

Address to the Belgrade Informal Ministerial Meeting of
the Southeast Europe Cooperation Process

by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia

Belgrade
31 January 2012

Dear Fellow Foreign Ministers,
Excellencies,
Representatives of the RCC Board,
Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to all to this informal ministerial meeting of the Southeast European Cooperation Process.

Both last year and continuing into this one, Belgrade has been a symbolic center of regional cooperation—playing host to more than one hundred chairmanship events.

In 2011, we successfully presided over the Central European Initiative, the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, and the Migration Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative. Serbia currently chairs the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation. In a few months, the Second UN Alliance of Civilizations Forum for Southeast Europe will take place here, as well.

Excellencies,

One of our most important SEECP chairmanship priorities has been to establish a coordinated approach in the fight against organized crime and terrorism. Through a number of concrete initiatives involving law enforcement and judicial authorities, we have taken notable strides towards synergizing efforts to eliminate this grave threat to our region's security—its root causes, as well as its effects.

Another chairmanship priority is deepening institutional dialogue with the European Commission and other branches of the Union's governance structure. The EU—like the OSCE—is a valued member of the Regional Cooperation Council, which is the SEECP's implementing arm. We have enhanced the RCC project-oriented approach, with a particular emphasis on modernizing infrastructure. This includes updating the electricity grid, harmonizing national energy strategies,

and furthering railway network rehabilitation—as well as fully modernizing Corridors VII and X.

As SEECP chair, Serbia has also placed special emphasis on the complex set of issues related to refugees and IDPs, including the rights to which they are entitled. We have further strengthened the working mechanism jointly established by Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia over the course of the 2010 and 2011 meetings in Belgrade, with the participation of the EU, U.S., UNHCR, OSCE and Council of Europe. There is still much work to be done in this area before all the wounds can heal, but we finally seem to be moving in the direction of securing a just compensation for the victims—a long-overdue development in regional relations.

Excellencies,

Promoting cultural cooperation is one of Serbia's most important SEECP chairmanship priorities. In early September, for instance, we hosted a successful meeting of Southeast European culture ministers. This was immediately followed up by the Ninth UNESCO Regional Summit of Heads of State and Government.

We have worked very hard to place our cultural commonalities at the heart of regional peace-building and reconciliation efforts. Our ultimate goal is to put an end to enmity in this part of the Old Continent—to break for good the vicious circle of hatred, and to make sure it never again takes hold of our political imagination.

In Southeast Europe, heritage often cuts across international borders, administrative boundaries, and ethnic heartlands. Regrettably, this has sometimes led to horrifying attacks on cultural sites. Serbia has ardently campaigned against such acts of aggression against another's identity.

We have also emphasized our shared heritage, and how this can bring us closer together. For instance, we will propose—together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro—inscribing on the UNESCO World Heritage List the medieval funerary monuments of the Bogumils, the Stećaks. Together with Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Slovenia, we will soon nominate the Dinaric Karst Region for inclusion on the List.

As a term-member of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Serbia will work hard to promote the cultural diversity of Southeast Europe in ways that enhance good neighborly relations between the member states. We will also build upon the commitments made during our SEECP chairmanship to keep strengthening links with the most creative elements in civil society—artists, intellectuals, teachers, and writers.

We will re-double our efforts to imbue young people with a sense that they belong to a shared regional cultural environment. For instance, Serbia will continue supporting the establishment of a multinational Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo—in addition to promoting various traveling exhibitions, as well as cross-border music and theatre festivals.

Excellencies,

An additional priority of Serbia's SEECP chairmanship is the development of a cohesive strategy for environmental security. Natural disasters and climate change take no account of boundaries. The member states need to work together in developing strong, cohesive adaptation and mitigation strategies.

By the end of our term in office, we will have held a number of meetings and conferences on this critical public policy issue. Our aim is not only to explore ways in which existing mechanisms can be updated and made more efficient, such as the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for Southeastern Europe. It is also to further a concrete initiative we believe should be an integral part of the solution to shared environment security challenges: the Niš-based Regional Humanitarian Emergency Response Center.

This state-of-the-art disaster management facility is designed to optimize civil defense response-time, as well as build capacity for rescuers throughout Southeast Europe. The Center is also intended to serve as a focal point for disaster relief efforts—including rapid humanitarian assistance, search-and-rescue, emergency population evacuations, and aerial forest firefighting.

We hope this flagship initiative will be supported by the SEECP member states—all of whom are invited to participate in it as full-fledged partners.

Excellencies,

Our meeting is taking place under the ominous cloud of a global recession, whose epicenter now lies in the EU. Its enormity and still unfolding consequences will inevitably impact well into the future not only Southeast Europe, but regions and markets far beyond our shores.

Some have gone so far as to caution against the "ease" with which the eurozone crisis could "slide into a 1930s moment," as did the IMF's Managing Director, Christine Lagarde, just a few days ago in Berlin.

For a number of states represented here, its resulting political effects will pose additional challenges, given the fact that in many quarters of the Union, the enthusiasm for enlargement has waned.

But I want to make it very clear that this has not impinged on our Government's strategic determination to firmly anchor Serbia in Europe.

Our comprehensive reforms agenda will continue apace, for we believe this is indispensable to the long-term prosperity of our nation.

Its foundations have been set by the 1993 Copenhagen European Council criteria, as well as the regional cooperation conditions subsequently established by the Stabilization and Association framework about a decade later.

Excellencies,

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the First Balkan War. To observe this centenary, we propose that the unifying slogan for our regional activities be 'From Balkan Wars to Balkan Peace.' This phrase indeed encapsulates what we seek to establish: an unbreakable pattern of continuous cooperation amongst the nations that belong to the SEECP space.

The critical question is whether we have the will to do so, after a century characterized by political confrontation and recurring warfare.

This may seem to be a tall order. But by combining hope, confidence and imagination, I believe it can become an eminently achievable proposition.

What will be required is not only a common vision and the courage of leadership, but also the strategic foresight to concentrate on the fundamental benefits that would ultimately result for the entire region.

In my view, success is predicated on casting aside antiquated ways of thinking about each other as rivals or adversaries. We will have to work together on shaping outcomes to unresolved issues in ways that will be acceptable to everyone who inhabits our lands.

And we will have to guard ourselves against the cynical, fearful or doubtful. Such people have never been able to solve our region's problems, either being content with allowing them to fester until reaching the boiling point, or wanting to relinquish control over our own future in one fell swoop.

Neither extreme can empower the region to cross the Rubicon of everlasting peace.

A sagacious Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, once reflected that "some see displeasing things that are, and say 'why'; but we need men who can dream of great things that never were, and ask 'why not.'"

Such words could serve as a source of inspiration, as we endeavor to close the door for good on an era that ultimately delivered less than the promise it made to each of the nations that share our geography.

From Balkan Wars to Balkan Peace. Getting there is certainly not beyond our reach, if we are truly willing to emancipate ourselves from the mindset of conflict endemic to our region for much of the past hundred years.

As long as a shared resolve is maintained, our journey will move forward, irreversibly transforming Southeast Europe into a safe and sturdy bastion of freedom and prosperity.

Thank you for your attention.