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Mr. President,

Honorable Members,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that in the next generation or so, the progress of Europe will revolve around two fundamental political issues. The first concerns the institutional reforms of the EU itself. Were Serbia a member of the EU, it would be appropriate for me to take part in this debate. Unfortunately, we have not yet acceded to the Union, so I will leave this issue in the hands of my EU colleagues.

This evening I would rather concentrate on the second fundamental issue: Europe's place in the world.

The question can be put in the following way: will the EU limit itself to the status of a marginal geopolitical player—by continuing to rely on the application of soft power absent strategic forethought? Or will it choose to play a more active role on the world stage?

Provided that Transatlantic ties are harmonized, I believe that the EU must focus on the belt of nations to its east and south-east—in particular, on the three pivot countries in the greater European space: Ukraine, Turkey, and Serbia.

How the EU chooses to interact with the first two will almost certainly define its sway in Eurasia and the Greater Middle East. And the decision about whether Europe will rapidly extend membership to Serbia will definitively affect the future of the entire Western Balkans, which I believe is vital to the consolidation of European security.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I turn first to Ukraine. As the recent energy crisis demonstrated, Europe has a strategic interest in the stability of this country.

The way in which the EU engages with Ukraine will strongly affect the overall tone of its relationship with its greatest neighbor, the Russian Federation.

This issue is as complicated as it is significant. It would take me too far off course to discuss it at length. Suffice it to say that it is of permanent importance for the EU to develop a healthy relationship with Moscow. Ensuring the combination of a stable Ukraine and an un-antagonized Russia is both a security and economic imperative for the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come to Turkey. Situated at the crossroads of two great civilizations, Turkey can easily become the EU's strategic capacity multiplier for influence in the Greater Middle East.

By fully embracing Turkey—a Muslim democratic nation, with footholds in Europe and Asia Minor—the EU would accomplish two essential things.

Firstly, it would find itself standing at the vanguard of forging a 21st-century compact of peace and security in that part of the world.

And secondly, it would transform the EU from being perceived as a partisan actor in the drama, to an honest broker in the Greater Middle East.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The third pivotal country I want to discuss is my own. I do not aspire to put Serbia in the same category of significance as Ukraine or Turkey. But I would like to make the case for a similar level of importance for these three theatres—from the strategic perspective of the European Union.

Let me start by quoting the words of Carl Bildt, the Swedish foreign minister and an old Balkan hand. “The future of Serbia is obviously key to the future of the wider region. A stable Serbia will project stability in the region—an unstable one will obviously project the reverse. Its European integration is the only lasting guarantee of its peace and its prosperity.”

In other words, Serbia is the indispensable anchor of the Western Balkans, uniquely placed to

act as the region's EU accession accelerator.

Europe mustn't contemplate an exit strategy when it comes to Serbia. Should we begin to hedge our bets on enlargement in the Western Balkans, we would end up devoting more resources to managing occasional flare-ups and gathering crises, than those that will have to be spent on completing the integration process. Hands-on engagement is the only way forward.

Simply put, the EU will be safer if the Western Balkans, with Serbia at its center, enters the House of Europe, instead of remaining bitterly at its gates.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The citizens of Serbia have time and again demonstrated their commitment to join the European Union. All elections held since the democratic revolution of October 5th, 2000, have returned reformist majorities.

This Government of Serbia has made it clear that European accession is our central strategic priority.

We have an unprecedented opportunity. It mustn't be squandered. The European Union is the grandest and most successful peace project in history. It has reconciled age-old adversaries through the rejection of hegemonic ambitions of individual states, in favor of a binding commitment to overcome disagreements by democratic means.

Serbia feels an acute sense of belonging to this kind of Europe.

We deem that our heritage, our culture, our beliefs, and our history bind us to a constellation of nations that have come to instill what Winston Churchill once called "a sense of enlarged patriotism," rooted in a common set of values deeply held and widely shared.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

None of us would be well-served by opting to close our eyes to the challenges that still remain. The primary one is the issue of Kosovo.

A year ago tomorrow, the ethnic-Albanian authorities of Serbia's southern province of Kosovo and Metohija unilaterally declared independence from my country—in direct violation of the basic tenets and principles of international law: the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999), as well as the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, and numerous other binding covenants that guarantee Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

At the time, we stated clearly that Serbia would never recognize, under any circumstances, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence—or UDI. This position is enshrined in our constitution, and will not change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UDI has called into question the very nature of the international system, setting a ready-made precedent that any number of ethnic minorities with a grievance against their capitals could use.

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.

Now, we have heard the argument that Kosovo's UDI is not a dangerous precedent for the international community, because it is *sui generis*—a unique case.

But the truth is, this comes down to saying that Kosovo is an exception to international law—that Kosovo should stand beyond the rules that govern the behavior of the international community.

Well, let me be blunt: I don't believe that anyone should permit himself the right to declare such exceptions.

Consider the consequences should a group of countries somewhere else in the world proclaim another exception to international law, in the name of supporting somebody else's separatism.

That's why Serbia's position has remained consistent: the only way to avoid illegitimately challenging the territorial integrity of *any* UN member State, is for the world community to work constructively together to solve this issue through international institutions of indisputable and universal legitimacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia has responded to Kosovo's UDI with utmost responsibility and restraint.

From the very onset of this grave crisis, Serbia ruled out the use of force. And we did not exercise other unilateral options, such as the imposition of economic sanctions, against our breakaway province.

Instead, we opted for a peaceful and diplomatic approach—the result of which is that a vast majority of UN member States, including member countries of the EU, have refrained from recognizing Kosovo’s UDI. They have continued to abide by their obligations to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia.

Our carefully measured response to UDI recognitions ensured that the political fallout with those countries was largely contained. As a result, our bilateral relations have not suffered substantially.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kosovo’s ethnic-Albanian authorities chose to unilaterally declare independence from Serbia after walking away from the negotiating table.

They believed that if they walked away, the path to securing independence would open up before them. They believed it, because that's what they were told. And they believed it because an artificial deadline on the talks was affirmed from the outside after which, if no compromise solution was reached, Kosovo's independence would be imposed.

Under such circumstances, a negotiated solution was never a realistic option. With a fixed deadline and a default position that fulfilled their maximalist demands, what incentive did Kosovo's ethnic Albanians have to negotiate with Serbia in good faith? All they had to do was to pretend to engage in a process pre-determined to fail, and wait out the clock.

Those who opted to support the act of UDI disagreed with Serbia and a majority of the international community on the importance of arriving at a solution acceptable to all. In other words, it came down to asking, "should Kosovo be solved in the 21st-century European manner, that is, through compromise, concession and consensus-building amongst all the stakeholders? Or should another logic animate the process—one that allows for the imposition of a one-sided outcome?"

The first alternative is about trying to overcome differences. The second is about entrenching them. Serbia's position has always been to underscore the dangers of sacrificing the regional geo-strategic priorities of all, on the altar of the communal aspirations of one.

This is a reason why we turned to the law. Serbia's decision to contest the Kosovo issue at the International Court of Justice—by prevailing in the United Nations General Assembly—constitutes a paradigm shift in favor of peace in the Western Balkans.

At Serbia's initiative, 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, for the first time in the history of our region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Court will spend well over a year deliberating the issue. Until it issues its advisory opinion on whether UDI violates international law, we have a responsibility to our citizens to constructively engage on a whole host of practical issues, while continuing to respect each other's red lines.

Common sense and the present circumstances dictate that we should emphasize what brings us closer together, instead of what can drive us apart. The European future of the Western Balkans depends on our ability to compartmentalize our differences.

Once the International Court of Justice hands down its decision, the situation will be clearer. In all likelihood, the Court will hold that Kosovo's UDI is not compatible with international law. One result of such a decision will be the cessation of recognitions. Another will be the denial of membership in multilateral institutions to the authorities in Pristina.

Two options would then present themselves: obstinacy or concession. The first would lead to the perpetuation of Kosovo's legal, political and economic limbo—at enormous cost to everyone.

The second would lead to the revisiting of Kosovo's future status. For the first time ever, a situation would be created in which a symmetric set of incentives would be put before the stakeholders—one that would encourage everyone at the table to seek a solution acceptable to all.

Only such a solution can be viable, sustainable, and lasting. And *only* such a solution can contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability in the Western Balkans—the ultimate prize of our common endeavor to come.

Honorable Members,

I leave you with the words of Edmund Burke: “All acts of Government—indeed, every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act—is founded on compromise and negotiation.”

To enjoy the benefits of the solution to come—for Kosovo and the rest of Serbia, and for the European future of the Western Balkans—we must compromise, and we must negotiate. In good faith, resulting in no winners and losers. In a way that puts the welfare and the stability of the entire region in the center of the process. In a way that delivers the region past the point of no return. And in a way that contributes to the consolidation of the security architecture of all of Europe.

Thank you.