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[UK Parliament](#) > [Hansard](#) > [Commons: 2 May 2024](#) > [Commons Chamber](#) > Security in the Western Balkans

Security in the Western Balkans

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Speakers

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con); Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con); Alicia Kearns; Sir Alec Shelbrooke; Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind); Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab); Mr Dhesi; Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing); Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP); Madam Deputy Speaker; Jim Shannon; Bob Stewart; Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD); Richard Foord; Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con); Fiona Bruce; Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP); Patrick Grady; Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op); Stephen Doughty; The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley); David Rutley

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Security in the Western Balkans

11.32am

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House recognises the acute security situation in the Western Balkans; supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina; condemns the attack by Serb nationalist militants in Banjska, Kosovo on 24 September 2023; further supports the authority of the Constitutional Court in Bosnia and Herzegovina; further condemns Russian interference in the Balkans; notes with concern pro-Russian and pro-Serbian irredentist political rhetoric in Montenegro; and urges the Government to increase its engagement with regional partners and international allies to improve the security landscape of the Western Balkans.

A pivotal moment for the western Balkans approaches —a moment that will decide whether the dream of a democratic, peaceful, Euro-Atlantic, integrated Balkans can be realised, or whether we will return to the nightmare of the 1990s. Without peace, there can be no progress, and with the threat of violence and the embrace of hatred, insecurity is bred. Today, I hope to set out some steps that the Government can take to protect peace and, as we all hope, to protect us from having to confront the dreadful alternative of conflict. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, which is very much appreciated, and I welcome the ambassadors of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of Kosovo to the Chamber.

I want to start by discussing Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, with its multi-ethnic character and constitution, acts as a linchpin for the wider region. Next year, we mark the 30th anniversary of the Dayton agreement, which brought an end to the horrors of the Bosnian war. Before the war, 34% of people in Sarajevo were married to spouses of a different ethnicity, with children who studied and played together and neighbours who cooked together, but they suddenly found themselves separated by conflict, unable to understand why their world had fallen apart and why those they had called friends shunned and abandoned them.

The tragedy of the Bosnian war is embodied in the story of the 25-year-olds Boško Brkić and Admira Ismić, known as the Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo. Boško was a Bosnian Serb who was deeply in love with his girlfriend Admira, a Bosniak. Both were trapped in the siege of Sarajevo by the Bosnian Serb army, and attempted to escape in 1993, hoping to continue their young lives, full of hope and away from the horrors of war. As they attempted to leave the city, Boško was shot by a sniper and killed instantly. Another shot injured Admira, who in her last moments crawled to Boško and embraced his body, eventually succumbing to her wounds while she hugged her beloved. Their final embrace, as Admira lay dying, signalled the unwavering strength of their bond and represented the rejection of hatred and of ethnic division. The hopes of the young Romeo and Juliet of Sarajevo continue to be held by many people across Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it is our duty to empower them to dream of that brighter future, and to do all we can to limit the return of violence and more cruelty on the streets.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate at a crucial time. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the current situation is a tinderbox and on knife edge, to mix metaphors. The story she has just relayed is important. Does she agree that it illustrates that the nationalistic leaderships who wanted to stir up hatred were in such a minority,

Security in the Western Balkans

because the vast majority of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina were unaware of their ethnic backgrounds? They saw themselves as Bosnians, and that was exploited by those nationalist tendencies.

Alicia Kearns

My right hon. Friend, unsurprisingly, is absolutely right. That is why it is so important at this time, when we see the risk of a return to the tinderbox, that we in this place attempt to safeguard the truth. We must never forget the horrors of the Bosnian war or the siege of Sarajevo, which is still the longest in modern history and where almost 12,000 civilians were killed. Neither should we forget the genocide of Srebrenica, where 8,000 men and boys were murdered, or the 100,000 people dead and the 2 million displaced.

Sadly, those who seek to break up Bosnia today use the past as a weapon, inverting it to retraumatise victims and glorify atrocities. Milorad Dodik, the so-called President of Republika Srpska, has consistently denied the Srebrenica genocide, despite a 2021 Bosnia-wide law banning genocide denial. As we know, denial is a continuation of genocide. A group of countries including Bosnia, Germany and Rwanda is bringing a resolution to the UN General Assembly formally to recognise 11 July as the international memorial day for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. The resolution is supported by Balkan countries including Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia and Slovenia, yet Serbia opposes it.

Enshrining remembrance of the Srebrenica genocide and other victims of the Bosnian war in international law sends a strong message that the international community rejects historical revisionism and the weaponisation of the past. It also prevents the revictimisation of survivors, and sends a strong message to Milorad Dodik and all those who seek a return to the 1990s that we have not forgotten and we will not forget. I am grateful that the Foreign Secretary has made it clear that the UK will both vote for and promote the resolution. Some, however, are seeking to misrepresent that resolution. What it does not do is pass collective judgment against the people of Serbia. It is about individual responsibility and ending the denial of genocide to build a better future with a common language. Denial prevents communities from coming together and building new futures, and the memory of past traumas steels us in our mission to safeguard modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Dayton agreement, to which the UK is a signatory, established the office of high representative and the constitutional court of Bosnia to ensure the state's viability and development. Milorad Dodik has sought to violate the treaty, passing illegal laws in Republika Srpska to reject the authority of both those entities. He is now before a court on charges relating to those violations, and if found guilty will be banned from holding office and face up to five years in prison.

Predictably, rather than face up to the consequences of his actions, Dodik has threatened Bosnia and Herzegovina, stating that Republika Srpska will secede from Bosnia if he is convicted. Republika Srpska is not Dodik; Dodik is not Republika Srpska, and he is wrong when he endangers all those who live within its environs. That cowardly attempt to shield himself behind state institutions will have dire consequences for all Bosnians, and the UK must be unequivocal in our support for the constitutional court and its judgments.

Russia has a clear interest in fomenting conflict in the Balkans to distract from its renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine. Sadly, it holds a veto over the security framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the renewal of EUFOR. That consequently hands it a veto over the entire region, which is akin, some might say, to handing a match to an arsonist. Eventually you

Security in the Western Balkans

will be forced to put out the fire.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

Just to illustrate where we are with Russia, Dodik gave the highest order of Republika Srpska to Putin.

Alicia Kearns

Dodik absolutely did do that. Once again my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Over the next few days, there will be a great Easter coming together of Dodik, Vučić and others around a Greater Serbia, which I will touch on briefly.

I ask the Government to work with our allies to consider an alternative peacekeeping framework to EUFOR, led by NATO. The Dayton agreement gives NATO explicit permission to legally establish a force in Bosnia for peacekeeping without time limit or UN approval. There is widespread support from the Bosnian Government, and its legality under the Dayton agreement means that neither Dodik nor Putin could block it, unlike the current arrangement with EUFOR. As a minimum, the UK should send a NATO peacekeeping force to the strategic Brčko district, which I am sure my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) will speak about shortly. Even one battalion of NATO troops in Brčko would make a secession militarily impossible and have a stabilising effect on all of Bosnia's politics.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind)

I entirely endorse that point. A British battalion positioned in Bosnia would give a very strong signal. Frankly, a British battalion is probably the best battalion to send into such a peacekeeping situation.

Alicia Kearns

My right hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right. To that point, I know that the Foreign Secretary, in answering questions from Members in the other place yesterday, said that he would prefer to emphasise and focus on Kosovo, but we saw that when British troops went into Kosovo last September, there was a resurgence in the delivery of the mandate. My right hon. and gallant Friend is right that British troops would make a fundamental difference. The fact that the Dayton agreement gives us explicit permission to create a new security force means that we should actively be debating it.

Finally, the UK should look at extending the sanctions levied against Dodik and other senior figures in his circle, which I was relieved to secure a few years ago. The joint sanctions with the UK and the US have begun to take serious effect, with Bosnian banks closing the accounts of those targeted. I urge the Government to consider sanctioning other figures from Republika Srpska who support laws designed to undermine the high representative and the constitutional court, promote genocide denial and glorification, and attempt to transfer Bosnian state assets to their personal control.

Bosnia, with its multi-ethnic character and constitution, is a barometer for the entirety of the western Balkans. When threatening the break-up of Bosnia, Dodik said:

"If anybody tries to stop us, we have friends who will defend us."

Security in the Western Balkans

I say, let us show him that Bosnia, too, has friends, and none more steadfast than the United Kingdom. Now is the time for deterrence, diplomacy and a rejuvenated NATO to take the initiative and ensure that Bosnia's sovereignty and security are protected.

While the situation in Bosnia is tense, Kosovo is the only country in the western Balkans to have faced an attack on its soil since our last debate on the western Balkans. The Banjska attack carried out last September saw 30 heavily armed Serb militants murder a Kosovan police officer, Afrim Bunjaku, before engaging in a firefight from the Banjska monastery. The amount of weaponry seized from the militants was truly extraordinary. I have seen it myself, and I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)

I thank the hon. Member for securing today's important debate on security in the western Balkans. On a recent visit to Serbia as part of a cross-party parliamentary delegation, I witnessed the immense potential as well as the stark challenges in the region. Does she agree that the UK Government must do their level best to help to defuse tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, to ensure that the rights of minorities on both sides of the border are protected and, crucially, to promote democracy by doing their level best to reduce Russian influence in the region and in Serbia?

Alicia Kearns

Without question, everyone must help to defuse the situation and everyone must support ethnic minorities, and we should be clear that we in this place, as I will say later in my speech, want to be a friend to a democratic Serbia. That is what we all aspire to in the region.

To go back to the Banjska attack, the arsenal of those 30 militants included 41 anti-tank rocket launchers, 66 automatic rifles, two automatic grenade launchers, four mortars, two armoured vehicles and more than 50 kg of explosives. The weapon serial numbers lined up. Those were not miscellaneous items. Nor were they old or expired stock—some were just a couple of years old. I am sure the Minister will agree that such a level of weaponry is not typical for provincial militia. It therefore begs the question: who was supporting the Banjska attackers and why?

The answer may lie in some of the footage recovered from those who undertook the attack, which shows the militants training in a Serbian military base on 20 September, just four days before the attack. Likewise, some of those aforementioned serial numbers on the weaponry match up to the maintenance documents recording the same weapons as belonging to the Serbian military.

Countless times in the House—in writing and in private meetings—I have asked the Government to release an assessment of whether the Serbian state provided material and strategic support for the Banjska attack. The US has completed a report on who is responsible and their links to the Serbian Government. Our allies need to release that urgently because truth matters and accountability matters. Without that report, the truth is denied and there is no deterrence, because impunity breeds contempt for the rule of law and order.

Swift and equitable accountability for acts of aggression is crucial if we want to discourage future violence and dispel any notion of appeasement. So I ask again: who organised the Banjska attack, who provided the weaponry and what do we assess was their intent? I would be grateful if the Minister answered that when he responds.

Security in the Western Balkans

What we do know beyond doubt is that the attack was led by Milan Radoičić, a former vice-president of the Srpska Lista party. The current wave of tension in northern Kosovo exploded when Srpska Lista orchestrated an electoral boycott of municipal elections last May. Without the participation of Kosovan Serbs, the election returned Albanian mayors. The installation of the mayors by the Kosovan Government sparked unrest. We have all spoken about how risky that was, including I directly to the Government. However, we then saw a violent attack on Kosovo Force—KFOR—by Serbian militias that injured 25 Italian and Hungarian troops, some of whom will never walk again. At the time, the UK, the US and the EU condemned Kosovo for installing the democratically elected mayors, but did not criticise Serbia for its support of the boycott and Srpska Lista.

I wrote a joint statement, signed by 74 parliamentarians from Europe—including almost every chair of a Foreign Affairs Committee in Europe—the US and Canada, asking for a fairer approach to the crisis and for Kosovo not to be singled out. The statement, and multiple votes and debates in the EU Parliament, have shown that the international community want to see a more even-handed approach to Kosovo and Serbia.

Kosovo has since, under international pressure, facilitated a referendum in the northern municipalities to allow elections for new mayors. Srpska Lista again orchestrated a boycott, frustrating the democratic process and inflaming intercommunal tensions even further. The US has been clear now, however, that Kosovo has fulfilled its democratic obligations and the northern mayors are legitimate. The EU, unfortunately, has been less clear in its messaging, insisting on a “both sidery” approach. Can the Minister confirm that the UK recognises that Kosovo has attempted to rectify the situation under its constitution and that, regardless of boycott by Srpska Lista, the current mayors are legitimate, regardless of their ethnicity? I also point out how disappointing it is that ethnicity continues to play such an important role in the Balkans.

Despite constant impediments by Russia and Serbia, Kosovo is on the verge of membership of the Council of Europe, with its application moving to the Committee of Ministers for approval this month. Membership would mark a vital milestone in Kosovo’s progress from the dark days of the 1990s. Kosovo’s journey is one in which we have played an important role, which we should all be proud of. However, some internationally have said that Kosovo should be admitted only if it creates an association of Serb-majority municipalities. The UK should reject that firmly. While I do not want another Republika Srpska in the western Balkans at all, an ASM will be created as part of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, but it cannot be rushed or extracted through external pressure. Can the Minister confirm that the Foreign Secretary will vote for Kosovo’s admission to the Council of Europe this month, regardless of progress on the ASM, and encourage all allies to do so?

More broadly, the UK, as a former member of the Quint, should assume a more active role in the peace talks. Our current passivity is untenable in the face of such a volatile situation. We are no longer constrained by EU consensus and non-recognisers, and we must be more inventive in diplomacy. We must find not just our voice but our backbone, stop standing on the sidelines and take action when we have a duty to support our allies.

Equally, the UK should be engaged with the five EU states that do not recognise Kosovo’s sovereignty to help boost Kosovo’s trajectory towards EU and NATO membership while solidifying the inviolability of its territorial integrity. The US and the EU should also adopt a resolute posture when addressing Serbia’s leadership for their role in stoking instability, aligning with Putin and increasing autocratic tendencies at home and abroad. The UK and Kosovo have a fantastic relationship, and I thank the Foreign Secretary for visiting Kosovo earlier this year to demonstrate that partnership. The bond was forged during NATO’s intervention in 1999, when British troops helped to avert further atrocities and put Kosovo on a path towards democracy, which it has fully embraced.

Security in the Western Balkans

Our armed forces continue to play a role. After the Banjska attack, the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment quickly deployed to bolster KFOR, acting professionally to defuse the situation. Likewise, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers deployed last year in a period of heightened tensions. The British Army is highly respected and appreciated, and I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking each and every soldier who served there with distinction. They made an enormous difference.

I urge the Government to work with NATO partners to ensure that KFOR is given the support and taskings it needs to maintain peace and stability across Kosovo. We should consider the establishment of a new security alliance between the US, the UK and other willing NATO member states with Kosovo to help to allay the immediate security concerns. Let me give an example of why that is needed. Last December, President Vučić said that Serbia should simply follow the example of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and wait for special geopolitical circumstances to allow it to reclaim Kosovo. That is a statement of intent and should not be ignored.

Such comments from a head of state are unacceptable. Indeed, Vučić threatened me last year for speaking out against the smuggling of weapons into Kosovo. My warnings were decried by many, yet what I predicted devastatingly came to pass in Banjska. I am grateful to the Speaker and to this House for the support I was given at that time.

There were also reports of electoral irregularities during the Serbian election and the bussing in of people, followed by the opposition MP Nikola Sandulović being kidnapped and brutally beaten by Serbian authoritarian terrorists. It is fitting that the Serbian opposition operates under the banner of “Serbia against violence”. We in this House want to be friends with a democratic Serbia. We want free and fair Serbian elections. There needs to be political reform, and that begins with free and fair elections. I fear that we are not seeing that, especially with Xi Jinping today in Serbia encouraging it to join BRICS.

Mr Dhesi

During a recent cross-party parliamentary delegation visit to Albania, we witnessed for ourselves—thanks to fruitful meetings with the President, the Speaker, Ministers, MPs and others to help strengthen ties—that Albania is a close, trusted ally in defence and migration. The UK Government are helping to support a great deal of work to tackle modern slavery. We also witnessed the UK Government supporting youth initiatives in Kukës. There was also considerable concern in Albania, and during my recent meeting with the British Albanian diaspora, about the sovereignty of Kosovo. Does the hon. Lady agree that the British Government must work with Albania and other allies to ensure that we help to protect Kosovan sovereignty?

Alicia Kearns

Yes, we must do that.

I had hoped to touch on Montenegro, but I will conclude. We can protect the truth in Bosnia by voting for a UN resolution to commemorate the Srebrenica genocide. We can end Dodik’s threats of secession by transitioning to a NATO-led peacekeeping mission under the provisions of the Dayton agreement. We can continue our successful programme of sanctions to shut down the accounts of those who threaten peace. In Kosovo, we can build on the UK’s proud legacy by voting to admit Kosovo to the Council of Europe, and we can redouble our commitment to KFOR and extend its mandate by taking a more proactive approach to countering militias and criminality. We can commit to a fairer and more even-handed approach to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, and in Serbia we can work with

Security in the Western Balkans

international partners to promote free and fair elections and a media environment.

We must be clear that we stand on the side of the people of Serbia, and that irredentist dreams care little about the people of the Balkans. It is within our power to support stability and security through deterrence and being resolute in our commitment to the region. Inaction is a choice that we cannot make. We must not step back and we must not look away.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

I call Jim Shannon.

11.53am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

Thank you so much for calling me so early, Madam Deputy Speaker. I really appreciate that. I was rather caught off balance, to be truthful.

Madam Deputy Speaker

I checked with Mr Speaker that it was constitutionally all right for me to do that. We were both rather surprised to find this situation.

Jim Shannon

Madam Deputy Speaker, you, Mr Speaker and I very much believe in the constitution, so we are on the same page. Thank you so much.

I commend the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for leading the debate with such a detailed and helpful contribution. I also commend her for her leadership as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and for her stance in this Chamber on these issues in relation to not just the Balkans, but everywhere. She knows I am impressed by her contribution and what she does.

The current security situation in the western Balkans has prompted considerable international concern. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with its history of engagement and long-standing partnerships in the region, has also raised its voice to the challenges that threaten the development of the western Balkans into a more stable and resilient region. With that in mind, it is really important to be here to discuss how we can provide further support and do more. There are more elegant speakers than I in the Chamber. I look forward to everyone's contributions.

The situation is particularly worrying due to Russian interference that continues to destabilise and polarise the region. The hon. Lady referred to that in her introduction. Russia considers the western Balkans as an important region in which to exercise its foreign policy by inciting instability and division, ultimately aiming to assert its place as a great power in the region. Media and disinformation are some of Russia's great tools in accomplishing that, and it uses them in Ukraine and all over the world. It is not the only one doing it.

Russia continues to interfere in the politics of Montenegro, often through Serbia; some nationalist Serbs in Montenegro are using media, specifically social networks, to promote

Security in the Western Balkans

Russia and pro-Serbian irridentist political rhetoric. The gravity of the situation is clear. I am concerned that any Russian involvement in the western Balkans serves only to undermine democracy, escalate tensions and destabilise the region. Indeed, in the axis of evil, Russia is right there leading at the top of the pyramid, along with others across the world.

I am very much looking forward to the contributions of the shadow Ministers and, in particular—if I can say so, Madam Deputy Speaker—my good friend the Minister, who always encapsulates our thoughts and concerns in a way that encourages us. I look forward to what he will say.

I think it was the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton who, in November 2022, instigated the last debate on the western Balkans. I spoke in that debate—I think that was the last time we debated this issue—and I reaffirm my position that Putin's regime is the greatest threat to prosperity and peace in the Balkans. I condemn any Russian interference in the region. I ask our Government, our Minister and others to join me and others in this House in doing so. It is clear that Russia is a danger to peace not only in the Balkans, but in the world, and in Europe in particular. Is it any wonder that many other countries—Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Germany and all those within the Russian axis some time ago—all fear their very survival from Russia's intent?

The Russia-Ukraine crisis poses an additional concern to security and stability in the western Balkans. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted some Balkan Governments to distance themselves from Moscow, Serbia has shown its commitment to its strong ties with Russia by refusing to support the EU sanctions regime amidst the ongoing conflict. Again, the influence of the axis of evil is clear. It relies on Russia for gas and oil, and on Russia's support for its denial of Kosovo's independence. However, Serbia's support for the UN resolution denouncing Russian aggression against Ukraine and its refusal to recognise Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory suggests that Russia is gradually losing its stronghold on the country. Only time will tell, but it would be very helpful, Minister, to have the thoughts of the Government and the Department on that. Do they see a gradual moving away by Serbia from Russian influence? Some indications show that, but whether they are strong enough and deep enough only time will tell.

Alicia Kearns

The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that in the last few days Aleksandar Vulin—a former spy chief for Serbia who, having been sanctioned by the United States Government for his involvement in gangs and narcotics, moved to Republika Srpska and was made a senator for life—has just been brought back as Deputy Prime Minister. Does he agree that that is gravely concerning, and is relevant to his point about people being put in place who have been sanctioned by the United States and are strong fans of Russia? Does he agree that it can be destabilising and make our partnership with Serbia challenging, especially when it comes to defence and security matters?

Jim Shannon

The hon. Lady's tremendous knowledge of this part of the world in particular, and the interest that she pursues so assiduously, cannot be ignored. She is right to underline the influence of Russia and its wish for people to be placed where they can have influence on its behalf, and I share her concern.

If the UK brings its global economic strengths to partnering with Serbia and other western Balkan states, there is a potential for those countries to increase their resilience against

Security in the Western Balkans

hostile foreign interference and progress towards wider economic development through trade and diplomatic efforts. The right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is admired by all of us here for the leadership that he showed in the Balkans when he was in the armed forces and for his knowledge of this subject following his experiences, and I know that when he speaks later he will remind us of how awful that particular war was. But if we can move forward and assist the world's wider economic development through the trade and diplomatic efforts that I have mentioned, let us do that. We cannot ignore the negatives, but it is always good to find solutions as a result of a positive attitude and a focus on our strategy.

The UK's objectives for the western Balkans include overcoming divisive ethnic nationalism and conflict. The attack by Serbian nationalist militants in Kosovo last year is a prime example of the necessity for our Government to pursue effective action to achieve that objective, especially with regard to Kosovo-Serbia relations. Perhaps, when the Minister responds to the debate, he will give us his thoughts about how those relations are proceeding, and what more we can do to bring about solutions.

In the light of the Serbian militants' attack, we remain committed to supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Kosovo, and oppose any action to undermine that. We, or rather our Government and our Minister, have been extremely strong on policies in that regard and their implementation, and I commend them for their leadership. I know that every one of us is greatly encouraged by it. However, the response to the attack from Kosovo and Serbia underscores ongoing tensions that can only exacerbate the regional security challenges, and we ask our Government to join us in condemning such attacks.

The attack is an indicator of nationalist sentiments that have increased in recent years, threatening the stability of not only the countries involved but the entire region. The focus of the debate is on security in the western Balkans, but what happens there will affect all the surrounding areas as well, as the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton emphasised in her speech, and it is important for us to do our best in that context. However, we recognise the need for this topic to be debated in the House, because the western Balkans certainly remain vital to UK and European security. We must bear in mind that Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are our NATO partners. Their peoples may be culturally or ethnically different, but they are morally focused on finding a solution, and I find that encouraging. Their partnership with us is critical in maintaining stability in the wider region. The stability of the western Balkans remains fragile, and we cannot ignore that.

The four regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland come as one, and we fight as one in the British Army, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, which I am greatly encouraged to see. Even colleagues on the SNP Benches will be encouraged to see those from Scotland who serve in uniform. Before it is too late, we must work alongside regional and international partners to change the situation in the western Balkans. The United Kingdom should redouble its efforts to address areas of needed reform in the western Balkans, including democracy, the rule of law and defence against foreign threats.

Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me early in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton for bringing forward this issue. I thank the Minister and the Government for their leadership, and for their achievements so far. I want that work to continue, so I call on them to utilise their regional and international partnerships, which are built on mutual accountability and trust, to improve the security situation in the western Balkans. Today we add our voice to the efforts to make the necessary changes, and I look forward to the contributions from others, who will equally reinforce the importance of today's debate.

Security in the Western Balkans

12.05pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Ind)

Some present will recall that I was the British battalion commander under UN command in Bosnia in 1992 and 1993. Since then, I have given evidence in four war crimes trials. I have visited Bosnia frequently over the last 31 years, and what happens there and to the people who live there matters to me and to all those people who have served there—whether in the military, for a charity or whatever. Somehow that country grips us, and it matters to people in our country.

I was last in Sarajevo just over two weeks ago, principally to attend the remembrance service for the Ahmići massacre, which took place on 16 April 1993 and where 116 people like us were killed. Those people may well have been Muslim, but they thought like us; they just had a different religion. Like us, they wanted to bring their children up, they wanted schools and they wanted things to work. That is why Bosnia matters—we are very much akin to the people who live there.

Today, Bosnia remains a very fraught place, with tensions between the three main communities: Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims. I could say there are tensions between the Christian community and the Muslim community, but I would like to point out that there are other people there, such as members of the Jewish community, particularly in Sarajevo. Tensions remain just below the surface, and sometimes they break through.

Bosnian society today is still like a lemonade bottle that someone has picked up and shaken. They put it down and think all is calm; they can see through it, and there are no bubbles. When they take the top off, there is an explosion—boom! Tensions in Bosnia remain ready to explode. These tensions are, of course, exacerbated by Russian support for Republika Srpska, which Russia already treats as an independent state. Recently, at a conference in St Petersburg, it was treated as a sovereign entity with its own flag. There have been strong indications, and maybe more than that, over the last few years that Russian weapons are going to Republika Srpska. With Russian encouragement, Dodik, Republika Srpska's leader, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) has already mentioned, is blocking all moves by the Muslim-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska—those two entities together are the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina—towards EU membership.

Just last week, Dodik stated that things will change after 2 May, which is today. Many people interpret that to mean that he will push for the secession of Republika Srpska from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. If that were to happen, such a change would be a disaster for the western Balkans and would very likely result in yet another civil war. Our excellent ambassador to Sarajevo, Julian Reilly, is really worried about that.

Equally, our ambassador is terribly concerned about the number of qualified young people who are leaving Bosnia. Youth unemployment in Bosnia is at nearly 40%. No other country in Europe has such an appalling statistic. Bosnia is bleeding its youth, and the youth are the future of any country. The reason for that statistic is mainly the political situation and the unstable base on which the country sits.

Security in the Western Balkans

Alicia Kearns

Is my right hon. Friend concerned that there is going to be an Easter Assembly, where Dodik and Vučić plan to sign a declaration around Greater Serbia? What does he think that means? What message does it send about Vučić's plans and support for the tacit secession of Republika Srpska?

Bob Stewart

I thank my good and hon. Friend for saying that. I totally agree with the implication. The real problem is that Russia is encouraging this to happen. Republika Srpska, under Dodik, is pushing for it, and the Serbs will play both sides. If it were to happen, we could have an appalling situation like we had in the early 1990s.

In fairness, the British are doing all we can to help, particularly economically. We are trying to pump-prime Bosnia's industry to support the setting up of new companies. Bosnia is still governed by the short-term rules—they were meant to be short-term rules—agreed at the Dayton peace conference in 1996. The rules were supposed to last a couple of years at most, but they have never been replaced. They really need to be sorted out to make a workable system for everyone who lives in Bosnia—Serbs, Muslims, Croats, whoever.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

Everyone is grateful for the service that my right hon. Friend gave to the world. He experienced and witnessed trauma to try to bring about that peace and, in doing so, had to deal with many areas of corruption. Does he believe that a drift away from the big stick has allowed the undermining of the very issues that he says need to be addressed?

Bob Stewart

I thank my right hon. Friend.

There has been drift. We had the most wonderful high representative Paddy Ashdown, who really did wield the big stick—and it worked. His name is still revered and he was a friend of mine—he remains one, although he is gone. We need a high representative with more power, and we need the situation to be sorted out so that people do not get away with criminal acts. The mafia are still rampant. When I was in Bosnia, I had to deal with three sides militarily and with the mafia, who were appalling. I do not want to go into how to deal with the mafia, because that is not the purpose of this debate, but they are always there and they are the people who do not want change. [Interruption.] I have slightly lost my place; I knew I should not have written my speech!

Corruption and cronyism remain and are largely supported by the system. Last year, when I visited Tuzla, in the north of Bosnia, I met a highly qualified young lady who was desperate to go to medical school and become a doctor. She had all the qualifications but she told me that she could not go because she was not a member of a certain political party and, more importantly, because she did not have enough money to bribe the officials to put her on a list to go to a medical school. She was in despair and felt that the only future for her and her friends lay in leaving the country.

Our country has put a lot of effort into supporting peace and stability in Bosnia. We have done so on many levels: politically; socially; economically—a lot of economic work has gone on in Bosnia; and of course militarily. I really believe that our efforts have been worth it; we have saved many lives, and nothing is more important than to save someone's life. We have to continue to do that. We have to do all we can to help the Muslim, Serb and

Security in the Western Balkans

Croat people of Bosnia. All that the vast majority of them want is a decent life—one that we are lucky enough to have—where their children go to school, where they can get jobs and where they do not need to worry too much about law and order. We are lucky to live in this country; there but for the grace of God go all of us. We could have been born Bosnian.

12.18pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD)

It is a genuine honour to follow the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He is revered in this place for his knowledge of the western Balkans, not only because he reads a lot about the area and visits Bosnia a lot, but because of his rich experience from the 1990s, when it was at its most bloody.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). I say humbly, as the newest Member present in the Chamber today, that a Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee ought not just to comment on some of the things going on in the world today, but anticipate what we might see in the future. We often come to the House to ask urgent questions about events, in the middle east or elsewhere, that are happening right now, but real statespeople look forward and think about what might happen in the future and how we can head that off.

I thank those Members who paid tribute to the late Lord Stunell. We were very shocked and saddened by his loss. It reminds us of another loss in the other place, that of Lord Ashdown. When I was trying to decide whether to speak in this debate or to go out and campaign in the local elections, I had to think, “What would Lord Ashdown be more appalled by? Would he be more appalled by my absence from campaigning or the debate?” Although it was a finely balanced decision, I think he would have wanted somebody on the Liberal Democrat Benches talking about the western Balkans.

I will concentrate my remarks on Kosovo, not just because of my personal experience—I spent a year there, all told—but because Kosovo has the most recently changed international border in the region. In 2008, many members of the international community, including the UK, recognised the state of Kosovo. One has to pay tribute where it is due, and it was good to see that Lord Cameron visited Pristina not long after he was appointed, at the beginning of January this year, when many others were sleeping off a hangover.

My first trip to Kosovo was working with KFOR on trying to encourage Serb returns to Kosovo. That reminds us that the efforts by the international community to build peace in Kosovo were grounded in trying to establish a safe and secure multi-ethnic environment. It is easy to forget just how much effort the international community put into trying to keep Kosovo a very diverse place. While I was working on Serb returns, I met a lady whose husband and children had been dreadfully butchered—hung from a tree and disembowelled. I later went back and worked with the Kosovo Protection Corps, an organisation that had grown out of the former Kosovo Liberation Army and subsequently became the Kosovo Security Force. For many, that was going to be the future Army of Kosovo. I have, therefore, had the privilege of seeing things from two extreme sides and I feel I am able to see things from two very different perspectives.

While there is still a strong sense of grievance in the Kosovo-Serb community, there is no doubt that Moscow is playing on that. Moscow would love to see Belgrade acting as some sort of satellite, or even a proxy. We have pretty good reason to believe that Moscow is delighted to see the middle east burning right now because it serves to distract from its illegal war in Ukraine. In much the same way, we suppose that Moscow would be very

Security in the Western Balkans

pleased if the Balkans were on fire too.

Alicia Kearns

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words earlier in his speech. Is he aware that when the Foreign Secretary was giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee he described Serbia as a proxy of the Russian state?

Richard Foord

I was not aware of that but it sounds feasible. We should try to bring Serbia away from the mantle of Moscow, if we can. I appreciate that is not entirely within our gift. One way to do that is through economic means, by trying to attract Belgrade and Serbia to our cause.

We must think, too, about the Kosovo Serbs. More than 10% of Kosovo Serbs have left Kosovo in the past year. Clearly, they are electing to leave, unlike what we saw in 1998–99 when people were being burned out of their homes. It was ethnic cleansing on a scale that, thankfully, we have not seen in southern Europe since. My fear is that, by legitimising the election that the Kosovo Serbs chose to boycott, we might inflame or enrage that sense of grievance that exists among those Kosovo Serbs.

Thinking about the intervention from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I was intrigued to see that members of the International Relations and Defence Committee in the other place wrote a letter to Lord Cameron earlier this year, and among the list of suggestions that they made was one promoting a BBC Albanian service, which strikes me as an excellent idea as it would encourage the spread of our soft power in Kosovo.

When we hear remarks about Greater Serbia, we have to pay tribute to how the international community deliberately avoided creating a Greater Albania in the wake of the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. It deliberately avoided any sense that the international community was seeking to annex territory. That stands in stark contrast to what Russia has sought to do in Ukraine. It may claim that there are precedents for redrawing international borders, but it cannot point to Kosovo as any sort of precedent, given that that involved the creation of an independent state, and that what we see in Ukraine at this time is nothing but aggression and imperial annexation.

I accept the premise that Russia is keen to interfere in the western Balkans, and is seeking to stoke tension between Serbia and Kosovo. My feeling is that we must try to avoid the Serbs becoming susceptible to the goading that is coming from Moscow.

The proposal from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for a trilateral security alliance is an interesting idea. What we saw in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine was Pristina appealing to its allies—appealing to the United States and to NATO to admit Kosovo into NATO. In the absence of that, I suppose that deterrence through a strong alliance with Kosovo makes a whole lot of sense, and, of course, we have seen similar proposals in relation to Warsaw and Kyiv.

Yes, deterrence is required, but my closing point is that we should not afford Moscow greater opportunities to appeal to the Serbs. There are some well-educated and well-informed Serbs who have grievances about what went on in the early 2000s. We must try to appeal to both the Kosovo Albanian community and to the Kosovo Serbs and try to create that much sought after multi-ethnic state.

Security in the Western Balkans

12.28pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for securing this debate at such a critical time.

In November, I was in Sarajevo with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly for a Rose-Roth seminar, which involved a series of lectures and presentations. We got to hear about what was going on from many angles, which led me to the conclusion that I could make one statement saying one thing and another saying the complete opposite. There is a paradox in the country, and the truth of it all depends on one's perspective. For example, people will say that basically nothing has happened since 2017, and that the country is in a stalemate and is not moving forward in many of the areas my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) mentioned. In the same breath, they say that the country is moving forward, building more solid foundations, and becoming a more trusted partner of international institutions. Where the truth lies between those statements is what we are exploring in today's debate, but we know that corruption is still rife, and there are too many self-serving interests.

In the interests of time, I will not repeat the examples given by my right hon. Friend. He outlined them perfectly, especially the example of the young girl who wanted to start a medical career. The reality is that if someone is not a member of a political party, or cannot pay certain people, they can be caught in a trap. Corruption, electoral fraud, the state of law—these are all things that the Government are trying to work on in Bosnia with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, but they are not taking major steps forward. There are, however, politicians and parties that are trying to break away from the established corrupt institutions. We will watch the elections with interest over the coming years, especially in Sarajevo, as anti-corruption candidates start to stand. We have a responsibility to support those processes, through organisations that we support, such as the OSCE.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: brain drain is a massive issue for Bosnia. A country cannot survive and have an economic future if what remains is just the retired population, and those who would serve its best interests are leaving. In 2021, 182,000 people out of a population of 3.2 million left. Ten years ago, there were 300 vacancies in the military, which 7,000 people applied for. Last year, there were 300 applications for 1,000 vacancies. That is a stark change in a decade. Military investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina has stalled at 1% for a decade. That is not enough to maintain the equipment, let alone a force. We then start to see those with corrupt and criminal interests able to get a foothold again—and, more fundamentally, not being worried about any consequences.

There is a way that we can turn that around and support Bosnia. It is about, in words that I have used already, the big stick. My right hon. Friend described Paddy Ashdown using that big stick. I think my right hon. Friend was a little shy about his role in the country, doing what he could to keep criminality under control. The blunt truth is that too many politicians are playing a very dangerous game in Bosnia, in Republika Srpska and the surrounding area. When it looks as if democracy will threaten their position, they launch into nationalist fervour and push that forward. That is exactly what Dodik did in Republika Srpska: he moved to a relatively moderate position, until it looked as though his position was under threat, and then became far more extreme.

It is easy in such a debate to discuss where we are and where things are going. We say that what we did in the war was 30 years ago. I think that sanitises things slightly. I

Security in the Western Balkans

remember watching—it has to be 25 years ago—the BBC drama “Warriors”. I only watched it once, and I was traumatised by it. It was an excellent drama.

Bob Stewart

“Warriors” was based on my infantry battalion, and it demonstrated how brilliant, well trained and decent our servicemen are in such situations. I am very proud that “Warriors” won the Montreux golden rose for its production.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

I am more than grateful to my right hon. and gallant Friend for making that point. He is held in high esteem in this House, in Parliament and in the outside world for the role that he played in that operation.

I was coming on to say that the reason why I have never been able to watch that programme again is that it was horrific. I was not in the services, and I did not go out to Bosnia. I watched that drama in my very early 20s, and I found it so horrific that even though it has been repeated since, and even though it is excellent, I have not been able to watch it. That must not be forgotten. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) outlined some of the horrific scenes that took place—the butchery, the savagery, the hatred that led decent people and neighbours to carry out those acts. We have to recognise them in this House and never forget.

I had the privilege of being the international chairman of the Conservative party for a period. We did a lot of work with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, a body through which Labour, Liberals and Conservatives work with their sister parties to help build democracies. It was set up after the Cold War. I am proud that I was able to work with three factions from the centre right in Bosnia, to get those right-wing parties around the table, talking and working towards developing a better future. I used to say, “I don’t know whether this will have any long-term effect, but at least I can one day look my maker in the eye and say that I tried.” I had a very tiny part in trying to make peace last, because that is what we have to do.

Tragically, in my opinion, Republika Srpska representatives did not turn up to the Rose-Roth seminar of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in November, apart from one person who very bravely did and got a hell of a lot of pushback for it. Its representatives have been disengaging. That is what I mean when I talk about the dangerous path that they are on. Take the history of the second world war. By about the 1960s, German society started to teach about the holocaust. That was a very important moment; it turned to education to make sure that history could not repeat itself. In Bosnia, however, not only are people not talking about some of the crimes against humanity that took place during the war, but in some of the schools in Republika Srpska, they are actually saying, “It’s lies—it didn’t happen. This the problem. We’ve got to separate out.” We should be highly concerned about that.

What lies behind all that is the arm of Russia. I have heard that Russia is not directly involved. It is not supplying arms; it is not doing some of the things that it has done in other parts of the world, such as Syria and Ukraine. However, the hand of Russia is there, politically and disruptively, and we do not have to look very far to see it. This is a critical moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton and my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham used the word “deterrent”. One thing we could do today is take a British

Security in the Western Balkans

battalion, in a NATO-led operation, to those areas, and act as a deterrent. I do not want any forces to have to try to stop the slaughter of innocent civilians. We now have an opportunity, in that the Minister is here to take these points back to the Foreign Office. I know that Ministers are always constrained in what they can and cannot say at the Dispatch Box, but we have to send a clear message in this debate.

History does not have to repeat itself. We do not have to have programmes that I have only ever been able to watch once in my life because I found them too horrific for me, let alone for the many Members of this House who served in Bosnia, or those now in the other place who were Ministers at the time, and had to deal with the consequences. There is ongoing trauma. I have met service personnel, some of whom served under my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham, and I have heard and seen the deep distress that they live with to this day, having tried to protect innocent civilians. That does not have to happen again. We can, and we need to, take action this day. That is the responsibility of the developed western world. It has responsibility for managing its military, and for the ethics that we apply to stop those who, purely as part of power-grabbing political games, play the nationalistic card, which will lead to murdered civilians. We see that today in Ukraine because we did nothing after Crimea.

Bob Stewart

If we deployed a British battalion in Bosnia under the very small NATO headquarters there, it would show that we meant real business, and aimed to stop things this time. It would, by its presence, demonstrate power, but hopefully it would not have to use force. Battalions from other countries could help, too. My goodness, Minister, this is a time when taking a little action would have a huge dividend.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

I am bringing my comments to a close, and my right hon. Friend has absolutely summarised the point that I am trying to make. I am on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I am the chairman of its Defence and Security Committee and I lead the UK delegation. What do we talk about more than anything else? The word “deterrent.” Deterrence has to be better than going in to try stopping a war. We can do this today. My right hon. Friend’s intervention has absolutely summed it up. Minister, if there is one message to take away at the conclusion of the debate, it is that we can prevent horror that could happen very soon—maybe as soon as the end of this week.

12.42pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)

As the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I had the privilege of visiting Kosovo in February, having been encouraged to do so by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron. I went to discussions on freedom of religion or belief with Government Ministers, civil society and faith leaders to explore the relationships between different faith groups and to gather best practice on freedom of religion or belief in Kosovo. I had the very pleasurable experience of joining the Kosovo Government’s celebrations of the 16th anniversary of Kosovo’s declaration of independence. Above all, the main aim of my visit was to reaffirm the UK’s commitment to strengthening its relationship with Kosovo.

I have visited many countries in my 14 years as a Member of Parliament, and I can honestly say that I cannot recall a warmer welcome than the one I had from everyone I met in Kosovo, from the President and Prime Minister to Government officials and civil society.

Security in the Western Balkans

Indeed, that warm friendship was started in my first meeting, before I had even left the UK.

Alicia Kearns

My hon. Friend gives us the opportunity to reflect on the fact that none of us wants to be stood here talking about conflict in the Balkans, or just about security. In fact, when I was elected to this place, I said that I would talk about the future for those countries. I thank her for reflecting on the fact that those countries are full of people who want brightness and future, and who are full of joy and hope for their country. I thank her for bringing that moment of reflection, which was missing from our debate. That is what we want to focus on: prosperity, future, hope and co-existence.

Fiona Bruce

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. On that national day of celebration, I had the experience of listening in the Parliament of Kosovo to reflections by leader after leader about the progress their country has made in democracy, in governance and in other ways over the past 16 years. The pride that they showed was heartwarming. I will give one small example, but a very real one: one of those leaders spoke about how good it is that now, when a young child sees a policeman or a man in uniform in the streets in Kosovo, they do not run away in fear. It was a privilege to be there.

My first encounter with someone from Kosovo was with Kosovo's ambassador to the UK, Ilir Kapiti—I am pleased to see that he is watching from the Gallery. From the first moment I met him, he extended the hand of friendship. He helped facilitate the visit, which I know was also enjoyed by my colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who is the UK trade envoy to the region. My hon. Friend has now visited Kosovo seven times, and I was very impressed to find that he is on first-name terms with the Prime Minister, who greeted him as Martin. That shows the importance of the relationship that Kosovo has with the UK. It was my pleasure to emphasise how much we want to reciprocate, because Kosovo is an important country in the region. It is an important bulwark of stability against malign influences, and I very much wanted to convey the message that the UK wants to work with Kosovo to strengthen stability in the region, and to do all we can to assist that country in doing so.

When I went to Kosovo, not only were all my meetings convivial and productive, exhibiting a deep and enduring affection for the UK, it was clear to me that Kosovo and its people display great respect for differences in religion or belief, despite—or perhaps because of—the region's tumultuous history. The purpose of my visit was to encourage a celebration of Kosovo's religious diversity and the lessons we can learn from its people's experiences to ensure the promotion of freedom of religion or belief in a multi-ethnic society.

I also put on record my appreciation for Kosovo's contribution over the past three-plus years to the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a network of 43 like-minded countries determined to promote freedom of religion or belief around the world and to call out its abuses. We are a very active alliance, and I am proud to serve as its vice-chair; from 2022 to 2023, I was its chair, but our Czech Republic ambassador Robert Řehák is now the very active chair. I commend Kosovo for its engagement: the alliance has 43 member countries, but some are much more active than others, and Kosovo is one of those. It has signed a number of our statements, demonstrating its commitment to religious diversity—for example, on discrimination against the Baha'i community across the world, on the contribution of the Jewish faith and combating antisemitism, on Christians more recently, and on the international day for commemorating the victims of acts of violence based on religion and belief. Those are just a few of the statements that Kosovo has

Security in the Western Balkans

signed.

I also commend Arton Krasniqi, Kosovo's envoy to the alliance—and therefore my counterpart—for his personal commitment. There are some representatives in our alliance who one can tell have a genuine and heartfelt commitment for the work of promoting freedom of religion or belief around the world, and Arton is one of them. He makes sure that, whenever he can, he joins our meetings internationally. This year alone he has met us in Washington and Geneva, and just before the end of last year he met us in Prague. His personal commitment to the work of our alliance demonstrates his meaningful engagement and also that of his country.

It was with great pleasure that I met Liza Gashi, the Deputy Foreign Minister, among others from the Government in Kosovo while I was there. She immediately wanted to emphasise to me the importance in which Kosovo holds strengthening relationships between different faiths and of religious diversity. She said she wanted to hold in Kosovo, organised by the Government, a conference on freedom of religion or belief. I was delighted to hear that, because these gatherings really are important. Very shortly after my visit, her determination was followed up with a memorandum, written by one of her staff, detailing proposals for a Kosovo religious freedom forum this year, 2024.

The memorandum states:

"The Kosovo Religious Freedom Forum seeks to address pressing issues surrounding religious freedom, tolerance, and coexistence in the region. Hosted in the Republic of Kosovo, this forum will bring together renowned religious leaders, policymakers, scholars...to foster dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among various religious communities... the conference aims to highlight the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right and a conduit for peace and how countries can work together to address the challenges facing religious freedom today."

It also states that the conference would very much bring to bear the

"lessons learned from Kosovo's rich history of religious tolerance".

I look forward to the discussions about that gathering progressing between Minister Gashi and the chair of our alliance, Ambassador Řehák.

During my visit, I was also very pleased to meet Hajrulla Çeku, the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sport. He similarly emphasised to me the importance he attached to Kosovo being an increasingly multi-ethnic state and society. I was delighted to hear that he is working hard to plan the hosting of the Mediterranean games in Kosovo in 2030. I was equally delighted to hear him extend his hand towards a meeting with Bishop Teodosije of the Serbian Orthodox Church, indicating how willing he was to meet him in whatever forum the bishop would like. I was equally pleased that the bishop, when I met him, gave a clear indication of his willingness to reciprocate in that regard. It was a very important moment, and I know that our new ambassador in Pristina, Jonathan Hargreaves, will do all he can to promote that relationship.

I welcome the Government of Kosovo's approach to religious freedom. It was excellent to hear, shortly after my visit, that the Government of Kosovo had implemented the 2016 constitutional court decision, which confirmed the Decani monastery's ownership of several hectares of land. That was a practical demonstration of their commitment to religious pluralism, and the securing of that was something I sought while there—although

Security in the Western Balkans

I of course claim no credit for the fact that it happened.

We cannot take for granted the continued security of the region, and we must continue to address legacies of the past, while also working for a more prosperous and secure future. I believe that religious freedom and the work that Kosovo is determined to undertake have a vital role to play. Our ambassador, Jonathan Hargreaves—he has recently returned after beginning his tenure there—is particularly determined to do all he can to make progress on dialogue with Serbian representatives, and to help promote, facilitate and follow up on a joint meeting of the independent monitoring committee, and the dialogue that we hope will ensue.

Kosovo may not be a large country, but it has an important role to play in the Balkans. It is important not only for that region, but for the wider stability of the world, as we work in an increasingly unstable world. The UK recognises the importance of working together to secure that, and in my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I look forward to playing my part and, I hope, returning to Kosovo soon to play my role in the conference, which I hope will take place later this year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

I call the SNP spokesman.

12.57pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing this incredibly valuable debate, and on her commitment to ensuring stability and security in the western Balkans, not just in her time in this place but throughout her professional career. The other incredibly valuable contributions we have heard all speak to Members' own personal expertise and experience, and demonstrate why the Backbench Business Committee was right to grant time in the Chamber for this important debate. Many of my hon. Friends have worked closely with the hon. Lady and the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in some of the parliamentary assemblies that were mentioned, on these issues over the years.

The security and stability of the western Balkans affects the security and stability of the wider region, especially here in Europe. As we have heard, conflicts and disputes in the different countries often act as proxies or plays for influence by other actors on the global stage. Sadly, much of that is not new. Anyone who has studied basic high-school history will know that the roots of the first world war are often traced to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the streets of Sarajevo in June 1914, just short of 110 years ago. For the many reasons we have discussed, the region continues to this day to be seen as something of a tinderbox or powder keg, or even a shaken but unopened bottle of fizzy lemonade.

Much progress was made, especially with the establishment of the Dayton accords in 1995, but those structures have not been without challenge or strain over the years, and there are increasing challenges to the status quo, as we have heard throughout the debate. The increasingly assertive stance of Milorad Dodik within Republika Srpska threatens the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the motion suggests, and tensions remain high between Serbia and Kosovo after cross-border violence. The Ohrid agreement between those countries is welcome, but it must be followed up with practical action.

Security in the Western Balkans

The roots of the instability, and political instability in particular, run deep. That in turn has significant consequences across the region, including ubiquitous corruption, inter-ethnic tension, strong organised crime, autocratic tendencies and limited human rights. The powerful speeches about freedom of religion or belief are testament to that. Organised crime in particular remains a challenge, and drug and weapons trafficking, illegal immigration, money laundering, contraband or terrorist acts all add to the sense of instability and insecurity. These factors explain and sometimes compound the opportunities for external influence and exploitation by bad faith actors.

The hon. Lady's motion refers to Russia, and the SNP joins her in her condemnation of Russian attempts to amplify tensions in the region for its own gain. Putin clearly sees the western Balkans as central to his arguments for the return of multipolarity in world affairs, in opposition to what he sees as a US-dominated unipolar order. For example, by blocking UN recognition of Kosovo's independence, Moscow tries to position itself as a defender of Serbian territorial integrity, which boosts Russia's popularity among Serbs and puts pressure on Belgrade to maintain friendly relations with Moscow. As we have heard repeatedly in the debate, Russia continues to back Bosnian Serb antagonists both officially through Republika Srpska and informally through myriad cultural, religious, educational and paramilitary groups.

At the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has seen the western Balkan countries emerge essentially as a new frontline in Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the west. Russia has used the media and information sphere, stepped up its political influence and mobilised proxy organisations to project its narratives, protect its interests and slow the region's integration into western institutions. However, integration continues to provide something of a counterbalance. Progress continues to be made towards that integration, in particular the prospect of accession to the European Union and, perhaps for some countries, eventually to NATO. Those are the institutions that have promoted peace, security and economic development among their member countries and international partners for decades, since the end of the second world war.

Countries that wish to join the EU should largely be supported and encouraged to do so, and at least to start making progress towards the different membership criteria that would allow them to pursue membership in future. That has not necessarily been the case for the UK Government's attitude towards the European Union. There is some irony in promoting and encouraging expansion in one direction, while dealing with the consequences of Brexit in the other.

Alicia Kearns

I think that is a deeply cynical and unfair point to make. The people of Bosnia and Kosovo want to join the EU, and therefore it is right we support them in their ambitions. We are not saying we think they should join because we think it is right; we are saying that, if that is what they want—if that is their determination—we will support them in that journey because it is right for them. The hon. Gentleman's point is deeply unfair. If I am honest, it brings domestic politics into a debate that so far has rightly focused on the Balkans and their people, rather than lowering down to domestic politics. It is disappointing to make that point today.

Patrick Grady

I take the hon. Lady's point, and I am not trying to upset much of the consensus we have heard today, but there have been consequences. A message was sent by the United Kingdom when it decided that the European Union was not for it. Many of us during that debate—we do not need to rehearse it just now—warned that that was a potential

Security in the Western Balkans

consequence of the UK's decision to leave. I will not go any further on that, and I want to agree with the points that have been made.

There is an important role for the UK to continue to play, as the hon. Lady's motion notes, particularly by increasing engagement with international allies and regional partners. Indeed, the counterpart to her Committee in the House of Lords made a number of important recommendations in a recent letter to the Foreign Secretary, all of which the SNP would welcome being taken forward.

Those recommendations include: actions by the leaderships of Serbia and Kosovo to implement the Brussels and Ohrid agreements; supporting the high representative in efforts to tackle secessionist activity by Republika Srpska; re-evaluating the possibility of rejoining Operation Althea, the EU-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the provision of funding for a BBC Albanian service; the use of longer-term funding instruments to support development in the region; more activity to promote economic growth and combat corruption; continued participation in the Quint; and continued collaboration with EU and US partners on development, security, reform and democratisation.

I agree with the points that the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) made about the value of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in that regard, speaking as someone with some experience of that.

Richard Foord

The hon. Member referred to Operation Althea, a European Union-led operation that the UK chose to leave on leaving the European Union; we left in 2020. Does he think that the UK would be wise to go back into that operation, as it can, as an associated state, or should there be a parallel security arrangement of the sort suggested by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee?

Patrick Grady

The recommendation of the House of Lords Committee was that the United Kingdom should re-evaluate the possibility of rejoining the operation, so that is the kind of direction in which there should be travel. It is about identifying the most important and appropriate role that the United Kingdom can play. Whatever form that takes, these are practical and achievable steps that the Government could take to demonstrate their willingness to be a good global actor.

A secure and stable, peaceful and prosperous region is not just in the interests of the people who live in the countries that make up the western Balkans—we heard powerful testimony about how people want to get on with their everyday lives—but in the interests of all of us who want to live in a peaceful and prosperous world.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

Will the hon. Member give way?

Patrick Grady

I have just concluded my speech.

Security in the Western Balkans

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)

I call the shadow Minister.

1.05pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op)

I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for securing the debate and all hon. and right hon. Members for their insightful and considered contributions. I recognise in particular the speeches by my friend the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the hon. and gallant Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who have direct experience of both Bosnia and Kosovo and the region more widely. There were also excellent contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) and, of course, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on behalf of the SNP.

I draw attention to my declarations in relation to my role as a shadow Minister and visits to the region. I, too, welcome the presence today of the two ambassadors from Kosovo and Bosnia. It is always a pleasure to meet and work with them.

We heard poignant tributes to the late Lord Ashdown and the late Lord Stunell, to which I add my remarks. I also pay tribute to my former colleague Tony Lloyd, who is deeply missed in this place. He played a key role on the western Balkans in the last Labour Government and continued to take a keen interest in the security and stability of the region.

We are all too aware of the crises we currently see in the middle east and Africa and, of course, the terrible war in Ukraine, but we must not lose sight of the strategic importance of other key regions, and indeed our historic diplomatic, military and other obligations to them. Of course, the western Balkans is one such region. I am pleased that, despite the many political differences in this place, the debate has underscored that there is cross-party support and concern for maintaining the values of democracy, security and stability in the region, a commitment to the prevention of conflict and atrocities, and the defence of fundamental human rights.

As a Parliament, and indeed as a country, we must recognise the continuing tensions across the region and—this warning has been made many times in the debate—their capacity to destabilise the countries and peoples in the region, with potentially dire consequences not only for the peoples of the region but for European security more widely. The destabilising role that Russia is playing has been rightly recognised and referenced many times.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) also made that point. He was about to sit down so sadly I could not intervene on him. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is absolutely right about the consequences for the rest of Europe. Dodik is not just talking about Republika Srpska as it stands; he is talking about a greater Republika Srpska, with parts of Serbia, parts of Kosovo, and parts of Montenegro, which is a NATO ally. With Russia's help to cause disruption—in history, that has happened in similar ways—all of us could easily be dragged into a war if we allow this nationalistic fervour to take the route that he is preaching.

Security in the Western Balkans

Stephen Doughty

The right hon. Member is absolutely right to highlight some of the deeply irresponsible rhetoric we have heard in recent weeks as well as over longer periods. We all know the risks posed by that from the historical conflicts we have seen in the region. The concerns raised are indeed shared by NATO as well as by our colleagues in the EU, the United States and others. I emphasise that the region is a priority for me and our shadow foreign affairs team, as it would be for any future Labour Government. Indeed, over the past two years, I have personally met diplomatic, parliamentary and governmental representatives from every country in the region as well as our excellent envoy, Lord Peach. I pay tribute to our excellent ambassadors in the region, and our Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office teams for all their work. Just last week, I met colleagues from Albania, the Bosnian ambassador, delegations from Kosovo and other envoys across the region. As has been referenced, it is crucial that we work together with key allies and partners.

The horrors of the 1990s are ingrained in the minds of many people across this country and the House, including armed forces personnel from my own family. I have powerful memories of visits, particularly to Bosnia with the right hon. Member for Beckenham, and to Kosovo. We all know the terrible consequences that can happen if ethnic hatreds are allowed to devolve into identity-based violence. I think of the young man my own age whom I met, Nedžad Avdić, a survivor of Srebrenica, and the horrors that he went through. I was a young lad enjoying a beach holiday in south Wales while his family and others were slaughtered around him. Those examples will never leave my mind.

No dynamic underscores the need for our collective engagement more than the enduring challenges in the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. The Opposition remain strong supporters, along with the Government, of Kosovo's independence, sovereignty and security. Earlier this month, it was disappointing to see many in northern Kosovo boycott the local referendum. Only 100 out of 46,000 registered voters cast ballots in the predominantly Serb municipalities. That comes despite the Government in Pristina agreeing to annul last year's local elections and hold new ones.

I have had the pleasure of visiting Kosovo, as I mentioned, and meeting members of all communities. It is clear that there can be a positive future for Kosovo, involving Kosovan Albanians, Serbs and other minorities. It was pleasing to see the Kosovan delegation recently visiting Northern Ireland and learning from our examples of different communities coming together and living in peace despite their differences, finding ways forward and political solutions. We should all want to support those efforts.

We are proud of our historic actions in relation to Kosovo, but it is crucial that we play our part now. I pay tribute to the UK forces who have gone in to reinforce the existing UK forces in KFOR, particularly after the incidents that have been referred to in Banjska and elsewhere. It is crucial that those responsible for destabilising are held to account and brought to justice. We must work closely with all colleagues to ensure that those tensions do not develop in any further devastating direction.

It is also crucial that we support the decisions of people in the region and note the decision of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to approve its recommendation for Kosovo to become its 47th member state. It is crucial that any tensions are not escalated. Kosovans must be free to determine their own paths.

I welcome the UK Government's recent statements on this matter. I hope the Minister can outline what recent discussions he has had with EU counterparts, the United States and others about the ongoing tensions, how we can work to prevent further destabilisation and

Security in the Western Balkans

how we can ensure that contribution to KFOR continues. Where does he see the diplomatic dialogue going to normalise relations between Belgrade and Pristina?

Reference has been made to the internal dynamics within Serbia. I have heard from many figures across the Serbian political spectrum. It is very important that we support democracy, inclusion and stability within Serbia, and that people are allowed to take part in political processes there. I also recognise that there are tensions in a number of other countries, which we do not have time to go into today. The situation in Montenegro and North Macedonia—both key NATO allies—has been particularly fragile over recent years. I had the pleasure of visiting Skopje and meeting political figures across the spectrum. What are we doing to ensure that those countries continue on a path of democracy, stability and the rule of law?

We have had extensive discussions today about the situation in Bosnia. As I said, I met the ambassador recently. We have all joined today in raising concerns about the rhetoric of Milorad Dodik and others. We have joined the Government in supporting sanctions against those who seek to undermine Dayton. When it comes to recognition of the past atrocities and otherwise, it is about identifying those responsible, not going against a people or a whole community, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee pointed out. We have also seen concerning steps in Republika Srpska towards a so-called foreign agents Act, mirroring developments elsewhere and again removing democratic transparency and the ability of human rights organisations to hold Governments to account. It is a hugely worrying step, and I would appreciate the Minister's comments on that.

Finally, it has been a pleasure to meet colleagues from Albania, another key NATO partner, in recent weeks. It is good to see increased co-operation with Albania on migration and trade. The British Council is playing a crucial role, particularly on the future for young Albanians, which was rightly raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough. I hope the Minister can say a little bit about the positive steps being taken in our bilateral relationship with Albania.

The United Kingdom has crucially important relationships across the region. We must strive to play a positive and engaged role through our ambassadorial teams and through international forums. Crucial elections are taking place in the region over the coming weeks. We must ensure that security and stability in the western Balkans remain a priority, particularly given the warnings in relation to Kosovo and Bosnia. I hope the Minister will say what steps will be taken at the upcoming European Political Community summit, which we will be hosting in July, not only to bring together parties but to promote peace and stability in this crucial region.

1.16pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing this timely and very important debate. I pay tribute to her for her work as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, along with her tireless and very active efforts to secure a more stable, peaceful and prosperous future for the people of the western Balkans. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), the Minister for Europe, would have been delighted to take part in the debate. She is currently travelling on ministerial duties, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I am grateful to hon. Members for their many thoughtful and emotive contributions, which help us to understand the significance of the

Security in the Western Balkans

region.

The people of the western Balkans clearly deserve the opportunity to live in stable, inclusive and democratic societies where they can heal the scars left by conflict and grasp every opportunity to thrive and prosper. That is what we are striving towards: all six countries playing their full part in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations, with the opportunities and benefits that brings. Sadly, as we have heard today, we are a long way from the peaceful and stable Balkans we all wish to see. The contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton and the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) highlighted the context within which we are working: democracy is fragile at best; political elites are ramping up ethno-nationalist tensions for their own benefit; and Russia, as was highlighted by Members across the House, is fanning the flames of division to distract attention from Ukraine and move the region away from the west. It is good to see the House united in calling out that behaviour.

We must, of course, avoid a return to conflict in the western Balkans at all costs. We are painfully aware of the serious consequences that that would have in the region and beyond. Meanwhile, it is clear that political weakness and instability in the western Balkans is threatening the UK's security. Endemic corruption is fuelling illegal migration and allowing serious organised crime groups to thrive and operate in this country, including in the drugs trade.

With that in mind, we are taking a multi-faceted approach. First, we are addressing the drivers of instability, whether that be Dodik's push for secession or heightened tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, but we are also focusing on the underlying factors enabling that. We are engaged with all six countries, taking a cross-Government approach underpinned by our programmes in the region. Last year, we spent over £47 million on supporting security and defence, preventing conflict and promoting media freedom, along with efforts to tackle corruption and organised crime, and to empower women and girls.

Given the growing instability, with all the risks it poses, we are prioritising the western Balkans in our diplomatic engagement. As others have pointed out, the fact that one of the Foreign Secretary's first visits was to Kosovo, in January, demonstrates the importance that we place on our ties with the region. Indeed, the Prime Minister's special envoy to the western Balkans, Lord Peach, visited the region 12 times last year and made a further 16 trips to other interested countries, as well as engaging regularly with international organisations such as NATO and the EU.

The UK has long worked with Serbia on shared priorities and will continue to do so, making clear the points on which we disagree and judging individuals by their actions. It is not for us to comment on the appointment of individual Ministers, but it clearly raises questions when we see a US-sanctioned individual in the Government.

A number of issues have been raised today about the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. We have seen an increase in violence, including last September's terrible attack in Banjska, which was described very clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton. In every meeting, every call and every letter that we exchange with Serbian and Kosovan leaders, we urge them to avoid inflammatory rhetoric and escalation and engage constructively in the dialogue. Only through genuine dialogue and mutual good will can we normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia and start to build the brighter future that their citizens deserve. We also continue to make it clear to the Serbian authorities that they must co-operate fully with efforts to hold to account those

Security in the Western Balkans

responsible for the Banjska attack, take steps to tackle cross-border arms smuggling, and encourage Kosovo Serbs to return to the institutions and serve the communities that they represent. We have also made clear to the Kosovo Government the need to ensure that minority communities can play a full and equal role in the country's future.

We are disappointed that the mayoral recall referendum on Sunday 21 April was boycotted by Kosovo Serbs. It was arranged specifically to return Kosovan municipalities to representational governance, and it is important for a route back to that to be found. I can confirm to Members, if they do not already know, that the UK will vote for Kosovo to join the Council of Europe.

Points have been raised about investigations of the Banjska attack. The Kosovan police and prosecutors are the appropriate authorities to investigate it, and it right for us to wait for that investigation to conclude. We have previously sanctioned Radoičić, the Kosovan criminal charged with organising the attack. We have urged Serbia to hold perpetrators to account and address the ongoing problem of cross-border arms smuggling.

Along with others, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) rightly spoke of the role of Lord Ashdown in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but I think we all recognise the important role performed there by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). He reminded us that that country matters, and highlighted the tensions that exist there. I will never forget visiting Sarajevo with my family. One cannot but be moved by being in that great city, meeting its people, and being reminded of the horrors of the past.

We recognise that we are facing the threat of Republika Srpska seceding from Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have condemned Dodik's secessionist actions, and have underlined our steadfast support for the High Representative. We are working with our international partners to deter further attempts at destabilisation, and to support the reforms that are necessary for progress towards EU accession.

Richard Foord

The Minister has mentioned deterrence. We heard from the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that what might serve deterrence better at this time would be putting a British battalion or battle group into Bosnia. Does the Minister agree with their suggestion, and would that be feasible with a regular Army of 73,000?

David Rutley

At the moment we have no plans to contribute to EUFOR or to rejoin, but we recognise that it is vital for Bosnia and Herzegovina's security, and we work hard to support it. NATO supports the force under the Berlin-plus arrangements, and the UK continues to be a strong supporter of Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces. That was underlined by the deployment of the First Battalion Royal Anglian Regiment to train alongside Bosnia-Herzegovina armed forces personnel in October and November last year.

I come back to sanctions, which are an important aspect of the situation in Bosnia. In January, we sanctioned a Bosnian media company for undermining the country's constitution. That builds on the sanctioning in 2022 of Dodik and the then President of Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, and we constantly keep our approach to sanctions under review. We will consider targeting others who continue to seek to undermine the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Security in the Western Balkans

Sir Alec Shelbrooke

I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying. We must be very careful not to allow recent history to repeat itself. President Obama made it crystal clear that if chemical weapons were dropped in Syria, it would cross a red line and would not be tolerated, but nothing happened. Then Russia walked into Crimea, and nothing happened. Now we have a war in Ukraine. It is all very well saying that we will work through diplomacy and sanctions, but what I am really interested in is saving lives. I do not expect a response now, but I urge my hon. Friend to go back to the Foreign Office and say that this debate has highlighted that normal diplomatic routes are not going to be enough. We need a big stick.

David Rutley

I know my right hon. Friend's views well, and he communicates them with alacrity and clarity. We will reflect on his remarks, but I want to underline that we are taking a comprehensive approach to a very serious problem, and it is good to see support across the House. I and the Government have heard the points that have been made.

I am getting the eagle eye of Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will accelerate through the last parts of my speech. In response to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, we will continue to support North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic path. We welcome the progress that is being made in Montenegro under Prime Minister Spajić, which is geared towards boosting economic growth, bolstering the rule of law reforms and building closer ties with the country's European neighbours.

I would also like to talk about the very important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, about the really important work that she has been doing in Kosovo. It was good to see how her work, and indeed the work of civil society and religious groups in Kosovo, is helping to celebrate the diversity of religion and belief. It is important that Kosovans are actively participating in the wider FORB agenda, because we can learn from their experience, to put it frankly.

The UK is determined to bring about a more stable, secure and prosperous future for the western Balkans, for the sake of all our people. This includes supporting the Governments of the region to build open and inclusive societies with strong democratic institutions, helping them to tackle the criminality and corruption that drives illegal migration and blights economic growth, and ensuring that women and minority communities are empowered to play a vital role in society.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton on securing this debate, and on her huge contribution to it and to the action that is being taken. It is important to focus on this important region, and on the steps that we need to continue to take to help underpin the stability of the people who live there.

1.28pm

Alicia Kearns

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for convening this debate. I thank the Minister for his response.

The future of the Balkans must be one of peaceful co-existence—it is what their people desperately want, and it is what the world needs. We also need to end the

Security in the Western Balkans

retraumatisation that is taking place through the falsification of history, and to ensure that when we see crises, we step up and act. Foreign policy is not just about reacting, although too many people think it is. It is about shaping, mitigating and supporting, and we have a duty to act, not least in the Balkans.

I will finish by saying that in the face of denial rages a truth undeniable—eyes that saw too much, and eyes that saw nothing. We must see in this place, we must speak in this place, and we must make sure that the country acts. I thank every hon. Member who took the time to contribute to this important debate, not least because the local elections will have called on all of them to be elsewhere. I really appreciate their commitment to this cause.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the acute security situation in the Western Balkans; supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina; condemns the attack by Serb nationalist militants in Banjska, Kosovo on 24 September 2023; further supports the authority of the Constitutional Court in Bosnia and Herzegovina; further condemns Russian interference in the Balkans; notes with concern pro-Russian and pro-Serbian irredentist political rhetoric in Montenegro; and urges the Government to increase its engagement with regional partners and international allies to improve the security landscape of the Western Balkans.