



Let me start off by thanking the *Economist* magazine for putting together this important event.

I will try to discuss three inter-related themes with you this morning: the region's European future and how to secure it, Serbia's forthcoming parliamentary elections, and the Kosovo situation.

But I would like first to place this discussion in a global strategic context.

We live in transformational times. A great deal of the world is in flux; the fault lines are multiplying. Across the world, the disparate forces of democracy are faced with an uphill struggle. Trans-national friendships continue to shift as interests diverge and comprehensive alternatives are postulated. A source of commonality remains the observance of the easterly drift of the global balance of power, together with a growing recognition that the international community is becoming less coherent and less predictable.

Sensing the significance of this moment, we in the Balkans feel somewhat uneasy about its

implications. I don't think we're behind the curve on this: much of Europe feels the same way. But in our region, the disquietude is somewhat more acute. The reason is that in the Western Balkans, fundamental matters are still in the process of being settled, resolved, and decided upon. And so we tend to face new circumstances with greater trepidation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The great philosopher of democracy Montesquieu wrote that government should be set up so that no man need be afraid of another.

This is the all-too-often submerged basis of the European project. Recall how it began: with the reconciliation of two age-old adversaries after the Second World War. How it continues today: with the absorption of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. And how it will hopefully culminate: in the integration of the Western Balkans, including Serbia.

When it comes right down to it, the European project is about transformative institutions which ensure that no man need be afraid of another.

Such an understanding makes possible the belief that today's hopes will become tomorrow's realities.

And it makes it possible for us in the Balkans to liken the process of EU accession to the state of mind of walking safely with one another, through a succession of open doors, towards a common future.

In short, achieving membership would bring us together in democracy as never before. And that is why membership in the European Union should be the ultimate goal of all the nations in the Western Balkans.

Belonging to Europe can unify a country; it can consolidate its national identity; and it can do so in a non-threatening way that results in its incorporation into a broader, more cosmopolitan fabric of distinctiveness. For Europe is the embodiment of a commitment to national transformation. It is an antidote to self-isolation and the poverty of options that would result.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have before us an opportunity to consolidate the region's tremendous democratic progress since the passing of its dictators. But only if we seize it—only if we can find a way to harness it constructively and cultivate it responsibly—can we fulfill the promise of the peace dividend that stands ready for the taking, just a little ways off from the path we are now on.

The route to consolidating the future is not without its obstacles, and it is not sufficient to have a strategic vision of where you want to end up. Of equal importance is being in sure possession of a tactical understanding of how to get there. Putting them together wisely constitutes the craft of state—a rare quality among any generation of politicians.

Thankfully, we have such men of vision and ability in Serbia. And they exist throughout the Western Balkans. But the region's statesmen need to be understood, not pressured beyond the breaking-point.

And this brings me to the SAA question. Serbia is ready to sign the SAA immediately. I want you all to have no doubt about this. And I want to take this opportunity to say to you in all candor: *this is the time for Serbia to sign the SAA*. By making this happen, by overcoming the reticence that we still feel in some quarters, the member-states will in effect be saying to our

democracy that all doubts about us being welcome in the European Union have been removed. And that would go a long way to secure regional stability.

To sum up, I believe that if choose to really think strategically about the steps we need to take together as partners, then we might just bridge the gap, fill over the divide, and be able to set a course for where we hope to end up.

But let me underline that the eventual success of the endeavor is not guaranteed. The future is not yet written. We do no one any good by pretending that it's just a matter of "when" the states of the Western Balkans will become members of the European Union.

I am not trying to sound pessimistic, but I reject the idealism of some who naively want to believe that the only outcome is the one they wish for—that our destiny, that is to say, *their* preferred outcome, has been determined for us in advance.

I reject it because such an approach to politics is puerile.

And hasn't our region seen too much irresponsible behavior to have the luxury to make political assumptions on the basis of hopes discordant from realities?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is from such a standpoint that I wish to discuss the forthcoming parliamentary and local elections that will take place in Serbia on May 11<sup>th</sup>.

The result will be very close, and the discourse will be animated and polarizing. For these are dramatic times in Serbia—times in which confusion abounds, populism is resurfacing, and aspirations are being reformulated.

It will be a definitional election—the most important one in Serbia since October 2000. The result, whatever it may be, will produce radical consequences for the coming development of my country and the Western Balkans.

I say to you: this election will be about choosing the future course of Serbia. *The main issue will be whether to choose Europe*

. Yes, I believe that the critical battle for the European soul of the Western Balkans is upon us, and that it will be fought at polling stations across my country.

And this brings me to the issue of Kosovo. For notwithstanding the fact that this election is about Serbia's relationship with Europe, almost no voter's choice will be unaffected by what has recently taken place in our southern province.

Let me therefore try to clarify the Kosovo issue in the context of our elections.

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Make no mistake, on this fundamental issue—on this question that concerns the very nature of the identity of our nation—there is no disagreement in Serbia.

An overwhelming majority of our citizens are not prepared to give up our country's sovereignty over Kosovo. We are strongly united on this issue. And we will remain so. We will continue

defending our territorial integrity, and we will continue defending the rights of the Kosovo Serbs.

I believe that Serbia can build on the national unity forged by Kosovo to preserve a democratic nation that is whole and free—and that understands the strategic importance of forging ahead with our European membership perspective, while remaining actively engaged with the world.

This is a tall order. But we must rise to the challenge.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The unilateral, illegal and illegitimate declaration of independence of the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo from Serbia on February 17<sup>th</sup> has greatly complicated domestic, regional and global politics.

There is no sense in downplaying this fact. We all know that it has.

For the first time since October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000, the European idea in Serbia is on the defensive. It is still a viable option, but it is no longer a foregone conclusion. It is no longer seen as our destiny, but as a decision for us to make—because Europe is today closely associated by many in Serbia with support for UDI. And that has resulted in a whole lot of uncertainty and commotion throughout the country.

On the regional front, as a result of UDI, the countries of the Western Balkans have inescapably been put in a situation to choose between Serbia and Kosovo. I want to be clear about this. There is no way for any country to have its cake and eat it too on this issue. Ambiguity is not possible: choosing to recognize the UDI of our province of Kosovo means choosing to explicitly disregard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia. The direct, regrettable corollary of such a choice is the downgrading of the comprehensive set of ties with my country.

And it's a shame, for instead of rallying under the banner of regional solidarity, some have chosen to side with those beyond the Western Balkans who were in a hurry to impose a solution in our part of the world, while at the same time arguing that imposing solutions to similar conflicts in other areas of the globe would be, let us say, counterproductive.

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Consequent to this choice to recognize, a revival of the debate about the legitimacy of internationally recognized borders has been triggered. For the illegal attempt by Kosovo to unilaterally secede from Serbia has created a precedent; a dangerous, perilous precedent that does fundamental damage to what we're trying to create together—in *this* region, in the context of European integration.

This precedent legitimizes the doctrine of imposing solutions to ethnic conflicts. It legitimizes the act of unilateral secession by a provincial or other non-state actor. It transforms the right to self-determination into an avowed right to independence. It legitimizes the forced partition of internationally-recognized, sovereign states. It violates the commitment to the peaceful and consensual resolution of disputes in Europe. And it supplies any ethnic or religious group with a grievance against its capital with a play book on how to achieve their ends.

No amount of melodramatic arguments to the contrary will change this reality, if it is allowed to become set in stone.

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Adding fuel to the fire, an unfair charge has been leveled against my country. It says that Serbia is to blame for the stalemate, that it's *our* fault that we aren't going along with carefully laid plans that have singularly failed to take our national interests into account.

Well, blaming the Serbs may ease the conscious of those who ought to know better, but it won't solve the problem that we face—the problem of determining the future status of Kosovo in a way which ensures that all stakeholders can claim a share of the victory that a just solution would inevitably produce.

For sooner or later, when the dust settles, when the forty or so countries worldwide that choose to recognize the illegal declaration of independence by Pristina do so, we will all come face to face with a new, sobering reality: Kosovo will not be a member of the United Nations; it will not be a member of the OSCE. And as such it will not belong to the world community of sovereign nations. It won't acquire this ultimate status of legitimacy. It will remain unattractive to foreign investment; unresponsive to the rule of law; and incapable of preventing its freefall to failure without the engagement of Belgrade.

When the underlying implications of such a destabilizing outcome sink in, a new window of opportunity will open up. And it could create the conditions to forge a comprehensive settlement to the province's future status—one based on the European way of coming to an agreement: through compromise, concession and consensus-building.

The question is whether we will have the strategic foresight to take advantage of its possibilities.

This will not be easy. Nothing in Europe is easy. But everything is possible.

And yet there are those who will object. They could claim that some things are beyond the scope of the achievable, or repeat, mantra-like, that a new reality is upon us.

Well, the Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis had a response to such cynicism. He said, "let us change the eyes which see reality."

Let our eyes see a deeper reality.

Let them see reality through eyes of prudence and courage, vision and boldness.

Let them see the occasion to come for what it will be: a chance to solve Kosovo for good and pave the way to the ultimate consolidation of the European future of the Western Balkans.

Thank you for your attention.