

Excellencies,

Dear Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I flew to Israel yesterday, I went to the Jewish cemetery in Zemun, a suburb of Belgrade and an old center of Jewish life in the Balkans, to pay my respects to the grandparents of Theodor Herzl, who are buried there. As I walked back to my car, I was reminded of Yehuda Alkalai, one of the major precursors of Zionism, who was rabbi of Zemun and a good friend of Simon Herzl, the grandfather.

Their lives—and Jewish life in Serbia more generally—was and remains, marked by a remarkable level of inclusion. Starting to immigrate to what is today Serbia in the late Middle Ages, Jews formed part of a pluralistic society that got more stable, secure and prosperous over time. Full emancipation came in the 19th century, as Serbia regained its independence from the Ottoman Empire. Jewish life began to thrive, as Serbia itself began to thrive—as antisemitism remained largely absent. Jews from Serbia fought valiantly in the two Balkan Wars, and in the First World War. And Jews such as Geca Kon—the most influential bookseller and publisher in my country between the two world wars—also helped to bring Serbia back into the cultural mainstream of Europe.

And then came the Shoah. With unmatched ferocity, Hitler systematically set out to destroy all traces of Jewish life in our occupied homeland. Many of the Jews able to escape the onslaught of the Nazis joined the Partizans, my country’s anti-Fascist resistance movement, eventually participating in the liberation of Belgrade and other parts of the country, including the Belgrader Moshe Piyade, a member of Tito’s wartime inner circle, and later Vice President and Speaker of the Federal Assembly.

After the Second World War, my country was the third in the world to recognize the State of Israel, immediately giving the option to all 15,000 surviving Jews to emigrate to Israel, which a vast majority proceeded to do. And my country, from 1956 until 1967, contributed a greater number of soldiers to the United Nations Emergency Force in the Sinai than any other, helping to keep the peace for more than a decade, when peace was what Israel needed most to accelerate its socio-economic development and consolidate its democratic gains.

I say this to you today because I want to reassure you of my personal commitment to keep building, to further strengthen and deepen, comprehensive diplomatic, political, economic and cultural ties with the State of Israel. This is an important element of our foreign policy. I am proud to single out the presence of my close associate, Mr. Mirko Stefanovic, currently the Secretary-General of the Ministry and my country’s former ambassador to Israel. He is the son of a survivor of Auschwitz, and I am the grandson of a survivor of Dachau and Matthaussen.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The main theatre in which world politics was conducted in the 20th century was Europe. And its central characteristic was conflict and war, suspicion and mistrust. From the Great War and the October Revolution to the Spanish Civil War, from the rise of Hitler and World War Two, to the Cold War and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, a zero-sum, adversarial approach to power politics reigned supreme for much of the last hundred years.

The dangerous European model of power politics led to a plethora of bloody conflicts outside of the Old Continent, but almost all ought to be viewed through the prism of the clash of ideologies that was predominantly taking place within its boundaries. Places like Korea, Vietnam, and much of the rest of Southeast Asia, Central and Latin America, including Cuba, as well as the terrible legacy of a large part of post-colonial misrule in Africa, remind us all of the tragedy of proxy wars, as do many of the conflicts in the Middle East that took place in the second half of the “century of total war”, as Raymond Aron famously put it.

Indeed, man’s inhumanity to man reached its apex in the 20th century—with its gas chambers, Red Terrors, trench warfare, and threats of nuclear annihilation. Human life was never quite as cheap as it was then.

And even the truly amazing accomplishment that is the European Union—with its historic capacity to defeat the divisions that plagued the continent for more than a millennia, while building sustainable prosperity for those that reside within its expanding boundaries—would not likely have come to pass had the disaster not been so complete.

In short, Europe was the area of focus in the quest for peace in the 20th century. And it took a mighty long time—and cost tens of millions of lives—to achieve it.

Well, I believe that in *our* century, the Greater Middle East will be the ultimate theatre of significance in the quest for a better global tomorrow.

And I therefore believe that Israel stands at the very heart of the attempt to forge a 21st-century compact of peace, security and prosperity. That is why the Republic of Serbia proudly stands shoulder to shoulder with this country and all other peacemakers in fully supporting the efforts of the Quartet. And we wholeheartedly welcome the Annapolis initiative to renew the mission of a comprehensive solution acceptable to the stakeholders, and verifiable in the Security Council.

For we believe that the key to peace lies in embracing the values of democracy—values that the State of Israel enshrined in its Basic Laws, that it upheld in the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, and that it continues to advocate in its efforts to find a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian issue.

And that is why Serbia holds a firm view that within the sphere of these universal values, terrorism has no place. For it is not, and can never be, a legitimate means of resolving political problems. Whatever the eventual solution to the Middle East peace process, it must be agreed to by political leaders through a process of negotiation that leads to a mutually-acceptable solution—not by terrorists that reject the very legitimacy, the very existence, of the other side. To paraphrase one of your former prime ministers, peace will only come to the Middle East when each side starts to love its own children more than it hates those of its adversaries.

The way forward is fraught with peril. But failure to engage—failure to try to secure a lasting, just peace in the Middle East—is a prescription for a disastrous global future. All the gains the world has made, all the potential still left to be uncovered, can come to naught. We must work together by combining our strengths in order to ensure the survival of all that we have worked so hard to build. All of it—future prosperity, peace, reconciliation, democratic consolidation—all of it rests on our success to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to quote some words to you—words that will serve as the paradigm of the main portion of the remarks I want to make today.

“Any deal that gets done has to be agreed on by the parties. In other words, this country can’t impose its vision on the two parties. If that happens, then there’s not going to be a deal that will last. Our job is to facilitate the discussions—is to make sure that they stay on track. That there is a focused effort. But we can’t dictate the results.”

So said the President of the United States less than a month ago. The context, of course, was the Annapolis Process. And while I want to stress that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is different from other challenges to the international system, there are a few similarities—similarities of principle—that I want to highlight as I discuss the most important issue facing Serbia today, the future status of Kosovo and Metohija, our southern province under United Nations administration since June 1999.

For as long as anyone can remember, Kosovo has been multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional. And for as long as anyone has been paying attention, one group has dominated the others. Right now, our province’s Albanians dominate the Serbs that remain after the waves of orchestrated violence in 1999 and 2004 designed to expulse our community from Kosovo. Before that, the Serbs dominated the Albanians. A few years prior, again, the Albanians dominated the Serbs. And so on and so forth—all the way back. It’s as if a social wall of separation, of prejudice, between the communities was erected many centuries ago, held together with a glue whose key ingredient was oppression. And we believe the only way to tear down that wall—the final wall in Europe—is to do it together, to agree on a way forward, by finding creative ways to combine the arguments both sides are making.

One party—Serbia—says, international law is on our side. And we think of it as the cradle of our civilization: Kosovo is like our Jerusalem. The other party says, we the Kosovo Albanians are in the majority, and recent history, in which you were the bad-guys, teaches us that we cannot live

together. Serbia replies by saying that the villain who persecuted you, Slobodan Milosevic, is dead, and do not forget that we overthrew his dictatorial regime, sending him and his cronies to the Hague Tribunal to face justice. We are a European democracy. We have embraced the values that bind us to one another as never before in our history. We are committed to full reconciliation. And we are prepared, more than ever before, to extend our flexibility on the traditional definition of sovereignty, in order to reach an agreement with you, the Kosovo Albanians.

We are willing to narrow it so as to ensure that Kosovo has the broadest possible autonomy one can imagine, while remaining with Serbia under a common sovereign roof.

For we have no interest in ruling over the Kosovo Albanian community: we do not want to tax them, nor to police them, nor to have their judicial or their educational systems re-integrated into ours. Our currency does not have to have a presence in Kosovo. Our military would not have to be there, either. And we would not interfere with their relationship with international financial organizations; with them having separate membership in international sporting federations; or with them having some sort of representation abroad.

And how has Pristina responded? At the end of the latest round of negotiations held under the auspices of the Contact Group Troika a few weeks ago, the province’s prime minister, Agim Ceku, said flat out that the Kosovo Albanians do not want to negotiate status. They don’t want to negotiate—full stop. And they never did, he stated. Independence is the only option—the consequences be damned. You know this tactic, don’t you? You’ve heard it used against you so many times—“What’s mine is mine, what’s yours is negotiable”?

Such a worldview is unacceptable to Serbia. As Golda Meir said, you cannot shake hands with someone whose fist is clenched. Unfortunately, some actors in the international community support Pristina’s maximalist position. They support the view that imposing Kosovo’s independence on Serbia and the Western Balkans will produce a secure and viable peace—that it will help accelerate the entire region’s journey toward full membership in the European Union.

Serbia believes that the opposite would likely happen. For imposing an outcome that is fundamentally at odds with our vital interests could fundamentally destabilize Serbian democracy. Our democratic capacity to continue with the reforms necessary to keep us on the EU membership track—our central strategic priority—would be pressured close to the breaking point.

And because Serbia is the pivot country of the Western Balkans, the regional spill-over effect to imposed independence would not be negligible: for the geopolitical dynamic of the Western Balkans is such that what negatively affects one country adversely affects events beyond its borders. Throughout the region, stability would not take root, democracy would be undermined, prosperity would remain illusive, and the legitimacy of borders would be called into question.

Why is that? Because the imposed independence of Kosovo is nothing other than the partition of an internationally-recognized, democratic, state—Serbia. Partitioning my country could call into question a fundamental tenet of international relations that revolves around the United Nations Charter and the continuing legitimacy of the Security Council—reinforced in Europe through the Helsinki Final Act—by setting a precedent that allows for any country to be partitioned without its consent.

And we all know that there are dozens of Kosovo-s throughout the world, just waiting for secession to be legitimized, to be rendered an acceptable norm. Many existing conflicts could escalate, frozen conflicts could reignite, and new ones could be instigated.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some say that Kosovo is a unique case, but I simply don’t believe that’s true. An anchor of the international system would be cut away—despite all attempts to claim otherwise. For precedents cannot be announced or denied, they just happen.

The claim that Kosovo is a unique case rests on the assertion that a *uniquely* tyrannical regime ruthlessly oppressed a minority and denied them human rights. But there is nothing unique about Milosevic’s crimes in the recent annals of human history. Think only of Darfur, or Rwanda, or the case of the Kurds in Iraq.

There is no doubt that Saddam’s crimes against the Kurdish minority, for example, were truly

atrocious. But encouraging the forcible partition of Iraq does not advance the stability of the region, and therefore is not in the interest of any responsible stakeholder to support it. And that’s why no country has done so.

Now of course, one could say that the Middle East is not the Western Balkans, and that Iraq is not Serbia. But the parallels are striking and I think they deserve our consideration.

For in the 21st century, geo-strategic priorities should not be sacrificed on the altars of communal aspirations and political expediency.

And that is why in the case of Kosovo’s future status, the only truly workable solution is a compromise, negotiated one. It is . . .

- a solution that advances the EU membership prospects of the *entire region*;

- a solution which promotes the consolidation of democratic values and institutions in the Western Balkans;

- a solution that pushes the region beyond the point of no reversal, and away from the illusory nationalist temptations of the recent past;

- and a solution that advances the economic transformation of the Western Balkans, and the security architecture of all of Europe.

How do we get there? How do we achieve a sustainable solution, and rip out for good the seed of future conflicts in the Western Balkans?

We do so by creating an environment in which a historical compromise settlement between Serbs and Albanians could be crafted.

That means that a symmetrical set of incentives for both sides to reach a negotiated, mutually-acceptable agreement, must be put on the table.

And it means that those who threaten the use of violence if their extremist demands are not met must be sidelined, not granted a favored seat at the table, and not given political support.

So far, that has not happened. Because so far, the status process has suffered from a fatal flaw—constant public messaging by some external actors which basically announced that the province’s independence would be imposed if no agreement was reached by a pre-set deadline.

In effect, the Kosovo Albanians were told that they would get everything they wanted if they *did n’t* compromise—hardly the sort of inducement that could lead to a negotiated settlement, wouldn’t you say?

What is urgently needed therefore, is a process that is analogous to the Bush principles I referred to a moment ago: that the international community, that is, the Security Council, act as a good-faith facilitator in getting the parties to agree to a settlement, but not to dictate the results by imposing a one-sided outcome.

For only a solution that is acceptable to both sides can be viable, sustainable, and lasting. And that means that the way forward lies in embracing principles such as compromise, concession,

and consensus-building, by engaging in a process of deliberate, patient, and sustained negotiations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A man I deeply admire, your former Foreign Minister, Abba Eban, once said that “history teaches us that men and nations behave wisely only once they have exhausted all other alternatives”, adding that “tragedy is not what men suffer but what they miss.”

Well, the alternatives to a negotiated peace in the Western Balkans have been tried, and all they produced was more violence. For we Serbs and Albanians have pretty much never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

And so here we are, on the brink of potential disaster, but also, paradoxically, on the threshold of a truly European renewal of not only Serbia, but all the Western Balkans. All we ask is for a genuine chance to replace the bias of confrontation with the bias of agreement—to open avenues to solutions instead of putting up obstacles to peace.

We say to the Kosovo Albanians: let us listen to each other in order to understand, rather than reject without hearing. For I believe that there is room in a European, democratic Serbia for all identities to be affirmed, for all aspirations to be respected, and for all views to be pursued.

Let me end with the words of Yitzhak Rabin, the great statesman and the father of a very dear friend of mine. Speaking in Oslo in 1994 on the occasion of having received the Nobel Peace Prize, Rabin spoke of the “one universal message which can embrace the entire world, one precept which can be common to different regimes, to races which bear no resemblance, to cultures that are alien to one another. It is a message,” he added, “which the Jewish people has carried for thousands of years, the message found in the Book of Books: VE NIŠ-MARTEM | ME-OD

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—therefore take good heed of yourselves—or, in contemporary terms, the message of the sanctity of life.” And for Rabin, as for all of us, that means that, in his words, “there is only one radical means for sanctifying human life. The one radical solution is a real peace.”

My friends, I hope you agree that the time for a peaceful, enduring settlement to Kosovo’s future status has come, and we must do everything in our power to secure it. We must do everything in our power to cultivate it, to watch it bloom, to help it prosper, to make it sustainable and durable. We must do everything in our power to make it happen, because we believe in the sanctity of life, and of the sanctity of life of the generations to come.

If we truly believe in the sanctity of life, then let that be the starting point from which we should begin our further journey towards the horizon of peace, discerning in the fading darkness the vision of a better and brighter dawn.

Thank you.