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Mr. Chairman,

Dear Colleagues,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking our Romanian colleagues for the excellent organization of this important event, for their warm hospitality, and for their activism during their chairmanship over the Central European Initiative. I would also like to wish every success to our good friends from Montenegro, as they take over in 2010.

We are here to mark the 20th anniversary of the founding of CEI, the first multilateral cooperation forum to be established after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Gathering mere days after the world's ultimate fault line was brought down, foreign ministers from Belgrade, Budapest, Rome and Vienna came together to establish a platform for mutual support called the Quadragonal Cooperation.

Yugoslav diplomacy, at the time headed by Mr. Budimir Lončar, played a decisive role in bringing to life our unique institution—the original bridge across a formerly divided continent, the first practical consequence of the end of the Cold War. As Mr. Lončar said in his opening remarks two decades ago in the Hungarian capital, “this is a worthwhile initiative, one that announces a good, new beginning, [...] an economic and political foundation upon which a common, all-European home can be built.”

Serbia is proud to be a successor to one of the founders of the Initiative, and I note with pleasure that representatives of all the former Yugoslav republics are in attendance here today. Serbia shares this legacy with them equally. It is a common experience we should proudly celebrate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The intent of the CEI founders was to seize the initiative and exercise leadership in consolidating the gains of 1989. It ended up being only a partial success, for the Western Balkans soon took a wrong turn. A missed opportunity led to a great tragedy.

After a devastating decade of war, and political and economic isolation, democracy arrived in our lands, raising the prospect of completing the European construction.

Today, we are hopeful of success; we feel it is within our reach. We know the world is in the midst of another transformative period, in some ways comparable to 1989. This time, we are determined not to let events pass us by. We stand resolute in wanting to join the European Union as soon as possible. This is the central strategic priority of the Republic of Serbia.

We believe the Central European Initiative can help us achieve our goal more rapidly. As a conduit for regional cooperation, it continues to serve as an important link between EU member states in the region, and the aspirant countries.

Today, the Initiative has become a focal point in our quest to consolidate regional trust, by working together on concrete projects, as partners seeking a common future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia has worked very hard to get to this point, in the face of numerous obstacles and against overwhelming odds. As the region's accession accelerator, we have worked to help bring the entire Western Balkans closer to the EU. The Central European Initiative has been an important vehicle in this effort.

We have promoted political integration through fora such as the Southeast Europe Cooperation Process, and the Regional Cooperation Council. We have also taken the lead in ensuring the Alliance of Civilizations has a strong and vibrant regional context, by working together to foster inter-cultural dialogue and complete the painful process of reconciliation.

We have also encouraged economic integration through completing cross-border infrastructure

projects like Corridors VII and X, and through institutions such as CEFTA—the Central European Free Trade Accord—as well as, for instance, the Agreement on the Energy Community, the Southeast Europe Transport Community Agreement, Open Skies, and the Europe Strategy on the Danube River.

All of these were initiated and supported by CEI member states, confirming the continued relevance of this organization. It has played a sort of a clearinghouse role in the context of the on-going process of European enlargement. That is why Serbia would like to see the European Commission assume a more active posture in the CEI, believing this would help us all move closer to actualizing our common strategic objective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me turn to the significance of the conference that will take place in Brussels on December 9th, co-chaired by the Swedish EU Presidency and the European Commission. Its strategic aim is contained in its title: “Overcoming the Economic Crisis: From Regional Cooperation to EU Membership.” Coming quickly on the heels of the activation of the Lisbon Treaty, I believe it will serve to remind us all of the dedication to keep the region’s EU perspective high on the Brussels agenda.

We know the next few months will place great demands on European institutions, yet we believe this period of adjustment will quickly result in building a firmer foundation for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

In this context, I would like to underline our strong support for the idea of the forthcoming Spanish Presidency to hold an EU-Western Balkans summit in May 2010—one that would build on the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003, and, we hope, re-create, on more solid ground, the sense of imminent belonging to Europe that is required for this region to move decisively towards membership in the EU.

Such a summit would banish the creeping accession fatigue already being felt in some corners of the Western Balkans, and it would shatter the perception that the region is about to be put on hold.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The 20th anniversary of the Central European Initiative seems to be an appropriate place to start talking about how to prepare for the next EU accession wave. In a way, this forum is where the enlargements to the east began to be contemplated, and where the conversation about its completion should commence.

When it comes to moving the European agenda forward, some define themselves as enthusiasts or skeptics, others as optimists or pessimists. I am none of these. As Jean Monnet once said, "I am not an optimist, I am determined." The historical record has demonstrated that success did not come about by sitting back, by being passive, by waiting for the tide to turn. It came about by combining leadership and imagination.

And that is how it must stay. For all of us to come together, under one roof, as part of a single family, promoting the same values, and sharing common interests. Let there be no doubt: Serbia remains absolutely committed to fulfilling its European destiny, with all deliberate speed.

Thank you very much.