

The Obama Administration's Vision for Southeastern Europe

Philip H. Gordon

Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs

Kokkalis Program, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Cambridge, MA

February 17, 2010

As prepared

Thank you, Elaine. I'm delighted to be here. As some of you may know, I have a longstanding association with the Kokkalis Program, and I have a great deal of respect for the work the program does here at Harvard. In fact, one of the core goals of the program, the integration of Southeastern Europe into Europe as a whole, is precisely what I want to talk about today. This is a region that is vital to Europe's future and for that reason it is the focus of continued and intensive engagement by the Obama Administration.

Obviously, Southeastern Europe is not an issue that dominates the headlines the way Afghanistan or Iran does – or indeed as it did in the 1990s when the Balkans were beset by war. But I want to be absolutely clear that the ongoing stabilization and integration into Europe of the area from the Adriatic to the Black Sea is an important focus of this Administration's foreign policy agenda. And I want to begin my remarks by explaining how and why Southeastern Europe fits into our broader conception of European security.

Secretary Clinton gave a speech last month in Paris in which she laid out the principles that animate the Administration's approach to European security. One of the core themes she emphasized was our commitment to the indivisibility of security – the view that there cannot be security for part of Europe without there being security for all of Europe. This is a clear lesson from history. She also made clear that, contrary to speculation in some quarters that the United States is preoccupied with other regions, Europe is an essential partner of the United States and our own security and well-being requires a strong and secure Europe.

As we consider this Administration's strategic objectives with respect to Europe, we are pursuing three main goals. First, we seek to work with Europe on the whole range of global challenges that we face together. And on issues as diverse and important as Afghanistan, Iran, and restoring the global economy, we have shown that we are working together closely and productively.

Second, we have sought to restore more constructive relations with Russia. That means we want to cooperate where our interests converge, while still being honest and firm about issues where we disagree. We are proud of the progress we have made together in the last year in negotiating a follow-on to the START Treaty, working to help stabilize Afghanistan, establishing a binational Presidential Commission, and dealing with the nuclear challenges posed by Iran and North Korea.

Finally, we seek to complete the historic work of building a democratic, prosperous, unified, and secure Europe. The last two decades have witnessed extraordinary success as the newly free nations of Central and Eastern Europe have joined the European project. But it is a project that is not yet finished. To fully achieve European – and therefore American – security, it must extend to all countries across the continent.

Which brings me to this Administration's specific approach to engagement with Southeastern Europe. We have a vision of a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous region and we believe the path to achieving this vision for Southeastern Europe is through integration into Europe's political and economic institutions.

Perhaps the best way to understand the logic of this approach is to briefly consider the troubled history of this part of Europe. Think about what Southeastern Europe looked like at both the beginning and end of the twentieth century. The Balkan wars preceding World War I and those of the 1990s saw the region racked by ethnic rivalry, hyper-nationalism, and bloody interstate war. These conflicts demonstrate the stakes of politics in the region – for the citizens who live there and for outside powers that were inevitably drawn in. Though the experience of the 1990s differs in many ways from that of pre-World War I Europe, I think it is fair to say that the fundamental problem that lay behind this history of conflict was the mismatch between geopolitical and ethnic boundaries and the absence of adequate political mechanisms to deal with this mismatch. What this difficult history teaches us is that attempts to resolve this contradiction through force are doomed to foster only further conflict and violence.

Other parts of Europe have faced these same challenges, and the experience of Western Europe after World War II and Eastern Europe after the Cold War demonstrates that there is another and better way: the path of political and economic integration. The solution lies in transnational cooperation and institutions that guarantee the rights of citizens, promote economic freedom, ensure the inviolability of borders, and provide a reliable forum for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Moreover, the opportunity for political engagement that crosses national borders reduces the salience and pressure of ethnic and regional disputes within nations. That is the promise of the project of European integration: the peaceful resolution of disputes through a common political enterprise and shared wealth and opportunity through a common market. The lesson of the 1990s is that significant portions of Southeastern Europe did not share in this experience and we saw the tragic human consequences. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our work is not yet done: we want to extend this vision to Southeastern Europe and fully integrate it into the zone of democracy, stability, and prosperity on the continent.

The progress we've seen in Europe over the last six decades owes to the hard work of generations of Europeans bolstered by the sustained engagement of the United States. Two institutions, above all, have acted as the twin pillars of European freedom and prosperity: NATO and the European Union. They have offered security and economic opportunity to the nations of Europe, underpinned by a commitment to democracy. They began as essentially Western European clubs and eventually enlarged to encompass almost the whole of the continent. The United States wants to work with our European partners to bring Southeastern Europe fully into these institutions. But the responsibility for bringing that outcome about does not lie with the United States. European countries and institutions of course have an essential role to play in engaging with the region in a strategic and sustained manner. But the responsibility ultimately lies with the countries of the region themselves who must do the hard political work of reform and reconciliation.

When we look at Southeastern Europe today, many of the same challenges that have bedeviled the region throughout the last century still exist: finding ways to protect minority rights and to create stable, multiethnic politics. But there has been tremendous progress as well. The Balkans are a case in point. When I was last in government, in the late 1990s during the Clinton administration, war in Bosnia was still a fresh memory and Kosovo was consumed by violence and ethnic "cleansing." Today, following a decade of hard work, we have witnessed dramatic political and social transitions. With Montenegro's peaceful separation from Serbia in 2006 and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the final chapter in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia was closed. Now the nations of the Balkans are on the path toward integration into Europe's community of political and economic freedom. Nearly every country in the Balkans has taken steps toward EU membership. Croatia has moved forward in its EU accession negotiations, Macedonia is a candidate, and Serbia and Albania have submitted membership applications. The European Union has an indispensable role to play in encouraging these countries' commitment to reform by speaking with one voice on enlargement and by providing a clear path to membership. The countries of the region are also well on their way to integration with NATO. Croatia and Albania became members of NATO in 2009. Macedonia is on NATO's doorstep and will receive an invitation to join as soon as the dispute with Greece over its name is resolved. At the end of last year, Montenegro embarked on a Membership Action Plan and Bosnia will do the same when it completes the necessary reforms.

The dramatic changes in the U.S. relationship with Serbia in the last decade are another example of the progress we have made. Just over ten years ago, the United States was bombing targets in Serbia. Last year, Vice President Biden traveled to Belgrade and delivered the message that the United States was ready to turn the page on this troubled recent past and wants to be a partner with Serbia. Serbia, in turn, is now led by the most democratic and pro-European government it has ever had. We support Serbia's EU candidacy and the door to NATO membership for Serbia is open, if and when it is ready. While we have agreed to

disagree on Kosovo, we should work together to improve the lives of Serbs and other minorities, and Serbia needs to do its part to ensure stability in Kosovo as a responsible EU aspirant. I sincerely believe that, with good will on both sides, U.S.-Serbian relations could be a model of productive partnership by the end of this Administration's first term.

This record of change in the Balkans demonstrates what is possible but also what remains to be done. So let me turn to some of the remaining challenges in the Balkans, as well as what Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey can do to contribute to the full integration of all of Southeastern Europe into the institutions of Euro-Atlantic unity.

Beginning with Bosnia, the progress that we have seen since the mid-1990s has slowed recently and we must not allow it to stop. For the better part of the last three years Bosnia's political leaders have not demonstrated the political will necessary to advance the reforms that their country needs. They have been stuck in a vicious cycle where narrow ethnic and short-term personal political interests have trumped long-term objectives that would benefit all of Bosnia's communities. In an effort to break this corrosive dynamic, last October the United States and the EU started intensive consultations with political party leaders in Bosnia to encourage them to take the steps necessary to move Bosnia forward. These talks, led by Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg, became known as the Butmir process, named for the base near Sarajevo where the talks took place. The goal of this initiative was to reach consensus among the parties to improve the functioning of the Bosnian state so as to position Bosnia for EU candidacy and the NATO membership process. It was not an attempt to radically change the structures created by the Dayton Accords, to create a centralized state, or to alter Bosnia's two-entity structure. Unfortunately, the parties so far have not been willing to agree on how to proceed. The United States remains engaged and willing to help Bosnia move forward. We also look forward to working closely with the EU and High Representative Ashton, who is in the region this week. The EU and the United States have not always been on the same page with respect to the Balkans but the intensive joint diplomacy of recent months have shown how closely our visions are aligned, something which is essential for progress in the region. Ultimately, however, the burden of achieving Bosnia's aspirations rests on Bosnia's political leaders, and their willingness to compromise for the greater good. If they fail to do so, it is they who will have to explain to their voters why Bosnia's neighbors are moving ahead with visa-free travel to Europe, EU candidacy, and NATO integration, while Bosnia is left behind.

Kosovo provides a hopeful example of how much can be achieved in a short time by cooperative and committed political leadership. Kosovo is in fact celebrating the second anniversary of its independence today. The country has made tremendous progress in solidifying its democracy, promoting reconciliation, and playing a constructive role in regional and international economic cooperation. Sixty-five countries from all around the world have now recognized Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state. It is now a member of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Although the International Court of Justice has yet to render its advisory opinion on Kosovo's declaration of independence, the United States will remain committed to Kosovo's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Kosovo's independence is irreversible. Kosovo's young democracy is also growing with recent successful elections. In the period leading up to the vote, the government of Kosovo made an important effort to ensure Kosovo Serb participation, which contributed crucially to the positive nature of the process.

There is, however, still a lot of work to do. The important task of decentralizing government must continue – there must be ongoing outreach to Kosovo's Serb communities, particularly in northern Kosovo, and protection of Serb cultural and religious sites. Municipalities need support as they exercise new functions and provide services to citizens. Getting decentralization right will ensure people have access to government services throughout the country and that Kosovo provides a prosperous future for all of its citizens. On the economic front, the government must implement the reforms necessary for the private sector to grow. We are working closely with the Kosovo government, the EU, and other international partners to implement these reforms, fight corruption and organized crime, and move forward on privatization projects. Finally, the rule of law is a high priority for international assistance to Kosovo – because it is the key to success in other areas. Kosovo will need to pass and implement a series of critical laws that will modernize Kosovo's judicial process and update its legal codes. With these reforms in place, Kosovo can continue its steady progress toward fulfilling its promise as Europe's newest country.

There is a role for regional powers, in particular Greece and Turkey, to play as well in the development and political integration of Southeastern Europe. The Balkans are Greece's immediate neighborhood and Athens has played an important leadership role in

the region commensurate with its influence as one of the region's largest investors. The 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, which took place under Greece's EU Presidency, provided a historic boost to the EU aspirations of the Balkan countries and provided a roadmap for the region's integration into Europe. We applaud the effective role Greece played during 2009 as the OSCE's Chair-in-Office and welcome the role Greece is continuing to play in integrating the Balkans. The Greek vision of achieving the full integration of the Balkans into Europe by 2014, one hundred years after the start of World War I, is an admirable goal. A remaining challenge is the dispute between Greece and Macedonia over the latter's name, which is an obstacle to Macedonia's EU and NATO integration. We understand that this is a difficult issue but now is the time for courageous political leadership that will resolve this issue and promote the political stability and economic prospects of Southeastern Europe.

Cyprus is another example of an issue where regional leadership is necessary for progress. Though not strictly a matter of Greek-Turkish bilateral relations, both Greece and Turkey can play important and constructive roles in urging the Cypriot parties toward a lasting solution to their differences. The United States continues to support the Cypriot-led negotiations under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. Both sides have put considerable effort into these negotiations and Cypriot leaders should seize the opportunity these talks offer for a just and lasting settlement that reunifies Cyprus into a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation. The notable progress that Greece and Turkey have made in their own bilateral relations in the last decade, and especially the reinvigorated dialogue in recent months between Prime Ministers Papandreou and Erdogan, provides a hopeful and instructive example of the power of personal diplomacy and we look forward to supporting both countries as they continue to strengthen their relationship.

Turkey itself is an example of the case for the further integration of Southeastern Europe into Europe's institutions. It is of course a very different situation than that of the Balkans: Turkey has been a valued and active member of NATO for decades and its candidacy for EU membership is already in the negotiation phase. While we recognize that the decision is not ours, we continue to strongly support Turkey's accession to the European Union and urge Turkey to continue progress on the democratic and political reforms necessary for membership. These reforms not only further Turkey's EU accession bid, but they also democratize and modernize Turkey. Important gestures like reopening the Halki Seminary and further movement on Turkey's "democratic opening" to the Kurds, as well as progress on Cyprus, will also propel Turkey's EU prospects forward.

As President Obama has said, these reforms, and Turkey's eventual accession, are good for Turkey and good for the EU. They will cement Turkey's place in Europe and ensure the continued vitality and strength of the EU itself. To achieve these goals, Turkey and the EU should in our view jump-start the accession process by working closely together to meet the remaining requirements of EU membership. The EU for its part can ensure that this forward momentum continues by making clear that it is fully committed to engaging Turkey's bid for membership as the country meets reform goals.

Let me close by saying that I think this discussion of the challenges remaining in Southeastern Europe today reveals two things. First, some of the same fault lines of ethnicity, language, and religion that have caused so much strife in the region over centuries still exist. We are fortunate that they do not burn as intensely today as they have in the past. But they are still there. The second lesson is that there is a clear solution for meeting and overcoming these historic obstacles: the path of economic and political integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

The United States is committed to the progress and prosperity of Southeastern Europe and the nations of the region have an engaged and interested partner in the Obama Administration. The EU plays an essential role in the region's development and clear and consistent political engagement from the organization could make the difference between success and failure. After all, the stability of Southeastern Europe is first and foremost a European interest. But the ultimate responsibility lies with national leaders – in the Balkans, in Cyprus, in Greece, and in Turkey – who must make the bold political choices that will produce real change. We will stand with them. The choices are hard. But the goal is worth the effort: an ever more democratic, peaceful, and prosperous region, fully integrated into Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community.