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Dear Franco,

Respected Admiral,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be a part of the celebration marking 130 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries, formally established in 1879.

That historical event was foreshadowed one year earlier, in 1878, when Serbia's Prince Milan Obrenovic sent a diplomatic mission to Rome in order to officially congratulate King Umberto I upon his assumption of the Italian throne, as well as to seek Italy's support for the Serbian position at the forthcoming Congress of Berlin.

To the lasting advantage of our two peoples, it was enthusiastically given.

Thanks in part, therefore, to the Italian delegation to the Congress, led by Count Luigi Corti, an understanding was reached that greatly benefited our two countries, while strengthening the cause of peace in Europe.

With strong support from Italy and other Great Powers, the Treaty of Berlin of July 1878 formally recognized the Principality of Serbia as the world's 28th fully sovereign state.

And it set the stage for events we are here to commemorate.

Prince Milan sent his most trusted diplomat and former Prime Minister, Dr. Filip Hristic, to open Serbia's first embassy in Rome, at the very beginning of 1879.

In his inaugural public address, delivered to government ministers and the diplomatic corps later that year, Hristic invoked the visionary statecraft of Garibaldi: "I stand in the young capital of an ancient land as the representative of a young country peopled with an ancient nation. In my short time here I have come to realize how alike we truly are: in temperament, surely, and in ambition; but also in belief that our young states, nursed on the altar of patriotism, will one day come together in a Europe yet to be imagined."

As we all hope, events will one day soon prove true the farsighted nature of what were, in effect, Serbia's words of introduction to the Italian nation.

By the end of the 19th century, Serbia had named honorary consuls in Genoa, Torino, Naples and Palermo, while in 1894, Hristic—then more than 75 years old—returned to Rome to present a list of more than 30,000 Serbian industrialists and businessmen with an active interest in advancing our economic ties.

A few years later, in 1901, the Kingdom of Serbia had decided to open in Rome our nation's first ever Trade Office.

One could even say that Italy was Serbia's first strategic economic partner.

Well, it certainly is today. More than 200 Italian companies, investing about two point four billion euros in Serbia per annum, employ more than 18,000 hard-working citizens of my country.

At President Tadic's initiative, Serbia has institutionalized its ties with Italian regions such as

Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Veneto, Lombardia-Milano, and Piemont. As a result, trade between Italy and Serbia has exponentially increased, helping to advance the President's vision of solidifying the role of Italy as one of Serbia's main bridges to Europe.

A perfect example of what can happen when we work together is the commitment Fiat made last year to a one billion euro investment in Serbia. Together with companies such as Iveco and Magneti-Marelli, the Torino-based giant will work with us to re-energize Serbia's automotive industry.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Italy saw the promise of Serbia when others were far from convinced. So it was at the turn of the 20th century, and so it was about one hundred years later, too, when we signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement—with strong and vocal Italian support. And so it will be in the future, I'm sure of it.

Standing here before you, amongst friends in the capital of the Italian Republic—a country that serves as a vibrant symbol of the success of the European construction—I can say with

conviction that the present political moment is one of hope, driven by Serbia's fundamental commitment to consolidate once and for all the democratic gains we have made since our transition began on October 5th, 2000.

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 keep their appointment with Europe.

Our national commitment to accelerate the pursuit of a course that leads to full membership in the European Union was made in the somber context of the unilateral declaration of independence by the ethnic Albanian authorities of our southern province of Kosovo and Metohija that took place on February 17th, 2008.

Pristina's ethnically-motivated attempt at secession severely tested the resilience of our democracy. We responded to this challenge as any mature and confident nation should: we said no to UDI. We said we will not recognize.

Today, I reaffirm this policy—one that we are confident will contribute to a peaceful, compromise solution of a problem we all must work to solve together.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The central strategic priority of the Republic of Serbia is to join the European Union as soon as possible. With your help and that of other good friends in Europe, in 2009 we can get much nearer to fully achieving our common aim. Together, we can make it Serbia's leap year of European integration.

We can do this by working closely with one another to ensure visa liberalization becomes a reality for the citizens of Serbia.

To its great credit, the Italian Government has understood how important freedom of movement in Europe is for my country. And that is why it has been at the vanguard of the drive to make the right to travel visa-free a reality for all the citizens of the Republic of Serbia. All I can say is thank you, and keep at it. For we have not yet reached the end of our undertaking.

The second way we can work together on advancing Serbia's European perspective in 2009

centers on synergizing our efforts to overcome the recalcitrance of few on un-freezing the Interim Agreement between Serbia and the EU. Together with the vast majority of other EU member States, Italy is in no doubt that Serbia is fully cooperating with the ICTY.

I am grateful for Italy's leadership on this important question, but it is clear that an extra push in 2009 is still required. If we don't seize the moment before us to focus all our efforts on fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria as fast as we can, then I am afraid that the prospect of cementing the gains already made could fall to the wayside.

The third way we can work together on delivering tangible results in 2009 revolves around Serbia's upcoming application for membership in the European Union. We hope that the Council of Ministers will welcome its arrival, and swiftly forward it to the European Commission—tasking it to promptly provide the Council with an *avis* on its merits. With the strong support of dedicated friends, Serbia could achieve Official Candidate Status by the end of the year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What is clear is that in 2009, we need concrete action. We need our allies in Europe to work with us on the achievement of measurable results that bring us much closer to the Gates of Europe.

What I want you to know is that Serbia will devote all available resources to the fulfillment of this crucial strategic goal—through active and sustained engagement with Brussels and EU national capitals, including, of course, Rome. But we cannot do it alone.

I believe we will rise to the occasion in 2009 and help push through a strategic package to start delivering Serbia's European future—because I believe in the power of the friendship we are here to commemorate today; because I believe in the justice of our common aims; and because I believe in the powerful vision of men like Antonio Segni, the signer of the Treaty of Rome on behalf of Italy more than 50 years ago, who once exclaimed: "we must act like men in a rush to fulfill the work of destiny, and at the same time like men who are confidently working for Eternity."

Thank you very much for your attention.