

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

by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremic Minister of Foreign
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Dear Fellow Foreign Ministers,
Excellencies,
Representatives of the RCC Board,
Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Belgrade Ministerial Meeting of the Southeast European Cooperation Process.

Both last year and continuing into this one, this city has served as a vibrant center of regional cooperation, playing host to more than one hundred chairmanship events— over 30 within the SEECP framework alone.

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 addition to the SEECP.

As part of our duties, we organized the first-ever informal meeting of ministers of foreign affairs of three of these organizations on the margins of the UN General Assembly high-level debate—the SEECP, CEI and AI. On that occasion, we discussed a number of cross-regional issues, as well as exchange views on pressing international matters. I hope the inaugural meeting which I chaired last September in New York will evolve into an annual tradition.

Excellencies,

One of the most important priorities of the Serbian SEECP chairmanship was to establish a coordinated approach in the fight against organized crime and terrorism. A number of concrete steps were taken in the fields of law enforcement and judicial cooperation to tackle this grave threat to our security. One of the most important was the groundbreaking Ministerial Conference on Regional and Transnational Cooperation in the Fight against Organized Crime in Southeast Europe, which we hosted in November. For the first time, standardized mechanisms to combat this scourge were established, both in the law-enforcement and judicial fields.

Another chairmanship priority was the development of a cohesive strategy to enhance environmental security. Like organized crime, natural disasters and climate change take no

account of boundaries. We worked hard to increase the efficiency of existing projects, such as the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for Southeast Europe. This was a main topic of last November's Ministerial Conference on the Harmonization of Regional Activities in the Prevention of Natural and Man-made Disasters.

Serbia also continued to promote a concrete project we believe should be an integral part of the solution to shared environment security challenges: the Nis-based Regional Humanitarian Emergency Response Center.

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

We hope this flagship initiative, which we have developed jointly with the Russian Federation, will be supported by member-capitals and regional stakeholders—all of whom are invited to participate in it as full-fledged partners.

Excellencies,

Promoting cultural cooperation was another chairmanship priority. In September, 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.

The overarching theme of our activities in this area was how to deepen the sometimes underappreciated commonalities. Multiculturalism in this part of the world is truly authentic. There is nothing artificial or imposed in the way we borrow and complement each other as we mark various events and commemorate historical figures. The similarities in celebrations involving Hızır, the central figure of the Turkish spring festival Hıdırellez, and the feast of St. George in Catholic, Orthodox and Roma traditions throughout the Balkans, are a good example. An initiative is underway to place this shared experience on the UNESCO Representative List of World Intangible Heritage.

During the Serbian SEECP chairmanship, a proposal was made to inscribe 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 well.

Serbia will continue to play an active role in strengthening Southeast Europe's links with UNESCO, as a term-member of its World Heritage Committee.

We believe the cultural dimension is an integral part of completing the process of reconciliation, as is resolving the refugee issue.

During our chairmanship, concrete steps were taken in forging a new consensus on how to fully protect the rights of refugees in the Balkans. Last November, Belgrade played host to a Review

Ministerial Conference, which produced a groundbreaking Joint Declaration. It reaffirmed the political will of all the stakeholders to continue working on a comprehensive regional solution to all outstanding refugee problems. It also set up a Joint Regional Multi-Year Program, including a Regional Housing Program, which we have now begun to implement, thanks to the hundreds of millions of euros we were able to secure at the International Donors Conference, held this past April in Sarajevo.

Excellencies,

One of the most important issue raised during our chairmanship was how to institutionally strengthen our Organization, by providing it with the necessary tools to more effectively meet contemporary regional challenges.

In furtherance of this, I wrote to the SEECP foreign ministers several months ago to ask them to share their ideas and suggestions on how to move this Organization's reform agenda forward. I would like to thank everyone for their responses. It is good that we all agree that a more up-to-date concept of regional ownership within the SEECP context needs to be promoted. This will help our efforts to consolidate the role and capacity of our Organization in deepening political dialogue, economic cooperation, and cultural commonalities throughout our part of the Old Continent.

To that end, I would like to propose a discussion about establishing a Southeast Europe Parliamentary Assembly, on the basis of the best practices of the Council of Europe and OSCE parliamentary assemblies. As a balanced reflection of the political forces represented in our respective legislatures, what could be called "SEEPSA" would in time come to serve as our region's democratic conscience, endeavoring to help the member states honor their SEECP commitments and obligations.

Excellencies,

Deepening the institutional dialogue between the SEECP and the European Commission, as well as other branches of the Union's governance structure, was also a priority of the Serbian chairmanship.

The EU—like the OSCE—is a valued member of the Regional Cooperation Council, which is the SEECP's implementing arm. We worked to enhance 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. We expect that the forthcoming election of a new RCC Secretary General—my dear friend and colleague Goran Svilanovic—will inject a new dynamism into, and instill closer cooperation between, the RCC and the SEECP,

The RCC is also the appropriate regional fora within which the voice of the ethnic-Albanian authorities of our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija can be heard. This is in line with the agreement on regional representation reached within the framework of the EU-facilitated technical dialogue. It allows Pristina to participate as a non-state actor in RCC meetings. The

status-neutral agreement, which accords with UN Security resolution 1244 (1999), does not extend to multilateral fora in which membership is reserved for sovereign states, such as the SEECP.

Pretending otherwise serves no legitimate purpose. Doing so would set back the gains we have made in promoting cooperation over the past few years, constituting a threat to peace and stability in Southeast Europe.

I want to be clear on this point: wherever there is a Republic of Serbia, there cannot be a 'Republic of Kosovo.'

Not in the SEECP—and not in the Council of Europe, the OSCE and any institution or agency in the UN system.

Excellencies,

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the First Balkan War. To observe this centenary, we have made the unifying slogan for our regional activities to be 'From Balkan Wars to Balkan Peace.' This phrase aptly encapsulates what we seek to bring to completion: the full transformation and modernization of our respective societies.

Such an accomplishment will 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.

The gains we have made as a region have been tremendous—there is no doubt about that. The countries represented in this chamber have worked very hard to deepen bilateral and multilateral relations. Strengthening comprehensive ties has been and remains a strategic priority for each of us—all the more so in these times of political and economic uncertainty.

Nonetheless, peace, security and prosperity have yet to be fully consolidated in Southeast Europe.

As the Serbian chairmanship draws to a close, I would like to use this opportunity to appeal to the SEECP member States to work even more closely together, so our region can finally live up to its strategic potential, as we seek to emerge from this global period of change in a more advantageous position, making full use of our status as a great crossroads of cultures, traditions, ethnicities, and religions.

Thank you for your attention