

Remarks by Senior Deputy High Representative Peter Bas-Backer At the European Balkan Partners' Policy Summit Organized by the Friends of Europe

Is the Balkans becoming a Region of Stability?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As is always the case when discussing political and historical issues, any answer to the sort of question posed by this session will depend upon one's perspective – as well, perhaps, as on one's location, age, experience and psychology.

It can even depend on what one had for breakfast. Fortunately, I had a good one.

Seen from the perspective of Sarajevo , however, the question seems at first sight to demand a resounding negative.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina we have lately endured a highly divisive election campaign during which the country's continuing existence as a multinational state composed of two entities became a consuming issue.

Two months after these elections – and the victories of the parties that took the most radical stances on this existential issue – we still have no state-level government. We may not get one until February.

Nor – and, again, thanks in large part to the long and bruising election campaign – has BiH made any progress this year in fulfilling the preconditions set by the European Commission for signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, regardless of the fact that the SAA negotiations have themselves proceeded without hitches.

This political vacuum at the centre and the absence of any guarantee that the country will again take up the reform agenda required for Euro-Atlantic integration have been sufficient for domestic and foreign commentators alike to warn that the planned closure of the Office of the High Representative in June next year is premature at best and potentially catastrophic at worst.

Add to this the regional environment and, above all, the looming decision on Kosovo's future status and you will understand why it is nowadays difficult to see South-Eastern Europe as a region of stability.

As the rulers of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires – as well as the leaders of the Balkan national states that emerged from them during the nineteenth century – learned to their occasional benefit and more frequent cost, troubles, rebellions and wars on one part of the peninsula tended to spread far beyond their original breeding grounds.

Because Bosnia and Herzegovina is the last multinational remnant of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Yugoslav “empires” it remains uniquely susceptible to troubles from without. In fact, the passions and politics of its neighbours invariably become its domestic politics.

And so it was this past spring over Montenegro, where the independence referendum there set off the debate over whether Republika Srpska might also go its own way or should, rather, be abolished.

The eventual decision on Kosovo will do the same, particularly

as Belgrade has every interest in frightening the international community to the maximum possible extent as it seeks to stave off the awful day when Kosovo is lost for good.

To borrow and adapt the immortal words of Bette Davis in 'Three Faces of Eve', we are all going to need to fasten our seatbelts and prepare for a bumpy few months ahead.

But that – if we maintain the sort of historical perspective to which I have alluded and also have some luck – is all it need be: a few bumpy months.

Kosovo is, in fact, merely the coda to the long and bloody drama of Yugoslavia's disintegration.

The malevolent dramatis personae that made the wars of Yugoslav succession have long since left the stage. And the international ineptitude and incoherence that made those wars so much worse have been remedied.

As of January, four historically "Balkan" states will be EU members. The rest have the much-vaunted and genuinely popular "European perspective" to keep them peaceable and on track with the sort of thoroughgoing reforms they need to make.

In fact, it seems to me that "enlargement fatigue" in the older member states represents a greater long-term threat to the stability of the region than does anything the Balkan countries can nowadays do to themselves or others.

Fortunately, however, this threat is sufficiently remote as also to be remediable with the passage of time. Once Romania and Bulgaria have been absorbed, the other and much smaller candidates and would-be candidates should not challenge the EU's digestive system too fundamentally.

We need first, however, to get through the difficult months ahead, all the while keeping both our nerve and sense of perspective.

Thank you