



Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It my great pleasure to be able to welcome you at today's event, which deals in a timely manner with a highly topical theme "Serbs and Albanians – which way forward?". This theme is of essential importance for our shared past, present and, of course, the future that we believe will be built on proper and considerably different foundations. At present, as well as in the period immediately ahead of us, the relations between Serbs and Albanians as peoples will be measured by the success made by the whole region, and I would say Europe as well, in the long process of reconciliation, overcoming the existing differences and of building mutual trust and confidence. The history has put us to this kind of test many times before - whether we are ready to make a decisive, wise and brave step forward or not, despite an international climate and environment that will never be equally favourable for both sides, and at the same time taking into account the peculiarity of the topic and feelings of both nations.

Firstly, to be able to properly understand certain social processes and phenomena, particularly those as complex as relations between these two large Balkan ethnic groups, which in the past decades developed and changed in a way that affected the very essence of international relations and their main stakeholders, we need to clearly and precisely outline the positions of Serbia and its people.

Much like other peoples, the Serbs have historically made constant and painstaking efforts to preserve their national, religious and cultural identity, which is still the case today. It is indisputable to us that Kosovo and Metohija is our fatherland and native soil, that Serbian statehood, culture and spirituality are rooted there, and that this is our heartland and the essence of our being as a nation. As an undeniable and magnificent proof of this, today, with a mixed feeling of pride and sadness, we point out many religious and holy sites there – Serbian churches and monasteries under UNESCO protection due to their global civilizational significance. The long and often tumultuous history of Serbia, our cultural heritage, tradition, customs, Orthodox faith and way of living, are all inherently tied to Kosovo and Metohija, where Albanian people also live, outside their motherland. In fact, no people in the Balkans lives exclusively within the borders of its motherland.

Serbia has always maintained a tradition of democracy. Historically speaking, Serbia became a multi-cultural and multi-religious country early on, comprising numerous national communities, including the Albanian one. Even though our peoples are close in many ways, we have lived and still live together, and we are neighbours, our centuries-long relations have undergone many stages, facing numerous challenges. By accepting diversity, upon its national liberation and the establishment of the modern Serbian state, the Serbian people fostered relations with other national communities living in all the states created in these lands throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Sadly, under the pressure of strong tensions at the time of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbian-Albanian relations assumed the character of a conflict, with strong separatist tendencies, in a new geo-political constellation of power strongly supported by outside factors. As it later became evident in all its irony, the key problem was that our state has always primarily focused on having a multi-ethnic society in Serbia, including Kosovo and Metohija of course, while the Albanian national minority rather focused on the resolution of its own national issue which had been already settled in the territory of Serbia. In the circumstances that ensued, characterized by conflicts and irreconcilable differences concerning the origins and the ways to resolve the compounding problems, both peoples, Serbian and Albanian, have had historic lessons to learn. We believe that these very lessons on the futility of conflict, and a much wiser and more rational approach would contribute the most to the strengthening of ties, not political, but the ties between peoples and ordinary personal relationships, which, once established, can outlast any kind of policy pursued.

Dear friends,

The position of the Government and the President of the Republic of Serbia is a very transparent one and is aimed at achieving the overarching goal of an active and progressive action towards the preservation and promotion of peace and stability. We are firmly oriented towards joint action with all interested parties and ready to talk on all issues in order to achieve an all-round progress. We believe that all nations and communities need peace and stability in the region as well as accelerated economic recovery. That is why Serbia seeks to integrate in the EU as soon as possible, along with other countries, and it has set the highest European standards with regard to the enjoyment of different rights by minorities.

The outcome of our position is profiling of Serbia as a responsible, reliable and foreseeable partner in the international community, ready to take part in all discussions in the regional, European and international forums, on all topics, and particularly on those relating to the direct interest of our country, i.e. Kosovo and Metohija. We must not allow ourselves a luxury to remain voiceless or to stand by while others decide on our fate. Serbia needs to be a key player on matters that concern it, because that is the only way it can represent and defend its national interests, its legal and legitimate rights. The participation of Serbia in the talks is not an easy task at all. There is a lot of resistance and unforeseen obstacles (even blackmail). However, the point is not in finding a quick and easy solution, in an uncontrolled giving away and accepting of minimalism. The great German writer Goethe said: "Difficulties increase the nearer we get to the goal".

It is a commonly known fact that the main stumbling block between Serbs and Albanians is the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. We believe that the dialogue is an imperative in seeking a solution for all problems and conflicts. Serbia demonstrates its readiness to participate in the

dialogue at all times and in every place, making continued efforts towards reaching a compromise with the Albanian community in Kosovo and Metohija in the framework of the EU-facilitated dialogue. Guided by the firm conviction that only a durable and sustainable solution is a prerequisite for the progress of Serbia and our region, we have launched an internal dialogue on Kosovo and Metohija. Launching of an internal dialogue is a demonstration of a large capacity of our society and of the need to find an appropriate solution while avoiding fragmented position. That is why the purpose of an internal dialogue is not just to have a sum total of different ideas and views but to provide an opportunity to have a look at the entire spectrum of possible solutions and of making the positions of our country crystal clear. Consequently, the internal dialogue increased the credibility of Serbia both on European and international levels.

In view of the Brussels dialogue, Serbia possesses sufficient political sensibility to feel the moment for solving the issue of Kosovo and Metohija and to put all its energy and strength into arriving at a compromise solution in order not to miss out on the historic opportunity to reach an agreement with the Albanian community. Belgrade strongly advocates dialogue with Pristina, holding the view that there is no alternative to a negotiating process. Unlike some of our partners from the West, we do not deem the Kosovo and Metohija issue as a solved matter but we believe that a solution can be reached only through dialogue. Serbia's priority is the survival and respect of the rights of the Serbian community, its economic development, preservation of the cultural heritage and property of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and Metohija.

Although many processes are part of the historical heritage, we must underline that the past results of the Brussels dialogue are not satisfactory and that they are constantly accompanied by new tensions provoked by the Albanian community in Kosovo and Metohija. Efforts of Belgrade towards a compromise are of a genuine nature and motivated by values we share with Europe and the world but we will not allow others to humiliate us and pull us down. Five years later, apart from periodic shifts but no concrete changes and substantial progress, the Brussels dialogue is faced with the same challenges of how to implement what has been agreed upon. The policy of representatives of the Albanian community in Kosovo and Metohija seems to be quite a resistant one when it comes to the influence by the third part which is lacking. Its foothold is a tacit and sometimes outright support by certain powers. The absence of a true desire for reaching a compromise and durable solution make the efforts invested by our side relative while the brunt of responsibility will be equally borne by the international community too, through its action sometimes and sometimes through its inaction. Regardless of that, Belgrade has demonstrated its readiness for a dialogue and will continue to do so whenever the other side wishes to sit at the negotiating table.

On the other hand, diplomatic activities of Serbia which have led an increasingly large number of countries to revoke their recognition of Kosovo are a reflection of our right and our obligation to protect our own interests and to affirm our respect for rules of international law, in bilateral relations with other countries.

Dear friends,

It is common knowledge that Serbia's relations with Albania have long been burdened by the

position held by that country with regard to Kosovo and Metohija, or by its overt support for the Kosovo unilateral declaration of independence. However, it is highly important to point out that, especially since 2014, the Republic of Serbia has been continuously showing its readiness and wish to enhance relations with Albania.

Serbia is interested in closely working with Albania in the context of European integration, and it reaffirmed its readiness to share the experience gained in the process of its own negotiations with the EU by having initiated the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in this area. It is both logical and expected that Serbia and Albania support each other before the EU institutions, including its most influential members.

Considerable unlocked potential for joint actions of Serbia and Albania exists in the field of regional cooperation, in particular cooperation within the framework of the Berlin Process. Intensification of regional cooperation – both cooperation on economic connectivity, primarily in the transport and energy sectors, and one focused on cooperation between generations which are less burdened with the legacy of the past - creates an atmosphere which recognizes dialogue as a means to settle disputes.

Speaking of cooperation in the field of economy, apart from increasing trade in goods which significantly facilitates membership of the two countries in CEFTA, one should bear in mind the considerable unleashed potential in specific areas like agriculture, tourism and telecommunications. In this sense, a move forward is evident – the exchange of visits between relevant ministers, the signing of cooperation agreements, etc. Cooperation between the chambers of commerce of the two countries has also been established, at both bilateral and regional levels, under the auspices of the Berlin Process.

Enhanced political dialogue and contacts are of the utmost importance, since the legacy problems between Belgrade and Tirana, i.e. Belgrade and Pristina, are big and serious. Allow me to reiterate that Serbia advocates dialogue, which we see as a European legacy, where the only acceptable solution for all interested parties is the assumption that the solution is also sustainable. We believe that it could contribute to the creation of a more favourable climate in the region, thus facilitating the solving of the inherited issues together with the neighbours.

Dear friends,

I welcome conferences of this kind, which we see as open fora to discuss, present ideas and exchange views, in which experts and the general public in and outside of Serbia can take part and contribute to a better understanding of the current situation. Also, we are pleased at the participation of distinguished Albanian representatives and guests from abroad, because these discussions and contacts improve connectivity and leave positive image among common people, both Serbs and Albanians, of the relations between the two peoples where national, religious and political aspects should not be decisive, although they are certainly important as a manifestation of civilizational and cultural identity of the two peoples, their similarities and dissimilarities.

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me and to wish you all success and good luck

with your work.