

“Balkans: A View from the New U.S. Administration”

“Southeast Europe: Crisis and Perspectives” Conference

Friday November 13, 2009 at 14:00

Megaron Concert Hall

Mr. Papantoniou, thank you for inviting me here today and providing the opportunity to address this esteemed audience. I am heartened to see such an important group of speakers and participants focused on all aspects of our relationship with the Balkans region. It is an understatement to say that there is a history of U.S. engagement with the Balkans and we look forward to continued work with our Greek partners and friends throughout the region.

I want to talk a bit about the U.S. Administration’s priorities for the region – and particularly the Western Balkans - and how we are working in partnership with our European friends to get where we need to go.

Let me start, by sharing with you one concrete symbol of the partnership and shared vision between our countries. I am speaking of our energy cooperation in the Balkans. Greece’s and the United States’ development agencies have partnered together to help create an environment to support private investment, improved energy security, and increased economic growth in Southeast Europe. I am proud of this cooperation, particularly since both President Obama and PM Papandreou have made climate change and greening the economy a priority. We hope to continue to build on this collaboration as we work toward our shared objectives of supporting stability, prosperity and full integration into the Euro-Atlantic community for the entire region.

For the United States – and many other countries represented here today – the Balkans are an area of symbolic and strategic importance, and, in the last century a battleground. While enormous progress has been made, the Western Balkans remains one of the last regions in Europe where there is potential for people to turn to violence to solve their differences. Bringing Balkan countries onto the mainstream Euro-Atlantic path is probably the single most important tool for ensuring peace and stability in this region. And the economic benefits of this path – with the growth of investment, trade and employment – will reinforce the sustainability of peace in the region.

The Obama Administration places great importance on completing the task of supporting a fully integrated Balkan region into the Euro-Atlantic community. Despite the challenges from the global economic slowdown, we can see that the region is moving forward. All of the countries have undergone dramatic political, economic and social transitions. All of the countries in the region have become valuable partners of the United States and Europe including contributing or planning to contribute, to international security operations. And, all of the countries in the region are committed to, and have taken steps toward, eventual membership in the European Union.

The United States shares the goals of the European Union and Greece. We are working to create the preconditions for sustained stability -- functioning democratic processes and institutions, respect for the rule of law and human rights, regional cooperation, and economic development. In concert with our European partners, we are intensifying our engagement with the region's leaders and pressing for reforms that will advance their states toward the European mainstream. Vice President Biden's May visit to the region and his public speeches in Bosnia and Kosovo made clear our commitment to helping the countries in the region to overcome debilitating legacies and realize their aspirations. And most recently in Bosnia, Swedish FM Carl Bildt and Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg have joined together in the Butmir process to help that country's leaders to find a way through the political impasse that stands in the way of their Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

However, critical challenges remain - challenges compounded by the pressures of a global economic crisis and the significant demands placed on the Euro-Atlantic partnership by other priorities around the world. These priorities compete for, and place pressure on, a limited set of resources available for accomplishing our shared objectives -- a situation that can exacerbate social pressures within the region if not managed well.

Crime and corruption remain one of the most serious problems hindering political and economic development in the region despite extensive internal reforms and international support. After more than a decade after assistance, the forces of democracy, openness and modernity still struggle in some places against backward-looking ethnic nationalism and intolerance. Much work remains to be done.

To this end, U.S. support has placed an emphasis on helping authorities in the region to reduce opportunities for corruption and bribery through building oversight and audit capabilities and increasing their capacity to investigate and prosecute corruption and financial crimes. We have worked to empower civic groups, associations, and the media so they are better able to scrutinize government operations. And we helped these countries to reform judicial systems by increasing accountability, transparency, and independence. To give just one example, the United States is participating in the EU's Rule of Law mission in Kosovo, which is monitoring, mentoring and advising the Kosovo police and judicial institutions.

The U S government remains a major donor of assistance to the Western Balkans in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In 2009 alone, the United States allocated more than 116 million dollars to these activities. 44 million dollars of this amount went for support for fair elections, development of a vibrant nongovernmental sector, and effective and transparent government. Assisting in the development of justice systems that effectively fight crime while preserving due process and ensuring full access by citizens to legal remedies is a priority. We are spending more than 70 million on this in 2009, including in training and capacity development for police.

And we are engaged not only in financial support but also on a humanitarian and person-to-person level. The fight against trafficking in persons is a personal priority for me – it is a modern tragedy with age old roots, and the Balkan Peninsula – unfortunately – is one of this illicit trade’s most popular modern routes. To combat the trafficking of victims within the region and to Southeastern and Western Europe, the U.S. Government is working with local governments, Non Governmental Organizations and international organizations, including the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR. Together we are building local capacity to identify and assist victims. This includes funding crisis hotlines and women's shelters, improving training to help law enforcement better identify and treat victims, and expanding public awareness and education efforts to prevent vulnerable individuals from becoming victims in the first place.

For others struggling to find a voice, the U.S. government is working with governments and international organizations to increase and facilitate minority representation in the civil service, judiciary, central government, and elected bodies. Secretary Clinton has also made it clear that the Administration -- and she personally -- remains strongly committed to promoting the rights of Roma. On International Roma Day, embassies throughout the region hold events and activities to highlight the plight of Roma, and they continue to press governments to work to end discrimination and ensure equality of opportunity for these communities.

Through small grants and technical assistance programs, we are also working to help build the capacity of local and regional NGOs to advocate for policy reform, build partnerships with public and private sectors, and promote inter-ethnic dialogue and understanding. We are working to advance media freedom and enhance the media's watchdog role by promoting investigative journalism and providing training, legal, and technical support to independent media outlets. For instance, the U.S. Government has helped to create a regional network of investigative journalists in Southeast Europe through the Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. This is greatly expanding the reach of investigative journalism and has garnered support from other donors, including the United Nations Development Program. We all have a common interest in supporting the development of civil society, the media, rule of law and human rights in the region as a key component of long term stability and development.

The United States looks to Greece as a partner and anchor of stability in the Balkans. We have been impressed with the priority the new Greek Administration has placed on the region. Greece exerts considerable influence in the Balkans through its strong diplomatic ties as well as its leadership in foreign investment and trade. We commend Prime Minister Papandreou’s public support for moving the Western Balkans toward EU accession.

We recognize the challenge that the name issue has placed in meeting this broader strategic objective. Resolving this issue is also important to both countries as it will promote stability and provide the foundation for enhanced economic ties. We continue to support The U.N. led process to finding an acceptable solution in the near term and welcome the bilateral contacts that have taken place recently to reinforce this objective.

I am proud of the cooperation between the United States and Greece in promoting stability and development in the Western Balkans. The Obama administration is intensifying our engagement with Greece and the region's leaders to support their reforms and advance their aspirations into the European mainstream. In the end, we will all benefit from their success.