

**Opening Remarks of Ambassador Elizabeth I. Millard, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary,
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First, let me begin by thanking the Center for the Study of Democracy for organizing this panel and inviting me to speak today.

It is such a pleasure to be in Sofia and to celebrate with you Bulgaria's first EU Council Presidency.

We value our relationship with Bulgaria and see your country as a leader, including in ensuring European energy security and in contributing to collective security. We are especially pleased that Bulgaria has chosen to use its EU presidency to prioritize the European future of the Western Balkans. As a neighbor, Bulgaria has a particular stake in the successful integration of the region into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, and this is an interest that the United States shares with you.

In April, the European Commission made important recommendations regarding the countries of the Western Balkans and reaffirmed the region's European perspective. The summit being held in Sofia tomorrow is an opportunity to underscore this message of inclusivity for the Western Balkans with the direct participation of leaders from across the region. While the violence of the 1990s is thankfully a thing of the past, the challenges facing the region today remain considerable and the stakes are high. It is critical that Bulgaria and the United States send a clear and consistent message that the countries of the Western Balkans have a natural place in a transatlantic community that is strong and free. This message will contribute immeasurably to the resolution of outstanding challenges in the region. The EU and NATO are standards-based institutions, however, and the countries of the Western Balkans will need to meet those standards.

Therefore, it is essential that the Balkan countries recommit to the necessary reforms that will strengthen their democratic institutions, build resilience against anti-democratic forces, and secure the rule of law.

Speaking in Podgorica last summer, Vice President Pence underscored our support for the Western Balkans taking their place as full members of the Western Community of Nations.

In his words:

"NATO's open door remains open. And so will it always be for those European countries that share our values, contribute to the common defense, and strive to achieve security, prosperity, and freedom for their people." For the United States, the NATO Alliance forms the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security, and our commitment to the organization remains as firm as it was at the advent of the Alliance in 1949. Within hours of being sworn in, my new boss, Secretary Pompeo, got on a plane and flew to Brussels for the NATO ministerial.

During that trip, he said:

“There’s no more fitting destination for my first foreign trip as the Secretary of State than a meeting of our NATO allies.” “The alliance has been the bulwark of international peace and security for nearly 70 years, and it will remain so.”

His trip is both a demonstration of the value we continue to place on the Alliance and, as the Secretary himself put it, a new world’s record for the longest commute to the first day of work. The United States wants a thriving, prosperous Europe as a close, global partner. That requires a thriving, prosperous Western Balkans, aligned with our shared values. Our shared principles include the rule of law and good governance, which reflect the political will and institutional strength essential to fight corruption. Because these principles are so vital, we are working hard to address the region’s considerable short-comings in these areas.

As a tangible sign of our commitment, we allocated in 2017 nearly million in democracy and governance assistance to the six countries of the Western Balkans. Sadly, not all countries want to see a Western Balkans at peace, stable, and prosperous. We must all acknowledge that Russia actively looks for vulnerabilities in this region that it can exploit. Moscow stirs up tensions, spreads disinformation, subverts democratic processes, and seeks to hold back the region from achieving its full potential. For the Kremlin, the Balkans is an arena for great power competition rather than a home for millions of people simply hoping for a better, more prosperous, and freer future. One cannot talk about Russia without touching on energy, which is central to economic prosperity. To achieve our common goals of energy security and access to reliable, affordable power, the region must continue to develop integrated, accessible, competitive markets supplied by diverse fuel types, sources, and energy routes. Let’s be clear – a multi-line Turk Stream would not contribute to diversifying Europe’s sources of energy. The Southern Gas Corridor, however, would help to achieve this goal. So we are encouraging the countries of the region to work together to build interconnectors, improve energy efficiency, meet European Energy Community commitments, and implement the EU’s Third Energy Package.

Despite many obstacles, we are seeing progress in many Western Balkan nations. Regarding Albania, the European Commission’s recommendation to open accession negotiations is a testament to the progress Tirana has made in implementing transformational judicial reforms. Good laws are important, but these laws must be enforced as well as adopted. Before and beyond the June European Council decision, Albania must show sustained progress in anti-corruption efforts and in fighting organized crime. We are very concerned about Bosnia and Herzegovina given the intensification over recent months of nationalistic, divisive rhetoric. We are also troubled by efforts of some leading politicians there to undermine the integrity of the state and the viability of the Dayton system. The United States and the EU are facilitating talks among Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political parties to reach agreement on electoral reforms that comply with European and Bosnian court rulings.

Even though failure to adopt the necessary reforms could lead to a political crisis, some political leaders are choosing not to compromise. On the security side, the United States was pleased to see the registration of 31 defense properties in the Federation, which moves the country further on its NATO path. But it is unacceptable that disrespect for the rule of law is obstructing progress on registrations in the Republika Srpska. Milorad Dodik cannot be allowed to exercise a personal veto over Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. We are also pleased Bosnia and Herzegovina took a step forward toward official candidate status by submitting answers to the European Commission's questionnaire. As with the rest of the region, we see Bosnia's full integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as the best guarantee for a secure and stable future. To get there, leaders must work together and enact the necessary reforms.

Montenegro's accession as the 29th member of NATO demonstrated that an aspirant can make it through the Open Door with political will and hard work. The Commission recognized that Montenegro is also investing that same energy in its EU accession process when it identified Montenegro as one of the frontrunners in the accession process. To achieve membership by 2025, however, Podgorica will need to redouble its efforts to close chapters. Macedonia's efforts to build on recent political momentum is reflected in the European Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with Macedonia. As an important element of its path to NATO and the EU, Macedonia's ongoing negotiations with Greece on the name issue show more promise than there has been in a very long time. But difficult compromises remain.

The United States strongly supports these negotiations. And we encourage both countries to demonstrate the leadership, flexibility, and creativity needed to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo is another pivotal issue for the region. We must commit now to reenergizing the EU-facilitated Dialogue. Such a commitment will redouble efforts to reach an agreement that allows both countries to move forward towards the comprehensive normalization of the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina. We must acknowledge Serbia and Kosovo individually are making progress. The European Commission identified Serbia as a frontrunner in the EU accession process. As Belgrade works to normalize relations with Kosovo, it must also continue advancing the reforms called for under the EU acquis. Kosovo, too, is making strides in strengthening its young democracy. It is making significant progress in combating organized crime and corruption. It also ratified the Border Demarcation Agreement with Montenegro—the European Commission's two outstanding prerequisites for recommending visa liberalization for Kosovo's citizens. Isolation is a recipe for insecurity and instability. We are hopeful that Kosovo's citizens will soon be able to travel to the EU without visas.

While I touched on just a few of the top issues facing the Western Balkans, let me close by underscoring a few points:

Maintaining a focus on this region is essential; dialogue and compromise are indispensable; and perseverance is a virtue. To accelerate progress, it is incumbent on the leaders of the region to champion our shared values and demonstrate through their actions a real commitment to their Euro-Atlantic paths.

This path is hard and long; there are no shortcuts.

Ultimately, each country must sustain the political will and do the homework. The United States remains dedicated to helping all the countries of the Western Balkans realize their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and to doing it in partnership with our Allies.

I am heartened by the successes of this past year, and look forward to continued progress.