



Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thessaloniki Summit was a unique turning point for all Western Balkan countries, a road-map with necessary guidelines on how to fulfill and carry out the pre-requisites in order to achieve European standards and make the European perspective of the region tangible. And, it has proved to be a successful drive, since all the countries of the region have made significant advancements. It is therefore important to build on these achievements and to make further progress on all key issues.

Serbia's application for EU accession was an important step confirming the strong EU integration commitment of the Serbian Government, one may say of historical significance for the country. There was broad support for this step among all political parties and the public. The positive opinion of the EU Commission on Serbia's readiness to join the EU, has eventually resulted in the decision of the European Council, in March last year, to endorse the candidate status.

Serbia has continued to work hard in an array of reform processes, placing special emphasis on the adoption of laws and by-laws, introducing approximation tables for all regulations, as well as on the very implementation of the already adopted norms and rules. Fight against organized crime and corruption, introducing rule of law, protection of human and minority rights, regionalization and decentralization, independent and free media and cooperation with civil society were and will continue to be in the focus of our endeavours. And, it is not solely because these are entailed by the EU reform agenda, but rather due to the awareness of our society that these changes and improvements are necessary to move forward. The next step is to open the negotiations on EU membership which we expect in the course of this year.

Immense progress has also been made in the domain of regional, both bilateral and multilateral, cooperation. Serbia has proven constructive in all regional fora and with all countries of the region bilaterally. And, we are convinced that this is a political and moral imperative, a sure way for stronger regional ties, confidence building, economic development and a recommendation per se for the region to become a unique network in the key fields of common interests and prosperity, compatible to those already existing in the European Union.

Kosovo is the most sensitive question for Serbia. However, we consider that all interested parties need to work together in a pragmatic and flexible way to improve the lives of ordinary

people. So far, peace and stability in the region have been preserved, also as a consequence of Serbia's constructive attitude. We are open for talks on all issues. Belgrade has commenced a dialogue with Pristina in order to make things better for all the communities living in Kosovo. We are ready to seek compromise solutions for each and every outstanding question, as it has been displayed so far in the dialogue and implement the agreements reached. Serbia will continue to cherish good cooperation with EULEX in the specific areas identified and together with the EU seek progress on all delicate issues.

In a comparatively short time since the EU's last enlargement, it has become clearer than ever that it is vitally important to ensure that the potential and candidate countries have a dual commitment - to the EU agenda and to their national and regional concerns. In a political sense, as well as social and even psychological one, the past and the current years were marked with ups and downs, whereby the latest crisis has shaken the Balkans in its entirety. The impact of the economic and financial crisis was felt at precisely the time when the region was close to the peak of its post-conflict recovery.

In spite of all the setbacks, the Balkan countries have continued with their reform programs, albeit to different degrees. This was generally recognized in the past communications of the Commission on enlargement, with visa liberalization for all the countries of the region further strengthening their membership prospects. This makes it all the more important to see the region advance, with no particular lagging behind. It is needed for the reasons of stability and regional cooperation as strategically vital goals. An all-out effort must now be exerted to complete the enlargement process and make sure there is no strategic vacuum.

Political leaders in Serbia, as well as those in the region, recognize their share of responsibility to deal with and resolve the remaining issues. We are endeavouring to uphold the pace of reforms and to fulfill all the aforesaid goals. Some solutions to the crisis and its consequences upon the region, aside from internal constraints, rationality and savings, one may find in pooling the resources in a regional platform and multilateral large-scale projects that would certainly accelerate our common economic development and prospects, whereby the participation of the EU and its member states would be very much needed.

As regards to the Lisbon treaty, the EU's efforts to play a more assertive global role will certainly hinge on its success in creating durable stability architecture in the Balkans. The countries of the region in that regard also have a clear responsibility to ensure that it becomes an integral part of Europe, in other words a part of the solution, not a problem, as many officials often point out.

There is a clear acknowledgement by leaders of the Western Balkans that progress on the path of reconciliation and the increased regional cooperation benefits the citizens. EU representatives emphasize the need to see continuing progress by states in the region toward settling border disputes and conflict legacy issues including refugee and confidence building problems. Rather than rush to welcome Western Balkan countries to the EU house, the Union would prefer to accept new members that have solved most of their historical disputes. Effective legal regimes are a pre-condition for reconstruction and development. Yet much more needs to be done to drive economic expansion and reconstruction. Billions of Euros ought to be invested

in energy, transport and communications infrastructure. Both tariff and non-tariff barriers remain an impediment to business in the region, and should be removed. And, investment in education and innovation are essential to improve trade volumes and help spread employment and prosperity.

Countries of the Western Balkans have achieved remarkable advances since the adoption of Thessaloniki Agenda and for some the progress toward long-awaited EU membership appears to be accelerating. This trend, however, should not cease until all countries of the region join the EU. Perhaps it is not the moment to talk about speeding up the enlargement of the EU, but one should not, in spite of all the economic and financial difficulties currently preoccupying the EU, neglect or simply put aside as indefinite the European prospect of accession of the W. Balkans. This, all the more, since the enlargement is not any more an idea, but a concept, a project, a strategy for a safer, more stable and more prosperous Europe, which should continue to cherish and promote the inspiring values like freedom and democracy.