

Monday, 19 November 2007.

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My Lords,

Distinguished Members of Parliament,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A mural painted by the British artist Sigismund Goetze in the immediate aftermath of the Great War hangs steps from the Foreign Secretary's office. It is called “Britannia Pacificatrix.” In the middle of the panel, Britannia encloses within the folds of its royal mantle three figures; the central one of which is Serbia. Emerging from the horrors of war in which more than one quarter of her population perished, Serbia lies draped in her battle-weary flag, a sort of personification of the small nation with a wounded soul.

Stopping to view this mural on the way out from a meeting with the Foreign Secretary two months ago, I found myself recalling the words spoken by Winston Churchill in April 1941 upon hearing of the decision—by what he termed a “valiant race”—to bravely fight Hitler, instead of ignobly submitting to a Pact with him. Churchill said: “that nation has recovered its soul.”

That mural and the words of Churchill brought together in one moment a sense of reminiscence about the partnership our two countries had forged in two World Wars—a partnership consecrated with the blood of those who fought on numerous fronts in common cause during the 20th century. Together with the other defeators of Fascism, we went on to help found the United Nations in San Francisco. And then, in the first, hardest years of recovery from the Nazi occupation, as Stalin sought to consolidate his grip in Eastern Europe, my country had the courage to stand up and say no. And, with international support, including Britain's, we preserved our sovereignty throughout the Cold War.

In 1989, great changes again came to Europe: the Iron Curtain withered away, and the old divides came down. Much of Europe entered a new era of freedom, stability, and prosperity. The tragic exception was the Western Balkans, which plunged into civil war and was delayed from enjoying the benefits of the peace that spread across the European continent. That delay began to be overcome in October 5th 2000, on the occasion of the democratic overthrow of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. On that day, Serbia once more recovered its soul, and re-entered the mainstream of a Europe dedicated to cementing the democratic changes made in 1989.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A democratic Serbia today shares with Britain, and the rest of Europe, a firm belief in the values of democracy. These values frame our behavior and our way of thinking; they bring out our humanity—they allow what binds us together to come to the surface of our nature. And thus enable the ennoblement of humankind to take shape.

In other words, we share an overall vision about the central place of democracy in the Europe of the 21st century. And we share the view that Europe is, as Foreign Secretary Miliband said in Bruges, “a model power”, representing a “triumph of shared values ... that respect our separate, [national] identities and traditions.”

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And we are dedicated to move rapidly toward full European Union membership. Indeed, a fortnight ago, Serbia initiated the Stabilization and Association Agreement in Brussels, and we expect to sign it in the next few weeks, which would put us on schedule to become an official EU membership candidate by the end of 2008.

We are also committed to actively participate in the NATO Partnership for Peace program.

Furthermore, we are devoted to completing regional reconciliation efforts, as demonstrated by the turning-over of 42 Hague indictees, including four former presidents, one former speaker of parliament, one former prime minister, and three former chiefs of the general staff. Let there be no doubt, we remain determined to locate, arrest, and hand-over the few Hague indictees still at large.

In sum, the Republic of Serbia is doing everything in its power to pursue policies that will never again lead to war and misery for our people, for *all* our citizens, and for our whole region.

We’re doing all this because we know what it means to suffer a generational setback. We know the price of economic sanctions, hyperinflation, international isolation, civil war, bombing, and the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs. We know it because we lived it. That is why we are working hard to ensure that our children grow up in a country free of privation and extremism. It’s because we are passionate about Serbia’s European future, and because we are clear-sighted about the work that remains to be accomplished for our vision to become a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Precisely because we have done almost everything right since we peacefully overthrew Milosevic in October 2000, the possibility of an estrangement between our two democracies is deeply regretful—especially to those of us who risked our lives to bring to an end the dictatorship central to Balkan nightmare of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it may be unavoidable, for this possible rift is rooted in a profound tactical disagreement on how to overcome the current impasse in the efforts to arrive at a solution to the future status of Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia’s southern province under United Nations administration since June 1999.

The precise nature of the disagreement centers on the importance placed on the view that there is nothing more important than reaching a solution acceptable to all. In other words, should Kosovo be solved in the 21st-century European manner, that is, through compromise, concession, and consensus-building among all the stakeholders? Or should another logic animate the process—one that allows for the imposition of an outcome on the parties?

I believe that the answer lies in thinking through what is best for the region as a whole, what best advances the cause of full European membership for the entire Western Balkans. Only such a solution would propel the region forward past the point of no reversal and away from the illusory nationalist temptations of the recent past.

The way forward lies in working together to *overcome the differences* between the parties, so that all the countries of the Western Balkans end up on the same side. The side of political stability—the side of Europe, its democratic values, its economic prosperity, and its social responsibilities.

Pursuing all other courses of action would reverse the tremendous progress that has been made in Serbia. And if Serbia falters, if we plunge back into a mindset reminiscent of our recent past, if our democracy suffers a fatal, generational blow, so will the rest of the Western Balkans—for Serbia is the pivotal country of the region. Throughout the region, stability would not take root, democracy would be undermined, the legitimacy of borders would be called into question, and prosperity would remain illusive.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We mustn't sacrifice this ultimate geo-strategic priority of the Western Balkans—accelerated EU accession for all—on the altar of communal aspirations.

And yet there are some—in Britain and in other countries—who advocate pursuing policies that will not lead to a solution for Kosovo's future status that advances the European membership perspective of the Western Balkans. And I want to say to them frankly that imposing an outcome fundamentally detrimental to one side's democratic survival will vitally affect the future of the region as a whole.

Let me summarize what Belgrade and Pristina were told at the onset of this round of the status negotiations.

It was publicly stated that the province's independence will be imposed if no agreement is reached by December 10th. And that has put us at an impasse, for a hard deadline strongly favours the interests of one side: the Kosovo Albanians.

Put yourself in their shoes: with a set deadline and a default position that fulfils its maximalist demands, what incentive does Pristina have to negotiate in good faith? Why not just sit back, appear engaged, and simply wait out the clock?

The way out of this looming crisis lies in viewing the December 10th deadline as a marker for assessing progress, and little more. By re-defining the significance of this date, an environment would be created—for the first time since the future status process began—in which an historical settlement could be crafted.

How so? Because for the first time, a symmetrical set of incentives to reach a compromise, mutually-acceptable agreement, would be on offer to both sides: one that says, in the spirit of 21st-century Europe: “keep at it until you concur.” As a German parliamentarian said to me a few days ago, “isn’t it better to have more time than to have more trouble?”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Arriving at a compromise solution would also prevent calling into question a fundamental tenet of the international system—reinforced in Europe through the Helsinki Final Act—by setting a

precedent that allows for any country to be partitioned without its consent. For let us not deceive ourselves, the imposition of the independence of Kosovo is nothing other than the forced partition of Serbia.

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. Throughout the world, existing conflicts could escalate, frozen conflicts could reignite, and new ones could be instigated.

In truth, then, resolving Kosovo’s future status unilaterally, without the consent of all stakeholders, is not just about preserving Serbian democracy and the European future of the Western Balkans. It’s also about preserving the international system, predicated on the observance of a set of rules—rules meant to maintain predictability of action.

And Britain, with its unique position in the world and its pivotal role in Europe, must come to see the dangers inherent in the pursuit of a policy that could undermine the renewal of global institutions designed to support, as Prime Minister Brown said during his first Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech, a new, “shared international endeavor.” For no country that has dedicated itself to the noble cause of contributing to a “better, 21st-century way of delivering peace and prosperity”—the Prime Minister’s words again—should undertake actions that clearly contravene international law. The risks are simply too high.

In the end, I want to share with you Serbia’s offer to Kosovo Albanians—a fair, and just compromise offer designed to help fulfill the entire region’s European destiny. An offer that facilitates the development of the province, while strengthening the democracies of all the other regional actors in the process. We offer a uniquely crafted partnership under a common sovereign roof: institutionally unrestrained autonomy—extraordinarily broad powers of self-governance—that at the same time preserves our sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Albanian response has not been positive. Some in Pristina have even threatened violence against us, if we don’t accept their independence *Diktat*. The moment is difficult, for, to paraphrase Karl Popper: “It is hard to conduct a negotiation with someone who prefers shooting you to being engaged by you.” But again, I say, the European way to overcome the intransigence of one side is to remove the factors that enable that intransigence to flourish—in this case, the commitment to impose independence after the passage of an arbitrary deadline.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have spoken about the fracturing bond between our two countries and how to mend it, about the clash between Europe’s values and its policies and how to overcome it, about the future of the Western Balkans and how to secure it, and about our shared commitment to the international system and how to strengthen it. All this and more is at stake with Kosovo.

In conclusion I want to appeal to your sense of fair play, and your sense of honour. Our nation, like yours, is ancient, and our convictions are ancient. And Kosovo is the cradle of our civilization, the beating heart of our “valiant race.” I ask you not to discount the symbolic centrality of Kosovo for the Serbian people and for our democracy. I ask you to help us reach a compromise solution that preserves our sovereignty, while giving the Kosovo Albanians a real chance to govern their own affairs. They have gone through many tribulations, and they do deserve an opportunity to prosper. But this opportunity cannot come at the price of destabilizing the region and humiliating Serbia.

Know that if you do choose to recognize Kosovo—if you choose to forcibly partition Serbia—you will have de-legitimized democracy in the eyes of the Serbian people. It will be a terrible blow. And not one that we will recover from easily.

So I ask you to be patient, and to be visionary. To help Serbia and the Western Balkans preserve what we have built. To “bring to pass that the savage works of war may be stilled to rest throughout all seas and lands,” as Lucretius so eloquently put it. So we can one day soon take our rightful place at the table of Europe.

Thank you for your attention. I stand ready to hear your comments.