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Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Parliamentarians,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to address you today.

I want to start by saying that the Republic of Serbia is fundamentally committed to fulfilling its European destiny—for reasons of geography, heritage, and economic prosperity for sure, but perhaps above all because of the core values we hold in common.

Arguably, the most basic of these values is the renunciation of war as a means of resolving disputes in Europe.

Indeed, the project to bind in peace and consent the states of this continent managed to bring to an end centuries-old feuds, divisions and disagreements.

The EU has become a safe guardian of the richness and complexity of distinct national pasts, which tie them all to a shared present, and point the way to a common, prosperous future. At the same time, it has come to serve as the guarantor of the equality of conditions and rights—as embodiments of the principles of solidarity and democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia's central strategic priority remains the achievement of full EU membership.

Our domestic debate about where we want to go is over. Two national elections were held in Serbia last year—one presidential, the other parliamentary. For our country, these were referenda about how to interact with the world of today. Our citizens were given a clear choice between two opposite ways forward. And they decided to cast their vote for a European future. Twice.

Serbia has worked very hard to get to this point, in the face of numerous obstacles and against overwhelming odds.

Much has been achieved, as the latest Commission progress report on Serbia makes clear. It is not perfect, but then nothing is. However, it is the best we have ever had. It is a truly positive statement on how much has been accomplished in the past twelve months.

We are greatly encouraged by the Commission's assessment that Serbia is fully committed to get into the European Union, underlining decisive across-the-board progress in all fields of interest.

While the fact that the Interim Agreement with the EU remains frozen is a profound handicap, we are pleased with the conclusions drawn by the Commission's most recent Enlargement Strategy. It complements my country for voluntarily "building a track record in implementing the provisions of the Interim Agreement and [for] undertaking key political reforms in line with European standards."

I wish to highlight the Strategy's conclusion: "Serbia has [...] made efforts to implement an ambitious programme for European integration, [...] and has the administrative capacity to make substantial progress towards the EU."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia has not focused on advancing its own EU membership perspective to the exclusion of others. Despite on-going difficulties, we have also worked to help bring the entire Western Balkans closer to Brussels, through enhancing regional cooperation.

We have promoted 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, and the Europe Strategy on the Danube River.

Serbia has continued taking all possible measures to ensure that extremist demagoguery never again infects the hearts and minds of the peoples of the Western Balkans.

Individuals from all sides committed heinous war crimes in the 1990s, wrecking havoc throughout the region. Serbia has worked hard to complete the process of reconciliation. That is why, for example, President Boris Tadic traveled to Srebrenica on the 10th commemoration of the war crime that took place there, and bowed to the victims of this terrible deed.

And that is why Serbia has fully cooperated with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. We do not consider it simply a legal obligation, but a moral and political duty—to our neighbors and the world, of course, but foremost to ourselves. Let there be no doubt, we will keep at it until the remaining indictees are no longer at large.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to turn to what is at this moment perhaps our most important achievement: visa liberalization.

This past July, the European Commission proposed that Serbia be placed on the White Schengen List. Having fulfilled all the benchmarks, we are eagerly awaiting a formal decision by the EU Council in December, on the basis of consultations with this Parliament.

If present expectations are fulfilled, the citizens of Serbia will start moving freely throughout the continent as of January 1st, 2010.

Let me emphasize that being able to get a first-hand impression of Europe is particularly important for my country's younger generations, who grew up in an atmosphere of political and economic isolation.

They will now be able to visit their relatives on a moment's notice; go to a conference in Berlin without having to demonstrate they can make their mortgage payments; or be asked to provide their employment history in order to swim in the Aegean.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As immensely important as the freedom to travel is, we cannot stop there. It is crucial that momentum for Serbia's EU integration, and that of the entire Western Balkans, is sustained.

Yet we are afraid that some may still hold the view that taking a break after Croatia joins the Union is an action Europe must take.

Whilst I do understand such sentiments, I do respectfully beg to disagree. As a matter of fact, I believe nothing could be worse than putting the rest of the region on standby.

A new psychological fault line would appear across the Western Balkans. The cost to Europe's credibility would be immeasurable. Enlargement fatigue in member states would result in accession fatigue amongst the aspirants.

This must be prevented. In all candor, while many Europeans speak of unfinished business in the Balkans, we all have to work together in making sure the Balkans do not become the unfinished business of Europe.

The best way forward is to start taking concrete steps towards actual European accession—not just for my country, but for the entire region—in the very near future.

In this context, we consider that the groundwork has been laid for Serbia to submit its official application for EU membership. We aim to do so by the end of the year.

We are aware of certain misgivings out there, and we do understand how they have come about. Nevertheless, we believe that the time has come to move forward. Every inhabitant of the Western Balkans should be a citizen of the European Union, and every effort should be made in that direction at all deliberate speed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The last time I spoke before this Committee, some MEPs expressed fears that our adamant opposition to UDI—the unilateral declaration of independence by the ethnic-Albanian authorities of our southern province of Kosovo—would negatively affect regional stability.

These have not materialized, since we chose to act responsibly.

Our principled position on Kosovo remains the same. The Republic of Serbia will never, under

any circumstances, implicitly or explicitly, recognize
UDI.

This

is

our

Constitutional

obligation

, as well as our

democratic duty

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ur nation is united as one

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At the same time, we have underlined our commitment to respond to the attempt at secession in a constructive, non-confrontational manner, through law and diplomacy.

This strategic decision constitutes a paradigm shift in favor of peace in the Balkans. For the first time in the history of our region, 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.

From the very onset of this grave crisis, a part of our strategy was to compartmentalize the issue. To that end, we turned to the instruments of peaceful adjudication. Through the UN General Assembly, we asked the International Court of Justice to rule on whether Kosovo's UDI is in accordance with international law.

By transferring the UDI issue to the judicial arena, we demonstrated how we want to manage political differences. In our view, this represents a role model for contemporary conflict resolution—one that could be applied anywhere in the world where the divides are deep, the historical burdens heavy, and the issues involved go to the very heart of defining one's national identity.

We also invested significant efforts to constructively engage with institutions operating within the framework of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999), such as EULEX. We have agreed to focus on resolving practical matters on the ground in a status-neutral manner, to the benefit of all residents of the province.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before coming to the end of my remarks, I would like to address recent developments in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

The Republic of Serbia will continue to strictly respect our neighbor's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are working to encourage representatives of all the three constituent peoples to find a way for the country to reform itself, so as to be able to accelerate the pace of its EU accession—a strategic priority shared by all.

We have made it clear that we will support whatever arrangement is acceptable to all parties, stressing the need for pragmatism.

Consensus-building is a core 21st-century European value and decision-making principle, aptly illustrated by the fact that on important institutional changes, all must give their consent. Sometimes this takes longer than one would like, as the Lisbon Treaty ratification process reminds us. But at the end of the day, agreement is reached—enabling everyone to move forward together.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Throughout my remarks to you this afternoon, I have been aiming to put the European future of my country and the Western Balkans in a broad strategic context, and emphasize the need to

take concrete steps towards membership.

I have done so as a firm believer in the EU—as someone who wants his country to join not out of fear of being left out, but out of pride and confidence in our ability to contribute to the full consolidation of peace and stability in the Old Continent.

In a few days, Serbia will join the celebrations marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. November 9th, 1989, will always symbolize the seminal moment when—without a shot being fired—the Cold War came to an end.

For many of us in the Western Balkans, that date also stands for something else: a missed opportunity leading to a great tragedy.

Today, the world is in the midst of another transformative period. This time, we in the Western Balkans are determined not to let the opportunity pass us by, and stand resolute in wanting to join the European Union as soon as possible.

Having come to the end of my remarks, I leave you with the words of Jovan Skerlic—one of Serbia’s most respected parliamentarians—who wrote at the turn of the last century that “to make democracy a truly living, breathing reality, we have to uplift the consciousness of freedom of all men and women who seek to breathe the fresh air of life lived to the fullest.”

For me, that is what the European project will be once we complete it. To “uplift the consciousness of freedom” means to lay aside the antiquated view of democracy as a value-neutral, mechanical process. It means to aim higher and do better, to seek concord and build bridges. And it means finding a way to live life in true solidarity with one another, in a community of shared values that are as lofty as they are profound, and common interests that are as compelling as they are just.

Now comes our time of testing.

I am confident we will seize the strategic opportunity the present moment offers to the bold and the confident. It is ours to grasp it and nurture it, so that it grows strong and good.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to address the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament.