

Address to the Euroatlantic Partnership Council

**by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić
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Bucharest, 3 April 2008

President Basescu,
Mr Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking our Romanian hosts for their kind hospitality.

Serbia and Romania have a long history of friendship. A friendship reaffirmed on numerous occasions in times of war and in times of peace. And a friendship made even stronger by the circumstances of history—circumstances that saw both our nations ruled by regimes that have been overthrown by our peoples in the name of democracy.

Sharing a common border and common values, our destinies have intertwined for centuries. And that is why it is my distinct pleasure to address the Euroatlantic Partnership Council in the capital city of our staunch ally, on behalf of President Boris Tadic of the Republic of Serbia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

South-Eastern Europe is still an importer of security. We need to work together to change this so that we can become net contributors to a new architecture of global peace.

Two questions constitute the heart of the matter: One, how do we advance the cause of collective security in our region? And two, how do we transform it into a better, more secure and prosperous place?

Our search for answers is made easier by the fact that the wars of the previous decade—which culminated in 78 days of the bombing of my country in 1999—are over in the Balkans. They brought us death, poverty, and refugees. And they have left in their wake bitterness, organized crime, and fragile democracies without fully consolidated national identities.

As a result of these wars, we still need peacekeepers in our part of the world. The largest number is deployed in our southern province of Kosovo. Over 15,000 KFOR troops are stationed there. We expect them to remain status-neutral, to maintain law and order, to work harder to close down one of the most lucrative organized crime routes into Europe, and—most importantly—to protect the Kosovo Serbs. Let me say it clearly: this most vulnerable community must not be allowed to become hostage to political competition and international rivalries. Regretfully, some of the countries represented in this room have recently chosen to recognize the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo. As a result, a dangerous precedent has been established—one that legitimizes the forced partition of internationally recognized, sovereign states; and one that supplies any ethnic or religious group that has a grievance against its capital with a playbook on how to achieve its ends.

We have proclaimed the UDI null and void, and we will continue employing all diplomatic and political means to protect our sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are a democracy that has made tremendous achievements since the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000. We have built up a market economy, strengthened our administrative system, transformed our military, and begun to engage with our PfP partners. We are a transition success story, despite the unique obstacles we have had to overcome.

And now, on May 11th, we will have parliamentary elections. These will decide the future course of our country. I celebrate the fact that Serbia is in a position to democratically determine its own destiny, a right we fought long and hard to attain. The result of the election will be very close, and the discourse will be emotional and polarizing.

This is natural, for times of historical choice are in fact moments in which the dreams and demons of a society are ventilated. But it is also a moment in which the political leadership is tested to contain the demons and to give substance to the dreams.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have to move to a permanent peace in the Balkans. We are not there yet.

We need to eliminate the flashpoints of potential violence in our region by creating a whole new set of incentives for all our populations. We must change the strategic framework so that frontiers matter less, while identities can be expressed in freedom and without fear.

For our part, we in Serbia are ready to engage. We want to move rapidly to ensure that there is a dialogue that prevents any further violence and more uncontrolled developments in Kosovo. We have already conveyed this both to the United Nations and the European Union. I convey this to you today. And I am pleased that our Ministry of Defense and the Serbian Army are in close contact with KFOR and the Secretary General.

We must build on this. We must restore trust and confidence in the local populations. That is the only way they will eliminate their fears, and stay away from the clutches of the fear-mongers who want to drive us all in a direction that promises only to make things worse.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is a tendency in some quarters to keep blaming the Serbs. I'm afraid that is just an alibi

for failure.

The regime of Slobodan Milosevic committed terrible deeds against the Kosovo Albanians. For eight years Serbia has not had a say in the administration of Kosovo, as per UNSCR 1244. But unfortunately, during that time, the tables have turned. Serbs in the enclaves walk in fear of stepping out of the perimeters in which they live. Thousands of murders remain uninvestigated. Tens of thousands of their destroyed homes remain unreconstructed. One hundred and fifty thousand IDPs are still unable to return to the province. And our churches continue to be threatened and desecrated—more than 150 at last count, including dozens that were built as long ago as the 14th century, have been set ablaze by Kosovo Albanian extremists.

But the blame game will get us nowhere. We cannot impose trust; we cannot compel it; we cannot legislate it. We can only cultivate it. This process has been long overdue, and it needs to begin right away.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The real issue is how to make frontiers less relevant. And the answer to that is simple, very predictable, but well behind schedule. The answer is the European Union. Until our entire region is in the EU, governed by its values and practices, sharing sovereignty instead of fighting over it, the Western Balkans will always be a potential trouble spot.

In other words, we are at a strategic moment in which the past and the future are overlapping. To meet the global threats of the 21st century, we need to address the regional challenges, and to do that we must tackle the local differences. Serbia is ready to act decisively, in concert with our partners, to overcome them.

That is why my country has devoted considerable efforts to ensure that our regional policies reflect our core belief in the importance of promoting common values, mutual understanding, reconciliation, and the sovereign equality of states. That is why we have joined the Partnership for Peace, why we actively participate in the myriad formats of the Euroatlantic Partnership Council, and why we constructively contribute to the region's security institutions—including SEEGROUP, SEECAP, SEDM, as well as the Visegrad Group and the Adriatic Charter.

If we work together, if we pursue a course of action that places the collective responsibility of statecraft at the foundation of the steps that need to be taken, then we will have created for ourselves a precious interlude in time. An interlude in which we can consolidate the region's tremendous democratic progress since the passing of its dictators.

Let us not waste it.

Let us use it prudently—combining patience and courage, vision and foresight—by augmenting our security, and that of the rest of the world.

Thank you for your attention.