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Excellencies,

Dear Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my distinct pleasure to address here today this country’s premier institution of global affairs.

Let me begin by saying that this has been a day of accomplishment. My meetings with Foreign Minister Kubiš and Mr. Boris Zala, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the *Narodna rada Slovenskej Republiky*, together with his colleagues, were highly productive. I look forward to continuing to broaden and deepen our bilateral relations in the months and years to come. The Slovak Republic is in many ways a model transition success story, and I thank you for your support of our goal of quickly joining you in the European family of nations.

I just came from the opening of an exhibition of ethnic-Slovak naïve art, on loan from the Pavel Babka International Ethno Center, located in the northern Serbian town of Kovačica. This multi-ethnic, heterogeneous community is a living testament to the bridge-building that our two nations have been engaging in for many centuries.

Another thing that we have in common is the heritage of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the enlighteners and evangelists of the Slavs. They passed through here just as they passed

through my country, leaving a permanent mark on the character of our ancestors. Their accomplishments continue to provide the thread that has woven a fabric of understanding between our two peoples for a very long time.

The character of our nations has also been formed by another common feature, the Danube. This mighty river flows through our capital cities, capturing the profound sense of shared destiny which unites all the nations that have been touched by its majesty. Bratislava was even called Istropolis, meaning Danube City in Greek, during the Renaissance. Our river has been a constant, vigilant witness to the ebb and flow of European history.

And it is history—or perhaps more accurately—historical change—that is the main theme of my remarks to you this afternoon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Serbia today, we hear history’s whisper, just as the people of Bratislava did in 1988 during the *sviečkova demonštracia* or the Candle Demonstration—just as our people did on October 5th

2000, when we peacefully overthrew the nationalist tyranny of the 1990s.

We hear history’s whisper telling us of the generational choice we face in the runoff presidential election to be held this Sunday.

We find ourselves in a time of great decision. For make no mistake, this election is a referendum, a Referendum on Europe. Each citizen of Serbia will be called on to make a clear and compelling choice, a fundamental choice.

The presidential election is not primarily about the *speed* of change. It’s about the *direction* of change: to walk forward to our European future, or to walk backwards towards self-isolation.

The result will be very close. The election has been hard-fought. The discourse has been 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—to remind those who have forgotten what it was like in our part of the world during the 1990s, and how it has been since: far from perfect, but immeasurably better.

I deeply believe that our citizens will make the responsible choice when they cast their vote the day after tomorrow. I strongly believe they will choose to embrace the promise of a better life—that they will choose to walk through Serbia’s open door to Europe, bringing untold prosperity not only to our country but to all the Western Balkans.

Starting Monday, with victory secured in Serbia’s Referendum on Europe, together, Serbs, Slovaks, and all other European nations can begin to implement the final stage in fulfilling the dream of generations of making our continent whole, free and at peace.

That is what the European Union is really about. It’s the antidote to isolation, protectionism, fear, extremism, and war. It brings us together, expands our markets, points to a more prosperous tomorrow, solidifies the gains made, and teaches us how to solve our differences in line with the enlightened aspirations of humankind, instead of giving in to our basest instincts.

That is why, in short, the European Union is truly an amazing accomplishment—a grand experiment in forging a new direction.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Created in the years after the deadliest conflict the world has even witnessed, the European Union brings together nations that fought innumerable wars against each other for more than a millennia into a union of peace, security, and prosperity, the EU has done more to advance the agenda of what your greatest poet, Jan Holly, called “remembering the future”, than any other political exercise in history—to construct, and to integrate, and so to grasp the infinite opportunities that the 21st century offers to the bold, and to the visionary.

The EU is about living together in a community of shared values. It brings to the world stage a common heritage, and galvanizes us all to address our common problems in a uniquely peaceful way.

That is a reason why I enthusiastically welcome the invitation to sign, on February 7th, the Political Agreement for Cooperation Between the European Union and Serbia.

This historical agreement will provide a comprehensive framework for the EU-Serbia relationship designed to accelerate my country’s progress toward EU membership.

It strengthens the vision of a European Serbia by transforming it into something very concrete, tangible, unmistakably real, by expanding the scope and increasing the intensity of economic, social and political cooperation. It will increase the educational opportunities for many thousands of young Serbs to study at European universities. And it will strengthen the momentum for the successful conclusion to an agreement on visa-free travel by year’s end.

Before proceeding with the remainder of my remarks, I want to say something very personal to you on the question of Serbia’s European identity. For a period of 500 years, we were outside of the mainstream of Europe. The significance of this period of our history—the Ottoman occupation—is something that I think is sometimes underappreciated.

It’s not just that we were subjugated by a foreign empire, that we had no country, no sovereignty, no *present*, but just a past to act as a guidepost.

It’s that our subjugation cut us off from our common European civilization. Our lands were considered beyond the frontier of Europe. And then, in the 19th and 20th centuries, we worked very, very hard to be accepted once more into the European family of nations. We succeeded, at mind-boggling human and material cost. Sometimes we made mistakes as we walked down the path history had laid out for us. But we made it.

And then the 1990s took it all away.

But now we have a chance to restore our dignity not only as Serbs and democrats—but as Europeans. We get to *belong*, we get to remember the future, to come back to Jan Holly’s words.

This sense of belonging—of returning to the European cradle, of not just remembering but *assuring* our future—is something that is of vital importance for the consolidation of our identity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This truly historic sense of purposeful belonging to Europe is being severely tested by some in the international community who wish to encourage the Kosovo Albanians to declare independence from Serbia. Such a blatant violation of international law could severely—perhaps fatally—undermine the tremendous democratic progress Serbia and the Western Balkans as a whole have made in past few years.

It could bring us back full circle to 1989—a year of great change for Central and Eastern Europe, but a year of descending darkness for the Western Balkans.

In the eyes of too many of our citizens, it could pit us against Europe once again. It could create a gap of understanding, and reverse the consolidation of the sense of solidarity so vital to our future, by striking at the very center of our identity as Europeans.

But not only that, the independence of Kosovo against the sovereign will of the Serbian people could freeze the completion of the generational transformation of regional security efforts, setting the stage for dangerous concepts of isolated national defense to return to the surface.

Moreover, regional integration could give way to the erection of walls against cooperation—economies would spiral into recession, perhaps depression.

And the politics of transformational change could be replaced by a politics of generational resentment throughout the region.

This short-sighted approach by some outside actors to the drama of the Western Balkans could, far from weaving us into the mainstream fabric of contemporary Europe, tear us away from the prospect of closing the book of strife and conflict for good.

Let me tell you why.

It is impossible to over-state the emotional impact that the forcible partition of Serbia—which is what the independence of Kosovo is tantamount to—would have on our citizenry.

To those who say, in effect, cut off Kosovo like you would an appendix, I reply that, with all due respect, Kosovo is our heart, it is our Jerusalem. It is the crux of our historical identity, it’s what kept us going for 500 years.

The forceful partition of Serbia would not result in, as some have suggested, a Balkan version of the Velvet Divorce. It would rather be like cutting off the hand of Peter to feed Paul, as the expression goes.

Moreover, forcibly partitioning Serbia would fundamentally overturn a core tenet of the international system established in 1945, strengthened in Europe by the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and reaffirmed countless times since the end of the Cold War.

The precedent that would be created would give great hope to secessionists everywhere, from the Basques in Spain and the Taiwanese in China, to the Kurds in Iraq and the Luos and Kalenjin in Kenya, to say nothing of the strong pressures that would be felt for a bloody re-drawing of borders throughout the Western Balkans.

Such a myopic vision of the way forward—such a tendency to view Kosovo’s future status primarily through the lens of political expediency—is truly disappointing.

I have to be honest. I fail to understand why some are willing to sacrifice Europe’s ultimate geo-strategic priority in the Western Balkans—cementing peace and stability that leads to accelerated EU accession for all—on the altar of the communal aspirations of the Kosovo Albanians.

Yes, we all know that some negotiations did take place, and that no agreement was reached. So some argue that the time for constructive talks is over and the time for unilateral action is now.

But these negotiations were not conducted on the basis of good faith. It is true that the Contact Group Troika acted as an honest broker. And we are very grateful for their serious, sincere effort. But 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 an arbitrary, pre-set deadline.

Let’s re-double our efforts.

Here is what I propose: that, for the first time since the future status process began, a symmetrical set of incentives for both sides to reach a negotiated, mutually-acceptable agreement, 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 no one from Pristina feels confident to say, as was done during the final round of the talks, 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 amongst the Kosovo Albanians—that says “what’s mine is mine, what’s yours is negotiable.”

To facilitate an agreement, Serbia is prepared to narrow the traditional definition of sovereignty. We are willing 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 institutions; with them having separate representation in international sporting federations; or even 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 in defiance of the Security Council, and in defiance of international law. Is it reasonable to reward this uncompromising position?

Only a solution that is acceptable to both sides can be viable, sustainable, and lasting. And that means that the way forward lies in embracing European principles such as compromise, concession, and consensus-building, by engaging in a process of deliberate, patient, and sustained, good-faith negotiations *until a compromise is struck*. For it is never too late to negotiate about the future—especially when it’s a future we all share.

Giving up is not the European way, history’s whisper reminds us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have heard our vision of the direction of change for the Western Balkans, of our vision of how to restore for good the European spirit of Serbian identity, to be achieved after a “yes” vote on the Referendum for Europe that will take place in Serbia in two days time.

By remembering the future—in the words of the *Svatopluk*—as we consolidate the promise of Europe in the Balkans, we believe we can avoid stepping into the Kosovo independence chasm before us all.

We believe we can achieve an equitable peace, a compromise solution.

We believe this is possible because we believe in Europe, and because we believe in fulfilling the democratic potential of our country.

We honor its past and have faith in its future. And we reject the views of those of little faith who, by their pessimism about a common European identity, diminish Serbia’s present, betray our past, and deny us our future.

Thank you very much.