

Transcript of the Speech given by Mr. James Mackey

Thank you very much and thank you to the organizers for the opportunity to speak. Dr. Shentov was quite modest at the beginning and he didn't give enough of a plug for the Centre for the Study of Democracy. I would just recommend to any of you who haven't looked to the products that they are turning out, to make sure that you do: they are required reading for my team at NATO headquarters. So just because you were modest I don't have to be modest on your behalf.

The Western Balkans, and I think all of the speakers before me have said this, is a region of strategic importance for Europe and the NATO Alliance and stability and security throughout Europe is dependent on what happens here in the Western Balkans. Now, we say this in every single one of these conferences and all of us who are in this room are probably convinced of that, but at the same time I think we have to keep repeating that. Because, given the many competing priorities that we face for the time and attention of our leaders, we need to make the case for why it is worth the investment in the Western Balkans. Why is it important to our security and our stability? But also why is it worth that investment? We need local leaders who would also show that if you invest time and money here you will make progress.

NATO has quite a long history in this region, both through cooperation and operations. Many of the states of the region have become members of NATO and we still maintain a pretty significant presence here through our KFOR operation in Kosovo, a NATO headquarters in Sarajevo and liaison offices in Belgrade and Skopje. I think this broad presence throughout the region shows our continuing commitment to stability and security, but it also shows that our work remains undone or unfinished, because otherwise we would not need such a continuing presence here. I won't really go into too much diagnosing the major challenges of the region because I think quite honestly I could sort of subscribe to everything professor Bieber just said and that these are worrying trends. I think the one thing that I would say that is that we can't leave these things unattended. I think oftentimes there is a feeling "Oh well, you know, there are problems with security and there are problems with backsliding on governance and if we leave it alone it is just going to sort of stay at the same low level of not very good". I don't think we can take that for granted. I don't think we can take stability and security in this region for granted. We need to continue to follow the issues, we need to address these issues and we need to make investments to move the region forward. Otherwise, we could face backsliding not just on governance and rule of law, but actually on security in the region and the fact that we have a very fairly recent history of conflict in this region. So there is a lot that could be said about diagnosing what is wrong, but what are we doing about it? What is NATO concretely doing about it?

There is a sort of three main areas that I want to touch on today. The first is enhancing our political engagement and visibility of the region on our agenda. Despite a truly full schedule at NATO headquarters from things like Syria to Libya to DPRK to reinforcing our allies in the East, NATO has decided to invest a greater amount of time and energy on the Western Balkans at senior levels. This means much more regular consultations with regional leaders, both in the region and in Brussels, to hear from them the challenges they face, to explore the concrete measures that we need to take, to assist them in addressing these challenges and to press them on the need to carry out reforms, the reforms that we have agreed jointly. Now, these conversations at NATO are not always easy and I very much take professor Bieber's point about needing to be more public about these criticisms, but these types of difficult conversations are necessary and NATO has the unique set of tools to assist our partners in their security challenges. This includes more than 2,000 training and exercise activities that are available each year to help security forces improve their capability and their capacity and to help to defence institutions improve their governance. These are available to those countries who sign up to achieve reform goals with NATO.

So after a period, which I think has been probably too long, in which the Western Balkans were not that much in our focus, we are definitely moving this region up the list of priorities despite the many other competing things that I mentioned and as the foreign minister said when she was here, that includes discussion at the ministerial level. There was a pretty substantial discussion in December on the Western Balkans and then most recently on the 27th of April and, as the foreign minister also said, we have a couple of difficult challenges and choices ahead of us in the run-up to the NATO summit in July. So the first area is the first way in which we are trying to address this is moving it up the agenda, more high-level time and attention, which brings greater focus and resources.

The second thing that we are focusing on is deepening our communications efforts in the region. Presenting more information clearly and factually both in the media and engagements with civil society is crucial to addressing the challenges we face. Now whether that challenge is malign external influence or politicians that are trying to stir up regional tensions to draw attention away from the fact that they are not reforming, we need to push back with information. We need to use information about what we are doing, talk about what we are doing concretely, information about what we hope to achieve in cooperation with the states in the region and information, most importantly, about the benefits of engaging in reform, so that civil society, the population, put pressure on their leaders to engage in those reforms. But we have to tell them, to tell civil society and the public what we are asking of their leaders, so they can then put pressure on those leaders to achieve those reforms.

A key milestone for NATO in terms of public engagement in 2018 is going to be quite a large civil emergency exercise that Serbia will host this coming autumn. It is going to focus on some of the challenges this region unfortunately faces all too often which is earthquakes, floods and landslides. It is going to bring together about 1,800 emergency professionals from all over the

euro-Atlantic region to focus on enhancing regional capabilities and being able to work together more effectively in a time of crisis. We think this type of exercise demonstrates clearly two things. Number one, obviously the benefits of working with NATO, but number two, the benefits of working across borders. Having those linkages and trying to build capability and capacity jointly, so that the region can address the challenges that it faces. I also don't have to tell you that, given that this is the first NATO exercise ever hosted by Serbia, it is a pretty important milestone for the NATO-Serbia relationship and we are going to try and do our best to highlight this.

So the third key area that we are working on, and I think quite honestly this is the most important area, is NATO's enhancing its cooperation with the European Union in the Western Balkans. These two organizations are deeply invested in the region and any success in the region is shared between NATO, the EU and the states of the region. The coordination between NATO and the EU starts at the staff level. My team talks pretty regularly to Genoveva's team and what we are trying to do is first and foremost coordinate our awareness, so we are actually coordinating the NATO annual assessment with the European Commission's annual assessments. What are we seeing, what are we identifying and what are the messages that we are trying to jointly send, especially in terms of governance and rule of law, where we both, NATO and the EU, have an interest. We are making sure that we share our expertise across our respective areas of interest. This coordination also extends to higher levels with joint visits by NATO and EU officials to the region and things like Ambassador Danielson coming to brief the NATO Council on a new EU Commission Western Balkans Strategy. But I think just as importantly as this coordination or perhaps more importantly is finding practical ways for the two organizations to work together in the region. So we are discussing ways to coordinate and deconflict our capacity-building activities in fields like cyber defence, countering hybrid activities, ammunition storage and safety and building up a rule of law and governance in different areas of the government. It is still pretty early days, but I do believe that a corner has been turned and we are likely to see a more coherent and joined-up approach from NATO and the EU in the Western Balkans region in the coming period.

Progress in the Western Balkans will continue to be dependent of the actions of local leaders. Will they or won't they lead their people to a more prosperous and safer future? But it is quite honestly crucial that NATO and the European Union together provide the assistance needed for these countries to achieve their goals and to provide a realistic perspective about the future of the region, which, we believe, can be more secure and prosperous for all the people here.