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Dear Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished MEPs,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to state at the very beginning—and with absolute clarity: full membership in the European Union is the first fundamental priority of the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

Sitting here before you, I anticipate the success to come. I anticipate it with a confidence born out of the knowledge that our purpose is good, that our purpose is right, and that our purpose is just.

In a very real way, Serbia is already taking part in the construction of Europe. The European scaffolding around the Western Balkans is coming down.

I feel your welcome and support. What is for certain, is that there is no going back. For us in the Western Balkans, the momentum is too great, for the tide has turned.

That is why I want to reassure you of my sincere dedication to work with all of you—and with the other European institutions as well as the member-states—to work on building a Europe that is genuinely free of division and strife. To work on building a Europe that is truly whole, permanently free and forever at peace.

I believe achieving this goal is the solemn duty of all in Europe who have dedicated themselves to public service. Failure in this endeavor must not be an option.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to share with you a part of my vision of the future of Serbia and the region. And I want to put this vision into a broader context—into the context of the end-point, into the context of our European accession. I also want to talk about the question of European values, *of what these values mean to us*

. For the European Union is a remarkable accomplishment, one of humankind's grandest political ideas ever put into practice.

As you know, Serbia has recently resumed its SAA talks—in no small part thanks to the efforts of many of you here present. I want to thank you for your support of Serbian democracy—and for your steadfast belief in our common future.

Once we conclude our SAA talks later this year, however, it is of great importance to us that we not only sign the SAA agreement as soon as possible, but that we are accorded official candidate status by the end of 2008.

Serbia is determined to keep to this schedule. We will do what needs to be done, but I ask for your help in making sure that bureaucratic obstacles do not get in the way.

This means foremost that we work together to ensure that 2009 is set as the year to start the actual talks on accession. If we maintain this pace, then by the end of this Government's four year term—that is, May 2011—we expect to conclude much of the negotiations.

Distinguished MEPs,

I am aware that you will be discussing the Draft Report on Serbia right after this meeting. Please be assured that we stand ready to fulfill our obligations, and that we are confident we can count on your support as we progress along the integration path.

The Republic of Serbia highly values the opinion of the European Parliament. We are particularly grateful for your sustained engagement in facilitating the visa regime. I very much hope that this effort will extend to ensuring an efficient parliamentary procedure when the Agreement on Visa Facilitation and Readmission reaches you and your colleagues in the autumn.

We are counting on your support for visa liberalization in the near future. This is a priority issue for me, because I strongly believe that the only way to build a society based on European values is to have citizens—the true stakeholders of our vision—gain first-hand knowledge of what these values mean in practice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a democratic pillar of the Western Balkans, Serbia is working to advance a whole host of regional cooperation initiatives. One is the cross-border fight against organized crime and terrorism—grave threats to peace, stability and democratic development in the region and across the globe. Another is promoting programs of tolerance, inclusiveness and empowerment—for we must work to establish a level playing field for all.

But our broadest initiative centers on values. In the 21st century, we in the Western Balkans must and will work together to overcome problems, not ignore them; make the difficult decisions, not avoid them; and join forces to build a better tomorrow, not scheme against each other in the illusory hope of restoring the mythic glories of the past.

Already, we have accomplished much in a short period of time.

We are working together to guard against the unrestrained exercise of power.

We are working to respect each other as sovereign states and as equal nations—and we are working to embrace the strength of humility and restraint.

We are learning to face the future with a bravery tempered by a moderation too often set to one side in our past.

And we are learning to blend passion with reason and courage and forethought.

We are introducing, in short, the tradition of European integration and the European practice of reconciliation.

This brings me to the Hague—more specifically, to the Government of Serbia's clear political will to fully cooperate with the ICTY.

All indictees must be located, they all must be arrested, and they all must be extradited.

I think nothing else shows as clearly the drive and determination with which we are pursuing our European future.

And I think nothing else shows as clearly the fundamental break with the 1990s that Serbia as a society has made.

Encouragingly, in every country throughout the region, national elections are no longer being won by dangerous extremists, but by parties whose explicit aim is to consolidate the European idea of democracy, the institutions that flow from it, the cooperation they entail, and the values that are its foundation.

Something in the Western Balkans has changed. Something profound has changed. The tide has turned.

Distinguished MEPs,

Democracy is about equality, openness, pluralism and prosperity. It's not a value-neutral, mechanical process, but something higher. Our model of democracy is about a joint future held together by common values. It's about human beings trying to justly live purposeful, noble lives. And it's about respecting our common European heritage—an integral part of which is the active encouragement of diversity as a source of strength and a force for greater cohesion.

The coming into force of CEFTA—the region's free trade accord—in January this year, speaks directly to the point. The goal is simple yet revolutionary for our post-conflict region: to facilitate regional trade liberalization and accelerate growth

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For CEFTA is the best preparation for joining the common European market. Through an increase in competition, we believe that our economies will
, in time,
stand a better chance of competing
with the more developed European economies.

By raising the standard, by continuing down the path of economic reform, we can walk down the parallel path of democratic consolidation with greater ease and confidence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The recent pace of regional transformation is breathtaking. And yet, all this could come to naught if we are not careful.

If we don't work together to solve the central outstanding regional issue before us all—the future status of Kosovo—all our recent success, everything so many have worked so hard to accomplish, could come apart at the seams.

An imposed solution is not sustainable—for it would only sow the seed of the next conflict.

Should independence be imposed against the will of the democratic leadership of Serbia, it would create a panoply of ethnic and sectarian problems. The Kosovo precedent would not just affect the Western Balkans. Throughout the world, existing conflicts could escalate, frozen conflicts could reignite, and new ones could be instigated.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What I want to make absolutely clear is that Belgrade will spare no effort in searching for a balanced solution. No one should underestimate our capacity and readiness to reach a historic compromise.

There is still time to pull away from the abyss' edge—for a window of opportunity has been opened. If real negotiations take place in the near future, then I sincerely believe that a compromise, mutually acceptable, truly European solution, to the question of the future status of Kosovo can be reached.

Such a solution must respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia, while at the same time enable our ethnic-Albanian citizens in Kosovo to satisfy their legitimate demand for substantial self-governance.

The solution must avoid, at all costs, an outcome that produces winners and losers in a region where revenge for perceived wrongs and losses has been a constant factor of instability.

Rather, the way forward must embrace a creative approach, because where there is no creativity, there is no vision. Europe itself is the product of a grand vision, of a grand idea, brought into existence through political steps achieved with patience and through consensus.

As in all important things, I believe that with patience, opportunities will come. And they will multiply as they are seized, as we work to make our own future, together.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying that it gives me great pleasure to express my deep appreciation to the European Parliament for supporting the EU membership perspective of the Republic of Serbia and all the Western Balkans.

Unmistakably, our place is in the European Union. Accession is our fundamental priority.

For Serbia, the EU integration process and the search for a compromise solution to the future status of Kosovo are separate issues. They should be treated as such. For in no way can Serbia accept a choice between the EU and Kosovo.

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Standing here before you—having spoken of the achievements we have made, the cooperation we have fostered, the challenges before us, and the progress still to come—I reflect on the fact that none of this could have been possible even a few years ago. But the tide has indeed turned.

The great Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla wrote in the margins of a notebook that “throughout space there is energy. The future will be ours when man succeeds in attaching his machinery to the very wheelwork of nature.”

I say that future is now. I say the European hour of the Balkans is upon us.

So let us harness the energy around us, tame it to suit our noble purpose, strengthen our resolve, and together move the region strongly towards its future in the machinery that is Europe.

Thank you for your attention.