

**“Serbia’s Path to Europe
Through Regional Peace and Reconciliation”**

Remarks Delivered to Chatham House

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

It is a privilege to be able to speak at Chatham House this afternoon.

When I was a student in this country, I used to come here to listen to speakers from around the world discuss the most pressing matters of state.

I was always impressed by the quality and candor of the conversations that ensued, and attributed it largely to the environment of frankness for which Chatham House is rightly

renowned.

Those occasions were formative ones for me. They helped shape my strategic thinking, and they helped me better understand the complexities of the contemporary world.

After one such occasion at Chatham House, when I came back home, I wrote the following in my notebook:

“We must begin all examinations of political affairs by seeing them as they are, not as we would like them to be. Only by understanding the situation as it is, can we work, through prudent action, to move it in a direction more in line with our interests. But this must presuppose that we properly understand our interests—something which cannot be done without a measured comprehension of our realistic capacity to act.”

I was thinking about Serbia as I wrote these words, and about the awful predicament my country was then in. We have come a long way since then. But we have not yet fully gotten ourselves out of the geo-strategic hole dug in the 1990s. There is still some way to go.

And so I believe that it is the present task of all stakeholders in the future prosperity of the Western Balkans to work together on consolidating a peace acceptable to all—a just, comprehensive peace designed to bring lasting stability.

Securing such a peace in our region, the last un-integrated corner of Europe, is the subject of my remarks to you this afternoon.

How to secure this peace is the strategic imperative informing my country’s regional policy approach—an approach leading to the construction of Europe truly whole, permanently free, and forever at peace.

I want to discuss two pre-requisites to securing such a peace. The first is reconciliation. All the countries of the region—all the nations of the Western Balkans—must commit to genuine reconciliation.

At the heart of this commitment lies full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. For Serbia, there is no dilemma: we are dedicated to locating, arresting, and handing-over the few Hague indictees still at-large.

Reconciliation is both an end in itself, and an instrument for the achievement of something more.

It is an end in itself because it corrects a twisted view of the other side—a view that to some extent continues to permeate the cultures of all the nations of the Western Balkans. This view teaches that an eye for an eye is a legitimate form of conduct against one’s neighbour in times of discontent. And thus for centuries, a tragic cycle of violence has played itself out throughout the Western Balkans in a way that calls to mind the Nietzschean phrase “the eternal recurrence of the same.”

Reconciliation is meant, therefore, to teach our children that all others have as much a right to live and work and be happy as oneself.

Equally, reconciliation provides a democratic moral framework—a framework through which the crimes of individuals who falsely acted in the name of their nation are to be understood. It is a moral undertaking whose completion will be a clear-cut demonstration that we have internalized the values of the Europe we aim to join. For reconciliation is about telling the truth—the unadorned, factual, horrible truth of the carnage that must never return to the shores of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The second pre-requisite to securing a just peace in the Western Balkans is a clear roadmap to full membership in the European Union for the entire region.

In the Western Balkans, where the wounds are still healing, a clear and unambiguous

European perspective may provide the democratic glue that could bind the region’s countries to one another as never before in our tumultuous history.

And so it is high time for the journey that began at Thessaloniki in 2003—where the future of the Balkans in the European Union was first clearly stated—to move to a next, more concrete stage.

“Wait,” one could say. “Things are underway. Everything is fine. The plan is working. We have the Stabilisation and Association Process. Serbia will initial it soon, and most of the other countries in the region have signed it already. What seems to be the problem? Just follow the procedures and keep walking down the road. Eventually you’ll get there.”

Well, eventually, someone will, I hope. But it may well be someone from a next generation.

So I tell you that if things continue being as they are, we may get to the end of the road we are currently on mighty fast. But we wouldn’t be anywhere but at a crossroads. To one side, we would come to a tunnel entrance that leads to Europe.

It would certainly appear to us to be a long tunnel. And from where we would be standing, the light at the other end would seem much too faint. No one would know how much gas there would be left in the tank. We might just end up having to stop half way. And who could know how long it would take to get us moving again?

Standing at that crossroads, we could, alternatively, choose to go in the other direction. But that would be tantamount to going back from where we came, because when the future doesn’t clearly beckon, the past likely prevails.

Let me be clear. I don’t mean going back to the recent past of civil war and ethnic cleansing. That’s not really in the cards, because even the most extreme political forces in the region know that such a radical return to the past would be akin to committing collective suicide.

Rather, I mean going back to an atmosphere that would be, overall, a retrograde one: something like a retreat into self-imposed isolation founded on the perception that seclusion is better than uncertainty and humiliation.

The operative image here is a cave, as in the place you go to for shelter when you retreat from the world around you.

If things continue as they are, we will shortly come to such crossroads. And from there, one way leads to a long, dark tunnel, the other, to a falsely-welcoming cave.

Let me be even more frank. Notwithstanding the fact that our transitional democracies haven’t always made full use of the opportunities on offer, that fact that the men of yesterday now scheme their return is in large part due to a present lack of boldness and vision in Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Think back to Thessaloniki and the sense of purpose we all felt then. The Western Balkans was at the center of European attention. We were given a powerful pointer in the right direction. But the opportunity was not seized by all: the visionary words spoken—and the commitments made—did not translate into implementable policies.

Simply stated, after Thessaloniki, the necessary consolidation of an atmosphere of imminent belonging to Europe did not take place. Tangible benefits were not felt.

In fact, all that was left, when the euphoric dust had settled, was a bureaucratic checklist designed to measure the Lilliputian steps of progress toward membership.

Think about it: does, for example, the process of harmonizing national legislation with the *acquis communautaire* make the average citizen, the average voter, feel like he or she belongs to something greater? Can he or she really be expected to believe the politicians who speak of

a light at the end of such a tunnel?

What is lacking, to use an American term, is an effective hearts and minds strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today’s democratic decisions in our countries are still hostage to a future with no clear European deadline. How can we fundamentally change this state of affairs? How can we get rid of the malaise that we find ourselves in? How, in other words, can we secure the region’s democratic—and European—future?

Well, “success is the child of audacity”, Disraeli once remarked. And the moment of audacity is at hand.

Europe can help the Western Balkans by an offer of immediate EU candidacy status to all the region’s countries. That’s what we propose.

This doesn’t mean a short-cut to membership. But it means a hands-on engagement. Turn up the brightness of the light at the end of the tunnel, give us a little more gas, and get in the car with us. That’s what we propose.

If this happens, there would be no more business as usual in the Balkans. The political debate would be transformed. Hope would take the place of fear. Reason would have an equal chance to trump passion. And historical limbo would be replaced by clarity of purpose.

The future could finally overcome the past. The point of no return would finally be crossed.

Of course, as we know quite well, Europe is not a perfect construct. It does not solve all of life’s problems. Differences will always remain. But the offer of EU membership would provide a safe, democratic framework within which these differences could be dealt with.

By offering the countries of the Western Balkans immediate candidate status, Europe would restore the visionary spirit of Thessaloniki, and return the region to a place of prominence in Europe’s strategic thinking.

That is why we ask for your support. Now is the time to be bold and audacious, to reaffirm commitments made, and to redouble the valiant efforts undertaken so far.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task of consolidating a regional peace acceptable to all cannot be accomplished without overcoming the challenge of finding a compromise, negotiated solution to the future status of Serbia’s southern province of Kosovo and Metohija.

Some believe that the key to securing peace in the Western Balkans is to force a democratic Serbia to accept something that no country in the world—and certainly no democracy—could accept. And, on top of that, to do so notwithstanding the fact that the terms of peace, if I may put it that way, that ended the 1999 conflict, the terms of peace imposed by NATO on a defeated and isolated tyrant, did not do.

The documents of peace—the Kumanovo Military-Technical Agreement followed by UN Security Council Resolution 1244—explicitly reaffirmed my country’s sovereignty over Kosovo.

Contrast that with what some are telling us and the Kosovo Albanians at present. They say that they will impose the province’s independence on us if we don’t come to an agreement by December 10th.

So tell me, with a set deadline and a default position that fulfills their maximalist demands, what incentive do the Kosovo Albanians have to negotiate in good faith? Why not just wait out the clock?

I submit to you that, paradoxical as it may sound, setting no firm deadlines will concentrate minds in both Belgrade and Pristina to come to a compromise, mutually-acceptable solution. One that secures the region’s prosperous future inside the European Union, through the creation of an atmosphere of imminent belonging to Europe. Of belonging to the values and the rules of the European game—rules that say that differences are bridged through a process of deliberate, patient, and sustained negotiations. And rules that a priori dismiss any threats of violence on the part of a party to the dispute if its opening position is not accepted by the others. For in Europe, violence is not a legitimate option.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Imposing the independence of Kosovo on us is nothing other than the forcible partition of Serbia.

Does anyone in this room think it’s reasonable to expect that our democracy will not suffer a severe blow by losing what even the tyrant Milosevic preserved? What legitimacy would we have? And how could such a precedent—imposed on the pivot country of the region—not affect the peaceful and dynamic development of all the Western Balkans, a result tied so intimately to the region’s EU membership prospects?

So when a democratic Serbia tells you that imposing a maximalist solution—a solution that satisfies only one side, is a mortal threat to our democracy and the region’s prospects for a European future—we expect you to hear us, and we expect you to stop perceiving us as the descendants of Milosevic. For we are his patriotic overthrowers, not his nationalist inheritors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I leave you with the words of Edmund Burke: “All acts of Government—indeed, every human

benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act—is founded on compromise and negotiations.”

To enjoy the benefits of a secure and stable peace—one that makes real the European membership prospect of prosperity for all—we must compromise, and we must negotiate. In good faith. With no pre-determined outcomes. With no time limits. And resulting in no winners and losers. In a way that puts the welfare and the stability of the entire region in the center of the process.

A successful outcome to such a process will be the victory of a true and just peace. It will be the victory of Europe. And it will be the ultimate victory of the values that overthrew the tyrant—the tyrant who wreaked havoc over all of us for much too long—the tyrant who is no longer, but whose deeds still haunt us all.

Thank you.