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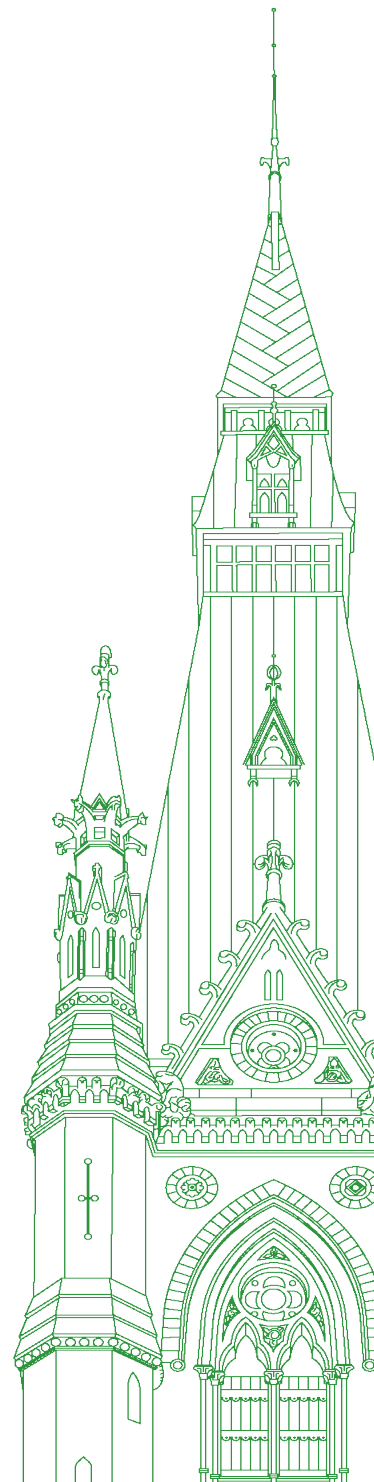
Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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Chair: Ahmed Hussen



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• (1550)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 39 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 is resuming its study of the security situation in the Balkans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

I would now like to welcome our witness for the first hour.

We have, from the Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo, His Excellency—

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): I have a point of order.

Given the time and the fact that we only have one witness here, would it be okay with you and the witness if we just went to 4:30, so we can have a longer time with multiple witnesses?

If he wants a full hour, that would also be fine.

The Chair: Yes. In fact, the ambassador told me that he would prefer a shorter time period. He doesn't want to do an hour, so we will aim for about 40 minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: We'd love to have him for an hour, of course.

The Chair: That's not his wish.

We have His Excellency Adriatik Kryeziu, the Republic of Kosovo's ambassador to Canada.

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

I understand you will go a little over five minutes. We will indulge you, knowing that you're giving up some of your time for the later period.

I now invite His Excellency to begin his—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

What is the committee's policy? When there is a vote, how much time do we have to return to the committee? I just want to know your policy because I left the chamber, arrived here, and we began. I feel like we had five minutes between the end of the vote and our return here. I just want to know how much time you normally allow for getting from the chamber to the meeting room.

[English]

The Chair: My approach is to wait for enough members to form a quorum before we start. We couldn't really start without your presence, so I waited for you to arrive. Then we started.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: At the committee meetings I've attended, we were normally given at least 10 minutes to get back to the meeting room. After the vote, we have to gather our things and come here. Please keep that in mind. That's just a little reminder, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Your Excellency, please proceed.

H.E Adriatik Kryeziu (Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo to Canada, Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo): Hello, everyone.

Honourable Ahmed Hussen, chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, and honourable members of the committee, thank you very much for having me here and for taking the time. It's a good opportunity to address today's security situation in the western Balkans, particularly the developments that directly and indirectly affect the Republic of Kosovo and our people.

I would like to begin by expressing Kosovo's deep appreciation of its long-standing partnership with Canada and Canada's continuing support for peace, democracy, human rights and a Euro-Atlantic future for Kosovo and the wider region. We also highly value Canada's outstanding support for Kosovo's membership in all the international organizations, as well as its broader efforts to advance international recognition for Kosovo.

Mr. Chairman, Kosovo remains firmly committed to peace, democracy, regional co-operation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Since declaring our independence in 2008, we have built a strong democratic institution, strengthened the rule of law and combatted corruption and other negative phenomena, despite operating in the region's historically fragile security environment.

Today, the security situation in the western Balkans is generally stable. However, it remains fragile because of Serbia's hostile attitude towards Kosovo. The region—and Kosovo in particular—continues to face pressure stemming from Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, its ongoing support for parallel and illegal structures that seek to undermine the sovereignty and constitutional order of the Republic of Kosovo and its territorial ambitions towards neighbouring states in the region.

The most serious security incident in recent years occurred in September 2023 in Banjska in northern Kosovo, when an organized and heavily armed paramilitary terrorist group launched an attack against Kosovo's territory and its border police, resulting in the death of Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku. Kosovo police successfully repelled the group and forced them back into Serbian territory. During the operation, Kosovo authorities seized a substantial cache of military-grade weapons, explosives and other equipment valued at several million dollars, confirming that this was a highly serious, well-planned attack carried out with significant logistical support and linked to individuals closely associated with the Serbian leadership, led by President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić.

This incident underscores the fact that security risks in the region remain real and that accountability is essential for long-term stability. Kosovo continues to insist that the perpetrators of this terrorist attack be brought to justice. This call for the surrender of the perpetrators was also raised recently by a distinguished Canadian diplomat and senior NATO official, Ambassador Kevin Hamilton, during his official visit to Pristina last month. Now your ambassador is also the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's deputy assistant secretary general for partnerships. Kevin Hamilton has publicly made clear that Serbia is responsible for what really happened in northern Kosovo in September 2023.

We take this opportunity to call upon Canada—as we have been doing—to increase its diplomatic engagements and to urge Serbia to extradite, to Kosovo, the perpetrators of this unprecedented terrorist attack in northern Kosovo.

We work closely with international partners, including NATO and KFOR, to maintain peace and stability, as well as to prevent escalation. We remain focused on monitoring criminal networks and organized gangs, strengthening the rule of law and guaranteeing security and equal treatment for all citizens, including members of the Serbian community. These actions are law enforcement measures and should not be viewed as policies directed against any ethnic groups. Kosovo's constitutional framework and legal system provide extensive protections for all communities in Kosovo.

• (1555)

While the rights of minority communities in Kosovo are protected according to the highest democratic standards, the situation of ethnic Albanians living in southern Serbia, in the Presheva Valley, remains a matter of serious concern with respect to human rights, equal citizenship and compliance with European standards for the protection of national minorities.

One of the most serious concerns relates to the practice commonly referred to as “address deactivation”, through which thousands of ethnic Albanians are alleged to have been removed from civil registries, thereby losing—or facing significant obstacles in access-

ing—personal documentation, voting rights and other public services.

Serbia continually calls for the highest standards regarding the rights of Serbs in Kosovo while failing to provide a comparable level of protection and rights to Albanians living in the Presheva Valley.

For this reason, the Government of Kosovo has consistently advocated for the inclusion of the rights and concerns of Albanians in Presheva within the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue process and has called for closer monitoring by the international community, including Canada.

Mr. Chairman, the broader geopolitical context cannot be ignored. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated how regional tensions can be exploited by external actors seeking to undermine democratic societies. The Balkans and Kosovo are not immune to these pressures.

Kosovo remains fully aligned with Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policies, including sanctions against the Russian Federation, and it remains committed to contributing to both regional and international stability. Kosovo's strategic direction is clear: membership in NATO, integration into the European Union, strong partnerships with democratic allies and respect for international law.

Kosovo's vision is that of a peaceful region founded on sovereign equality, mutual respect and good neighbourly relations. We remain fully committed to the European Union-facilitated dialogue with Serbia, emphasizing that normalization must be based on the implementation of existing agreements we have reached with Serbia and on mutual recognition as the foundation for lasting peace and long-term regional stability.

Mr. Chairman, the western Balkans also face broader external influences that affect regional stability. Serbia, fully aligned with the Russian Federation, continues to exert a destabilizing influence through disinformation campaigns, political pressure and efforts to deepen divisions both within and among states in the region. Beyond Kosovo, these activities are also evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia; here, institutional stability and the Euro-Atlantic orientation of these countries must be safeguarded.

At the same time, China's economic engagement and growing presence in the western Balkans should be viewed within the broader geo-economics context, in which economic development, strategic competition and the political orientation of the region intersect. We believe that all external partnerships should strengthen rather than weaken the Euro-Atlantic integration and orientation of our region. In this context, Kosovo's position is consistent: The future of the western Balkans lies in full—and as rapid as possible—integration into NATO and the European Union.

Despite the fact that all countries of the region are part of the belt and road initiative, the Republic of Kosovo did not join the BRI and has followed careful relations with China. In this regard, Kosovo has consulted with its EU and Euro-Atlantic partners.

Mr. Chairman, Kosovo is not merely a beneficiary of security; it is also a contributor to it. We are developing professional, democratic and multi-ethnic security institutions that work closely with NATO member states and partners. Through concrete programs, agreements and co-operation initiatives, we are pleased to be advancing this partnership with Canada as well.

• (1600)

Kosovo firmly believes that NATO enlargement has historically been one of the most effective instruments for securing peace and stability in the western Balkans and in Europe. Kosovo's membership in NATO would strengthen regional deterrence, reduce security vulnerabilities and further consolidate stability throughout the western Balkans.

We are fully aware that NATO membership requires consensus among allies and a sustained commitment to reform. Accordingly, Kosovo remains dedicated to meeting all necessary standards, obligations and responsibilities associated with the membership. Canada's role is particularly important in this regard. Therefore, we encourage Canada to continue supporting Kosovo's path toward NATO membership at the earliest possible opportunity. We strongly believe that it's high time to move on with the admission of Kosovo as a fully fledged member of NATO.

NATO is in the DNA of Kosovo and its Kosovo security forces. It would be a natural process for Kosovo to have a seat among other allies, contributing with all capacities and efforts.

Such support is essential not only for Kosovo's integration into the international community but also for addressing shared global challenges. Kosovo in NATO means more peace, more security and more stability in the region.

Thank you for your attention. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement, Your Excellency.

We will now go to questions from members, beginning with MP Michael Chong.

You have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills North, CPC): Thank you, Ambassador, for appearing in front of us today.

In a previous meeting in front of our committee, one witness argued that Kosovo's accession to the European Union should not be tied to the normalization of relations with Serbia because doing so does not produce stability and instead leaves Kosovo's future dependent on the co-operation of the Serbian government.

Do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: I would not agree with that. Kosovo has been doing everything in its power to find a way to live in peace with Serbia in the region. Our commitments started in 2011, when

Kosovo participated constructively in the EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia in Brussels. During the process of the negotiation dialogue, we reached a couple of agreements with Serbia. The problem is not on our side. The problem is on the Serbian side.

Hon. Michael Chong: Let me re-ask the question.

As it currently stands, the European Union has made it clear that one of the critical milestones on the path for Kosovo to come into the European Union is that relations between Serbia and Kosovo be normalized.

We had a witness in front of our committee a week ago who suggested that the milestone be removed as a requirement by the European Union. In other words, normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia should not necessarily be a precondition for Kosovo to be admitted to the European Union.

My question is whether you agree with that position.

• (1605)

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: As far as I can see, the process is very much related to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. We would be happy to see that we can somehow skip Serbia in the process of Kosovo's joining the European Union, but I think it's a process that is very much linked to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. This is not just for Kosovo but also for Serbia. If Kosovo and Serbia would like to join the European Union, I think we have to succeed, first and foremost, in the process of dialogue.

I would like to go back to the failure of the implementation of the agreement that was reached between Kosovo and Serbia. The most important thing is the last agreement we reached—the Ohrid agreement—a couple of years ago. Serbia continues to fall short of fulfilling the obligations under the agreement of the path to normalize the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Signals have emerged from Serbia's authorities regarding their commitments to the agreement, including a letter from the Serbian Prime Minister.... They agreed with the terms and conditions of the Ohrid agreement, but right after that agreement, they sent a letter to the European Union distancing themselves from the key elements of the agreement.

As far as I can see, this process is very much engaged in.... The paths to the EU for Kosovo and Serbia are very much part of this process.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: It would be easier for Kosovo to escape somehow, but as far as I can see, we first have to deal with each other.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I appreciate that answer.

I have a second question.

You referenced, toward the end of your opening remarks, the People's Republic of China.

Can you tell us what the relationship is like between Kosovo and the PRC?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: China's influence in the region is becoming more active every day as never before. Kosovo believes that all external partners should strengthen rather than weaken the Euro-Atlantic orientations of the region.

In this context, Kosovo's position is consistent. The future of the western Balkans lies in a full integration into NATO and the European Union, as rapidly as possible. The fact is that the countries in the region are part of the belt and road initiative, but Kosovo did not join that initiative. I don't know how aware you are of this initiative.

The belt and road initiative is a global infrastructure economic development strategy launched by China in 2013 to enhance trade connectivity and investment across Asia, Europe, Africa and beyond. This is why Kosovo has been very cautious about joining that initiative: As far as we can see, China is trying, through economy and trade, to have an impact on our region.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Abdelhaq Sari.

You have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

Thank you very much, Ambassador. First, I want to thank you and also welcome you. I would also like to note that our committee is closely monitoring developments in the western Balkans. It's a region whose instability, generally speaking, has a direct impact on the international and global order, which is normally based on rules that Canada very actively defends.

Our committee regularly reviews Canada's contribution to international peace and stabilization missions. In light of the ongoing tensions in the region and the role played by KFOR, the Kosovo Force, in the area, I would like to know what kind of presence or engagement by the Canadian government—whether diplomatic, military or in terms of capacity building—you think would have a much more direct, concrete, efficient and, above all, lasting effect on the stability of the western Balkans.

• (1610)

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: As a small country with great potential, we are proud of the consolidated partnership we have built between Kosovo and Canada. We are proud to share the same fundamental values of democracy, human rights, diversity and inclusion.

Canada was one of the first countries to open their doors and their hearts for the Kosovo refugee shelter in 1999. More than 7,000 refugees came from Kosovo to Canada. They came to find hope but also a home, so Canada has been doing very much for Kosovo over the years.

Recently we have been working very hard with regard to strengthening the relationship in defence and security. Two years ago, Kosovo joined the MTCP, the military training co-operation program. Today we have cadets in Canada who have been training for months. Canada also has a presence in Kosovo as part of the programs and agreements we have reached in the last couple of years. As well, Canada has a presence in Kosovo as part of KFOR, which is part of NATO. It's a very small mission. There are six soldiers and a defence attaché, but Canada officially has its own mission in Kosovo as part of NATO.

[Translation]

Abdelhaq Sari: On another note, I'd like us to talk a little more about foreign interference and your resilience as a new democratic country, as a young democracy. The committee is also closely monitoring the threats that foreign interference from certain countries poses to Canada's partner democracies. Kosovo, as I just said, is a democracy in a region where a number of foreign actors are seeking, in one way or another, to expand their influence.

What forms of interference do you consider most concerning for Kosovo today? How could Canada, through its foreign policy tools, help strengthen the resilience of your democratic institutions?

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: As of today, Canada has invested about \$160 million in Kosovo, and it has also been doing other programs when it comes to women, peace and security programs, supporting women as part of the Kosovo Security Force. We are also working very closely with the Halifax International Security Forum, and we are going to join a few more programs this November in Halifax as part of our collaboration.

With regard to interference, our direct threat in Kosovo is Serbia. Serbia...is no longer secret. It is the only country in the region that did not impose any sanctions against the Russian Federation, something that Kosovo has done since the beginning. It was one of the first countries in the region that imposed sanctions against the Russian Federation. The Russians and Serbs have been coordinating their efforts and commitments to destabilize Kosovo and the region. They targeted northern Kosovo—

Abdelhaq Sari: What forms has this influence taken?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: The media has been causing a lot of problems in Kosovo recently, as are the people who are undercover. I don't know if you are aware, but in Serbia, in the second- or third-largest city, Niš, there is a humanitarian centre called The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, which is a centre of undercover people that does everything. On a daily basis, these people try to jeopardize everything that Canada and other partners that have invested in Kosovo have done. They are trying to orchestrate another conflict zone, so they target northern Kosovo. That's why, in 2023, we had that unpleasant situation in Banjska.

• (1615)

Abdelhaq Sari: I want to say thank you.

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

You have the floor for six minutes.

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

Ambassador, it's a pleasure to see you again. Welcome to the committee.

In April 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe overwhelmingly voted—with 131 votes in favour, 29 against and 11 abstentions—in favour of a recommendation to invite Kosovo to become a member of the organization. However, the Council of Europe's ministers did not act on that recommendation.

How can we view the possibility of Kosovo one day becoming part of the Council of Europe in a positive light?

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: I am thankful and grateful for Canada's team in the Council of Europe. You are not a member of the Council of Europe, but you still have status as an associate member, as an observer country. Thanks to you, Kosovo has been doing quite a lot with regard to joining the Council of Europe.

As I mentioned, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is essential. We have to find a way to open other chapters, and this directly affects the Council of Europe. More or less at the time that Banjska happened in Kosovo, in 2023, somehow the dialogue did not go well for a couple of years. The geopolitics and geostrategies also changed in our region, and we were somewhat cautious about how to deal with Serbia. We were more focused on dealing with and coordinating our efforts and our commitment with the EU and NATO partners in order to keep Serbia under control—as well as the Russians, who have been working and present in Serbia. They have been trying to start something in our region, particularly in Kosovo but also in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Could you tell the committee what it would mean for Kosovo to become a member of the Council of Europe? How important would that be to your country?

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: If I may...? I didn't hear well.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How significant would your country's accession to the Council of Europe be? How important would Kosovo's broader European integration be? How important would that be for the country? What would be the positive consequences?

For the benefit of the committee, can you explain how such membership would change the lives of Kosovars? Can you also tell us how it would change the political landscape for future governments and the current government?

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: It might help our efforts to join the European Union in the shorter way. It also might help us to be closer to Europe and help Europe to understand better what Kosovo has

done for the Serbian community, another community that lives in Kosovo.

Also, it might help Kosovo to have candidate status to join the European Union. This is a kind of requirement. You first have to be a member of the Council of Europe in order to have that status—and to perform better and to upgrade your status within the European Union and thus for Kosovo.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Canada did, after all, have some influence. Obviously, Canada recognized Kosovo in 2008. In my opinion, significant ties have been created between Canada and Kosovo precisely as a result of this recognition. I think Canada—and this is coming from a Quebec separatist—did a good job advocating for Kosovo's cause.

Now, do you feel that this Canadian influence is waning? We've talked about Russia and China. Do you feel that Canada's influence—regardless of the decisions made by the various Canadian governments—is waning compared to that of other powers that are clearly gaining much more strength and significance in terms of their influence on what is currently happening in Kosovo and on Kosovo's future?

• (1620)

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: We are honoured and thankful to have Canada as one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo as an independent country. We are also honoured to say that for me as ambassador, and being here for six years, I've been able to work very closely with the provincial Government of Quebec. I'm honoured to say today that our cadets are in the Saint-Jean military academy and have been training for months.

The relationship between Kosovo and Canada is special, including here, with the relationship with Quebec. Also, we are proud to have a diaspora in Quebec. It is a small but well-integrated diaspora and a diaspora that makes a contribution to the Canadian economy and Canadian diversity.

This is from my perspective. I'm not in a position to say more on this kind of relationship, but....

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I completely understand. I'm pleased because Canada is good at recognizing new countries.

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It would be the first to recognize the country of Quebec.

[English]

The Chair: —we'll have to wait for the next round.

We'll start the next round with Mr. Aboultaif.

In the interest of time, we'll do four minutes each, except for Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, of course.

Please go ahead.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Your Excellency, welcome to the committee and thanks for appearing today.

Kosovo has ambitions to enter the EU and NATO—two different things, two big goals—and congratulations on being on this mission to do so. What do you think are the main difficulties you have in fulfilling those dreams?

Adriatik Kryeziu: What was it...?

Ziad Aboultaif: What is the main difficulty, and what is standing in the way of your becoming a member of the EU and NATO?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: When it comes to the EU, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is becoming something of a headache for our joining the EU. We want to join the EU because we have been working so hard for years and we've fulfilled a lot of criteria, but the dialogue is one of the big issues that we are having.

In regard to NATO, I have seen the geopolitics and geostrategy, and that's why I'm calling on and asking Canadians—friends and allies—to reflect and to push for Kosovo to join NATO as soon as possible.

Ziad Aboultaif: Is there a political deadlock? You have had three elections in a year. Is that one of the reasons that you can't move ahead? Do you believe that this is not really working to your benefit?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: In Kosovo, we continue to advance in the field of security training and strategic objectives with the NATO alliance. Kosovo applies NATO standards, doctrines and the same commitments. We do consider that we have been working and doing everything in our capacity to see ourselves as soon as possible as part of the organization.

Ziad Aboultaif: The relationship with Serbia is basically tense. You have a Serbian diaspora in Kosovo. Can you tell us, what effort is the Government of Kosovo making to basically reduce that tension? That could be one of the roadblocks in the way. Can you tell us again about the efforts of the government to reduce that tension and to move ahead?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: In Kosovo, we are doing everything in our power to reduce the tensions and to have a serious dialogue with Serbia. The Republic of Kosovo remains firmly committed to ensuring that the Serbian community in Kosovo is fully protected, represented and integrated within the country's constitutional and international framework, but it's Serbian leadership from Belgrade that interferes, puts their hands in the north of Kosovo and tries to keep that part of Kosovo as an unstable zone—

• (1625)

Ziad Aboultaif: If you'd be kind—

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: —using the Serb community, who are Kosovo citizens, to try to make an unstable zone.

Ziad Aboultaif: Can you name one single measure that you think would be helpful in improving those relationships so that you can move forward?

The Chair: Answer very briefly.

Ziad Aboultaif: I asked if you could name one single effort that you believe is the effort that's really going to make that difference so you can move forward.

The Chair: Just give a brief response, please, because we're over time.

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: The Kosovo government is very much committed to the rule of law in northern Kosovo. Equal opportunity is an essential pillar of a stable and democratic society. We remain committed to constructive engagement with all communities in co-operation with international partners to have a calm environment in northern Kosovo.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we go to MP Mona Fortier.

You have four minutes.

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much, Your Excellency, for being here today and being part of this conversation.

As we've been saying, Canada has been a long-standing supporter of Kosovo, and I want to talk about moving forward.

How do you think our bilateral co-operation between Kosovo and Canada has the greatest potential for growth in the coming years?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: Having seen Prime Minister Carney as a prime minister who engaged very much and pushed further the economic and trade collaboration, Kosovo has opened the door for Canada's collaboration in mining sectors. There are Canadian companies that are interested in investing in Kosovo and exploring mining and minerals in Kosovo.

During the past five years, Kosovo has been participating in PDAC every year. We engage with the provincial and federal governments, and we are trying to open a new chapter in economic and trade collaboration. In addition to defence and security, as we have succeeded so far, now is the time for Kosovo and Canada to see what we can do in regard to economic and trade collaboration.

Kosovo and Canada have signed a FIPA agreement, a foreign investment protection agreement. We are still in a process of negotiation for a second agreement, for the elimination of double taxation, as well as in a process to sign an MOU, an agreement between the chambers of commerce of Kosovo and Ontario. The infrastructure law already exists for Kosovo and Canada to do business and to invest in our respective countries. It's a matter of politics now to see whether they want to take concrete steps to see what we can do in this regard.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Earlier you mentioned the Kosovar diaspora. Can you talk a bit more about how the Kosovar diaspora in Canada plays a role in strengthening economic ties or cultural ties, for example? I know you mentioned a piece earlier, but maybe you have more to share with us.

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: Kosovo has a small diaspora here, but it's a very vibrant diaspora. It's a diaspora that is quite integrated in Canadian society, and it has been playing an important role in strengthening relations between Kosovo and Canada. It's a bridge, a very strong bridge, between Kosovo and Canada.

These people have been working with dedication and contributing to the Canadian economy. Also, lots of people from our diaspora here have recently been investing in Kosovo and encouraging other businesses from Kosovo to come and invest in Canada. This is, more or less, what they have been doing in terms of strengthening relations between our two countries.

• (1630)

Hon. Mona Fortier: If you have one more wish to share for the relationship—you have another 30 seconds left—what would it be?

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: I would love to see much stronger relations between Kosovo and Canada. I have been here for six and a half years, and I would love to see, after me—nothing yet officially, but I might leave Canada in a couple of months or a year—a much stronger ambassador come here, keep up the work and make Kosovo and Canada much closer to one another. This is my wish for what I want to see between our two countries and our people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go next to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Ambassador, I think that NGOs have identified some corruption issues in public institutions in Kosovo. Nevertheless, we've seen a new generation of politicians who seem genuinely willing to take up this challenge and tackle the problem. Is the current Kosovo government implementing measures to address the issues raised by some NGOs?

I don't want to attack anyone, obviously. However, we're here to talk about the situation. Is the government currently taking steps to address the issue of corruption in certain public institutions in Kosovo?

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: I really don't know for which....

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't know whether you've read the latest Freedom House report. Perhaps we can send it to you. The report found that many public institutions in Kosovo were plagued by deep-rooted corruption. The report noted that a new generation of political leaders seemed intent on tackling these challenges through judicial and administrative reforms.

I wonder whether you could, for the committee's benefit, share what measures this new political generation wants to implement to address these issues.

[English]

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: Well, honestly, I don't know. I haven't seen that report, and I am not in a position to provide any information on something I'm not aware of.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No worries. We'll send you the report, which was quite positive. It showed that Kosovo wanted to tackle certain issues head-on. Every country in the world has had to grapple with issues of this nature. I can tell you about the Charbonneau commission in Quebec. It was more of a “beach ball” type question to find out about the measures being implemented to clean up Kosovo's various public institutions.

I can ask another simple question. What economic sectors could Canada and Kosovo develop that are obvious areas where we could work together?

[English]

The Chair: Give a brief response, Mr. Ambassador, because we're over the time.

H.E. Adriatik Kryeziu: As I mentioned, mining and minerals is the sector that Canada and Kosovo can work very closely on in the near future. As I said, the infrastructure law already exists between our two countries, and Canadian companies are most welcome to come and invest in Kosovo and to consider Kosovo as a hub for the region.

Our prime minister has been very open with Canadians, and he really wants to see more steps taken and more concrete engagement with Canada. We targeted the mining and minerals sector. This is the key sector that might bring Kosovo and Canada closest. This is, for now, as far as—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Your Excellency, for appearing in front of the committee and answering our questions. We appreciate it. We know you're one of the longest-serving ambassadors in Canada. You've been here six years, and there's no sign of them wanting you back. You must be doing a really good job.

I will now briefly suspend to prepare for the next hour.

Once again, thank you, on behalf of the committee.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: I call this meeting to order.

For the second hour of today's meeting, I'm pleased to welcome our witnesses, who are joining us by video conference.

First, we have Dr. Muhamet Brajshori, lecturer at Heimerer College and former deputy minister of foreign affairs of Kosovo.

We also have Dr. Gëzim Visoka, associate professor of peace and conflict studies, Dublin City University.

Finally, we have Jos Boonstra, senior researcher, Centre for European Security Studies.

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

I now invite Dr. Brajshori to make an opening statement of no more than five minutes.

Thank you.

Muhamet Brajshori (Lecturer at Heimerer College and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and honourable members of the committee, for the invitation.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your study on the security situation in the western Balkans, a region in which Canada has played an important role in supporting the transition from conflict to peace. While significant progress has been achieved, the region continues to face challenges that could undermine these gains.

Canada is a special place to me personally. During the war of 1999, when Serbian forces drove hundreds of thousands of civilians from their homes, my own family was among those separated by violence and ethnic cleansing. Our grandparents got separated from us, but they found refuge in Canada, became Canadian citizens and lived the rest of their lives in dignity and peace in Canada. We are thankful to the Canadian people for that.

My principal assessment is straightforward. The western Balkans remains one of the most vulnerable geopolitical spaces in Europe, where unresolved bilateral disputes, external authoritarian influence and incomplete Euro-Atlantic integration continue to intersect. The region should therefore not be viewed as a post-conflict legacy issue but as an active component of European and transatlantic security.

Three developments deserve particular attention.

First, the post-Cold War political settlement in the Balkans remains a challenge. Serbia continues to reject Kosovo's independence, maintains close strategic relations with Russia and China, and seeks to preserve political influence across the region in the neighbouring countries.

Second, geopolitical competition is intensifying. Russia continues to exploit unresolved bilateral disputes and institutional vulnerabilities in the region, using regional tensions to challenge western cohesion and create strategic uncertainty.

Third, the credibility of the Euro-Atlantic integration process itself is increasingly being tested. When democratic reforms do not produce visible strategic outcomes, support for those reforms weakens and nationalist alternatives become more attractive.

Kosovo illustrates many of these challenges. Since declaring independence in 2008, it has built democratic institutions, aligned

consistently with the European Union and NATO, and demonstrated a clear western orientation. However, it remains only partially integrated into the international system, is excluded from the United Nations by Russia's veto and faces additional obstacles because five EU and four NATO members have not recognized its independence.

Reducing geopolitical grey zones in the western Balkans requires a structured pathway towards Kosovo's membership in NATO. The Banjska attack in September 2023, carried out by a heavily armed criminal group under the control of the security structures of Serbia, demonstrated that the unfinished normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia continues to pose security risks and has highlighted the importance of credible deterrence and renewed political engagement in their dialogue process.

The border region offers another important lesson. Countries that undertake difficult democratic reforms must see tangible progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Otherwise, public confidence erodes, nationalist forces gain strength and the credibility of the western project itself is weakened. The future European integration of countries such as Albania and Montenegro therefore has significance beyond their borders; it will shape the strategic direction of the entire region in the years and decades to come.

From a Canadian perspective, the western Balkans should be approached through the broader framework of transatlantic security. Instability in the region has implications for NATO cohesion, European security, migration management, energy resilience and the credibility of the rules-based international order.

In this context, I would respectfully offer three policy recommendations.

First, Canada should actively support Kosovo's membership in NATO and encourage further international recognition of Kosovo among partners with which Canada maintains close relationships in the European Union, NATO and the Commonwealth.

Second, Canada should establish a regular Canada-western Balkans summit that brings together governments, parliamentarians, business leaders and civil society to ensure long-term Canadian engagement within the region.

Third, Canada should expand its economic footprint by encouraging greater involvement of its private sector in defence, energy and critical minerals. This will provide credible alternatives to authoritarian influence while creating new opportunities for Canadian businesses in a strategically important market.

• (1645)

Mr. Chair, the central strategic challenge in the western Balkans is not the presence of conflict but the persistence of uncertainty. History has shown us that a political vacuum invites external interference whereas credible pathways towards Euro-Atlantic integration strengthen democratic resilience and long-term stability.

Canada has played an important role in the western Balkans over the past three decades. It possesses both the credibility and the strategic interest to continue contributing to the stability of a region that remains essential for the future security architecture of Europe.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

We will go next to Dr. Visoka.

Gëzim Visoka (Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, Dublin City University, As an Individual): Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Gëzim Visoka, and I am an associate professor of peace and conflict studies at Dublin City University in Ireland. My research focuses on post-conflict peacebuilding, the dynamics of diplomatic recognition and the rise of counterpeace forces in the Balkans.

For three decades, peace in the western Balkans has hinged on the stability and values of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Today, however, shifting U.S. foreign policy priorities and internal hesitation within the EU are directly undermining that security.

Today I want to highlight three interlinked trends that are affecting security in the western Balkans.

First, as we witness democratic backsliding and autocratization, as well as a global decline in the liberal international order, the Balkan countries are mirroring these trends. Serbia is no longer classified as a democracy but as an electoral autocracy experiencing protracted social instability. Other Balkan countries remain only partially free, affected by political instability, corruption, and in some places, restricted media freedom. As democracy promotion fades away from the spotlight of western foreign policy, regional leaders are actively backtracking on critical reforms.

Second, a shift towards transactional diplomacy, promoted by the Trump administration, has revived dangerous revisionist tendencies and heightened ethnic tensions, undermining the international peacebuilding and state-building investments of the past three decades. We've seen armed and sabotage attacks by Serb groups in northern Kosovo, coupled with aggressive disinformation campaigns designed to inflame ethnic frictions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, and ethnic polarization in North Macedonia and Montenegro. Furthermore, U.S. pressure on NATO and threats to withdraw security support from Europe have triggered competitive militarization politics and policies in the western Balkans. These cracks directly benefit Russia's grand strategy, which relies on disinformation, collaboration with antipeace actors and exploitation of frozen conflicts to weaken European and Euro-Atlantic security.

Third, security threats in the western Balkans do not come solely from hostile external forces such as Russia. EU and NATO membership remains the primary strategic goal for the region, but enlargement has largely stalled because of the EU's lack of political will to integrate the western Balkans. Only recently has the EU signalled a renewed interest in expediting accession procedures, particularly for Montenegro and Albania, driven by the geopolitical

imperative to offer membership prospects to Ukraine and Moldova to deter Russian aggression. A critical weakness remains within the EU itself. Kosovo remains unrecognized by five EU member states—Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain—four of which are NATO members that have so far blocked Kosovo's EU and NATO membership path and indirectly contributed to the stalled normalization of relations with Serbia. Their recognition of Kosovo and their willingness to unblock its Euro-Atlantic path would ultimately make Europe safer and more prosperous.

Honourable members of the committee, Canada has a proud history of supporting peace operations and the rules-based international order in the western Balkans. At this critical time, I believe that Canada is uniquely positioned to provide principled leadership to the Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Balkans. We cannot allow transactional politics to undo three decades of peacebuilding. Canada can, and should, play a pivotal role in rallying NATO and EU allies towards a unified, decisive stance on democracy and regional integration; the preservation of peace in and the statehood of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and the recognition of Kosovo's independence and its rightful membership in international organizations.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will next go to Mr. Boonstra to make an opening statement.

Jos Boonstra (Senior Researcher, Centre for European Security Studies): Dear chair and members, thank you for this opportunity to share with you my take on the security situation in the Balkans.

I work for the Centre for European Security Studies in the Netherlands. We are an NGO that was established in 1993 with the initial aim of assisting central and east European countries with their democratic transition in the field of defence and security governance, work that is ongoing today. Our focus in the western Balkans has been to build capacity and foster co-operation in the security sector among oversight actors. Foremost are parliaments in the Balkans but also audits and ombudsman institutions and civil society.

By way of introduction, I would like to raise three points, moving from broad to detailed. The first point is with regard to the European Union and the Balkans. Last Friday the EU and western Balkan leaders met in Montenegro to discuss enlargement, a process that has been stuck since Croatia joined in 2013. EU and Balkan leaders seem to accept a status quo. The EU member states value stability in the Balkans and are averse to explaining to their constituents why North Macedonia or Serbia should become an EU member. At the same time, Balkan leaders value a grip on power and want to keep managing their clientelist networks. However, the western Balkan population at large remains without benefits. Young people leave to seek work elsewhere, most often in the European Union.

The summit produced two results. First, people in the western Balkans and the EU will stop paying extra roaming costs over calls and data when visiting each other. That is a tangible result for all those families with children living abroad. Second, maybe more in the long term, Germany and France presented a non-paper that opens a debate among EU member states to revise the current enlargement policy into a staged process in which associate members reap benefits and gain influence at an earlier stage. Such a process is long overdue, as enlargement is not solely a benefactor-recipient relationship anymore. EU member states will need to think strategically. The EU needs the western Balkans and vice versa.

My second point relates directly to security in the Balkans. The EU, together with Canada, should think about how to include the western Balkans in new security co-operation initiatives next to, or as part of, the EU and NATO. One proposal here is the security and defence partnership, for instance, that the EU and Canada concluded one year ago. What impact will increased defence spending and militarization in the EU have on the western Balkans? How can the region be an asset instead of a burden? These questions should, in my view, dominate the security agenda with the western Balkans. Also, the broader region should be considered; this includes Bulgaria and Romania with the Black Sea, as well as Croatia and Greece with the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina remain the focal points of potential instability. Both countries have had their share of incursions and incidents in recent years. In travelling to these countries, I ask civil society representatives if they see an imminent threat of an incident turning into a broader crisis. The responses go both ways—that violence could easily erupt and that the vivid memory of war averts a new one. Both views hold truth. For this reason, an international presence in Kosovo and Bosnia remains imperative.

Finally, to conclude on a positive note regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, CESS has been working in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the last few years, together with NGOs from Sarajevo and Banja Luka. We work with members of Parliament, civil servants, civil society actors and students. Most are keen to travel between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska to exchange experiences and build networks of co-operation.

• (1655)

For too long, international donors have regarded Bosnia and Herzegovina as a place not worth investing in because of its problematic governance system and a lack of political will. Nonetheless, bringing people together, especially youth, creates security and progress.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

We'll go next to questions from the members, beginning with Ziad Aboultaif. You have six minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for appearing today before the committee.

We know the ambition of Kosovo to enter the EU and NATO is probably top of mind and a top policy when it comes to the government and the people of Kosovo.

I would like to start with one question and ask each one of you to answer. I'll give you the order to answer in. The question is this: What is the roadblock in Kosovo's way when it comes to fulfilling those ambitions?

I'll start with Dr. Brajshori and then go to Dr. Visoka and Mr. Boonstra.

Muhamet Brajshori: I will raise three issues in the roadblock to Kosovo's membership in the EU.

Number one, which is the most crucial, is the non-recognition by five EU member states: Greece, Spain, Slovenia, Cyprus and Romania. They are still blocking Kosovo politically from moving forward in the European integration process. Kosovo applied more than two years ago to gain candidate status and has been trying to open the accession talks. It's still being kept unaddressed by the European Union. Kosovo is the only country inside Europe that has applied for membership in the European Union and is not getting a response from the EU.

In the past, we had Morocco and Tunisia applying, and their requests were not addressed. Kosovo is making history in this regard because of political issues and divisions inside the EU. It's been nearly 20 years since Kosovo declared independence. I want to be very direct and undiplomatic. By not recognizing Kosovo, these five member states of the European Union are not aligning themselves with the Euro-Atlantic and other states that have recognized Kosovo, such as Canada, the U.S. and other EU member states. They are keeping their position in line with Russia and China, which still don't recognize Kosovo. It doesn't help the EU not to show leadership and a unified standing in the western Balkans.

Number two—I will be very brief on this—is the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovo remains a hostage of Serbia's unwillingness to become committed to a dialogue process, which would benefit itself and be an advantage.

If we are able, in a period, to address these two key issues, we will give Kosovo a chance to show whether it can fulfill the criteria and that it deserves to move on towards European Union membership. Without having a proper process, Kosovo is not able to show whether it's ready to become a member of the EU, because it's not being given that ability to—

• (1700)

Ziad Aboultaif: I apologize for cutting you off, but I have limited time and I need to move to the two other witnesses.

Please answer briefly, because I have another question for all of you.

Gëzim Visoka: Thank you. I'll proceed.

To build on what Dr. Brajshori noted, the main roadblock is a lack of vision. In particular, the EU lacks a unified position on Kosovo, and it has to make up its mind. Does it consider Kosovo an independent and sovereign state, or is it still a protectorate or a territory that is contested?

The second matter that is contested is this deep-rooted division within the EU and NATO when it comes to Kosovo's NATO intervention. The vision of what international order should have proceeded after the Cold War still pertains to and continues to resemble and manifest in Kosovo.

The main roadblock is a lack of a unified position on Kosovo on the side of the EU. Certainly, the five member states of the EU that don't recognize Kosovo are not a unified bloc. They have their own different historical reasons, and these reasons are not justifiable. Some of them are process-oriented; some of them are procedural, and some of them are legacy issues, because they did not change their view, as Canada and others did, to recognize Kosovo immediately. They are stuck in that stubborn position, and now there's a path dependent on that position, which, as the time passes, gets more difficult and worsens.

Ziad Aboultaif: Mr. Boonstra, go ahead, please.

Jos Boonstra: I will try to build further on those two good answers.

Indeed, it's very problematic that the citizens of a country in which people pay with euros need visas to travel to the European Union.

Beside problems with the European Union and NATO member states, there are also still problems in Kosovo itself. Kosovo had a good start in 2008, when it became independent, in being able to build brand new institutions that did not have all the heritage that neighbouring countries were carrying. Still, politicians in Kosovo lack any will to move forward. There is still a problem with corruption and clientelism. That is a large blockage in making progress in democratic reform.

Ziad Aboultaif: That political deadlock is one of the issues you did not mention in full.

Can you comment on that quickly, Mr. Boonstra?

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Jos Boonstra: The political deadlock has been going on for years now. There is good hope that things will change after the latest elections and the recent EU summit. I think there will be more pressure exerted on Kosovo. There will be a bigger understanding that this country needs to come to terms politically.

I have hope, but it's nothing more than hope, I'm afraid.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have MP Anita Vandenberg.

You have six minutes.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

I'd like to touch on this for my first question: Each of you mentioned, in some way, this connection among security, stability and democratic resilience.

Mr. Brajshori, I noticed that you talked about the persistence of uncertainty as being one of the things that open up foreign interference.

Dr. Visoka, I noticed that you talked about how democracy promotion is fading away among western leaders, which I think was a very powerful statement.

Dr. Boonstra, I know you do a lot of capacity building. You also mentioned parliaments.

Could each of you talk about why it's important for countries like Canada to continue to support even technical assistance and democratic resilience in places like the Balkans, in order to facilitate security interests?

Dr. Brajshori is first.

Muhamet Brajshori: I will try to be very brief.

The western Balkans are part of the transatlantic area. They should not remain a grey zone in this part of the world. It's very important that countries like Canada, with rich traditions of democracy and democratically controlled armed forces, get involved in reforming the security structures in the region and supporting them.

As I mentioned in my brief statement, defence is a very crucial sector in which the Canadian private sector, armed forces and government can get involved in assisting countries—especially Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. Canada can play a crucial role in supporting them in achieving the reforms they need to get aligned with NATO standards. In this regard, having a Canadian presence in this part of the world is very important. It will help these countries achieve their benchmarks. Most of them are part of NATO. In the case of Kosovo—which is still not part of NATO—this will help it to at least achieve those standards for when the political conditions are created in which it can become a member of NATO without any hurdle.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Go ahead, Dr. Visoka.

Gëzim Visoka: With regard to democratic resilience and the fading of the democratization agenda in the U.S. and other places, my view is that Kosovo, for a long time, was governed and administered by the international community. It did not really have a chance to demonstrate democratic resilience. Only now, perhaps in the last five or six years, has it operated on all aspects of governance without micro-interference. In that regard, I think it's doing well. It is holding regular elections, perhaps too many, but certainly all of them are assessed by the European monitors as democratic, fair and inclusive, including the one that happened this weekend.

Kosovo is a really good example in demonstrating that capacity, even under the current conditions. At the moment, the U.S. has removed democracy promotion, rule of law and anticorruption measures from their foreign policy priorities. Kosovo is realigning its attention to the European Union and other transatlantic partners and collaborations. In that sense, the short-term effects are not negative, but my fear is that as the U.S. and perhaps.... I hope that in the EU, we don't see an authoritarian turn. As long as the EU, Canada and other transatlantic allies remain within the remit of the liberal international order, Kosovo could retain its democratic character.

My fear in the long term is that if there is an authoritarian turn overall in the world, it will be a big challenge for Kosovo, because it's a small state and it will have to align with allies. If those allies no longer promote democracy and democratic values, it will be a challenge to adapt and survive in that new order.

• (1710)

Anita Vandenbeld: Now we have Mr. Boonstra.

Jos Boonstra: I think that Canada can really offer an alternative, a fresh perspective on democracy that is in line with what the EU presents, but is slightly different. I think it would be extremely welcome in the Balkans to hear from others, not always from Berlin, Paris, The Hague or Madrid. That is very important.

It would be important to find a niche. For instance, one niche would be the legislature. A hearing like this is exemplary for countries in the Balkans. Parliaments have no experience in holding such hearings. Issues such as budget oversight, research capacity in Parliament and postlegislative scrutiny are all topics that Canada has a lot of experience with in Parliament, and it would be very beneficial in the field of security to transfer this to southeast European countries.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

I only have a few seconds left. I will just ask each of you to say, in a couple of words, how serious the risk in the region for broader conflict is. How seriously should we take this?

The Chair: Give very brief responses, please, because we are almost over time.

Muhamet Brajshori: It is serious as long as we see western allies giving up on the idea that the western Balkans should become part of the western project.

Gëzim Visoka: My main concern is the Trump administration and their betrayal of the fundamental democratic values and principles that they've promoted for decades in the Balkans. This is providing openings to nationalists and to antipeace actors to revive their old historical revisionist projects.

Jos Boonstra: We easily ignore the Balkans as a security risk, and that makes it a security risk. We need to be very careful, I think.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we go to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us for this important study, which is unfortunately drawing to a close.

Mr. Brajshori, you have held some extremely important positions. You have solid expertise in foreign affairs. Despite all the international operations carried out since the 1990s—there have been several operations in the Balkans—why do you think that the entire Balkan region remains unstable today?

[English]

Muhamet Brajshori: Okay, I got it. I will give three short responses to your question.

Number one is that, because the international community came to the region, it brought a new idea that this region should be part of a larger integrated Europe. In the middle of the vote, it slowly gave up on that idea and focused on other challenges, including Ukraine—Crimea in 2014—the Arab Spring and many other challenges Europe faced, as well as the migration crisis some years ago.

Number two is that we saw a decline in democratic progress in some parts of Europe, and that decline affected the ability of the countries to fulfill the benchmarks to succeed in European integration.

Number three is uncertainty. Both the western allies and the actors in the region have enabled third actors—Russia, China, Arab countries, etc.—to get involved, to exploit the corrupt nature that exists in many other countries, to get a stronger footprint and to ensure that their values and the way that they act can be sustained in the Balkans.

It's a mixture of different reasons, but despite the challenges, the western Balkans region of today is much different from what it used to be 25 to 30 years ago. We have made progress, but that progress is still not enough to make the region sustainably peaceful and fully integrated in a larger integrated Europe.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do the other two witnesses share Mr. Brajshori's opinion? Do they have anything to add to the question that I just asked him?

[English]

Gëzim Visoka: Yes, I can quickly add to that. I suppose I see two reasons that go back to the way that the conflicts ended. The way peace settlements were created and, perhaps, imposed, favoured a particular political elite, who got into power, captured power and retained power for a long time. I think there was some [Inaudible—Editor] between the form of intervention that was taking place and the interests of local elites.

There was an interest in stability in the EU, in the western part. These local strongmen provided that, and so, for a long time, there was a trade-off of democracy and emancipatory or progressive voices in favour of more conservative nationalist forces, which provided stability and reliability when it came to implementing international missions. This led to power dependence, whereby codependency—created as a result of interventions—created special ties that linked the need for international intervention, presence and investment with the disobedience and peacebreaking dynamics of local elites. There's something inherent, when it comes to international interventions, state-building and peacebuilding, that is reproducing instability.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're saying that certain western policies favoured a form of authoritarian stability at the expense of the democratic reforms that should have taken place, and that our current situation stems from these earlier decisions made to ensure stability. Unfortunately, this has led to authoritarian abuses rather than democratic reforms. Is that what you're saying?

[English]

Gëzim Visoka: Except for the conclusion or the outcome of your statement, I agree with the premise you raised. When it comes to the authoritarian turn at the moment, I think it is a result of lack of vision and prosperity for integration into the EU that is creating this backsliding dynamic in the Balkans.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have MP Aboultaif.

You have four minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thanks, Chair.

In regard to efforts of the government in Kosovo toward the Serbs, do you believe that the government is doing enough? What can be done to improve that relationship and to reduce the tension?

I do believe that one of the reasons the political deadlock is taking place is related to this area, and there's no secret I'm telling here. It's nice to understand that if there's enough effort, knowing that if this is the problem, we may have the solution. If Canada can also help in that, it will be a great deal.

Mr. Visoka, I would like you to comment on that if possible.

Gëzim Visoka: Thank you.

The Kosovo government is undertaking a wide range of measures to respect minority rights. Kosovo has an advanced framework for minority protection. However, there is a reluctance on both sides when it comes to full implementation and advancements of political and territorial ambitions that minorities, especially the Serb minority, have in Kosovo.

This also goes back to the power-sharing nature of Kosovo's political system, in which local Serbs have reserved seats in the parliament, in local government, and language rights, but for a long period of time they did not avail themselves of them, pending a political agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

In a way, dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, under the EU's facilitation, hijacked the integration of Serbs via or within the framework of the Ahtisaari constitution and created a suspension of that inter-ethnic integration, waiting for large issues to be resolved first: questions of recognition, questions of political rights and perhaps larger autonomy for Serbs, and other questions with regard to the religious Orthodox sites and other protections.

These two processes are not congruent. One is cancelling the other out. In particular, there is, for example, evidence that civil society inter-ethnic organizations don't co-operate as they did before the dialogue in Brussels took place, so it has hijacked that local peacebuilding potential. It has displaced the attention from resolv-

ing everyday problems of the people on the ground to having these technocratic conversations.

• (1720)

Ziad Aboultaif: I ask you about Canada's role, what Canada can do. We have a great model in Canada. That's why we were able to keep Quebec and other provinces within the fold for 159 years. We're proud of that. I just want to point—

Gëzim Visoka: The fear is that if you proceed with territorial autonomy, that is the next stage to secession. I know in Canada it's different, but in the Balkans, that is the pathway. That is the fear. That's why there's that struggle in the Republika Srpska and northern Kosovo: the fear that it's just a stage toward a redrawing of borders.

Ziad Aboultaif: That's why I'm saying you should reach toward Canada, because I think we have a great model. In the meantime, I'm fully aware of the sensitivity of the region. The Balkans region is always known for the diversity and the historical tensions. Of course, it's sitting among many players regionally and internationally, so that's why we are concerned and we would like to help in any way we can. I think Canada can play a role.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Aboultaif.

We go next to MP Clark.

You have four minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for their expertise today.

Mr. Boonstra, I'll start with you because you mentioned this in your opening comments, and this is the only question I'll ask. You talked about the proposal that Germany and France put forward in the last few days coming out of the summit in Montenegro.

What's your assessment of that? Do you see it as a path that might make it easier to get into the EU membership, which we know, in many of these countries, has been a decade-long process? We're obviously not there yet. What is your quick assessment on that proposal?

Jos Boonstra: These proposals have been going around for several years now, mostly promoted by different think tanks in Europe, for staged accession and different forms of accession. These are good ideas, because for the western Balkans, it would be useful to take the membership question off the table a bit. It should be there, but it should not be an immediate end goal. It should be integration on different levels—not working only toward this end goal.

The problem with this is that other countries, like Ukraine at the moment, see this very differently and want to move forward immediately on direct integration and membership.

It is a process that needs to be discussed, but it will certainly have value for the Balkans, which will see immediate economic benefits for the population. I think it will also be beneficial for EU member states.

Yes, I see merit in this.

Braedon Clark: Thank you.

Mr. Visoka, what are your thoughts?

Gëzim Visoka: I completed an event last week in Dublin, in which I brought civil society from the western Balkans to discuss all these proposals. Dublin is at the epicentre because it's taking the presidency of the EU for the second half of the year.

There is certainly a welcome reaction to the non-paper. It's very smart and pragmatic. This is not putting the western Balkans in the reserve room or in a second-tier membership. It is offering a gradual, phased integration that will expedite and perhaps encourage democratic reforms, retain democratic orientation and push back against some of these authoritarian tendencies. Certainly, it's a welcome development.

In particular, Montenegro's experience will set the pace for how the other countries will proceed. They're currently drafting the accession treaty, which will define any reservations when it comes to the veto rights. How the Montenegro accession will look could be a model for Albania and the rest. It's certainly a welcome development.

There have been some concerns raised, for example, in North Macedonia. If they fall behind, will they experience a return to ethnic tensions or discouragement of reforms?

Overall, it's a positive outlook and reception.

• (1725)

Braedon Clark: Excellent, thank you.

Mr. Brajshori, you have the last 20 seconds. If you could, take us home. Thank you.

Muhamet Brajshori: It can bring positive change to the region if it's implemented fully. We also have to keep in mind that we have elections in France next year. That will influence the future of this idea.

It's positive, but we have to judge it by the actions more than the words.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Clark.

Thank you to the witnesses. I know that you're all joining us from Europe, and it's pretty late there, so we really appreciate your patience and making time for us. Thank you for your testimony and your ability to answer all our questions.

I will now proceed to committee business very quickly in the short time that we have.

As mentioned at the beginning of the meeting, there are a number of committee business matters that require our attention.

On Tuesday, June 16, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is available to appear for one hour in relation to the main estimates. Would the committee like to use that opportunity to examine both the main estimates and the supplementary estimates (A), as some have suggested? I would require explicit direction from the committee on this matter.

Is it agreeable that the minister would answer for both?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: For SDIR, I'd like to note that, earlier today, the clerk circulated draft budgets and a draft report from the subcommittee. The budgets are the following: briefing on the situation of the Tibetan children in schools administered by the People's Republic of China, \$8,600, and briefing on human rights in the Caribbean region, \$10,650.

Does the committee adopt these budgets?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: In addition, SDIR has adopted a draft report entitled, "Current Situation for Democracy and Human Rights Defenders Around the World". The committee is now being asked to adopt the standard motions related to the report.

Number one is that the draft report be adopted. Number two is that the report be entitled, "Standing with Democracy and Human Rights Defenders: Strengthening Support at a Crucial Time". Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I did that.

The witnesses are excused. Once again, thank you very much for your patience with us. Thank you.

Number three is that the chair, clerk and analysts be authorized to make such grammatical and editorial changes as may be necessary without changing the substance of the report. Number four is that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to this report and that the Chair present the report to the House. Are we all agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Our next meeting will be on Thursday, with clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-219. I know you're all eagerly anticipating that.

With that, I adjourn the meeting.

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