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Excellencies,

Dear Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to this seminar on excellence in diplomacy, co-sponsored by the
Koča
Popović
Diplomatic
Academy
of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Spanish Agency for International Development

Cooperation, and the Ibero-American Foundation of Public Administration and Policies.

Allow me to express a special thanks to the panelists who graciously accepted our invitation to share their views with us over the next two days. I am certain that the sessions to come will provide ample opportunity for all the participants—especially the young diplomats in the audience—to absorb much knowledge, share experiences and best practices, and further develop the sort of personal relationships that have always been the critical element of a diplomatic arsenal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of this country's former Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs—and the Nobel Prize winner—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 misleads the eyes, more than it shows the path and enables a person to find his way."

These words, written in the context of his reflection on the time spent in our diplomatic service between the two World Wars, provide a particularly good description of the intricacies inherent

in one of the world's most ancient and distinguished professions.

They reflect a perceptive understanding of the role of diplomats in complicated times, as one's country struggles to consolidate its position in the face of various regional and global currents. A situation that in a sense characterizes Serbia's present predicament, as well as that of Europe and the rest of our increasingly interdependent world.

The international system seems to be undergoing a great transformation, a paradigm shift in many ways comparable in scope to 1945 and 1989.

No one is yet able to reliably predict how deep the change will turn out to be. What is becoming evident is that interrelated factors—the latest one being the global economic crisis—have expedited the arrival of a new set of circumstances onto the world stage. A broad repositioning could very well be taking place. The global balance of power is shifting, and international relations are becoming less predictable to forecast.

In addition, diplomacy is now increasingly practiced in an environment where events can be experienced instantaneously and simultaneously—by leaders as well as their publics. The flow of information happens in an instant.

This is unprecedented, and poses a particular challenge to democracies—where accountability for the actions of government is a fundamental norm.

The test is more pronounced for democracies in transition, such as Serbia. The learning curve is acute: leaders have to navigate between maintaining consistency of strategic vision, and sustaining popular support for tactical decisions—a difficult task even in the best of times.

In sum, public messaging is assuming a disproportionately high degree of importance. This is something that no one can avoid or ignore.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Prudently conducting the art of diplomacy is especially important for a small country like ours, which stands at a great crossroads of civilizations. Today, much activity is afoot. This is a moment that could produce a fundamental change in the norms that govern the entire international system. It is vital that we remain actively engaged with the whole world, as the

rules get revised.

Thankfully, Serbian diplomats have the works of our predecessors to serve as guideposts in these transformational times. Consider, for a moment, the vital role played by Rastko Nemanjić, better known to the world as Saint Sava—the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, one of Serbia’s most important pillars of national identity.

Sava was not merely a spiritual leader. He was also our country’s first diplomat. The youngest son of our founding father, Grand Duke Stefan Nemanja, Saint Sava was called on various occasions to travel to the Great Power capitals of the day, in order to secure the support necessary for Serbia to thrive in an intricate international environment.

Sava accomplished something even more important. At the very beginning of Serbia’s arrival onto the historical scene, he laid the foundation for our country to stand as a bridge between East and West. To quote from a letter he composed shortly before his death: “At first we were confused”, Saint Sava wrote. “The East thought that we were the West, while the West thought we were the East. Some of us misunderstood our place in the clash of currents, so they cried that we belong to neither side, while others cried that we belong exclusively to one side or the other. But I say that we are destined to be the East in the West, and the West in the East”—end of quote.

I believe this national trait remains an essential part of what we are, an embedded compass of

sorts in the conduct of Serbia's foreign policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Modern Serbian diplomats worked hard to build on the strategic foundations laid by Saint Sava. Following the restoration of Serbian statehood in the first part of the 19th century, national architects in the tradition of Jovan Ristić and Stojan Novaković led the way in deepening Serbia's relations with world capitals, over the course of decades that produced an illusion of stability, yet resulted in increased international rigidity, antagonism, and tragic armed conflicts.

Rising out of the ashes of the World Wars, the golden age of our diplomacy began. It was led by Koča Popović, who began his diplomatic career during the time of the Partisans, when he helped sway the Allies to the cause of Tito.

Thanks in large part to Koča, we were able to carve a singular position for ourselves in the Cold War era. His vision led to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement, and enabled Belgrade to play a disproportionately large role on the global stage.

Koča's two most notable successors, Marko Nikezić and Mirko Tepavac, built on his strategic outlook and achievements. When the international situation demanded it, for instance, we reached out to Europe through the Helsinki process—inoculating the Yugoslav state from the specter of the dangerous doctrine of limited sovereignty.

Unfortunately, an opportunity was missed for us to be incorporated into the European Community in the late 1970s. Ideology trumped foresight and healthy self-confidence. And so Yugoslavia slowly began to implode: ideas about which course to take—both domestically and internationally—lacked direction as well as substance.

The country's increasing dogmatism in the 1980s contributed to the rise of extremist views, and finally to its dismemberment in the 1990s.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By the turn of the 21st century, democracy had been restored to Serbia, as was a strategic approach to national development. Its basis was a bedrock conviction in the need for comprehensive engagement with our neighbors, Europe, and the world.

True leadership returned to the scene, allowing us to face forward while proudly respecting the achievements of generations of Serbian statesmen.

Despite all the setbacks, our central strategic priority remains EU membership—not only for reasons of geography, heritage, and economic prosperity, but also because of the core values we hold in common.

Serbia's European vision is complemented by our strong determination to pursue a carefully balanced, artfully executed, and active foreign policy, aimed at engagement with nations throughout the world, near and far.

This is in our lasting interest, and will not change.

As such, our historic friendship with the Russian Federation will keep growing stronger. Our re-engagement with the United States will continue apace. And our strategic partnership with the People's Republic of China will gain importance in the time ahead, as will our drive to deepen ties with proud nations across the globe—many of which are members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

We will also work closely with neighboring countries to ensure that regional peace is consolidated. As the strategic anchor of stability in the Western Balkans, Serbia will invest ever greater efforts to complete the democratic transformation of our part of Europe.

Arriving at consensual solutions to unfinished regional business remains our profound concern.

This brings me to the open, unresolved question of Kosovo's future status.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UDI—or the unilateral declaration of independence by the ethnic-Albanian authorities of our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija—was an attempt to forcibly partition a member-State of the United Nations, in violation of our democratic Constitution, and against the will of the Security Council.

Serbia chose to respond to Pristina's effort at secession peacefully, and with maximal restraint, by harnessing all the diplomatic resources at our disposal to counter UDI and contain its potentially destabilizing consequences

As a result, an issue of such fundamental importance and complexity—passionately involving all at once identity, boundaries, communal rights, opposing historical narratives—was steered clear of resorting to the force of arms for the first time in the history of the Balkans.

As a part of our constructive approach, we decided to contest the UDI issue before the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice—tasked by the United Nations General Assembly to issue an advisory opinion on the legality of UDI.

Once the Court hands down its decision, an opportunity to reach a compromise will have been created. It must not be squandered.

Arriving at a viable and lasting solution to the Kosovo problem—one that would assure sustainable peace and stability in the Western Balkans—will be amongst the primary assignments of Serbian diplomacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The global paradigm shift that is underway poses particular challenges to diplomats the world over, including our own. Nevertheless, I am confident this country's foreign service will continue to meet them head-on.

Our history teaches us that the future is uncertain, that allies are imperfect, and that no single cause is worth excluding all others.

We must maintain our vigilance in the face of changing diplomatic realities, as we work to make true the generations' dream of a strong, confident, and European Serbia—of a country that has fully consolidated its democracy, that harmoniously works with its neighbors to secure regional stability, and that engages with friends throughout the world to promote the conduct of international relations on the basis of a shared vision of peace, sovereign equality, and sustainable development.

We will continue to do this as citizens, diplomats, and patriots.

Thank you for your attention.