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UNITED STATES SENATOR - DELAWARE

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BIDEN: Kosovo's Independence is Milestone in Road towards Peaceful, Prosperous Future

Biden Urges Serbia to Take European Path

BIDEN: *"For eight years now, the people of Kosovo – and the region – have struggled to build their economy and societies on a foundation of uncertainty. Today, we have an opportunity to remove that veil of doubt...Kosovo's new government must protect the magnificent heritage of Serbia's past, but we must help safeguard Kosovo's future."*

BIDEN: *"We should recognize Kosovo's independence for the milestone that it is. Managed deftly, it will remove the last major stumbling block standing between the Balkans and a peaceful, prosperous future."*

Washington, DC – Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee **Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (D-DE)** delivered the following remarks today at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Kosovo:

"Kosovo's status has been the last major challenge left after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The country's legal limbo meant that its people had no prospect of securing the foreign investment required to rebuild their economy or a political foundation on which to rebuild their society.

"For two years, the United Nations tried to broker an agreement on Kosovo's independence. Unfortunately, Serbia and its Russian patron rejected a plan that would have granted Kosovo "supervised independence" and provided powerful protections for the Serb minority.

"Not once during two years of negotiations on Kosovo's future did Serbia make a case for how continuing Serb sovereignty over the province would improve the lives of the ethnic Albanians who make up over 90% percent of Kosovo's population.

"In the modern world, sovereignty isn't an ancestral right; it's a sacred trust between a government and its people. Slobodan Milosevic violated that trust when he tried to ethnically cleanse Kosovo, and subsequent Serb governments did nothing to reestablish it. Belgrade only wanted to hang on to Kosovo – not the Kosovars who live there.

"We live in a world where history matters, but so do human beings. Kosovo could not remain a territorial souvenir of Serbia's past imperial glory. So while resolving Kosovo's status through a unilateral declaration of independence is hardly ideal, I believe it was necessary. I am proud that the United States was among the first countries in the world to recognize the newly independent Kosovo.

“Kosovo’s new government must protect the magnificent heritage of Serbia’s past, but we must help safeguard Kosovo’s future. Kosovo’s democratically elected government has agreed to strong protections for Kosovo’s ethnic minorities and initiated a series of conciliatory contacts with Kosovo’s Serbs. The people of Kosovo are demonstrating what type of country they want to create. If they succeed, Kosovo will prosper.

“It won’t be easy. Kosovo is struggling with epic levels of unemployment, widespread corruption, and continuing ethnic tensions. But the country possesses significant energy reserves, a young population, and the makings of the world’s most pro-Western majority Muslim democracy. If its people continue protecting human rights and combating corruption, Kosovo’s leaders will deserve our strong support as they work to fully join the community of nations and international institutions.

“Ideally, we could offer enthusiastic support for Serbia’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions as well. Belgrade should be setting the pace by which other countries in the Balkans measure their progress in joining the European Union and NATO.

“Instead, Serbs have been victimized by leaders who, to misquote Abba Eban, never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Instead of proceeding boldly toward Europe, leaders in Belgrade have hunkered down for a last stand amid the ruined policies of the recent past.

“I am particularly disappointed by the actions of Serbian government officials who came to office having ousted a tyrant, but have now resorted to the same tactics and tirades they once opposed.

“Prime Minister Kostunica’s continuing refusal to call for the arrest of fugitive war criminals and his opposition to signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, have severely undermined Belgrade’s international standing. Other Serb leaders have been less flagrant in their actions, but have still failed to take the tough stands that would allow their country to move forward.

“The violence that followed Kosovo’s declaration of independence was the predictable, preventable result of these individuals stoking fires of public rage and then abdicating responsibility for the consequences. Serbia’s government should stop using Kosovo’s independence as an excuse to inflict more damage on their wounded nation.

“It should start to turn the page on the failed policies of the last 15 years and pursue a future as a part of Europe. We cannot allow the dysfunction gripping Belgrade to spread to Kosovo and Bosnia. Americans, Europeans and other international partners have invested too much to see those countries’ democratic ambitions thwarted.

“Any attempt by Belgrade to sow chaos in northern Kosovo or Bosnia’s Republika Srpska should be dealt with quickly and decisively by the European Union and NATO. Serbia’s actions should also factor in the decisions of foreign investors who are considering projects in the country.

“For eight years now, the people of Kosovo – and the region – have struggled to build their economy and societies on a foundation of uncertainty. Today, we have an opportunity to remove that veil of doubt. Europeans and Americans should be wary of calls for hasty disengagement from the region now that Kosovo is on its own. Tensions will continue to run high during the next few months. Even under ideal circumstances, maintaining stability in the Balkans will require significant infusions of development aid, peacekeeping and robust diplomacy.

“I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how the United States plans to support Kosovo in the challenging days and weeks ahead.

“We should recognize Kosovo’s independence for the milestone that it is. Managed deftly, it will remove the last major stumbling block standing between the Balkans and a peaceful, prosperous future.”

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