

Submission of Kurt W. Bassuener
Senior Associate and Co-Founder, Democratization Policy Council and
PhD Candidate/Fulbright Scholar, University of St. Andrews

To the International Relations Committee, House of Lords

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Dear Esteemed Committee Members,

This following memorandum has been drafted in response to the public call for evidence by the House of Lords International Relations Committee, following a direct inquiry by Committee staff. The views herein are my own, but are consistent with the positions taken by the Democratization Policy Council, of which I am co-founder. While I am presently a PhD candidate at the University of St. Andrews as a Fulbright scholar, writing on a topic inspired by my 11 years of residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the positions below have not been cleared or endorsed by either.

Great Britain has for over two decades played a deep and important role in the Western Balkans, and continues to do so. The belated forceful intervention by NATO in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, catalyzed with American leadership, ended the most sanguinary of the post-Yugoslav conflicts, and began the process of developing a more coherent Western approach to the entire region. While British forces, particularly at the company-level and below, often took initiative to prevent or react to war crimes, it was only two years after the war that London's policy took a moral leadership role, beginning the overdue process of conducting arrests of war crimes indictees for trial at The Hague. Since then, I have seen British policy in the region as drawing a cross-party consensus in favor of assertively preventing such crimes, laying the groundwork for functioning democratic societies which can ultimately integrate into NATO and the EU, and attempting to propel that process forward, in close cooperation with other Western actors. This was certainly the ethos I saw in action when advising Lord Ashdown in preparation for his taking on his role as international High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later within OHR.

However, the actual vector in the region in the more than decade since Ashdown's departure from Sarajevo has been decidedly negative, despite declarative totems of progress. This may appear at odds with the narrative often proffered in Brussels and other capitals, which often point to the entry of Croatia, Albania, and Montenegro into NATO and Croatia into the EU, as well as the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue, the EU's "Reform Agenda" in Bosnia, and so on. But below the surface of these indicators, the state of actual democratic practice and accountability, rule of law, and broad-based economic development are dire and retreating, as

reflected in a host of independently assessed comparative indicators.¹ The essential error was the presumption that Euro-Atlantic enlargement alone would impel organic and durable reform in the states of the region, based on the “big bang” enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004. Even in retrospect, with the retreat from liberal democracy most visible in Hungary and Poland, that enlargement was a success.² However, that process was an experiment which succeeded for a number of reasons, both on the demand side and on the part of the EU and NATO. The countries of the former Yugoslavia, in which political leaders had benefitted personally from the conflicts of 1991-2001, posed a much greater challenge, requiring a broader set of tools and different incentive structure.

On top of this error, shared on both sides of the Atlantic, an additional element to the EU’s vaunting of its “transformative” and “soft power” served to limit its field of vision and leverage. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and attendant ructions within NATO and the EU led the leading continental powers and the EU institutions to append a connotation to “soft power” that Joseph Nye had not intended. Put cheekily, this could be summed up as “we don’t need to employ coercion and violence like our simpler Anglo-American friends – we have soft power.” However, what regional leaders rightly heard was “we no longer have the will to apply strong leverage or deter your worst practices.” They have acted accordingly – and have been indulged in their malpractice through undeserved declarations of progress and effective sidestepping of standards in the name of stability. The loss of Western credibility in the region has been considerable. And the stability achieved is not actual, durable, or in conformity with Britain’s professed liberal democratic values.

The winners of a string of five wars (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia - the middle three of which collectively yielded a death toll of at least 130,000) are the political elites, which through accumulation by war now form durable political, business, organized crime, and media complexes in each country. The overwhelming majority of their citizens, including many who fought, very clearly recognize that they lost. But the West’s approach has been predicated on the delusion that they share the same interests – and that the winners actually represent the losers. They are our “partners,” according the enlargement model, after all... The clearest indicator of popular sentiment regarding the future is the accelerating brain drain from the region. Even those with decent and secure employment are choosing to emigrate for the sake of their children. A more

1 For example, on Gini coefficients, see Zsoka Kocsan, “Being Poor, Feeling Poorer: Inequality, Poverty, and Poverty Perceptions in the Western Balkans,” *IMF Working Paper*, February 2016. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp1631.pdf> See also “Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy – Freedom in the World 2017,” *Freedom House*, available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf Regarding corruption, the countries of the region ranked as follows in 2016: Slovenia (31), Croatia (55), Montenegro (64), Serbia (72), Bosnia and Herzegovina (83), Albania (83), Macedonia (90), and Kosovo (95).

2 The EU and NATO’s leverage to effect change of applicants ends upon their entry. The unwillingness to demand Croatia end territorial disputes with Bosnia and Herzegovina was therefore a missed opportunity for NATO and the EU. Since entering the EU, Zagreb has involved itself ever more deeply – and detrimentally – in BiH’s internal affairs. See Bodo Weber and Kurt Bassuener, “Lost in Transition? Croatia’s Policy Toward Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *DPC Policy Note*, November 2015. Available at: <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC%20Policy%20Note%2012%20Croatia%27s%20BiH%20Policy.pdf>

damning indictment of local leaderships, economies, and by implication our policies, can scarcely be imagined. The hollowness of democracy and capitalism in the eyes of large swathes of the local populations owes to applying the terms to blatantly self-serving behavior by leaders. This cynicism provides a wellspring for populism, nationalism, and other forms of radicalization. The trend toward authoritarian rule has been manifest not only in Serbia and Macedonia, as well at the sub-state entity of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also within the club, in Croatia.

The vacuum which opened over the past decade because of the West's bureaucratic autopilot – in which Britain (often with some discomfort) participated – has allowed the increased regional leverage of external actors. Russia is the most obvious and immediately threatening of these. Up until the invasion of Crimea and launching of its war in eastern Ukraine, Russia could play opportunistic spoiler in the Western Balkans, abetted by Western disunity and differentiation in threat perceptions. This was most pronounced in Bosnia. But it was manifest throughout the region. Following Crimea, Moscow shifted into a much higher gear to being an active disruptor: first encouraging separatist adventurism by Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, then moving to support the increasingly nationalist and authoritarian regime of Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia, and most spectacularly in the attempted coup in Montenegro a year ago. In all these cases, Moscow has aligned its talking points and policies with Belgrade, creating a visible alignment of political players opposed to (in word and/or deed) to NATO and EU enlargement. From 2014 on, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made clear that it sees Euro-Atlantic integration – not just NATO – as a “provocation.”³ Serbia's government, despite claiming ambitions to join the EU and being a candidate for membership, refuses to align with the Union on sanctions against Russia – and appears implicated along with Moscow in the October 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro. It also seems, most worryingly, to be collaborating closely with Moscow in efforts to subvert Macedonia's new, fragile coalition government led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev.

Turkey, ever more deeply authoritarian and under the unchecked paranoid and abrasive leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has also amplified its regional ambitions and footprint, backing retrograde political, social, and religious elements in Western Balkan societies. The deepening frictions which result from Ankara's policies may well amplify these efforts.

China sees the Western Balkans as a vital economic conduit into the EU. So while unlike Moscow, it does not oppose EU or NATO enlargement (quite the contrary as for the EU), it does – as in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and throughout Asia – offer alternatives to leaders who wish to avoid the stipulations of international financial institutions, adhere to democratic and human rights standards, and so on. Balkan leaders have all warmed to their ministrations.

3 See Kurt Bassuener, “EUFOR: The West's Potemkin Deterrent in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *AI-DPC Security Risk Analysis*, Policy Note #3, November 2015, page 12-13.
<http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/AI-DPC%20BiH%20Security%20Risk%20Analysis%20Paper%20Series%203%20EUFOR%20%20The%20West%20Potemkin%20Deterrent.pdf>

Finally, Persian Gulf autocracies have developed a far larger footprint in the Western Balkans over the past five years. This can be seen through state-directed investments, private investment (often in large property purchases and construction of exclusive resorts for Arab visitors), cultural and humanitarian investments (often with a religious angle), and a large influx of people – most numerous being new arrivals to the lower-middle class. What is unnerving is not so much the influx of people per se, but the confluence of interests driving the process: opaque investment in collusion with local political actors (with attendant corruption) and an alien influence on local and organic Islamic practice. These factors have generated considerable resentment in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in particular – and mainline into standing anti-Muslim narratives and prejudices propagated by Serb, Croat, and ethnic Macedonian nationalists.

It is hard to conceive of a region on Earth where the West had developed a wider portfolio of policy levers and influence over more than two decades – and at great cost. The decline in Western leverage and credibility is overwhelmingly its own fault. While the challenge of the region’s organic democratization and development is in many ways greater than it was a decade ago, it can be surmounted. But only with a clear-eyed view of the actual dynamics, the stakes, and active development of a popular constituency for these processes is this feasible. A desire for “stability,” as reflected in the Committee’s request for evidence, is understandable.⁴ But it is illusory. The Western Balkans are, despite the recent positives of Montenegro’s joining NATO and Macedonia’s genuine, though reversible, forward movement, regressing in the aggregate. A Western policy posture which, as with the entire Mediterranean littoral, is focused on pacification and containment, not only undercuts Britain and the West’s real friends in these countries, to the benefit of its kleptocrats. It is also doomed to fail. It can only be maintained as a protection racket, effectively allying us with kleptocrats against their citizens. Maintenance of the current policy is politically and bureaucratically the easiest course. But it cannot succeed. Its threadbare character, together with the zero gravity environment which followed the Brexit vote and the Trump presidency,⁵ has encouraged all those with unfulfilled agendas to amplify and accelerate them. It has also resurrected dangerous fantasies of redrawing borders⁶ – a policy which would guarantee both violent conflict (in a far more geopolitically volatile environment than 20 years ago) and embroilment of the West – including Great Britain.

Britain’s bilateral policy, along with the US, has maintained greater credibility than the “international community” as a collective as a result of demonstrating that it understands it is

4 See the author quoted in Judy Dempsey, “Judy Asks: Is the EU Sleeping on the Western Balkans?,” *Carnegie Europe*, May 13, 2015. Available at: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60069>

5 See Kurt Bassuener and Valery Perry, “Erratic Ambiguity: The Impact of Trump’s Unpredictable Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans,” *DPC Policy Paper*, June 2017. Available at: http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/pdf/DPC_Policy_Paper_Erratic_Ambiguity_Trumps_Foreign_Policy_in_W_Balkans.pdf

6 See former British diplomat Timothy Less advocating this dangerous course in “Multi-ethnic States Have Failed in the Balkans,” *BIRN*, 16 January 2017. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/multi-ethnic-states-have-failed-in-the-balkans-01-16-2017>

willing to operate with a broader set of policy tools, including hard power deterrence. The UK's deployment of troops to Bosnia four years ago and continuing backup of the anemic EUFOR demonstrate this.

Great Britain's diplomatic credibility in the region remains potent; the Ambassador in Macedonia has been widely praised by civic activists as being direct and sincere. But Brexit has reduced the UK's leverage already in intra-EU fora, and therefore in other ad hoc coordination efforts as well. Efforts must be redoubled to compensate for this unfortunate retreat. NATO is one obvious avenue through which to pursue this. Efforts to more deeply engage with solid non-EU Atlantic partners Canada and Norway, particularly in light of the mixed signals from Washington, are essential. Canada's closing of several diplomatic posts in the region a decade ago, including in Sarajevo, where it is represented in the Peace Implementation Council, often makes them an afterthought. This is a mistake and dissipates the relative strength of like-minded capitals (which usually include Tokyo as well).

Despite Brexit, the UK has deep sunk costs and long-term interests in a democratic, open, and prosperous Western Balkan region whose states can integrate – under their own steam – into NATO and the EU. Britain's security obligations in Bosnia and Kosovo, for example, do not disappear with Brexit, as they are reflected both through NATO and bilaterally.

While the timelines and modalities – even certainty – of Brexit remain open questions, this need not, and must not, impede Britain's assertive engagement and collaboration with its democratic and developed allies and partners on both sides of the Atlantic in the Western Balkans. The UK's less doctrinaire and more practical posture, reflected across party lines for two decades regarding the region, is more vital than ever before. For all these countries desperately need – and had citizens actively calling for – rules-based societies and actual representation. Britain has a great deal to offer.

Following the German election, in which Chancellor Angela Merkel seems poised to be the victor, a wholesale reassessment of EU's operating system and policy portfolio is necessary – catalyzed by last year's Brexit referendum. There is widespread and vocal recognition that strong cooperation between the UK and the EU on security, defense, and rule of law is necessary, regardless of Brexit's functional arrangements. The Western Balkans provide an ideal venue and platform for this cooperation. Furthermore, London can act as a catalyst for the long-overdue reassessment of the West's stale, unimaginative, and unconvincing policy posture, both through its continuing membership of the EU and NATO. Such an initiative, I am confident, would be welcomed by Ottawa and Oslo as a joint endeavor – jointly proposing such a wholesale reassessment to NATO and EU allies. This ought to be launched in Autumn 2017.

The West cannot fix the Western Balkans on its own; the best it can do is use its still-massive leverage and to create an environment in which those citizens of these countries who do want rules-based societies and systems can gain traction toward that end. While the full panoply of policies and assets to be employed is perhaps a subject for another memo (DPC has proposed

a consistent and full portfolio through its decade of analysis and advocacy), the basic elements include the following:

- ! Amelioration of the existential fear which forms the central pillar of the political life support system for the durable elites forged during the wars. The West once provided this through security guarantees in Bosnia, for example; absolving itself from that responsibility fueled the ongoing regression. Without the credibility of the threat of renewed conflict, political elites would have to deliver to citizens or suffer the consequences – electorally, legally, or extra-legally. Providing direct bilateral security guarantees to the Western Balkan states in their current borders against external and internal threat would also reduce the room for maneuver of adversarial geopolitical actors, particularly Russia.⁷ Even NATO membership, for example, cannot replace the Chapter 7 UN Security Council guarantee of a “safe and secure environment” that first NATO, now the EU are obligated to provide under the Dayton Agreement’s Annex 1A.
- ! Assertively and consistently advocating rule of law, democratic standards, and the full set of obligations attendant with OSCE and Council of Europe, as well as NATO and EU membership aspirations. For too long, local elites have been graded on the curve, in the vain hope that through positive discrimination, they would be encouraged to redouble their reform efforts. This approach has had precisely the opposite effect.
- ! Britain and its Western partners must demonstrate solidarity with those who *do* espouse and adhere to our standards and values – in terms of publicly visible/audible policy support, as well as material assistance. At present, the beneficiaries of our support are, in the aggregate, the adversaries of reform and democratic accountability. This would include vigorous support to special prosecutors and courts to pursue abuse of power, corruption, and organized crime. – and where possible through existing mandates (as in Bosnia), executive personnel to directly assist.
- ! Finally, once the utility of ambient fear has been reduced through credible security guarantees, the West’s leverage through financial support – as provided through IFIs, the EU, and bilaterally – leaps in potency. At present, the West effectively buys social peace for fear of violent instability in the Western Balkans. By deterring violence unilaterally, this regressive relationship, which forestalls reform and political accountability, can end. Once their room to maneuver is limited, political elites should face much tougher conditionality from the West. The leverage of their citizens over them will correspondingly grow.

In short, while the direction of travel in the Western Balkans has been largely negative over the past decade, these countries *can* develop genuine and resilient liberal democracies, and

⁷ See Kurt Bassuener, “Filling in the Blanks: Prospects for NATO Enlargement in the Western Balkans,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Südosteuropa Dialog*, July 2017. Available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/12902/2017-06-07.pdf>

therefore pursue credible membership applications for NATO and the EU. In fact, the only way they will achieve entry, given justifiable skepticism in Western publics, is to demonstrate the support for values and obligations of membership in these clubs is sincere, deep, and broad. Despite the ructions of Brexit, Britain can play a catalytic and leadership role in righting a policy posture with which it has rightly, but inconsistently and to date ineffectually, demonstrated misgivings. The time to act is now.