country from which a person originates pays the salary. If I'm not mistaken, for the last 18 years, Canada has refused to pay any salaries for any people who are seconded to the OSCE. That means the only presence we have in all of these missions is from young interns who just want experience or people who don't care about not getting paid. Other countries, like the U.S., are trying strategically to get positions within the OSCE in strategic places, and Canada is absent.

I wonder if there's been any discussion about reversing that policy of not seconding to the OSCE and perhaps agreeing to pay salaries for Canadians who are hired by the OSCE.

Gallit Dobner: I want to thank the member for this great question.

As was said, the OSCE staffs its missions through contracted personnel and through secondments. Folks who are seconded to OSCE missions in the field are then paid through a set of per diems that allow for housing and board. When Canadians apply for secondment to these missions, the Government of Canada makes clear if it's not in a position to provide a salary.

It's important to underline that the Government of Canada doesn't have a secondment platform where it can systematically second to international organizations like the OSCE. It happens, and it happens on an ad hoc basis. Absolutely, it's been an issue of discussion for the Department of Foreign Affairs—Global Affairs Canada—and it continues to be an issue for discussion.

Anita Vandenberg: Are we the only country that doesn't pay for secondments?

Gallit Dobner: I'm sorry. I'll undertake to get a response for you. I don't lead on the OSCE, but I'm happy to get a response from you from the leads in our department.

Anita Vandenberg: You would agree that because this is unpaid and essentially per diem only, we aren't getting the senior levels, like the heads of mission or deputy heads of mission. There have not been any real senior-level Canadians in the OSCE in the last decade.

• (1550)

Gallit Dobner: Again, I'll have to undertake to get a response to you on that two-part question. I'm happy to do that.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

In the same vein, when I was in Kosovo, there was a Canadian office, and it has subsequently been closed. I know there's been talk over the years of having an honorary representative, an envoy, a small office—something. If you look at other countries—certainly

the United States—the presence there is significant. Canada right now has zero presence diplomatically.

I wonder if there's any discussion about having some kind of a representative, envoy or small office in Kosovo.

Gallit Dobner: It's important to say here that Canada is absolutely committed to peace, stability and security in Europe and in the western Balkans. Historically—we've talked about this today—Canada has played an outsized role in blood and treasure in promoting peace and stability in the region. We're still very active in a lot of different ways.

For instance, Canada is one of 11 members of the Peace Implementation Council steering board responsible for Bosnia and Herzegovina. We do a lot of military capacity building for countries in the region. We do programming to support governance and the rule of law through the various instruments we have here in Ottawa and at mission level. We absolutely do what we can.

In terms of the coverage for Kosovo, we're lucky to have an incredibly competent ambassador who covers Kosovo, but covers Kosovo from Croatia. Right now, we don't have embassies across all countries in the world. We have to cover some countries from other capitals. We rely on those missions to be our eyes and ears, and I know that our ambassador for Kosovo travels there consistently, reports in and represents Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next is MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

You have six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Dobner, I love your title already: director general of Arctic, Eurasian and European affairs. I hope to have a title that long one day. You certainly have your work cut out for you with that job.

There was no mention of the western Balkans in the briefing book presented to Ms. Anand when she was appointed minister of foreign affairs in 2025. In terms of Canadian foreign policy, I don't know how much of a priority the Balkans are in your department. There's no mention of that region anywhere. It is, after all, a key region in terms of many geopolitical developments.

Gallit Dobner: That's a good question.

[*English*]

I'd begin by saying, as I've just previously stated, that Canada is still very much active in supporting peace, stability and security in the western Balkans. Has our focus shifted since the 1990s and the early 2000s, when the security situation was most acute in the region? Yes.

Canada, of course, doesn't have infinite resources, and we've focused our resources to support Europe's eastern flank—our presence in Latvia right now, for example, through the multinational NATO brigade there, and the support we're providing to Ukraine, where we judge that the situation is most acute.

There's no doubt that Canada provides less support than we have in the past, but the region has evolved. I would also say that with NATO and EU missions in place in the western Balkans and with the Europeans actively working with countries in the western Balkans on their accession, there is probably less need for Canada to play a role like it did in the past.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand perfectly. Given the geographic location of the Balkan countries, given everything that's currently happening with external forces—we've talked about Russia and China—and in a context where, geopolitically speaking, significant shifts are happening, I would have thought this would have been part of the minister's key briefings. Compared to the past, you're telling me that the priority and focus on the Balkans have changed. Is that correct?

• (1555)

[*English*]

Gallit Dobner: Allow me to address that question. Is the Minister of Foreign Affairs briefed on the situation in the western Balkans? Absolutely. Just because that briefing was not part of the book to which the member refers, it doesn't mean the minister isn't actively briefed on the western Balkans.

I can certainly attest to the minister being briefed on that and to preparing lots of products for her. I want you to rest assured that it's a region that Canada obviously pays a great deal of attention to and that our political leaders are briefed on regularly.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Canada also recognized Kosovo fairly quickly, a move that was commended by a number of our allies, by the way.

What was the basis for the Government of Canada's decision when the time came to recognize Kosovo as a country? What were the criteria? When a government recognizes a new independent country, it necessarily relies on certain criteria. What were the criteria for recognizing that country?

Her Excellency Jessica Blitt (Ambassador of Canada to Croatia and Kosovo, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): I'd be happy to answer your question.

It's certainly true that, when this happened, it was in a truly significant context. It was after the war, after the intervention. As we have said, Canada was very active during that period. We recognized the importance of managing Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration. We understood that it was important for Kosovo to be part of the international community as a country.

We also had significant ties with Kosovo, both during the war and after the war with the arrival of refugees. We saw that the democracy that was beginning at that time would continue. That was something we wanted to manage and support.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand, but aside from the fact that we had ties with Kosovo and considered that important, there is always a path to independence that must be legitimized through international recognition of the country. Now, when I talk about criteria, I'm obviously referring to the means that country used to achieve independence.

When it comes to recognizing a country internationally, what criteria does Canada use to recognize that country in light of the means it used to achieve independence? Do you understand what I'm saying?

[*English*]

Gallit Dobner: If I may say, it's not every day that Canada recognizes a new country.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Gallit Dobner: I apologize, as I don't mean that in a flippant way at all. It's a great question, but we don't have a fixed set of criteria. I'd say it's case-by-case, because it's fairly unique and specific to the circumstance.

I wouldn't be able to identify for you a set of criteria that are—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What criteria does Canada use when it comes to recognizing a new country?

No one here can answer my question, despite your rather important positions.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I think we have experts on this region, the Balkans. They are not necessarily experts on the issue of how to recognize an independent country. I think Ms. Dobner said as much—that this isn't something that happens every day.

I think this is clearly an issue of great interest to my colleague across the way. We can certainly try to find someone who could provide answers to that question, if the people who are here can't do so.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I'll respond to the point of order raised by my colleague, whom I very much appreciate and who gives us plenty of time during question period.

When you're an ambassador to a given region and you're unable to provide the criteria that led to the recognition of the country you're serving in, I find that rather peculiar. What I'm being told is that they're unable to answer my question.

[*English*]

The Chair: I have given you more time than was allotted, so we'll go to the next person.

MP Ziad Aboultaif, you have five minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Welcome, ambassadors.

Director Michelle, it's good to see you again after 10 years.

Canada's legacy in the region stems from when Major-General Lewis Mackenzie, in 1992-93, was the first commander of the United Nations Protection Force. That legacy left Canada with a big responsibility to carry forward its role in the region, although we have many players there—Russia, China—and in the surrounding area. The Balkans have always been a place where conflict takes place and becomes a concern—not just for the region, but obviously for the world.

If we were to assess the situation now compared with 10 years ago, how do you see it?

Michelle, maybe you can take this.

• (1600)

Michelle Cameron: You're right that Canada has a strong legacy there, whether we look at military engagement, development, humanitarian assistance or political engagement in the region. A testament to that is the number of Serbian Canadians, or other folks from the region, we have in Canada. That is a testament to our humanitarian side of things.

When we look at our engagement over the years, as Ms. Dobner said, we have shifted our priorities. We don't ignore our history; we're proud of it and the region is proud of it, but there are times when you have to realize where your core competencies can be leveraged. That is not to say they can't be in the western Balkans, but when we look at all the geopolitical challenges of our time and across the world, we continue...through a variety of means over the last 10 years. If you look at strict numbers and see a drawdown of some of our troops and programming, over the last 10 years we've engaged very strategically—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

While I was speaking and asking questions earlier, I was distracted by discussions on the Liberal side. I don't understand; this is the first time this has happened to me at this committee. Now there are questions for the witnesses from a member of the Conservative Party, and it continues. I find this somewhat disrespectful to the witnesses.

To my Liberal colleagues, if you want to have conversations among yourselves, step out of the room. That's two turns in a row. If you're not interested, please leave the room. Otherwise, listen to the witnesses. They've come here for us today.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you for pointing that out. I think members have understood your point.

Michelle Cameron: I'll focus on Serbia, and then I'll pass the floor to Ms. Dobner to add anything regionally speaking.

We've continued very specific and targeted programming to enhance and encourage human rights records and democratic reforms across the region. We have lent our voices to the EU and other

western countries that have other carrots and sticks to use in the region. We've done very targeted advocacy. I think we've used the tools in our tool kit as we pivot or reprioritize some of our resources. We really have, over the last 10 years, used targeted tools to assist them in their democratic reforms.

Maybe Ms. Dobner wants to add something from a broader view of the region.

Gallit Dobner: As I understood the question, part of it was about how the situation in the western Balkans has evolved over the last 10 years.

We have seen enormous strides in this region. It's pretty incredible that three of the six countries in the western Balkans are now members of NATO, thus fellow allies of Canada, and that many are on their path to EU accession. Actually, this committee hearing is very propitious because there is an EU-Balkans summit this week to discuss that very fact. Montenegro has now opened each one of its 27 chapters for EU accession and has closed seven of those, so I think the progress in the region is undeniable.

Do parts of the region remain fragile? Yes. Do there continue to be challenges with corruption, interethnic disputes and foreign interference? Yes, yes and yes. However, I don't think any of that should belie the fact that there has been enormous progress in the western Balkans over the last decade.

Ziad Aboultaif: I have a quick question.

We have to believe that the memory and institutions of the Communist era still play a role in the instability of the region. How is Canada monitoring that, if we are, and do you think that impact still exists?

Gallit Dobner: I spoke a bit in my opening remarks about weak institutions, and we absolutely monitor and report on this. I count on our rich network of ambassadors across the region, who report regularly back to headquarters so that we remain current on the state of affairs. Then we use the various levers we have, whether they be diplomatic—the discussions we have at all levels—or programmatic.

We have funding envelopes within our peace operations program at headquarters. We have funding envelopes at missions—albeit modest—that are used strategically to catalyze projects, working with civil society on the rule of law, governance, human rights and foreign interference. We use all the levers at our disposal to try to address these challenges.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Guilbeault, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to our guests for being here today to discuss the issue of this important region.

Ms. Dobner, if I understood your answer to my colleague Mr. Chong's question earlier, there is a significant Russian influence in the region. I understand that this influence manifests itself in various ways, particularly on a cultural level.

The first time I served as Minister of Canadian Heritage, I had a very interesting conversation with the Ukrainian minister of culture. He was very interested in what was known at the time as Bill C-10, which became Bill C-11, the Online Streaming Act. He was especially interested in the part requiring the web giants to promote Quebec and Canadian cultural content. He said he found this very interesting because Canada was doing this to protect itself from the American giant, whereas he, in Ukraine, had to deal with two giants: an American giant, like everyone else on the planet, and a Russian giant on the other side of the border.

I wonder if one of Canada's contributions could be to work with some of these governments to share our experience in this area and show them how to use this kind of mechanism as a sort of a shield. It certainly won't solve all the problems of Russian interference, but it could at least solve some of them.

[English]

Gallit Dobner: I want to thank the member for that really interesting suggestion. It's a great recommendation and not something we have thought through a great deal, but we will absolutely take that back. I thank the member for the valuable suggestion.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I could speak to my friend, the Minister of Canadian Identity and Culture, and suggest that he have a conversation with you about this.

In your opinion, are there other things a country like Canada could do to try to counter the role of a country like Russia in this region?

I know that work is being done regarding democratic institutions, but in your opinion, are there other tools we could add to the tool box we have for the region you represent?

[English]

Gallit Dobner: Allow me to start with an answer. Then perhaps I'll turn to my colleagues if they'd like to add anything.

Ambassador Cameron talked earlier about the reliance on Russian energy, which is real and important. Pivoting takes time. I think our European friends have demonstrated this. They've pulled a real rabbit out of the hat in how quickly they have kicked their dependence on Russian energy, but these things happen with time. I think of the degree to which we can work with countries in the western Balkans to rid themselves of dependencies such as energy—which is the one that first comes to mind, but there are other dependencies as well—to help them diversify and help them in a very practical way to be in a position to choose their alliances and partnerships.

Jessica Blitt: Just very briefly, I think Kosovo is an interesting situation in this regard because it has very firmly taken a Euro-Atlantic position. It is not letting Russia, or frankly China either, in the door. It has aligned with the EU on sanctions, despite being a small country. Symbolically it has aligned with the EU on the Rus-

sian sanctions. It has been extremely pro-Ukraine and done very concrete things in that regard, whether it's demining training or support for Ukrainian journalists. I think it's really interesting to see the way Kosovo, despite being a small country, has really stepped up and shown where it wants its alignment to be.

Michelle Cameron: In thinking outside of the box about ways that we can combat Russian influence in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, we've taken a look at where Russia plays a niche role. We've talked a bit about trying to divest them of their oil and gas dependency, but we've also connected educational institutions to give civic education on anti-disinformation. We have been encouraging companies to enter the energy sector, the IT sector or anywhere that we see Russia getting a foothold.

We've also launched a few public education campaigns, particularly around disinformation. With Russian disinformation, there's often a seed of truth. Russia likes to celebrate that at the end of World War II, it liberated Belgrade. Sometimes it expands into how it liberated Serbia. We've been quick to point out that it was disproportionately Ukrainian troops that came in to liberate.

By taking a look at where Russia has its hooks in, we've been somewhat successful in being able to rally companies, educational institutions or public affairs to tackle those hooks—and then, of course, bringing in the wider western community to also do the same with their assets.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to MP Brunelle-Duceppe for two and half minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Blitt, I just have a friendly piece of advice for you. When you are an ambassador to a country, it would still make sense, in my opinion, to know the criteria used to recognize that country. If you're unable to state them here before the committee, that's fine. I would still like to point out that it's important to know them, not necessarily when a Bloc Québécois member asks you to name them, but when you're doing your job abroad. It's always good to know the criteria that led to a country's recognition by the country you represent in that very country.

That said, Ms. Dobner, what are the most significant entities involved in disinformation that are currently active in the Balkans?

We hear a lot of stories about this. We hear that networks are using disinformation for purely political or geopolitical purposes in the Balkans. There's a lot of talk about China and Russia, of course. Is that something you see and feel? Is Canada taking any measures regarding the disinformation currently prevalent in the Balkans?

[English]

Gallit Dobner: I think we addressed the issue of criteria. It would be impossible to have a fixed set of criteria because each situation would be unique.

On the issue of foreign interference—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Excuse me. Did you just tell us that there are no defined criteria for recognizing a country?

[English]

Gallit Dobner: The answer I've given a few times already is that we don't have a set list of criteria. When it comes to recognizing a new state like Kosovo, this would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If I may, my question was: What were the criteria used for recognizing Kosovo? I wasn't asking you about recognition in general; I was asking about Kosovo. That's the question I asked. What criteria did Canada use to recognize Kosovo's independence?

[English]

Gallit Dobner: If the honourable member would like information of a historical nature that dates back 20 years about the deliberations at the time when Kosovo was recognized, I am more than pleased to undertake to go back on that and provide an answer in writing.

The Chair: I think that's a fair point.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Dobner, I sincerely believe that you should be aware of these kinds of things, given your position. Perhaps even more so—

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I'm saying is not hostile.

[English]

The Chair: The witness has agreed to provide the factors that led to Canada recognizing Kosovo. That last comment was not appropriate, in my opinion.

Anyway, we're out of time for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We'll go next to Madam Rood.

You have five minutes.

Lianne Rood (Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you so much for being here today.

Ambassador, China has already provided substantial financing to most western Balkan nations through the belt and road initiative,

granting Beijing significant economic and political leverage across the region. Consistent with Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, which explicitly calls out China as a disruptive global actor, and with CSIS's assessments of PRC influence operations, what concrete whole-of-government plan is Global Affairs Canada implementing to counter this non-transparent economic statecraft?

Gallit Dobner: This is a great question. It's a very complicated question.

I have to admit that I am not the director general responsible for China or the Indo-Pacific. A question about China's strategy writ large would probably be best answered by other experts from our department.

• (1615)

The Chair: Yes, but I think a question on Chinese influence and activities in this region would be appropriate.

Gallit Dobner: I apologize. Maybe I misunderstood the question. I thought it was a more general question about China's economic strategy. Pardon me if I misunderstood the question.

Lianne Rood: What whole-of-government plan is Global Affairs Canada implementing to counter non-transparent economic statecraft? That was the question.

Gallit Dobner: Pardon me. Do you mean in the western Balkans?

Lianne Rood: I mean in the Indo-Pacific, in the western Balkan nations.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: To be fair to the member, she referenced the government's Indo-Pacific strategy comments about China, and then pivoted from there to ask how the witnesses view Chinese activities in the western Balkans.

Lianne Rood: Yes, that is correct.

The Chair: Okay. I think that's within scope.

Gallit Dobner: Is the question about how the Government of Canada views China's activities in the western Balkans?

The Chair: That's correct.

Gallit Dobner: Thank you for the clarification. I appreciate the scoping here.

I think I mentioned earlier that China is active in the western Balkans, as it is around the globe. It has, in the western Balkans in particular, a lot of economic interest. Canada has economic interest vis-à-vis China, and we collaborate with China in certain ways. It is certainly up to the western Balkans to choose to collaborate with China.

Historically, China has been in a position to provide development financing to countries that hasn't been available to them from other countries, so thinking about how you provide countries in the western Balkans with options is important. How we can help them diversify their sources of financing is an important thing we think about and something we need to sharpen our pencils on.

Lianne Rood: Are we coordinating with NATO allies and actively promoting transparent western alternatives so that the Euro-Atlantic integration succeeds for every country in the Balkans?

Gallit Dobner: That's a great question.

Absolutely. As we mentioned already, three of the countries in the western Balkans are already members of NATO, and two of them have a partnership with NATO. We saw military exercises for the first time between Serbia and NATO just last week. Canada played a role there as well.

We absolutely work with our fellow NATO allies to promote integration.

Lianne Rood: The western Balkans have emerged as a significant vector for foreign-directed hybrid interference—particularly by Russia—combining cyber-operations, disinformation and the exploitation of local governments and ethnic vulnerabilities, alongside the activities of transnational organized crime networks that are increasingly incorporating sophisticated cybercrime capabilities.

To what extent does Canada assess the region as a staging ground or platform for cyber-attacks, hybrid operations or criminal enterprises that could directly or indirectly threaten Canadian national security, critical infrastructure, democratic institutions or economic interests? What diplomatic capacity-building, intelligence-sharing and law enforcement co-operation initiatives are Canadian missions in the Balkans undertaking in coordination with our Five Eyes partners to strengthen resilience in the region and to mitigate spillover risks to Canada?

Gallit Dobner: Those were big questions with lots to unpack.

Lianne Rood: They were big questions. I'm running out of time.

Gallit Dobner: Yes, transnational crime is an issue in the region. Yes, foreign interference is an issue in the region. Yes, cybersecurity is an issue in the region.

I would note some of the comments I made earlier about the capacity building and programming that Canada has put in place. Whether it's through military co-operation and training, through our Canada fund for local initiatives, which is available through missions, or through our peace operations funding, we are trying to address all of these vectors. We do it in partnership with other like-minded countries in the region. I would just point to some of that programming.

The Chair: Thank you. That's perfect.

We are next going to hear from Braedon Clark.

You have five minutes.

• (1620)

Braedon Clark (Sackville—Bedford—Preston, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here this afternoon. It's been very interesting.

Ms. Dobner, you talked in your opening statement about stability of the region relative to recent history, and that's wonderful. I was curious about the domestic political situation in Kosovo. On Sunday, I believe they'll be having their third parliamentary election in less than a year, which is a lot. I'm curious if you could give us your take on that and what your sense is of the situation there.

This is for whoever is best situated to address the question.

Gallit Dobner: I'll turn it over to Ambassador Blitt, who's definitely best positioned to respond.

Jessica Blitt: Thank you. I'm happy to do so.

This Sunday will be the third election since February of last year. The two preceding elections have been free and fair. They've been well-run. In some ways, it's a sign of democracy that it's finding its way.

Institutions are continuing to grow and build. Some institutional stability is something the international community, including Canada, would like to see in Kosovo in order to have a stable partner on the ground. The way they've gone through these electoral processes has been fully in line with their constitution. A number of situations have gone to the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court has decreed one way or another, and that has led to action.

I'm a little "glass half full", or at least I try to be. Obviously, Kosovo needs to have a stable government to be able to move forward, and to move forward as a strong partner for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which is what we want to see for the overall Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country.

They have been following their constitutional processes and electoral processes. We're hoping that will continue. We expect to have successful elections this weekend, and then we'll be able to move forward from there.

Braedon Clark: I really appreciate that. That's an excellent answer.

All of us around this table know that democracy is messy sometimes and unpredictable, and that's okay. That's also a sign of resiliency, so I appreciate that.

Ms. Dobner, you also mentioned that the presence of organized crime networks in the region obviously has a pernicious effect on the region in general.

I'm curious. In your view, are those groups strictly non-state actors, or are there ties to foreign states as another means of influence through those criminal organizations?

Gallit Dobner: Pardon me. You mean to foreign states outside of the....

Braedon Clark: I mean outside of the region.

Gallit Dobner: Okay, outside of the region.

Braedon Clark: Yes—or inside, if there are cases.

Gallit Dobner: This is a level of detail I'm not sure I'd be able to provide from my vantage point, but, of course, organized crime flourishes where institutions are weak. I talked earlier about corruption, which is not unheard of in the region. To the degree that you have corruption, you usually have some partial elements of state capture, I imagine, but I wouldn't be able to give you a detailed answer to that question.

Braedon Clark: You talked about NATO membership for states in the region as well as EU accession. As all of you would know very well, when you look at the map of Europe and EU membership, there's a blank spot essentially hovering over the region, although the countries are in different states of play.

I'm curious. In the last minute or so—and I know it's hard to put you on the spot in a minute—give us the highlights of where you see work towards EU membership in the region and what that tells you in general about the stability of the region.

Gallit Dobner: Do you mean where we are on the path to EU accession?

Braedon Clark: Yes.

Gallit Dobner: It goes without saying that Montenegro is the next closest. It has, as I mentioned earlier, opened up all of those chapters and closed some of them already, which is really encouraging. The fact that the President of the European Council is in town this week and is joining the leaders of the Balkans in a summit is a really strong signal that the European Union is committed to the accession path and bringing on board Balkan countries. It's really encouraging.

Certain countries in the region still have far to go and need to resolve some of the disagreements among themselves as well as the security situations before they can become EU members, but Canada is playing an important role through some of the programming that I spoke about earlier, contributing to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These are all important facets of accession. Overall, we're optimistic.

• (1625)

Braedon Clark: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I really want to thank the witnesses for coming in, sharing their statements and answering all of our questions.

We will briefly suspend now to prepare for the next panel.

• (1625)

(Pause)

• (1630)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

Before I introduce our witnesses, I would like to get a number of brief committee items out of the way so we can get to the panel.

Number one, there is a budget for the subcommittee on international human rights in the amount of \$11,700 for its study on the human rights of children around the world. It was distributed to all members.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt this budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Second, there are two budgets for the committee to consider: the security situation in the Balkans study at \$10,850, and the supplementary budget of \$1,000 for the study of Bill C-219.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt these budgets?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Finally, I'd like to inform members that we're still working on organizing an informal meeting with the Speaker of the Parliament of Greenland on June 9 at 9 a.m. A confirmation email will be sent from the clerk as soon as those details are confirmed.

In the meantime, do members authorize the clerk to incur the necessary hospitality and logistical expenses for the proper conduct of this meeting with the Speaker of the Parliament of Greenland?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the second hour.

We have Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani, a gender equality and social inclusion specialist, joining us by video conference. We have Valerie Percival, professor, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University. We also have Krenare Recaj, Ph.D. candidate, Carleton University.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

I now invite Ms. Percival to make an opening statement of no more than five minutes.

• (1635)

Valerie Percival (Professor, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, I really appreciate this invitation to speak to you today on the security situation in the Balkans. I'm going to take a slightly more historical perspective, but I was very interested in the questions that were asked, and I am happy to address more contemporary concerns.

As a vital crossroads between east and west, the Balkans have always served as a bellwether for global peace and security. From the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which sparked World War I, to the wars that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and killed tens of thousands of civilians, geopolitical transitions clearly reveal themselves in the Balkans. The history of the region serves as a reminder that preventing conflict is far less costly than fighting wars and that what happens thousands of miles away can deeply impact Canada.

We are currently living through another such geopolitical transition. The number of conflicts worldwide is at its highest level since the end of World War II. The scaffolding of the liberal international order, long underpinned by the United States, is under stress and at risk of collapse.

Canadian foreign policy is still finding its footing in this shifting landscape. The government's stated objective is to build Canada strong by expanding export markets and by building our military strength, but we cannot ensure our security in a more divisive and violent world through military means alone. While the Prime Minister has discussed working together with other middle powers to provide new mechanisms to bolster our economic security, he has provided less clarity on what this means for our foreign policy in places like the Balkans.

Earlier in my career, I worked in Kosovo, first for the Canadian government and later as director of the International Crisis Group's office in Priština. This was a time when Canada punched above its weight internationally, making significant contributions to building stability and peace in the region.

During the current time of global uncertainty and upheaval, I've been reflecting on what Canadian foreign policy can learn from that era of engagement. What can our experience teach us about how to advance our interests in a complex world? Today, I will share some of those reflections to outline three lessons for Canadian policy born from both our successes and our mistakes in the Balkans.

First, Canadian foreign policy is at its best when the government provides a clear sense of direction or purpose, which I refer to as a "foreign policy compass". Such a compass should not only reflect Canadian values and interests. It must also advance our reputation as a country that contributes to peace and stability, while being realistic about Canada's value-add as a middle power.

During the Balkan conflicts, our foreign policy compass was the human security agenda, centred on the protection of civilians. This compass enabled Canada to quickly respond to the rapidly changing situation on the ground, an environment where our objectives of protecting human rights and promoting security sometimes appear contradictory. While we must adapt that compass to our new geopolitical realities, we cannot forget our value-add and our principles.

Second, Canada's contributions to peace and stability in places like Bosnia and Kosovo can have a cascading effect, elevating our global standing and benefiting our broader foreign policy objectives. However, this requires Canada to deliver tangible results rather than rhetorical platitudes. Canada deployed a broad range of coordinated and complementary foreign policy tools in the region.

This integrated approach included diplomatic assets, peacekeeping troops, police, civilian experts and the rapid disbursement of development assistance to promote security, as well as social and economic recovery.

Recognizing our limitations as a middle power, we worked through regional and international institutions such as NATO, the OSCE and the United Nations, while supporting the critically important role of the European Union as the key guarantor for future economic prosperity and stability. Given that preventing conflicts is far less costly than responding to them, we also supported research and advocacy for good governance, conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Third, a narrow focus on national security is insufficient for managing complex global crises. National security approaches focus on the symptoms rather than the root drivers of conflict and often underestimate the strategic importance of civilian protection, expert diplomacy and development and humanitarian assistance.

In the Balkans, Canada did not shy away from using our military assets, deploying approximately 40,000 troops to the region over the course of our engagement. These deployments strengthened our armed forces by providing them with vital real-world training. Crucially, however, the military was not the only voice at the decision-making table. The deployment of military assets was one tool in Canada's broader foreign policy tool box.

● (1640)

What does this mean for Canada's ability to contribute to the fragile peace in the Balkans today? When promoting the foreign policy objective of "Canada Strong", we must be keenly aware that our own security relies on our ability to contribute to a more stable and peaceful world in the Balkans and elsewhere.

While security in the Balkans is largely in the hands of our European partners, we can and should provide support where it's needed. We can do more than just sit at the table. We can put forward a clear and coherent agenda. Ultimately, we must carry the lessons of the Balkans forward as we navigate an increasingly complex and conflict-affected global landscape.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your statement.

Krenare Recaj, I now invite you to make your opening statement.

Krenare Recaj (Ph.D. Candidate, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the invitation to speak.

My name is Krenare Recaj, and I am a doctoral candidate at Carleton University and junior fellow at the Bill Graham Centre at the University of Toronto.

Today, I will be discussing what I and numerous experts have identified as one of the most serious security concerns in the Balkans: the lack of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. I will argue that the west's current approach to this problem is flawed and conclude with recommendations for what Canada's role should be.

Since 2013, the governments of Serbia and Kosovo have been engaged in EU-mediated talks backed by the U.S., which led to what's known informally as the Brussels Agreement. This agreement ties the Euro-Atlantic integration of both countries to the normalization of relations between them. The pressure for normalization has intensified since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as western leaders seek to prevent another flashpoint in Europe. The most problematic aspect of this renewed push for normalization between these two countries is the extent to which western actors have accommodated President Vučić's government, treating him as the guarantor of regional stability.

Using the example of the Banjska terrorist attack of 2023, I argue that this approach of tying Kosovo's European future to normalization with Serbia does not produce stability. It produces the opposite, while unjustly tying the future of the citizens of Kosovo to the co-operation of a government that continues to perpetuate dangerous nationalist myths and inflame tensions.

To understand this example, some context is necessary. Serbia's approach to Kosovo is shaped by nationalist mythology rooted in long-standing history that has been weaponized to justify violence against Albanians, most devastatingly by Milošević in the 1990s. Crucially, as experts have pointed out, this mythology continues to be perpetuated by Vučić's government today.

In September 2023, more than two dozen heavily armed Serbian nationalist militants attacked Kosovo police officers in northern Kosovo, killing one. Although Serbia denied any involvement and continues to do so, the government declared a day of national mourning for the three attackers who were killed. State-aligned Serbian media portrayed them as martyrs, explicitly invoking anti-Albanian rhetoric and nationalist mythologies. The response by both the government and state-aligned media reflects the continuation of nationalist rhetoric directed at Albanians and defiance towards the international community.

Following this incident, the United States condemned the violence in general terms but called on both parties equally to refrain from actions that inflamed tensions. In doing so, it created a false equivalency. The EU's language was admittedly stronger, with a resolution explicitly stating that Serbian authorities were heavily involved and condemning the use of the attack to spread hostility toward Kosovo Albanians, yet none of this translated to policy change. The framework tying Kosovo's future to normalization with Belgrade remained intact.

Meanwhile, Kosovo has historically been one of the most pro-western countries in the world. Although this continues to be the case, there is growing frustration among both Kosovo's government and its citizens towards the EU and the United States. It is important to note that this frustration for the most part has not been directed at Canada, which has remained largely on the sidelines of the question of normalization between Serbia and Kosovo.

This brings me to my two recommendations.

First, Canada should use its voice within NATO and multilateral forums to advocate for decoupling Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration from normalization with Serbia. Kosovo's citizens, the vast majority of whom simply want security, economic opportunity and participation in the international community, should not have their future depend on the co-operation of a government that glorifies those who attack them.

Second, Canada should capitalize on the goodwill it has already earned among the government and people of Kosovo and take concrete steps to deepen its influence and presence in the region so that it's positioned to play a greater and more constructive role.

I'm out of time to go into the concrete steps, but I'm happy to address them in questions.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now invite Ms. Berishaj-Sylejmani to make an opening statement.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani (Gender equality and social inclusion specialist, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to everybody for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani. I'm a gender and social inclusion specialist. I have worked for more than 15 years on the issue of women, peace and security. I'm also a board member of the Kosovo Women's Network, the largest umbrella organization of women NGOs in Kosovo.

Among the other issues that have been mentioned, which are very important and tied to security, today I would like to speak about the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda in Kosovo and why it remains relevant to this day.

The wars in the western Balkans during the nineties, including the war in Kosovo, caused immense human suffering and had a profound impact on women and girls. While women were disproportionately affected by the conflict, they also played a critical role in supporting their communities, rebuilding social ties and contributing to peace and recovery in the whole region, yet women were largely absent from formal peace negotiations and post-conflict decision-making processes. This exclusion is precisely what United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 seeks to address. It focuses on and addresses it through participation, protection, prevention and recovery, which are the four pillars of the resolution.

More than 20 years later, Kosovo has made important progress, as we heard from the previous speakers, in many fields, but significant implementation challenges remain regarding Resolution 1325. Women in Kosovo not only support this agenda through institutions; they live it every day. They also lived it during the war and after the war. Through community mediation, support to survivors, dialogue across communities and grassroots skills building, they continue to contribute to stability and social cohesion.

Kosovo is now preparing the new program of gender equality. It's very important to say that "women, peace and security" is one of the main pillars, the third pillar, of this new program.

Also, civil society organizations, particularly women-led organizations, have played a central role in advocating for these advances, providing services and promoting accountability. There has also been important progress in recognizing survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, who now have access to legal recognition and to institutional support.

I have mentioned what may be some positive steps that happened here, but there are also many issues that still remain. We need continuous investment to maintain peace in this part of the world, in our Balkans. Kosovo and the wider region continue to face challenges linked to unresolved grievances from the war, incomplete justice for victims and persistent mistrust between communities in Kosovo. By "communities", I mean the majority Albanian community, the minority Serb community and other ethnic communities such as the Bosnian, Roma and Ashkali communities.

The western Balkans, in addition, are facing challenges from disinformation and foreign influence. This has been mentioned before. External factors often exploit existing divisions, amplify mistrust and undermine confidence in democratic institutions. This makes resilient and inclusive institutions even more important to have in Kosovo. In this context, a women, peace and security agenda is not about gender equality; it's about stability in Kosovo and the wider region. It's about social cohesion. It's about democratic governance in Kosovo.

Despite policy progress, women in Kosovo remain under-represented in decision-making institutions. Since I'm talking about women, peace and security, I'm going to mention the participation of women in security forces, which is only at around 15%. In the Kosovo police service, women are at around 10%. We are still not at the percentage we would want. The law on gender equality calls for fifty-fifty participation in all decision-making areas.

One notable gap is also women's limited and inconsistent participation in the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue, which was mentioned. It is our only platform.

The most important platform for co-operation and communication with Serbia for the time being is being facilitated by the EU. That process, if implemented and handled correctly, will have a direct impact on long-lasting peace in Kosovo.

• (1650)

Another concern, which is very important to say, is the gradual reduction and fragmentation of international funding for women, peace and security. It's also worth noting that this is happening not only to the women, peace and security agenda but also across all the human rights and women's empowerment issues, and not only with funding but also with anti-gender narratives and the backtracking in the field of human rights and gender.

Canada, in this area, can continue and can increase its meaningful participation and engagement. Canada has been a strong supporter of women, peace and security globally. Continued support for women's civil society organizations, women's leadership development and women's participation in peace and security processes can help strengthen Kosovo. Canada can also continue to promote the meaningful inclusion of women in dialogue and decision-making processes and support efforts to build resilience against disinformation and polarization.

Why does this matter beyond Kosovo? It's because the stability of the western Balkans is not a regional concern. A stable Balkan region is a stable Europe. The region's experience also demonstrates how inclusive peacebuilding strengthens societies and helps prevent future instability. Across the western Balkans—

The Chair: Thank you. I have to stop you, unfortunately, because we're way over the time.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: Sure.

The Chair: I hope you can cover some of the extra points during questions.

I will now open the floor for questions, beginning with MP Michael Chong.

You have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Some of our witnesses mentioned taking concrete steps to deepen the presence in the region and talked about delivering tangible results in terms of diplomatic assets. I want to ask a question about our embassies and consulates.

I know we have embassies in Croatia and Serbia, and we have consulates in North Macedonia and Albania. However, we have nothing in Montenegro and Kosovo. It seems to me that of the six states in the western Balkans, Montenegro is closest to being admitted into the European Union. Is that a fair assessment? That would suggest that the Canadian government should be looking at opening an embassy in Montenegro, because I believe we have embassies in all the other member states of the European Union. Is that a fair conclusion?

Valerie Percival: Yes, I would say that's a fair conclusion.

• (1655)

Krenare Recaj: I think that is a fair conclusion. I don't think that precludes looking at opening an embassy in Kosovo as well. We're the only G7 country without an embassy in Kosovo. Although I would never think to discredit the amount of work that gets done by the ambassador of Canada to Kosovo, who was on the panel before mine, there is a limitation to how much you can get done through a cross-appointed embassy without an in-residence ambassador.

Hon. Michael Chong: You suggested in your testimony, by the way, that Canada should advocate for decoupling Kosovo's European Union aspirations from the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Is that based on your view that the coupling of those two issues provides an incentive for one of the state parties to continue to meddle in the other state party in order to prevent accession to the European Union?

Krenare Recaj: It is based on that. It's also based on the history. The last five to 10 years have shown that Serbia's government continues to be intransigent towards the European and international communities and towards Kosovo itself. This means that we've been in the same talks without making progress, and the Government of Serbia uses it as an excuse to hold over the relations with Kosovo.

Hon. Michael Chong: Dr. Percival, do you share that view as well?

Valerie Percival: I perhaps have a broader perspective. I would say that Kosovo owes it to its Serbian minority population to ensure that they have safety and security. The current government of Prime Minister Kurti—who I met when he was first released from prison 20 years ago—has not fulfilled its share of the obligations in terms of the protection of Serbian communities.

However, I also agree with my colleague that the role of Serbia in intervening in Kosovo is long-standing, and the current government in Serbia has definitely continued, and perhaps accelerated, that tradition.

Hon. Michael Chong: Can you speak a bit about the national security and defence dimensions of Serbia with respect to NATO and with respect to Russia? I understand that there is some military co-operation going on between Serbia and NATO. Can you speak to that a bit and also speak to whether there's any military co-operation going on between Serbia and the Russian Federation?

Krenare Recaj: In the previous panel, there was mention of a recent NATO exercise done with Serbia. All of these are efforts to have Serbia turn towards the west instead of Russia. As I and other experts would point out, Serbia does this very intentionally. They will flirt with both sides. They will take part in these exercises and

say what they need to to western countries, but they will still have their ties to Russia—Russian oil. Continued rhetoric by the government and public polling of the citizens show that they will continue to flirt with the Russian side.

There are activities going on with the west and co-operation with the west, but I don't think that reflects an actual and lived turn towards the western nations.

Valerie Percival: This is a bit out of my area of expertise, but I would note that one of the side effects of the conflict in Ukraine I think has been a general weakening of Russia's ability to exercise its influence with Serbia. That presents an opening for countries like Canada.

Hon. Michael Chong: I'll just say that several years ago, I read a book by Tim Butcher called *The Trigger*, and it was a real reminder of how history is so present in that region of the world. It was just something to note.

I appreciate your answers.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will go next to MP Vandenberg.

You have six minutes.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses. I wish we had a lot more time with all of you. I have questions for each of you, but I'd like to start with Ms. Berishaj-Sylejmani.

Maria, it's good to see you again. You spoke a lot about women, peace and security, and we know that the former Yugoslavia is a very good example of both the worst and the best when it comes to that. I'd look at the Dayton accord as a bad example. There were no women involved in that, and some of the instability of that accord is probably a factor now. I note what you said about the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo and the lack of women there—that we don't want history to repeat itself.

You said there needs to be more investment. One of your recommendations was that Canada provide more support for women, peace and security efforts going on in the region. I know there have been a lot of spontaneous platforms where women in Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia have come together on their own in order to facilitate dialogue in ways that the formal processes may not have been able to do.

I wonder if you could talk a bit more about what Canada could do to support that.

• (1700)

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: Thank you, MP Vandenberg, for your question. It's so good to see you.

That's an excellent question. You pointed out, rightly so, that even during the 1990s, when there was a lot of ethnic tension, and also during the war, women's civil society organizations from both Kosovo and Serbia never actually stopped co-operating and participating. They basically kept the bridges of co-operation and communication open between the two societies.

You rightly pointed out that this is something we should still be focusing on and investing in. That is the first thing. This is the fourth pillar of Resolution 1325, which is on prevention. More investment in talks and dialogue among civil society organizations from both Kosovo and Serbia would bring us closer to peace.

On the other hand, it is very important, as I mentioned, that Kosovo is developing a program for gender equality, and one of the pillars will be Resolution 1325. It is very clear, with objectives, time frames and what needs to be done. Looking at that program, it's very important that the country knows what it wants to achieve. Basically, it's about designating what is important in the program and supporting it—with support to women's participation in the security sector, in the security force and in police—and also supporting dialogue among Kosovo women, Albanian women and Serb women.

We also have to take into consideration—somebody rightly said this before—that we need to support dialogue among women from different communities in Kosovo, because this would also bring us peace, create trust and, in the long run, create more sustainable peace for Kosovo.

I'll add one more thing, because you also asked what would be interesting for Canada to invest in, besides these things. When it comes to countering disinformation and foreign influence, media literacy programs and independent journalism are two very important programs in which Canada can invest. There are also the Association of Journalists of Kosovo and the network of women journalists, which can be part of this support because they can help counter disinformation and bring more stability to the region.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you so much for that.

I know I don't have much time.

Dr. Percival, you said there was an era when Canada punched above its weight, particularly in Kosovo. You said that engagement can enhance our status and can prevent conflict. Do you think Canada should be doing more in the region, with more offices, a diplomatic presence or perhaps more engagement with multilateral organizations like the OSCE and others? Do you think we should do more?

Valerie Percival: I would agree that we definitely should do more. There was a question about embassies in the region. I think we could learn a lot from fellow countries that have a lighter footprint.

When we open an embassy, it's very expensive. We could have a lighter footprint and still have a lot of influence. One example is secondments to the OSCE. Questions were raised about cybersecurity and other forms of countering foreign interference. Those are all areas where Canada has tremendous expertise.

• (1705)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

Ms. Recaj, you said that you had some concrete steps that Canada could take, and you ran out of time. Could you please tell us those?

Krenare Recaj: I mentioned that Canada is the only country without an embassy, so that's a concrete step.

My second recommendation was about capitalizing on goodwill and engendering more goodwill among the Kosovo government and Kosovo citizens. An example of that is visa liberalization. It's been two years since the EU liberalized visas, and although there have been some minor drawbacks, overall it's been a success. The problems that were forecasted never came to fruition. Canada could engender goodwill with the country and have more influence through EU visa liberalization.

Also, as both you and my colleague Valerie Percival mentioned, we should give funding for paying secondments and make sure that we aren't the only country among our allies that doesn't have the same status within things like the OSCE.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before I turn to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I will ask Vice-Chair Michael Chong to chair the rest of the meeting. I have to be back in the chamber to speak to a private member's bill that I'm sponsoring.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chair.

I hope Mr. Hussen will not bring shame upon the committee when he makes his statement in the House of Commons.

Ms. Percival, you said in your opening remarks that we cannot forget our principles in the current geopolitical context given that, according to some experts, there is currently a kind of powder keg in the Balkans, in the heart of Europe.

What did you mean when you said that we must not forget our principles?

[*English*]

Valerie Percival: That would be the principles of balancing the importance of civilian protection and national security, of focusing on human rights and of understanding how Canada can advance our own national interests while also ensuring that we are building peace and stability in the region and have a comprehensive approach.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The fact that you are asking this question means that, to some extent, you fear that we might forget our principles. What is the basis for your fear? Is it based on government actions, positions or simply inaction?

[English]

Valerie Percival: I don't think we have necessarily lost our principles, but I am concerned about the current global environment and the current focus on national security. While I support fully the importance of supporting our military, increasing that support and using our military assets in places like Bosnia and Kosovo, I am concerned that when the focus is on building Canada strong, we forget about our obligations globally. That is my concern.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: For example, don't you see the fact that the government has slashed its international aid as a problem for certain programs, which may have had or will no longer have a concrete impact in the region we are discussing today?

Cuts to international aid are not limited to Canada. The United States has slashed the USAID program, and a number of European countries and Japan have also made cuts. We're seeing a kind of an international trend where many governments are spending more on defence, but cutting their international aid budgets. In our opinion, these should be two separate budget envelopes, which are not inter-related.

Don't you see such budget cuts to these programs as a problem that could, unfortunately, have harmful consequences?

[English]

Valerie Percival: I have written about my concern about the decline in development assistance globally, including in areas like the Balkans. Development assistance is a tool that helps us project soft power and support for diplomacy. In the last budget, there was a decrease in support for Global Affairs Canada, and we have not yet fully seen what the consequences of that decrease will be in terms of our diplomatic footprint. It is a concern that I share.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We know that the Balkans are home to a diversity of peoples, as well as languages, religions and traditions inherited from the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. You have demonstrated that quite eloquently.

In your opening remarks, you said that the region has always been a barometer. To what extent, even today, are the Balkans still a barometer? Was this barometer more important at one time than it is today? Do you still see a connection today? If the past is any indication of the future, is this barometer still as relevant?

[English]

Valerie Percival: It's a very interesting question. Thank you for that.

As I mentioned, the Balkans is a bellwether for global peace and security. We have a situation where the scaffolding of the liberal international order, which was underpinned by the United States, is weakened, and I think you see that in the Balkan region.

I think you see the emergence of potentially a path forward, because you have the role of organizations like the European Union and you have Canada's continued engagement—and hopefully enhanced engagement—in organizations like NATO and the OSCE.

The Prime Minister has spoken about working with other middle powers, and the Balkans could be an arena where that agenda could play out.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

We'll continue with Madam Cody.

You have five minutes for questions and comments.

Connie Cody (Cambridge, CPC): Thank you, and thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

My question is for Professor Valerie Percival.

Drawing from your expertise in research at the Norman Paterson School on fragile states, gender inclusion and Balkan dynamics, where are the documented gaps in Canada's current response to authoritarian economic tools like the belt and road initiative compared to other interference methods? What evidence-based recommendations would you offer to strengthen democratic resilience and social inclusion across the region?

Valerie Percival: That's an excellent question.

One of the things we need to reflect on in terms of the belt and road initiative is that it filled a gap. China provided financing for infrastructure at a time when in some places that financing might not have been more readily available. Also, I would point to the COVID pandemic. China provided vaccines when vaccines were in short supply in other places. I think the vaccines were not as effective as others, but it was a symbolic gesture.

In terms of countering influence—that's a very big question—we need to go back to the fundamentals. It's about having a presence in the region, a diplomatic presence, so that we can identify how other actors are engaging in that kind of financing and support, how we can counter it and where the avenues are for our engagement.

I support a lot of what my colleagues said about the women, peace and security agenda. Gender equality has lost its appeal in the current global backlash against gender equality, but the evidence is 100% crystal clear that supporting gender equality and doing concrete things like ensuring labour force participation—Kosovo has the lowest labour force participation in Europe—are measures that can contribute to more peaceful societies.

• (1715)

Connie Cody: Your research and teaching have long focused on fragile states, conflict prevention and inclusive governance. China has already secured major infrastructure projects and financing across the western Balkans through the belt and road initiative, creating clear avenues for economic leverage and potential foreign interference. Serbia in particular has emerged as China's principal partner in the region, which included a free trade agreement in 2024.

In your view, how vulnerable does this leave the region to delayed or derailed Euro-Atlantic integration, and what critical gaps exist in Canada's current diplomatic and development response?

Valerie Percival: That's another excellent question.

I think countries in the region—and my colleague can probably speak to this in more detail—are weighing different countries off against each other, so the European Union remains the key gravitational force in that region that is helping to ensure economic security and national security.

The role of the People's Republic of China is something to be concerned about. It's not an area that I have done extensive research on with regard to the Balkans, but I have seen it elsewhere. On the role of China particularly with debt, something we're not really paying enough attention to is the degree to which the level of debt can be exploited for geopolitical gain.

Connie Cody: I'm not sure if you would like to answer this or one of the other witnesses would like to. To what extent does growing Chinese engagement in sectors such as infrastructure, energy and telecommunications have on geopolitical or security implications?

Valerie Percival: That is another excellent question, and a tiny bit outside of my wheelhouse, but it definitely does have an impact. The role of China in that space demonstrates that.

One of the other areas of research has been Africa. The engagement of China in the belt and road initiative filled a gap there and provided infrastructure in ways that western donors didn't do. We have to reflect on that, and we also have to think about how important infrastructure is for economic growth and stability.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Sari.

[*Translation*]

Abdelhaq Sari (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for being here.

I have many questions for them. The more answers they give us, the more our eyes will be opened to the issues that we need to look at and understand better.

Ms. Berishaj-Sylejmani, you spoke at length about disinformation on the issue of gender equality. In one minute or less, please explain to me how we can counter this disinformation. You started talking about it earlier, but you didn't elaborate on the subject.

I'll give you a few seconds to finish your answer. Afterwards, I will ask the other witnesses some questions.

• (1720)

[*English*]

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: Thank you very much, MP Sari.

As you said, that's a very important topic, and it's being talked about across the whole Balkans. I mentioned, I think very briefly when I was giving an answer to MP Vandenberg, that investing in education—and this was also mentioned by one of the ambassadors on the first panel—especially in media literacy programs but also in independent journalism, is one of the most important ways to fight disinformation and counter especially Russian influence. Russian influence comes through different portals and media outlets in Kosovo. We don't know who owns them or where they come from, but it comes mainly from Serbia, which is Russia's proxy in the region when it comes to influence in the security sector.

On investing in education, in this case, the Canadian state and the embassy should be closer to Kosovo. That's the first thing. Second, investing in programs for education, for countering misinformation, for media literacy and for independent journalism should be one of the main issues to counter disinformation and foreign influence, such as Russian influence.

I have to say one more thing. I was looking at infrastructure projects. China has invested in all the Balkan states but Kosovo. We still don't see a big Chinese influence in Kosovo, but Russian influence is there for sure.

[*Translation*]

Abdelhaq Sari: Thank you very much, Ms. Berishaj-Sylejmani.

Ms. Recaj, I'll turn to you for a very important question. Sometimes, when we want to carry out operations in a country—whatever that country may be—there is always a risk of misunderstanding. What role do researchers like you and the diaspora play in helping us gain a better understanding before intervening in a country like that?

[*English*]

Krenare Recaj: The role of the diaspora is extremely important. When I say that we need to look at Kosovo as a pro-western state, this doesn't mean that we aren't looking at the Serb diaspora at all. Diasporas are often made up of people who can assess and be frustrated but can also pull levers in their own states. The Kosovar, Albanian and Serbian diasporas in Canada can play important roles in pushing their governments towards a more pro-western stance.

I really want to put that on the table. It's not just about looking at the Kosovar and Albanian diasporas. The Serbian diaspora in Canada also has a lot of goodwill towards the west and Canada. We can rely on them as emissaries and diplomats within Canada to speak to their country and to advocate for better policies.

[Translation]

Abdelhaq Sari: Thank you.

In closing, I have a question that you can answer quickly, Ms. Percival: Could tensions surrounding the issue of identity also have an influence? You spoke earlier about the issue of human security. Could local identity politics also have an influence? How can we truly gain a better understanding before also taking action on this identity issue?

[English]

Valerie Percival: If I understand the question correctly, you're asking about identity.

[Translation]

Abdelhaq Sari: I'm talking about identity-related tensions, not necessarily identity itself.

[English]

Valerie Percival: Reducing ethnic tensions is an area where Canada can engage more. We could be—

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Be brief, please.

Valerie Percival: We can draw on our experiences in Canada in terms of relations with Quebec.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Recaj, you told us that a number of countries were trying to normalize their relations with Serbia and that, in your opinion, those countries were on the wrong track. If I understand correctly—please correct me if I'm wrong—Canada is taking a somewhat backseat approach to this push to normalize relations with Serbia, but it is participating in a certain way, precisely by staying in the background. I would like you to tell us how you view Canada's position regarding this kind of a push—which is coming from all over—to normalize relations with Serbia.

• (1725)

[English]

Krenare Recaj: The normalization talks between Serbia and Kosovo are EU-led. The European Union is leading those talks. They're backed mostly by the United States, which is the main stakeholder and has been the main stakeholder.

Canada hasn't had a very prominent role in them, other than taking, I would say, a passive role on the side of its allies. It doesn't have a direct involvement in the EU-mediated talks, and it doesn't have the backing or pushing that U.S. politicians and diplomats have in Kosovo.

The point that I made is that Canada has an incredible amount of goodwill and history with Kosovo. As Kosovars, Albanians, Serbians, other ethnicities within Kosovo, and citizens in Serbia get frustrated with the U.S.- and EU-backed talks, Canada can capitalize on its goodwill and take a more progressive and involved approach.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How could Canada do such a thing, knowing full well that the United States and Europe together are united in their determination to move in a specific direction? How could Canada tell them that they are on the wrong track? I find it difficult, quite honestly and without any bias, to understand how Canada could go against the will of the United States and the European Union. Even if they are on the wrong track, what relative power does Canada have compared to a coalition—which is quite impressive, when we're talking about Europe and the United States—that is moving in a specific direction?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

Be very brief.

Krenare Recaj: I'm by no means saying that Canada comes in and becomes the person to push the talks, but I'm saying that Canada can, behind closed doors in international forums, raise concerns about the way that Vučić's government is being accommodated, even while he's intransigent to the international community. On the flip side of that, Canada can use its goodwill among the people of Kosovo and the people of Canada to support the talks. Behind closed doors in forums, we could raise their concerns and then openly support the talks and their allies.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Majumdar, and following that it's Mr. Oliphant, at which point we will adjourn.

Mr. Majumdar, you have five minutes.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, sir.

This first question is for Ms. Percival and Ms. Berishaj-Sylejmani. The question I have for you is related to Russian political and security influence. Given Russia's enduring political, military, energy and security ties to Serbia and its support for hardline actors such as Milorad Dodik and others, how is Moscow exploiting ethnic tensions and blocking progress on EU integration for Kosovo and Serbian normalization?

What specific evidence exists of Russian hybrid activities, including disinformation, paramilitary training or political financing, which we know is very problematic, that undermine both stability and human rights in the region? How should Canada coordinate with allies on targeted sanctions, on support for independent media and civil society, or on diplomatic pressure to counter this without rewarding obstruction?

I know it's a very small question, but please proceed.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: It was all for me. Is that right?

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Yes, that's correct. Please go ahead.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: Okay. Thank you.

First, you are completely right. As you know, there is a Kosovo majority, which is the Albanian population, and then there is a minority in Kosovo, which is the Serbian population. Serbians living in Kosovo are about 4% or 5% of the population, and 92% are Albanians. There are also other minorities in Kosovo.

Tensions are created because most of the Serb population in Kosovo live in enclaves and are directly responding to Vučić and Belgrade parties. Basically, most of the Serbs in Kosovo, unfortunately, don't consider Priština to be their capital; they consider Belgrade to be their capital. Most of the Serbs in Kosovo would rather listen to what Moscow and Belgrade have to say than what Priština—which should be their capital—has to say when it comes to what their integration should be and where their path should be.

Basically, without having a meaningful integration of the Serb minority community into Kosovo's institutions, and without them seeing Priština as their capital, not Belgrade, there will be a lot of influence. Russia influences through different media. Russia influences through the media in Serbia, but most of the Serb population watches that media from Serbia in the Serbian language. It's basically news from Russia to Serbia, translated into the Serbian language. People in Kosovo are basically being informed directly by Russian sources and Russian bots through Serbian media.

• (1730)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much. It's impressive that you were able to get through so much in such a brief time.

Let me ask a quick follow-up, if I might, in the interest of time.

Russia and China are increasingly coordinating authoritarian tactics internationally, including in the information domain. To what extent are they using disinformation, cyber-operations or influence campaigns in the western Balkans to inflame ethnic divisions; to erode support for democratic reforms and EU or NATO aspirations; or to target Kosovo's sovereignty and minority rights? I appreciate this is pretty much a legacy of the late Richard Holbrooke, who I got to know a little before he passed, but it certainly was a confusing mess that was left behind.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: To a large extent, and not very directly, this is not something you might see as obvious, but if you track the signs, you will basically be able to read it.

You mentioned meddling directly with the elections in Kosovo. We didn't see that. We saw it more through the influence of the Serbian List. It is the only Serbian political party in Kosovo that operates, and 99% of the Serbian population that works and lives in Kosovo votes for this party. It's Vučić's party, basically, which is a Russian proxy in Serbia, so this is a direct link if you want to see it.

Also, we had very good examples from before, unfortunately, in Montenegro. When Montenegro had elections and was trying to join NATO, we saw that Russia was directly influencing the referendum and these processes.

On the other hand—and I also have to stress this—as I said before, Chinese influence is not that obvious in Kosovo. In other Balkan states, yes, it is, but Kosovo is still pretty good at handling Chinese influence when it comes to energy, infrastructure, soft

power and other things. For this, I have to give the Kosovar government credit.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much for that answer.

We'll have our last round with Mr. Oliphant.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I want to delve a bit into the so-called normalization issue. I guess I'm a little less pessimistic about it than maybe our witnesses are.

I want to talk about two areas. One is the Belgrade-Priština dialogue, what has stalled it and what could incentivize it to continue. Some think that EU membership for either Serbia or Kosovo could lead to that. I understand that it may not, but I want to push a bit harder on that dialogue and what we could do as Canadians to foster it.

Not related to that but not dissimilar is the issue of the Peace Implementation Council, or PIC, and its steering board, which Canada is a member of, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the influences that have led to the high representative stepping down. We have foreign influence this is not just Russian and Chinese but also American. We have foreign influence from Serbia manifesting in minority populations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo.

I just want to get a bit of thought on what could incentivize the dialogue to be bumped up, and what role Canada could play in the north in Bosnia and Herzegovina with respect to the Peace Implementation Council. I know we have a bit more Kosovar experience here, but maybe some Kosovar and some Bosnian and Herzegovinian...and also witnesses online.

Krenare Recaj: I'm happy to start. Thank you for the question.

There are two things that I think can further normalization.

First, as I said, decoupling Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration from normalization will make progress on normalization. If Kosovo starts making progress on its own merits on Euro-Atlantic integration, the Serbian government will see that. The Serbian populace will say, "Kosovo is making progress on Euro-Atlantic integration. We want to make progress too." I think both countries are being stalled by it.

The second thing, which is related to that, is to put pressure on the Government of Serbia when they are intransigent towards the international community and Kosovar Albanians. Continue to put pressure on the Government of Kosovo when they are intransigent towards the national community as well.

At no point today have I said that the Government of Kosovo is never an obstacle to normalization of relations. I have only said that there cannot be an equivalency between the two. Both governments have been obstacles.

I think decoupling normalization from Euro-Atlantic integration will serve as an impetus for both countries to move forward.

• (1735)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: What about the PIC?

Krenare Recaj: The PIC is not my area of expertise, so I will defer.

Valerie Percival: I have only worked tangentially on Bosnia, so I won't engage.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): I see that Madame Berishaj-Sylejmani has her hand up.

Go ahead.

Maria Berishaj-Sylejmani: Thank you.

It's a bit challenging being online. I hope I'm not interrupting. I just want to add something to what my colleague said previously.

A clear European path for Kosovo and Serbia...whoever is constructive in the dialogue. Speeding up the process of EU accession would, I think, speed up and incentivize people to be a bit more constructive in the dialogue.

Somebody mentioned sanctions towards Serbia. I think the international community needs to be a bit firmer when Serbia is, let's say, not honouring its commitments to the EU.

Also, as you said very rightly, it's not only Russian or Chinese influence. We have had a major shift in Bosnia. I'm sorry; we are talking about things regionally, but this has been all over the news lately. We saw the change in high representatives. It's all about praising Dodik and trying to have different political shifts and movements in the region in order to accommodate certain business interests.

That's why I think Canada stepping into a more active, constructive role and having a different approach than the U.S. at this stage would mean that we have a friend across the Atlantic Ocean that wants good things for this region.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you very much, Mr. Oliphant.

Thank you very much to all three of our witnesses on this panel. Your testimony is valuable and will be, I'm certain, incorporated into a potential report.

Without further ado, this meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>