

Address Before the First Serbian Ambassadors' Conference

by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić
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Dear Foreign Minister Cioroianu,
Dear Ambassador Eide,
Respected Dean of the Diplomatic Corps,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to welcome you all to the first Ambassadors' Conference of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To our two distinguished guests from opposite corners of Europe—a special thanks. I am very glad you are here, and I thank you both for the policies of support and friendship that your countries have consistently pursued toward the Republic of Serbia and the whole of the Western Balkans.

I believe it is a fair assessment to say that an overwhelming majority of this generation of policymakers, throughout Europe and beyond, share a common approach in thinking strategically about the world—about the 21st century characterized by a rapidity and comprehensiveness of change not seen in the voluminous annals of human history. Great opportunities await the bold in this new world of both interdependence and uncertainty. We must have the courage to seize them, and harness them, and mold them to suit our national particularities.

We Europeans especially share a duty to promote what we see as the central role of

contemporary statecraft: to look to the future, to construct and integrate, and to consolidate the elimination of an adversarial, zero-sum perception of the balance of power on the Old Continent.

How we respond to today's challenges will define our generation. And it will determine what kind of a world community we will hand over to our children, and our children's children.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would also like to extend a heartfelt welcome to the diplomatic corps. I call on you to continue your important work of building bridges between your respective countries and the Republic of Serbia. Know that I and my Ministry will continue to be at your disposal. There is no limit to what we can accomplish when we work together.

To the ambassadors of the Republic of Serbia abroad, and to our Belgrade-based diplomats—I extend a message of profound gratitude. The dedication and diligence with which you perform your service to your country is sometimes overlooked. I want you to know that this will change. We are modernizing the Ministry. All of us will have to adapt. But I am confident that you will all be up to the challenge, for you are inheritors of a long and proud tradition of Serbian diplomats who have sacrificed much for the sake of their nation.

Most of you hold the rank of ambassador—inheritors of a distinction first given to the poet-diplomat Jovan Ducic. His friend and colleague, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature—and a former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs—Ivo Andric, once wrote that the diplomat is a “person who moves as through a mist in which the light that glimmers intermittently bewilders and deceives the eyes, more than it shows the path and enables a person to find his way.”

His words, written during the time he spent in the diplomatic service between the two World Wars, can serve as a particularly good description of the intricacies inherent in the profession you have chosen.

They reflect a perceptive understanding of the role of a diplomat in complicated times — times in which one's country struggles to consolidate its position in the face of accelerating global and regional currents. A situation that in some sense characterizes Serbia's current predicament, and much of the world's.

Excellencies,

As we all know, this past Wednesday, a presidential election was called for January 20th, 2008. This was both a constitutional necessity and an opportunity for the people of Serbia to engage in a critical debate about the future course of our country.

President Tadic will stand for re-election, and we have a pretty good sense of who his main opponent will be. The campaign will revolve around four sets of fundamental, self-defining issues. First, domestic choices—in particular, those related to the economy and social welfare. Second, the question of the future status of Kosovo and Metohija. Third, the pace at which Serbia progresses toward full EU membership. And fourth, the consolidation of the values that have defined us since our democratic revolution of October 2000.

It will be a hard-fought election. It will be a referendum in the profound sense that our citizens will have a choice between two fundamentally opposite ways forward. During the campaign, I'm sure many arguments will be heard that may sound extreme to outsiders. But in this, Serbia is no different than many other countries. An election is usually a moment 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. Come what may, we are determined to maintain the course that made Serbia time and again a natural ally in the historic conflicts for the freedom of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the central strategic priority of the Republic of Serbia is accelerated EU accession, it is in our vital national interest to further our comprehensive relations with not only Brussels, but also with Moscow and Washington—the three main pillars of our foreign policy.

We do not seek to balance, and we are not hedging our bets, for we know our future is in the European Union. We are merely pursuing our interests in a realistic, prudent and strategic way, aiming always towards consolidating our democratic institutions while sustainably developing our economy.

Moreover, the Republic of Serbia will continue to devote particular attention to deepening our ties of friendship with the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, both traditional partners, as well as with other friends in Asia, such as Japan, Indonesia, and South Korea.

We will also continue to reaffirm a number of close bilateral relationships forged during the heyday of diplomatic activity conducted by the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. The world has indeed changed dramatically since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of Yugoslavia, but old friendships—many rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement—will not be forgotten.

But as I said, the key to Serbia's future success lies in European integration. It has been a long time coming. In 1989, great changes came to our part of the world. Much of Europe entered a new era of stability and prosperity, welcoming a sense of common destiny. The tragic exception was the Western Balkans, which plunged into civil war and was delayed from enjoying the benefits of the peace that spread across the continent. That delay began to be overcome on October 5th 2000, on the occasion of the democratic overthrow of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. On that day, the people of Serbia embraced what I have called the "grand idea of Europe", namely that democracy is interdependent with individual liberty, the rule of law, human and minority rights, and integration.

The grand idea of Europe frames our behavior and our way of thinking; it brings out our

humanity—and allows what brings us together to come to the surface of our nature. For in a European democracy, government walks hand in hand with each and every citizen with empathy and understanding, sharing in their hopes and dreams. Twenty-first century European democracy is not a value-neutral, mechanical process, but something higher. It is about living together in a community of shared values.

And no less significantly, the grand idea of Europe is also about delivering sustainable economic growth and prosperity. Today, the 27 EU member-states make up 33 percent of global wealth—an incredible figure. And they do so in the context of a social contract that ensures the equality of opportunity for all citizens—that empowers marginalized and vulnerable groups; that assures in practice the lifting of the often invisible barriers to the full participation of all in political, social, and economic life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From its inception, joining the institutions of Europe has in effect meant renouncing war as a tool of statecraft in the European space. That is why Europe is so aptly termed the reconciler of nations.

In post-conflict and post-communist societies such as those of the Western Balkans, the democratic march toward full European integration enables all the region's countries to deepen their cooperation and to safely promote their prosperity. But it also enables us to implement true, genuine reconciliation.

At the heart of this absolute commitment to reconciliation lies full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Serbia's track record is laudatory, for we have already turned over 42 Hague indictees, including four former presidents, one former speaker of parliament, one former prime minister, and three former chiefs of the general staff. Let there be no doubt, we remain determined to locate, arrest, and hand-over the few Hague indictees still at large—on both a political and operational level. And we will succeed. I am sure of it.

I remind you that President Tadic traveled to Srebrenica on the 10th anniversary of the horrible, tragic events that took place there, in order to show that Serbia mourns for all the victims of

ethnic cleansing. That is why for us, cooperation with the ICTY is not only our undeniable international obligation; it is our moral duty—to our neighbors and the world, of course, but foremost to ourselves.

This moral dimension of reconciliation is central to building a better Balkans, for it provides a framework through which the crimes of individuals who falsely acted in the name of their nation are to be understood.

And lastly, reconciliation allows for participation in collective structures through which the region's security arrangements can be consolidated, using the benefits provided by the Partnership for Peace program. By bringing the Western Balkans into the wider Trans-Atlantic family of nations, shallow, outdated concepts of isolated national defense will fall by the wayside, to the benefit of all the citizens of the region.

Thanks to the integrational perspectives emanating out of Brussels, regional issues of trust are being resolved; dilemmas about intent are disappearing; and a 21st-century sense of purpose is being created.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The perpetual peace in Europe that Kant could only dream of is within our grasp. But to complete our common vision of a Europe that is whole, free and at peace, we must overcome one more hurdle. And that is the future status of Kosovo, Serbia's southern province under United Nations administration since June 1999.

I hope that everyone in this room believes that a compromise, negotiated solution—a solution that advances the EU membership prospects of the entire region—is the optimal outcome to the future status question. That a solution which promotes the consolidation of democratic values and institutions in the region, is the optimal outcome. That a solution that pushes the region beyond the point of no reversal and away from the illusory nationalist temptations of the

recent past, is an optimal outcome.

And if we all agree, then does it not mean that the only way forward is to solve Kosovo's future status in the manner of 21st-century Europe, that is, through compromise, concession, and consensus-building among all the stakeholders, through a process of deliberate, patient, and sustained negotiations?

But unfortunately, there is a tendency to view the Kosovo future status process through the lens of political expediency. This is very dangerous, for it has strengthened those within Serbia who are skeptical of our European perspective—doing damage not only to Serbia's future, but to that of the Western Balkans as a whole.

Why has this happened? Why are some willing to sacrifice the ultimate geo-strategic priority of the Western Balkans—accelerated EU accession for all—on the altar of the communal aspirations of the Kosovo Albanians?

Someone could reply by saying that there was a hundred and twenty day negotiating period, conducted under the auspices of the Contact Group Troika. And one could ask, "Were they not acting as an honest broker?" My answer is, "Yes they were." And we are very grateful for their serious, sincere efforts.

And yet, no agreement was reached, despite Serbia's myriad proposals. The reason is as simple as it is tragic. The process suffered from a fatal flaw—constant external disturbances in the form of public messaging which basically announced that the province's independence would be imposed if no agreement was reached by December 10th.

In effect, the Kosovo Albanians were told that they would get everything they wanted if they didn't compromise—hardly the sort of inducement that could lead to a negotiated settlement, wouldn't you say?

But I do not believe opportunities for negotiations are exhausted.

I think now is the time for all the stakeholders involved in the future of the Western Balkans to constructively make use of the weeks and months to come—and to do so in the spirit of cooperation and partnership, informed by the values and aims that we share.

Here's what I propose: that an environment be created, for the first time since the future status process began, in which a historical compromise settlement between Serbs and Albanians could be crafted. That means that a symmetrical set of incentives for both sides to reach a negotiated, mutually-acceptable agreement, must be put on the table.

It's not that we are asking for more of the same, for more time. What we're asking for is quality time. So that someone like Agim Ceku does not feel confident to say, as he did in his closing statement in Baden a few weeks ago, that the Kosovo Albanians do not want to negotiate status. We have to work together to find a way to change the psychological mindset—ever-present in Pristina—that says “what's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable.”

And we are prepared to extend our flexibility on the traditional definition of sovereignty, in order to reach an agreement. We are willing to narrow it so as to ensure that Kosovo has the broadest possible autonomy one can imagine, while remaining with Serbia under a common sovereign roof.

We have no interest in ruling over the Kosovo Albanian community: we do not want to tax them, nor to police them, nor to have their judicial or their educational systems re-integrated into ours.

Our currency does not have to have a presence in Kosovo. Our military would not have to be there, either.

And we would not interfere with their relationship with international financial organizations; with them having separate membership in international sporting federations; or with them having some sort of representation abroad.

Can you think of another country that would be willing to go that far? And still Pristina refuses to relax its maximalist demand for independence. Is it reasonable to reward this uncompromising position?

For make no mistake, arriving at a compromise solution would also prevent calling into question a fundamental tenet of international relations that revolves around the United Nations Charter and the continuing supremacy of the Security Council—reinforced in Europe through the Helsinki Final Act—by setting a precedent that allows for any country to be partitioned without its consent. For the imposition of the independence of Kosovo is nothing other than the forced partition of Serbia.

And we all know that there are dozens of Kosovo-s throughout the world, just waiting for secession to be legitimized, to be rendered an acceptable norm.