

Mr. Chairman,
Mr. President of the EU Committee of the Regions,
Mr. Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the onset of my remarks, I would like to congratulate Milan Roćen, the Minister of External Affairs of Montenegro, on a successful and dynamic twelve months in office as the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative.

I would also like to underline the importance we attach to the hard work of the Initiative's Permanent Secretariat, headquartered in Ancona. I thank our outgoing Secretary General, ambassador Alessandro Grafini, for his singular contribution to our organization, and wish his successor, ambassador Fabio Pigliapoco, all the best in the carrying out of his important duties.

Lastly, I take this opportunity to express, once again, my deep gratitude to Foreign Minister Franco Frattini and the Italian Government, as well as to the Marche region, for consistently supporting the work of this Initiative.

Excellencies,

For the first time under the auspices of this Initiative, we have chosen to meet in the capital of the European Union, Brussels.

In my view, this symbolizes a heightened awareness-by all stakeholders-of the fact that the promotion of regional cooperation in our part of the world is inseparable from the promise of a clear European perspective to the Western Balkans, first made at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003.

It is this strategic vision that has enabled Serbia to pursue its European agenda with confidence and determination.

Building a European society is the way our country will prosper in peace and security. We will focus on fighting corruption, enforcing the rule of law, protecting human and minority rights, and ensuring a free and independent media continues to thrive.

We see these and the many other measures we have undertaken as being foremost about modernization and standards. This has driven us to reinvigorate the spirit of reform that sees responsibility, transparency, and accountability as indispensable to the long-term health of our nation-and, ultimately, to the whole of Southeast Europe.

A critical part of this process is reconciliation-working in concert with one another to remember the past by honoring the victims, while ensuring that yesterday's tragedies don't circumscribe our ability to reach out and work together for a better tomorrow.

This much-needed contribution to the European transformation of the Western Balkans has opened the door to making Belgrade the symbolic capital of regional cooperation in 2011. This year, we preside over the Central European Initiative, the Migration Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative, the South East European Cooperation Process, and, of course, the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative-before taking over the chairmanship of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization in 2012.

A common theme driving all our activities will be fighting organized crime. Serbia's zero-tolerance policy on this transnational scourge will continue unabated. However, ultimate success cannot come without a much stronger and more coordinated effort by the member states.

When it comes to the issue of organized crime, as well as every other topic of regional cooperation, Serbia will work hard to strengthen existing partnerships and create more interaction between the various platforms. By streamlining and-where necessary-even restructuring the way all these mechanisms work, we will increase inter-functionality, reduce

political risk, increase our credibility, and, in the end, secure our long-term prosperity through sustainable economic development.

Excellencies,

The Serbian chairmanship of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative will maintain the successful project-oriented approach. We will host a series of roundtables on cooperation in fields such as tourism and inter-university cooperation; small- and medium-sized enterprises; archeological and cultural heritage protection; safeguarding the environment; scientific and technological research; rural development; as well as transportation and maritime industries.

We will also devote special attention to deepen parliamentary cooperation between the national assemblies of the member states.

Furthermore, the Serbian chairmanship will seek to function in tandem with European Commission-sponsored programs. In this context, I emphasize our preparedness to share our experience with other member states on harmonizing their respective fluvial management policies with the EU Strategy for the river Danube.

Lastly, we will engage with Brussels and encourage the Union to define our geographic space as an EU macro-region-that is, to adopt an official EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

Excellencies,

Our Initiative is unique amongst the panoply of regional organizations. It is the only one to focus exclusively on the Adriatic and Ionian area, the cradle of European civilization.

Almost everything that defines the Old Continent's contemporary way of life-our classical heritage and respective national cultures, ethical norms and forms of government, even our alphabets-traces back their origins to our shores.

Paradoxically, a subset of our region-the Western Balkans-is the last part of European geography proper where integration remains incomplete.

By common agreement, this feature is only a temporary one, denoting that our Initiative is well-positioned to play an active role in bringing this transformation to a successful conclusion.

For that to happen without a loss of momentum, the upper hand will have to be regained from the skeptics and naysayers. A complication is the fact that this will likely be done under suboptimal, perhaps even adverse circumstances mostly not of our making.

But the truth is that we will have to work very hard to harness the 21st-century potential of the Balkans. The resulting peace dividend will undoubtedly create a better, more inclusive era for all in a free and integrated Europe.

I conclude by recalling what one of founders of modern-day Europe, Paul-Henri Spaak, said on the very day the Treaty of Rome was signed: "The men of Europe must never again lack audacity or act with delay. This must now become the spirit of our times: to begin from a profound appreciation of a civilization burdened by the riches of its glorious past, and then to transform it somehow in order to be able to channel so much hope towards a future in which society operates according to the rules set by Justice and Fraternity, that it truly and actually comes to pass."

Thank you for your attention.