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Your Royal Highnesses,

Fellow Ministers,

Excellencies,

Your Grace,

Dear SUC Members,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not too far east from here, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, the first son of the earliest known Serbian immigrants to the United States was born. The year was 1863.

This little boy—his parents named him Jovan—went on to become a truly amazing man, a man of many firsts. He was the first Serb to be born in the New World. Then, after having been tonsured as a monk and given the name Sebastian, he was ordained a priest in 1892 right here in San Francisco, thereby becoming the first American-born Orthodox priest. Two years later, in 1894, he built and consecrated the first Serbian Orthodox Church in the Americas, in the then booming mining town of Jackson, CA.

Father Sebastian Dabovic later went on to organize Serbian communities across North America, founding the first Serbian churches in Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, etc.—even in far away Douglas, Alaska.

Let me say a few more words about this extraordinary Serb—the first American Serb—before I explain why I have chosen to begin my remarks to you this evening with a discussion about him.

The man our absent friend Bishop Irinej Dobrijevic has called “the father of Serbian Orthodoxy in America”, traveled to Serbia for the first time when he was over 50 years old, in 1917, during the First World War, to serve as a chaplain in the Serbian army. In the 1920s and 1930s, he went back and forth more than a dozen more times, before finally settling in Serbia for good in the mid 1930s. He spent his final years in Zica monastery, where he passed away in 1940. As you know, a few months ago, Father Sebastian Dabovic “returned” to his native land, and was interred within the very church in Jackson, California, he founded more than a century ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Notwithstanding his many accomplishments as a servant of the Church—there is some talk of canonization—I want to focus on Sebastian Dabovic the man, the American Serb.

Here was an individual truly dedicated to his community: the Serbian American community. You could even say he was its founder. Together with others, he built it up, kept it going, and laid a solid foundation for the future. By being actively present at the beginning, by bringing Serbs in America together, by establishing Serbian communities across this vast continent, and by keeping the ties with the homeland strong, he did us all a service that can never be repaid. In a way, his work is the reason we are all gathered here, in San Francisco, as a community. Thanks to his pioneering struggles, the Serbian-American community continues to flourish, to grow, to expand, and to pass on its history to the generations to come.

For more than a hundred years, a critical mass of Serbs in the Americas have chosen—*chosen*—not to fully assimilate, not to be completely absorbed into the melting pot of America. You have *chosen* to remain Serbs, to retain the ties to your homeland. And I want to say to you as clearly as I can that your homeland is grateful to you.

It has not always been easy, for your homeland has not always showed its gratitude to you and your valiant efforts. At the beginning, you were benignly neglected. Later, during communism, the home country saw you more as an opponent than as a partner. Late still, starting in the mid 1980s, false prophets came to your communities and spoke myths to you, painted illusory pictures for you, and made promises to you they could not keep.

They tarnished the image you had of your homeland. And they brought unprecedented misery to their own citizens back in Serbia. Many of you were gravely disillusioned. But all the while, you persevered, and you did not give up. And you kept your identity, helping to ensure your community kept on growing. I admire all of you for that, for it required a lot of effort and sacrifice.

And ultimately, when we really needed you, you helped us with a generosity of spirit rarely seen in the home country at that time. Your solidarity in 1999, and your support in 2000, helped us to overthrow the last dictator of the Balkans.

Again, I say, your homeland is grateful to you.

My Friends,

Since the peaceful overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000—an event “recorded in golden letters in the annals of our history,” as His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Alexander fittingly put it—much has been accomplished, but much remains to be done.

Our young, fledgling democracy has suffered severe setbacks—most notably the assassination of the engine of our democratic changes, Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic.

Perhaps our greatest accomplishment—as a post-conflict and post-communist society

re-establishing its rightful place in the center of the region's affairs—has been not to yield to the dangerous urge to retreat back into self-imposed isolation. In contrast to the past, Serbian democracy faces the challenges head on. We channel our justifiable pride in the past into making and executing plans for the future. A fine example of this new, 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic Serbian spirit is the inspiring work that our Minister for the Diaspora, Milica Cubrilo, has been doing to rebuild bridges between the diaspora and the homeland.

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Friends, in perhaps as few as five years, Serbia will be a member of the European Union. Certainly, the pursuit of this fundamentally important goal is the central priority of the Government of Serbia. The incentives provided by the promise of EU membership will, I am confident, enable us, in the years ahead, to fully consolidate our democratic institutions, reconcile with our neighbors, further develop our economy, bring our living standards up to European levels, and reform our social safety-net.

There is just one more obstacle, one more challenge, to overcome on the road to a secure, prosperous future. And it's a big one. It's so big that it threatens all the gains we have made since democracy was restored. That challenge is the future status of Kosovo and Metohija.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The talks on the future status of our southern province are in a very delicate phase. Our future—and the future of all the Western Balkans—hangs in the balance.

In the time I have left, I would like to provide you with a snapshot of where we are in the future status process, share with you what Serbia has offered to the Kosovo Albanians, and give you my thoughts on where we are headed.

When the United Nations Secretary General appointed former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari as his Special Envoy for the Kosovo future status process, we all hoped that future status talks—leading to a negotiated, compromise settlement—would begin in earnest. But we were disappointed. Over the course of close to 16 months, Mr. Ahtisaari chose to schedule only several hours of direct talks on the one question that truly matters: *the* question of what Kosovo's future status—its legal standing—would actually look like. His Report to the UN recommending “supervised independence” was unacceptable. It not only failed to accurately reflect the substance of the negotiation process on so-called “status-neutral” issues—such as the scope of local powers to Serbian municipalities—but it also failed to responsibly consider the central issue of status itself.

Serbia rejected the Ahtisaari Report's recommendation, and, together with the Contact Group, decided on a new format for negotiations—real, substantive face-to-face negotiations between Serbs and Albanians, facilitated by a Troika composed of senior representatives from the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States. The role of the Troika was

conceived to be that of an honest broker between Belgrade and Pristina—to help us reach a compromise, mutually acceptable solution to Kosovo’s future status—a status that would then be endorsed by the United Nations Security Council.

Three rounds of direct negotiations have been held, but little progress has been made. The reason is not difficult to understand. The Troika set December 10<sup>th</sup> as a deadline for the successful completion of the talks. And some key participants in the process are telling both sides that Kosovo’s independence will be imposed on the parties if no agreement is reached by then.

Now put yourself in Pristina’s shoes. With a set deadline and a default position that fulfills their maximalist demands, what incentive do they have to negotiate in good faith? Why not just sit back, look interested, wait out the clock, and stick around for the mother of all Christmas presents to be delivered at their door?

Serbia’s response has been to say that, paradoxical as it may seem, only the setting of no firm deadlines can concentrate minds in both Belgrade and Pristina to come to a negotiated, mutually-acceptable solution. By re-defining the December 10<sup>th</sup> deadline as a marker for assessing progress—and by embracing the view that there is nothing more important than reaching an agreement acceptable to all—we would create, for the first time, an environment in which a historical deal can be crafted.

Encouragingly, as we approach the deadline, more and more countries involved in the process have understood this line of reasoning. There is a growing awareness of the importance of constructing a more appropriate negotiating framework in which a legitimate deal can be struck.

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I remain cautiously optimistic that the vision, courage, and boldness necessary to forge a historic compromise between Serbs and Albanians is there, just below the surface, waiting to be harnessed. Serbia is ready—truly ready—to be a sincere partner in a peace that brings prosperity to all.

A peace, in other words, that overcomes the differences between us, that enables not just Serbs and Albanians, but all the nations in the Western Balkans, to end up on the same side. The side of Europe and its democratic values. That is why this past September, in New York, President Tadic emphasized the crucial importance of fundamentally transforming the relationship between Serbs and Albanians—from one of historical suspicion and antagonism, to one of 21<sup>st</sup>-century trust and cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The framework of the strategic settlement that we have offered is straightforward. It must fully conform to the principles of international law enshrined in documents such as the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act. This means that the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia must be maintained. But Serbia's offer also recognizes the legitimate right of Kosovo's Albanian community to autonomously administer their own affairs. This is why we have offered them wide-ranging institutional concessions—extraordinarily broad powers of self-governance.

In short, we have offered them a uniquely crafted partnership for the future under one common sovereign roof.

This future must be rooted in a categorical rejection of violence, which must not be present at any stage of the process. Failure to reject violence means denying the credibility, the legitimacy, of the other side in the common quest for peace. It means embracing the view that neither side wins by seeking to maximize narrowly conceived objectives, but we both win by working together to consolidate a shared future.

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I believe that there has never been a more opportune time for Serbs and Albanians to come together, as partners, in peace and reconciliation. I have already alluded to why I think this is the case: the democratic reconstruction of the Western Balkans, and the region's European future.

These two transformative trends—democracy and integration—give us hope. We must harness that hope. And we must embrace the possibilities and the vision that this hope is revealing to those with eyes to see. And we must use the time to come wisely, prudently, and boldly. Our future depends on the success to come.

Dear Friends,

Serbia is dedicated to remain a regional source of stability and security in a time of political transformation.

I leave you with the August 2002 words of Zoran Djindjic to a group representing Serbs from the diaspora. This is what he said: "Since October 5<sup>th</sup>, Serbia has restored her faith, her self-respect, and her dignity. Now you can once more exclaim with pride where your roots are. Our task now is to make life peaceful for everyone in our lands, and we need your help. Your know-how, your experience, and your aspirations can only help us get to the future faster."

That task is before us still. To that end, I congratulate the members of the new Board of Directors on your election. Your homeland looks forward to working with you all. So we can all get to the future faster.

Thank you very much for your attention—for your kind invitation to address you tonight—and for your warm welcome. Thank you for your inspiration. And God bless.