



Transcript:
Senator Peter Welch's Sarajevo Security Conference Remarks

Thank you very much, all of the esteemed guests, my colleague in the Senate, Senator Shaheen.

It's pretty inspiring for a person from the United States who's never been to the Balkans, who's never been to Sarajevo; who was aware of the four-year siege where folks had no water, no electricity, no food. And you survived.

It's inspiring, too, to be in this building. Your wonderful library that was destroyed in the war and rebuilt. And it's a sign of hope, and what can be done despite enormous suffering.

So, I just want to say that this person from Vermont is really inspired to be in this historic city of survivors and thrivers. Thank you.

I'm glad to be here with Ambassador Murphy. He's got the best assignment in the whole embassy corps. That's what he tells us. And he's deeply respected in the United States and with Republicans and Democrats. Ambassador, it's great to be with you.

You know my home state of Vermont has a strong connection.

We're a small state of 650,000 or so, and our Vermont National Guard, with the Balkans, has had a 30-year relationship with North Macedonia. And then, in between 1994, when you were still in the height of the troubles, and 2003, nearly 2,000 Bosnian refugees came to Vermont.

And you know what? They made Vermont a better state, and I want to thank you for that.

Several speakers have mentioned about the importance of values, and this—your presence, our presence—is an affirmation of those values. And it's an affirmation of the importance of living those values and what they can do to benefit us all.

So, the United States does have a shared interest in Western Balkan regional stability. We've supported Bosnian stability initiatives in North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia among others. We know that the security of the region affects the entire continent of Europe and definitely America very much as well.

So, we are in this together.

A liberal, democratic system guided by shared values was reinforced and expanded after World War II, is under stress now. But that structure, it does promote civil liberties.

It promotes free enterprise. And it promotes tolerance. And it has promoted security and prosperity in Europe and beyond.

And democracy is always a work in progress, never without challenges.

It's complicated and it's difficult. But that process is the best device we have to resolve conflict, to create understanding, and to build community and share prosperity.

So many of the challenges we face today in Sarajevo, or in Washington, D.C., or around the world are not so much due to the defects or deficiencies in democracy – quite the opposite.

They are struggles against right-wing ethnonationalists trying to take control by force. Not by democratic debate. They are often self-anointed, acting like bullies and thugs.

That's the truth. And we definitely see this in Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin chose to violate Ukraine's sovereignty and territory. The international efforts to defend Ukraine have reinforced our shared governing values and transatlantic alliances, including expanding NATO. It has advanced the goals of Europe and the United States.

We have to stick with it, and we will. We will.

I know that Bosnia, more than anybody, knows this cautionary tale very well; the importance of international engagement and intervention when necessary.

Stability. Easy to say but harder to achieve. And it is achieved when we create strong, multicultural institutions. We have respect for the rule of law and freedom of an independent judiciary which is essential in promoting enduring stability.

This enduring stability is so important for a country like Bosnia, but like our country as well, as everyone in this room fully appreciates.

The soul of a country never belongs to any individual, as much as some individuals might like to think it does. No.

Regions and countries, and peoples; we have evolved for decades and over generations. The foundational institutions which guide a country must be strong enough to protect against the whims of any one person or any one faction.

Our laws are the standards we share, the values we share. And they shift sometimes in big ways, but mostly in small ways. And that's reflective of democratic progress.

There's lots of causes of instability and friction, and they're often intertwined. And while it's important to acknowledge transnational corruption as an example of a cause of instability, not a single one cause should be assigned full responsibility.

There's no panacea, no quick fix. But what we must have, and what folks here are saying is we have to have strong institutions.

The populists are now attacking important institutions in all of our societies. Those institutions require the rule of law and independent judicial processes ensuring that the traumas of the past are not used as a smokescreen to incite harmful actions in the present.

And of course, prosperity. Bosnia was named an EU candidate country last December, and let's get that done!

The EU raises several economic and institutional challenges. And the EU accession process, as we have been hearing, is pretty hard. But it does advance democratic institutions. It will help us achieve that goal of entrenching the rule of law and will promote economic prosperity.

We will do all we can, not that there's much we can do as mere United States Senators. We're not in the EU. But you know what, we can be persistent. And you'll see a persistent woman following me tonight.

So, I believe that the future of the Balkans is with the West. I believe that. And I believe that the future of Bosnia must be solidly in Europe.

Whole, free, and at peace.

And it's appropriate that you're beginning the EU accession negotiations with Bosnia, and I encourage the Bosnian leaders who are here to advance their accession path by doing everything they can – I'm preaching to the choir, here.

Just keep at it, and get it done.

And we in America will continue to support Bosnian stability and security needs which will enable EU accession.

Finally, the United States has a long history of partnership in the Western Balkans with Bosnia.

We're all proud of President Bill Clinton and the role he played. We're all proud of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Hillary Clinton, in the roles they played.

But in the Senate, we have a particular pride. Then-Senator Biden, then-Senator Dole, Democrats, and Republicans took great interest in connection with the Balkans. As did Senator George Voinovich.

And George Voinovich, one of his last contributions to the Senate was to introduce Senator Jeanne Shaheen to the Balkans.

And she has taken over from then-Senator Biden, to Senator Dole, to Senator Voinovich to be our voice and our advocate; our champion in the United States Senate on behalf of the Balkans.

So, thank you so much, thank you so much for inviting me to participate in this security conference.

It's a big world beyond Vermont, and here I am in the city of survivors and thrivers.

May we all continue the difficult but important task of promoting security, increasing stability, and advancing regional prosperity in the Western Balkans and around the world.

Thank you very much.