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# **Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, November 21, 2017**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Robert Nault**



# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Tuesday, November 21, 2017

• (1140)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)):** I call to order this meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

To bring everybody up to speed, first of all, we're going to go in camera. Those of you who are not supposed to be here have to leave because we're going to do some in camera business.

You might want to just keep going, because we won't have time to get into clause-by-clause study today. In 20 minutes we're going to get to the President of Kosovo. Obviously that will be televised and open, and everybody can come back.

We have literally 15 minutes to do some in camera business, and then we'll go from there.

Go ahead, Ms. May, please.

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** Mr. Chair, just so that I can state this on the record, I'm here based on the motion passed by this committee. In future I would appreciate a heads-up. Two committees are in clause-by-clause study at the same time, and I'm supposed to be in front of both of them. I will now run back to Centre Block, but I would have been deeply appreciative of a heads-up before I got here that this meeting was going in camera.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Just to be clear, it's not the committee's fault that we had a vote. If we didn't have a vote, we would have been doing exactly what was intended, but I can't control the votes of the House. They happen from time to time.

My apologies if you can't be in two places at once.

**Ms. Elizabeth May:** Right.

**The Chair:** Those who should leave, please leave. We'll move in camera and do some business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1135)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1155)

[Public proceedings resume]

**The Chair:** Order.

On behalf of our foreign affairs standing committee, I would like to welcome President Hashim Thaçi to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

The committee is honoured that you have agreed to appear before us. We look forward to hearing from you. On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome you back to Canada and wish you a pleasant and productive stay here.

President Thaçi has had a distinguished career as a Kosovo leader, having previously served as prime minister and foreign affairs minister. As prime minister, he oversaw Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 and served as the new country's head of government until 2014. He was elected to the presidency in Kosovo's national assembly in 2016.

Canada and Kosovo have very good relations. Canada recognized Kosovo's independence in 2008. We maintain full diplomatic relations with Kosovo and have provided significant amounts of aid to Kosovo over the years to support its development and growth.

I hope the President's trip here will further the engagement between our two countries and I welcome the President.

For the President's information, this is fairly new for our foreign affairs committee. Having the opportunity to hear from foreign leaders of other countries is not something Canadians have seen in the past. This is a televised occasion for us to hear directly from the President of Kosovo. We think it's extremely exciting for Canadians to hear what has been going on in your country, along with the relationship and the work that we're doing.

I want to welcome you, Mr. President, and turn the floor over to you. We will want to hear from you for as long as you will give us, and then I'm sure my colleagues will have some very good questions to ask you as they relate to our relationship with Kosovo.

Mr. President, the floor is yours.

• (1200)

**His Excellency Hashim Thaçi (President of the Republic of Kosovo, Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo) (Interpretation):** Thank you very much, Mr. Nault.

I will continue in the Albanian language.

Thank you very much for this extraordinary opportunity to be here among you today, members of the foreign affairs committee.

It's an honour to meet all of you today and to discuss Kosovo and southeast Europe in terms of our achievements and the challenges we face in building peace and reconciliation, as well as to discuss bilateral co-operation between Kosovo and Canada.

As always, let me express our deepest gratitude in the name of the institutions of the state of Kosovo and the people of Kosovo to the government and the people of Canada for the continuous support you have given to Kosovo from the time of war, when the Milosevic genocide was prevented, through independence to today, when we have consolidated a state of Kosovo. The story of Kosovo is one of success and of achievements in common.

I am pleased that I am here when Canada is celebrating 150 years of Confederation. Canada is a strategic partner with whom we have in common aspirations, values, and principles. As Kosovo, we will always remain grateful to Canada. I would especially emphasize receiving 7,000 refugees from Kosovo in 1999. I met some of those former refugees while in Halifax visiting the military base where most of them were received when they arrived in Canada. It was a very touching moment to recall the days of war, but also a moment of joy and pride to see how well they have integrated into Canadian society and how they contribute to the Canadian society and state now.

Now they are the bridge between our two nations. I met young men and women who arrived here as kids, and now they are part of society. They are athletes, politicians, artists—people who love this country as much as they love Kosovo.

The support of Canada was also important after the war in rebuilding the country and building peace. We are grateful that Canada was among the first countries to recognize Kosovo and that it continues to support Kosovo in consolidating its statehood. I am personally a witness to this. Our bilateral co-operation is growing, especially economically, and more particularly in the mining sector, though of course we look to expand in other fields as well.

Last month I had the honour to award a medal for contributions to peace and democracy to former foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy, and I am pleased to see here in this committee MP Vandenberg, who was decorated by the Government of Canada for her contribution to peace.

I very much look forward to a document that will be signed between our two countries on the protection of investments.

Also, yesterday I laid a wreath at the reconciliation and peacekeeping monument to express our gratitude for the role of Canada in bringing peace in the world. It memorialized the involvement and the role of Canada in Croatia, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Macedonia, in Kosovo, and all around the world. That is the greatness of Canada, their deputies, and their MPs.

Let me say a few words about the past and present of Kosovo, and in particular about future aspirations for Kosovo and the whole of southeastern Europe.

In December Kosovo celebrates the 10th anniversary of its independence. It is recognized by 114 countries. The declaration of independence came after a lengthy international process that sought solutions for Kosovo's political status.

●(1205)

This international process started in the 1990s with resolutions at the United Nations that condemned the violence and repression of the Milosevic regime. It continued with the international conference in Rambouillet, France, in the spring of 1999, where the international community again sought a solution for Kosovo.

The Milosevic regime not only did not co-operate with the international community, but continued its violent and repressive campaign, which escalated into genocide. This forced NATO to intervene to stop another genocide taking place in Europe. This brought Kosovo under United Nations administration.

In 2005, the United Nations appointed President Ahtisaari of Finland, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, to work on finding a solution for Kosovo's status. In a process led by the United Nations in which all took an active part, but in particular the United States of America, the European Union, and Russia, President Ahtisaari recommended that the best solution for Kosovo was independence under supervision. In five years we implemented fully all the provisions of the conditions of independence that were outlined in Ahtisaari's package. With the recommendation of Ahtisaari, in February of 2008 Kosovo declared independence. Today I can say there has never been a more multilateral and more internationally coordinated declaration of independence than in the case of Kosovo.

The final stamp on Kosovo's independence was given by the International Court of Justice in July of 2010, when it stated clearly that the declaration of independence by Kosovo was in line with international law, after Serbia had asked the court if Kosovo had violated international law by declaring independence.

Dear MPs, where is Kosovo today? It has signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, which is the first step towards membership in the European Union. Kosovo was accepted in the Millennium Challenge Corporation's program of the United States Congress and is now implementing those projects. Both these achievements were achieved only after recognized reforms in the economy, in the rule of law, and in the building of democratic institutions.

Kosovo is a member of many international organizations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Venice Commission, and other political, sporting, or cultural international organizations.

In line with the Ahtisaari package, we have built all-inclusive governing institutions in which all communities of Kosovo are represented. Kosovo's parliament has 120 seats. Out of those, 20 are reserved for non-majority communities—10 for the Serb community and 10 for other communities—to ensure their political representation.

We have installed affirmative policies in education, in employment, in using languages in the public media to ensure education, employment, and information for all in their own language. We have installed communication and dialogue as the only tool to find a solution for all our outstanding issues. We promote dialogue between faiths. That is best seen in the interfaith conference that we organize every year, which brings together religious leaders, politicians, and academics from all over the world to discuss the dialogue between faiths.

We are proud of tolerance and coexistence between all communities in Kosovo. I have initiated the establishment of the commission for truth and reconciliation as another tool to promote the dialogue between ethnic communities in Kosovo to close the chapter of war and to open the chapter of peace, of dialogue, of co-operation, of coexistence in a multi-ethnic society, a democratic society, an all-inclusive society.

● (1210)

We have consolidated the statehood of Kosovo internally by extending the sovereignty of Kosovo into all the territories of Kosovo, including the northern part of Kosovo. Thanks to the dialogue and the affirmative measures we've taken, today this part is also part of Kosovo's state institutions.

We've had elections according to Kosovo laws. Elected leaders work according to Kosovo laws within the institutions of Kosovo. The last achievement was the swearing in of judges and prosecutors from the Serb community in the northern part of Kosovo, who now implement Kosovo's laws in the northern part of Kosovo. This is the result of the dialogue that Kosovo has been conducting with the state of Serbia, with facilitation and leadership from the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen, this brings me to another important aspect for Kosovo, the promotion of dialogue to find solutions for the whole region. For five years now, Kosovo and Serbia have engaged in a dialogue process, facilitated by the European Union, which has brought a lot of agreement that has improved the lives of our citizens and the relationship between our two countries.

For the first time, after 100 years of conflict and hostilities, in April 2013 we signed the first international agreement for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. This has contributed not only to strengthening peace between Kosovo and Serbia but also to strengthening peace in the whole region.

Today, as the President of Kosovo, together with President Vucic of Serbia and the High Representative of the European Union, Madam Mogherini, I seek a new dynamic, a new quality for the dialogue process. We are working towards a new agreement for full normalization of relations, for good neighbourly relations, and for reconciliation between our two states.

We promote dialogue and co-operation in our relationship with other countries of the region. We have excellent relations with Macedonia, with Albania, and with Montenegro. We respect the territorial integrity of Macedonia and we always call for a full implementation of the Ohrid agreement as the best way to accommodate all communities living in Macedonia.

We also have a very good relationship with Albania. We don't work to change the borders, but to open them according to the European Union model.

With Montenegro we have an excellent relationship, and we were very happy when Montenegro joined NATO, because that's another step towards strengthening peace and stability in the whole region of the western Balkans.

Just for your information, it is true that as Kosovo we have not ratified a border demarcation agreement with Montenegro. This is due to internal political competition in Kosovo and has nothing to do with our relationship with Montenegro. It's a clear, just agreement. We are an active member in all regional forums, where we promote co-operation in the region.

Dear MPs, let me also say a few words about the future, about our challenges and aspirations. The continuation of reforms in all sectors of life is our main aspiration, and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union is the best guideline for this. The governments of Kosovo are committed to achieving those reforms, and they include a stabilization and association agreement in government programs.

In Kosovo, the international community led justice initiatives, for the first eight years as the United Nations and then for nine years as a mission of the European Union for the rule of law, the so-called EULEX. This brought us the best legal framework, and also brought us national capacities to deal with implementing those laws. Reports from the United States and the European Union follow all achievements in all sectors, in particular in the rule of law.

● (1215)

The main challenge for Kosovo is the consolidation of Kosovo's statehood internationally. I would not be saying anything new if I said there are those who still oppose the project of building an independent, democratic, multi-ethnic Kosovo. I am particularly here to talk about Russia, which is fighting the west by preventing projects for peace and stability in southeast Europe. Russia, as you all know, attempted a *coup d'état* in Montenegro to prevent its membership in NATO. It tried to prevent democratic elections in Macedonia, again as an obstacle to reforms in NATO and the EU. It prevents Kosovo's membership in international organizations like the UN, UNESCO, or other organizations.

I was very pleased to hear in Halifax that the Secretary General of NATO warned about the Russian threat to the west and to NATO. However, the main reason Russia is able to exert an influence in the Balkans is delay. The European Union and NATO are late in including the region in their integration processes. This delay by NATO and the EU has opened the way for other ideologies to penetrate the region, be they Russian or other ideologies.

In the Balkans we've also seen fundamentalists and radicals trying to penetrate that region. We've had individuals join ISIS. There's no denying this. We are also a target of terrorist attacks. We have been successful in preventing terrorist attacks in the territory of Kosovo and also in the region. We are an active member of the Global Coalition Against Daesh and a leader in the region in fighting terrorism, radicalism, and extremism. However, our efforts are made more difficult because we lack membership in Interpol and in other international security mechanisms. This is why it's important that you support us in our membership in these mechanisms.

To strengthen Kosovo's security infrastructure, we have initiated transformation of a coastal security force in Kosovo's armed forces. This will be done in consultation and agreement with communities in Kosovo and in full coordination with NATO and our international partners. We've asked Canada to deepen its co-operation with the KSF—Kosovo Security Force—and in particular to help on projects to include all communities and to ensure proper gender representation. KSF today has more than 10% of its troops coming from non-majority communities, and almost 10% of these troops are women.

Kosovo has moved far since the days of the war. It's not a country destroyed by war. It's a country that aspires to membership in NATO and the EU, and it is successfully implementing reforms in the economy, in justice, and in building democratic institutions. I am aware that we have to face many more challenges, but I'm very proud that in all opinion polls, Kosovo citizens always come out as more pro-NATO. They're mostly pro-NATO and pro-European citizens.

We are determined that our future is in NATO and in the EU, in peace, in dialogue, and in co-operation with all. We are on the right path from being a consumer of security to becoming an example of the promotion of peace, dialogue, and co-operation.

Thank you. I would be very happy to continue discussing this and answering all your questions.

•(1220)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, President Thaçi.

We're going to go right to questions, as we always do. I want to start with Mr. O'Toole, please.

**Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC):** Thank you very much for your presentation, Mr. President.

You touched upon several issues that I wanted to explore with you, and I'm glad you did.

However, first I want to say that I was pleased to join my colleagues yesterday at the peacekeeping monument. As a veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces, I have friends who served as part of the Kosovo mission, and it was nice to see our last officer from Pristina join the ceremony. I'd like to thank my colleague Anita for organizing it. As someone who served in Halifax in the air force with our navy, I was very happy to see you inspect our honour guard in Halifax in conjunction with the security forum. I know that this city would have treated you very well.

You touched on international membership, and with Kosovo being recognized by Canada, the United States, and other countries for a decade now, where do you feel your campaign for status in the

United Nations sits? Did you raise UN membership in your meetings with Prime Minister Trudeau?

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi :** Those are two or three questions....

**The Chair:** Mr. President, we'll go one member at a time.

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi:** Okay.

**The Chair:** Mr. O'Toole gets a number of minutes to ask questions. Sometimes he's quicker than we expect.

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi:** Okay.

**The Chair:** The floor is yours.

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** You all know that the declaration of independence was done in a coordinated manner with the European Union and the United States, and was done at the very last moments with Russia as well.

We were told, as leaders of Kosovo, to take upon us implementing fully the Ahtisaari package, which was drafted by the United States, the EU, and the Russians together, Ahtisaari being the emissary of the United Nations, so it was a UN-led process. It was according to this manner that we moved towards finding a solution for Kosovo's political status.

I personally was part of this process, which lasted for three years in Vienna, Austria. I have to say that we made a lot of compromises in order to save or to maintain international consensus regarding Kosovo's independence and Kosovo's political status, but at the end, like all our partners and the leaders of this process, we were also disappointed with the insistence of Russia to use its right for veto in the Security Council of the United Nations on the acceptance of the package of President Ahtisaari. This continued in summer and autumn of 2007, and in winter 2008. President Ahtisaari was personally involved in this.

Where do we stand with Kosovo's membership in the United Nations? To be honest and very open, Russians were taking part in negotiations for independence in Rambouillet and in Vienna. They also participated in the peacekeeping forces in the war in Kosovo and they have a liaison office in Pristina, Kosovo, but the Russian attitude, the Russian stance, regrettably remains unchanged, meaning they are opposed to Kosovo and openly oppose Kosovo in the Security Council of the United Nations.

This stance is not accidental. It is not only directed against Kosovo. We have looked at this more broadly from a strategic perspective, and I believe, judging from meetings I've had, that this is Russia's fight against the west, against western principles, western values, and western interests.

I want to believe that Russia will recognize Kosovo's independence one day, and I believe and hope that very soon we will have an agreement on normalization and reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia. Through this dialogue, we will remove any arguments from the hands of those who are opposed to Kosovo's independence and give more arguments to those who support Kosovo's independence.

With regard to Kosovo's membership in the United Nations, this again will be a process coordinated with our partners. It will not be a one-sided process. Personally, I don't like a Palestinian model for Kosovo. I don't prefer that for Kosovo. After all, these are two very different cases.

After we've finalized the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia, I don't believe the Russians will be more Serbs than the Serbs themselves. If we agree with Serbia for reconciliation, co-operation, and good neighbourly relations, then what's the argument for Russian not recognizing Kosovo, unless they really want to fight our partners through Kosovo?

• (1225)

Kosovo is not an enemy of Russia, but it is very clear in its aspirations that its future lies in NATO and in the European Union. We will not give up on these values and aspirations under any circumstances.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. President.

We'll go to Madam Vandenberg, please.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.):** *Mir-ëdita.*

Thank you very much, Mr. President, for being here in Canada and before our committee. It is a particular honour for me to welcome you here because, as you know, in the crucial period of 2007 and 2008 I was seconded by the Government of Canada to be part of the OSCE mission in Kosovo, as an adviser to the Assembly of Kosovo and to the nascent democratic institutions that were being established there.

I am very impressed with how far Kosovo has come in those institutions in terms of ensuring that they are pluralistic, gender-balanced, multi-ethnic, and independent. We've seen that progress, and you've outlined some of it today.

I was also extremely happy yesterday to see you come and lay a bouquet at the peacekeeping monument. As we know, Canadian peacekeepers have been around the world. In seeing the progress that Kosovo is making, we see the value and the reason Canadian peacekeepers go to other countries and promote that kind of peace, so thank you for being there yesterday.

Ten years ago, almost to this month, I led a study visit to Canada from Kosovo to come and look at our Parliament and our public service tribunal, and to look at how the pluralistic institutions operated here in Canada, independent from political interference. I know that many of the lessons from that were implemented in Kosovo.

I would be very interested to hear from you how Kosovo has developed in terms of its institutions, both in the parliament and in oversight institutions and the public service. I know that Kosovo has a very professional and independent public service, with very many talented young people in it. If you could, please tell us a bit about how those institutions are progressing.

• (1230)

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** Kosovo is lucky; we have been fortunate. Since the first day—since the end of the war, in June 1999—there has been an international civilian and military presence there. From that moment, we started building independent institutions based on advice and suggestions, and learning from international communities.

I would like to emphasize that we were a country that was occupied and suffered genocide at the hands of Milosevic, but we

also had some experience of working with institutions. Our society was emancipated. Together with the international community, we drafted constitutions and a legal framework in line with the highest international standards. We built independent institutions to ensure the separation of power between pillars and the democratic functioning of all the pillars of society.

Yesterday we just finished a second round of municipal elections in Kosovo that were fair, democratic, transparent, and all-inclusive. All participants accepted the results of the elections immediately, and the elections were highly praised. The Central Election Commission is always highly praised for its role. Also, Kosovo's institutions are always praised for maintaining their independence, be they the constitutional courts, the courts, the media, or other relevant institutions. This is why I would emphasize that we have built a tradition in Kosovo of respecting the separation of powers and the decisions of independent institutions.

Of course there's always room to do more. Again, I say proudly that we are a good example for the whole region. I would also like to emphasize that these institutions—including the ombudsperson's office and other important institutions—are now led by Kosovars, by nationals. This means we have built our own capacities to turn these institutions into national, credible institutions for citizens of Kosovo, providing services of international standards.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Canada was, of course, one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Kosovo. I will never forget that day, February 17, almost 10 years ago now. I saw the old men in the streets with wrinkled faces. Tears were running down their faces. They were holding their children's hands, knowing they would live in peace and a democratic pluralistic society. That's something that will stay with me.

Many Canadians remember the arrival of the refugees and the contributions that refugees are now making to Canada. Lloyd Axworthy, our former foreign minister, was recently in Kosovo. He talked about this as a model in terms of peacekeeping in regions of the world currently undergoing some of the horrors that Kosovo went through. He mentioned how Canada, and Kosovo itself, could potentially help the world today by looking at what happened in Kosovo and at how the international community coming together led to an independent country, and how this might be used as a model in the future in other countries.

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** As I said, the story of Kosovo is a story of success, but this is a common joint achievement of Kosovo's international community. We are consolidated internally and also on the international stage.

I also said that we don't only have partners and supporters; we also have opponents of our independence. Any obstacles in further international consolidation, I believe, will be overcome by working together with international partners, including Canada.

Canada has given support for our democratic transition, for freedom, and just as you don't forget the day when we declared independence, for me, the support we've received from international countries in this aspiration, including Canada, is also unforgettable. Canada is recognized in Kosovo. Its role is recognized by all sides in Kosovo. What I believe we can do further is deepen our bilateral cooperation, be it in the economy, diplomacy, defence and security, or education, through the common values and common principles that we share.

I'm very proud that a lot of Kosovars are in Canada. They serve as a bridge that links our two nations together. They and their families bring Canadian experience to Kosovo society and to Kosovo institutions. Please see Kosovo and view Kosovo as your strategic partner globally, and this will always be like this.

Today Kosovo is more pro-NATO than even some NATO member states. Even though there's a lot of criticism toward the EU because of their delay in reaching out to the Balkans, nevertheless more than 90% of Kosovars are in favour of EU membership, not to mention their pro-American attitude. They are very pro-American citizens. Their aspiration is western values, western principles.

Delays in integration are the challenges and the issues we are discussing with all our partners. A month ago I discussed this in Washington with Mr. Pence in the White House. We discuss this with our counterparts in the European Union.

Let me say very openly, as a friend among friends, what my main concern is. My main concern—and I'm not concerned only about Kosovo, but about the whole of the western Balkans and southeastern Europe—is that NATO and the EU should not be late with enlarging and integrating the western Balkans. We were all happy about Montenegro's membership in NATO, because it was a strong message for the whole western Balkans. Any delays by NATO, by the EU, leave a vacuum that is being used by Russia and other anti-western ideologies.

Russia is very influential today, certainly in Serbia. It is influential in their economy, their media, their military, their intelligence service, in their political competition, in all segments of life. They are influential in other parts where there are Serbian communities, particularly in Bosnia. They tried to influence Montenegro and to prevent further reforms. Even though they are losing their rhythm, they have not given up attempts to destabilize Montenegro.

They will not be able to penetrate and exercise such influence in Kosovo, of course, but there's always *Sputnik* there in Russia today, which is immediately translated in the media around the world, including Kosovo media. It includes fake news about Kosovo, about the Kosovo leaders, and about the western Balkans. Delays by NATO and the EU are also used by extremist elements and radicalists, be it radical Islam or fundamentalism or others.

Kosovo was determined to fight these elements, to fight terrorism, and I'm very proud. I feel very good that we have received the highest praise all the way to the level of President Obama, and his vice-president in the past, and now by President Trump and Vice President Pence, and we will continue fighting extremism and terrorism without any compromise.

● (1235)

We have the necessary experience. We have built the necessary legislation. Now institutions of the rule of law are functioning in fighting these phenomena.

We've identified all the individuals who are in Syria and Iraq who went to join ISIS. Of course, we have to be rational and remain determined to continue this fight, especially in case they return to Kosovo, and to find ways for how to deal with them and also with their families. This is an issue that we've discussed both in Pristina and with our partners and allies in the global coalition against terrorism. Kosovo, a country that needed peace, today has the capacity to export peace and to support peace around the world. This is why we need to be a member of international organizations as soon as possible.

● (1240)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Vandenberg.

We'll go to Madam Laverdière, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Thaçi, for being here and for your presentation today.

I believe you speak a bit of French.

You mentioned the various communities' efforts, tolerance, and coexistence. I understand that a recent agreement would give greater autonomy to the regions in Kosovo with an ethnic Serb majority.

Can you elaborate on that please?

[*English*]

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** Let's understand each other clearly. In 2013 we reached an agreement for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. This was the first agreement.

The first point of this agreement was to ask for the establishing of an association of municipalities with a Serb majority community. This issue went to Kosovo's constitutional court and got approval from the constitutional court, and now Kosovo's institutions have the obligation to establish, and will establish, the association of Kosovar Serb majority municipalities, which will work in accordance with the constitution and laws of the Republic of Kosovo.

This is another step towards accommodating Kosovo's Serb community, but it is not a step towards giving them an autonomy that would have legislative or executive powers. It is similar to the association that we have with other municipalities in Kosovo. Every municipality will be allowed to join this association as they wish. It is fully in line with the European standards of self-governance. This is an obligation that Kosovo has taken up itself, and it will meet this obligation. We will establish the association of Serb majority communities. This is in the spirit of accommodating all communities in Kosovo.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Thank you.



A few months ago or last year, the committee did a study on women, peace and security. We noted what an important role women play, in reconstruction in particular. Yet this is obviously not always easy or always automatic. I believe that, among other things, the unemployment rate among women in Kosovo is very high.

Have you taken any special measures to include women in the social dialogue and in reconstruction and to empower them in a sense?

[English]

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** The role of women in Kosovo is not only about taking part in decision-making; it's also their role to lead in the Republic of Kosovo. There's always room to do more, but, for example, 30% of the members of the Kosovo parliament consists of women MPs. This is a required quota by law.

On the other hand, I am very proud to say that in a time of democratic transition, Kosovo was the first in the western Balkans to have a woman as president and head of state. That was President Jahjaga, who served before me.

Today, the Central Election Commission is led by a woman. The Basic Court in Pristina is led by a woman. The Constitutional Court is led by a woman. Our ambassadors to the United Nations and the United States are women. There are ministers, though I wish there were more women ministers. It's a battle among political parties, and sometimes egos grow bigger than principles.

We also had elections, and in many of them, women were running for mayor. I can say there is a noted representation in the Kosovo security force, where almost 10% are women. In the Kosovo police force, 20% are women, and it is the same in all other institutions.

Of course we will do more, but we have to appreciate the achievement. The way that we treat it is we try to create opportunities not only to participate but also to lead institutions in society. Civil society media is also where women have an increasing leadership role. There has been a lot of valuable progress.

What I would also like to reiterate is that Kosovo is nominally a majority Muslim country, but this is a traditional European Islam. This is not an Islamic country; this is a country with European Islam. We were victims of developments in our history, but Kosovo has never lost its roots. It is returning to its roots, which is a European identity.

The first condition for this was freedom. Only in the last 20 years can we speak for ourselves and make our own decisions for ourselves. Only now are we building capacities.

• (1245)

[Translation]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Thank you.

I will give the floor to my colleagues, but first I would point out that, with 30% of members who are women, you are ahead of Canada.

[English]

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** Thank you.

**The Chair:** How did I know she was going to say that?

Go ahead, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj, please.

Thank you, Mr. President.

**Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, President. It's an honour to have you appear before the committee today. It's a special honour for many residents of Etobicoke, because I know they're watching this televised proceeding.

We have many Kosovar Etobians. They're proud Canadians. They're also very proud of their ancestral roots and very proud of how far Kosovo has come since independence. However, notwithstanding all the progress, they're also worried that war and conflict could once again be visited upon the people of Kosovo.

I noted that the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies publishes occasional research papers on serious security threats. Just last month they published such a paper, entitled "Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why?" The first line of the executive summary reads as follows:

Kosovo is exposed to a genuine and formidable Russian meddling campaign against [its] Western state-building model and its democratic values, in particular since 2008. Numerous subversive and non-military instruments...continue to be used against a multiethnic Kosovo in order to create a pretext for a failed-state and heighten local separatism with[in] the Kosovo Serb community in northern municipalities.

I'd like to zero in on the "subversive and non-military instruments" that Russia appears to be using in Kosovo.

You've referenced the threat in neighbouring states, like Montenegro. In the 21st century, it's mind-boggling that a prime minister of a European country would be the potential victim of an assassination attempt by Russian special services, which has now been well documented, for his pro-NATO stance. However, in the Balkans and especially in Kosovo, it appears that Russia is using particular tools in their special ops kits, tools that we are not necessarily familiar with in the west that would be counterintuitive.

The report mentions the "construction of the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in the city of Nis", which is "less than 100 km from Prishtina." Notwithstanding the name, it actually appears to be an outpost for the Russian military and Russian intelligence, so you have that particular tool in the tool kit.

Something that we don't quite understand that well, because we have long-established traditions of the separation of church and state, is that it appears that the Russian Orthodox Church is often used as an arm of the special operations, as part of some of the geopolitical games that are being played. In the Balkans in particular, we see the use of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a tool in these games.

I note that Russia used UNESCO to provide significant funding to Serbian monasteries in Kosovo. As well, they provide monks to go there. The suspicions are that these people aren't really monks, nor are they serving spiritual needs. At the same time, they've blocked Kosovo's attempts to join UNESCO.

Perhaps you could expand on some of this, because it's something that we don't encounter in the west. It runs counter to our political culture.

• (1250)

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** Thank you very much for this question.

Earlier I mentioned Russia's attempts to destabilize the region. This is done on so many levels and in all the countries there. First, they try to slow down or to make the reforms in the western Balkans fail.

You mentioned the worst example, actually, in Montenegro. They tried to prevent Montenegro's membership in NATO. It was not a battle among political parties in Montenegro; it was a strategic battle of Russia trying to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. This is why we were so happy to see that Montenegro did become a member of NATO.

You mentioned the centre in Nis. We all know that it is a centre for spying, for monitoring, and it has nothing to do with humanitarian issues. It's not only to observe Kosovo and provide surveillance; it's also about monitoring Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, and all these countries. It is my suggestion to all our international friends in Washington, Brussels, and all around to begin looking at the western Balkans from a strategic point of view. It is not only a technical issue of implementing agreements.

Unfortunately, those who are opposed to Euro-Atlantic integration don't choose the means for their goals. One of these is the attempt to present Kosovo as a failed state by producing fake news that is immediately translated in the international media, including the Kosovo media. These are the worst speculative news items, which people unfortunately read.

This is the case in other parts of the Balkans as well. As I said, in Kosovo they will not be able to change the attitudes of the people and their aspirations, but they present a distorted view of Kosovo. That is what they do every three months when reporting to the Security Council of the United Nations, as Putin does, or anywhere that they have an opportunity, be it in the Council of Europe, through particular members of the European Parliament, or through media that are close to the Russian oligarchs.

This is really the last moment for our partners to take seriously this need to consolidate Kosovo internationally. After all, this is our joint project. We are loyal to our international partners and we don't even seek another alternative. We don't have an alternative; it is either membership in NATO or membership in Russia. We are not like Serbia in relation to Brussels, always using the Russian card: "If you give us something, we will agree with you; if you don't give us something, then we will go with Russia."

Our patience is stronger and deeper than the European Union delays, but we are not able to fight Russia's war to present Kosovo in a negative light. As Kosovo, we have obligations to try to oppose Russia's attempts. I cannot deny that there are attempts by Russia to penetrate Kosovo and exert influence, either through the media or businesses.

As I said, they have a liaison office in Pristina and people in Pristina. They have people in the northern part of Kosovo, in Mitrovica, and there they have even recruited for the paramilitary service in Ukraine to fight along with pro-Russian forces. This is not a secret. This is public.

For us it remains very important that we coordinate with all of our international partners to understand each other and to conclude consolidation of Kosovo's statehood internationally.

• (1255)

I don't believe that the Russian veto in the Security Council is directed only against Kosovo. It is much more than Kosovo. I've heard this from Lavrov and Churkin. They told us they are not fighting against us; they are fighting those who have supported our independence, the west, and this includes you, Canada, as well. This is the reality.

**The Chair:** Colleagues, I want, on behalf of the committee, to thank the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, for coming. It is a great honour and a pleasure. I think Canadians will enjoy the opportunity to hear first-hand about the developments and the struggles, obviously. In every government, those of us on the government side and those who were a while ago know that every day is a challenge, and every day requires good leadership, a firm hand, and lots of friends and allies. We think Canada is one of those for Kosovo.

We want to thank you very much for this opportunity to spend a very high-end, quality hour with you. Thank you, Mr. President.

**H.E. Hashim Thaçi (Interpretation):** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Colleagues, this will bring our meeting to a close. We will see you on Thursday.

This meeting is adjourned.







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