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Respected President and Vice-Presidents of the General Conference,

Director-General Matsuura.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to address the 35th General Conference of UNESCO, and to salute the legacy of our outgoing Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his dedication, his resolve, and his vision.

Our new Director-General-elect is a woman from Southeast Europe who has demonstrated a clear capacity to bridge differences. Her strong leadership will be of great advantage to us all.

With ambassador Bokova at the helm of our Organization, we are confident that UNESCO will confirm strategic ownership over a number of flagship initiatives. We congratulate her, and underline the importance of creating new opportunities for Member States to discuss ways in which we can shape a more dynamic future for this Organization. Such a debate should not only take place in the run-up to selecting a new Director-General.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We give our full consent to the proposed program and budgetary recommendations. The Serbian delegation will contribute to building consensus on these and all other matters before the General Conference, in line with our commitment to responsible global citizenship and activism in UNESCO.

The Republic of Serbia will continue to support UNESCO's priorities, namely Africa and the promotion of gender equality. As part of our efforts, we will start offering university scholarships to outstanding students from across the developing world. And we will stipulate—as part of the acceptance package—that the beneficiaries must return to their countries of origin, in order to help their societies thrive in the 21st century.

In our view, the most effective way to synergize the economic, scientific and cultural dimensions of the Organization is for it to embrace a greater number of creative initiatives in the field of education—the ultimate bridge-builder and capacity-multiplier, both for individuals and States.

By working through existing fora, such as the World Education Forum, we propose an innovative, cost-effective program to encourage literacy in the information age.

Serbian schools have already launched a successful pilot project, which aims to combine book-reading with posting profiles of authors through social-networking websites such as “Facebook.” Not only does this project increase the motivation of students to read the classics, but it facilitates learning through information technology. It also creates a virtual discussion environment—a book club of the 21st-century. Students would exchange ideas and viewpoints, while making new friends from across the world on the internet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As an indispensable anchor of stability in the Western Balkans, Serbia will continue to play an active, constructive role in deepening regional cooperation. We plan on hosting a UNESCO Southeast Europe Heads of State Summit on Cultural Heritage in 2011.

We hope the occasion will be the capstone in our efforts to activate a UNESCO Southeast Europe Heritage Fund, along the lines of those established in Africa and the Pacific.

As we approach the second decade of the 21st century, it is important that we deepen efforts to de-politicize culture and heritage, and to condemn the desecration of patrimony wherever it occurs, including in our southern province of Kosovo.

One such recent example is the wholesale pillaging of the largest medieval hermitage complex in the mountains above our ancient capital of Prizren. This unique monastic center was built by the Serbian ascetic Saint Peter of Koriška, and dates back to the early decades of the 13th century. Born near the city of Peć, the remnants of this local holy man's accomplishments were looted and violated only a few weeks ago. Frescos were damaged, altars were vandalized, and a network of tunnels was dug by heavy-duty equipment into the solid rock by men seeking gold and treasure. The extent of the material damage is still being documented. What is beyond dispute is that the perpetrators succeeded in debasing our faith, and destroying a part of our patrimony.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is unacceptable. We must work together to stop such terrible deeds from being repeated.

We are very grateful for the important work UNESCO has already done in Kosovo to safeguard Serbian culture. By working through this Organization, for instance, donors have been able to target their preservation and reconstruction funds for World Heritage Sites in Danger located in our breakaway province, irrespective of the open question of Kosovo's future status and the legality of UDI: the unilateral declaration of independence by the province's ethnic Albanian leadership, currently being adjudicated before the International Court of Justice.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, our Ministry of Culture, and our Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, have worked hard with UNESCO to ensure that Serbia's holy sites retain the maximum level of protection.

In this context, let me underline the vital importance that UNESCO's continuing legitimacy is preserved by its non-partisan, status-neutral position on the Kosovo UDI issue. We believe the way forward is for Member States to work together to protect Serbia's patrimony in Kosovo, by putting aside their political differences. The only constructive approach is for UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) to keep being applied in full by this Organization and its various bodies, including the World Heritage Center and the World Heritage Committee.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia is an outgoing member of the Executive Board. We have had the privilege to serve in a very delicate and sensitive period. I wish to extend my gratitude to all the Member States for placing their confidence in us. I can only hope you share our assessment that we worked hard to promote the noble aims and programs of this Organization. We stand ready to continue playing an active role in other UNESCO bodies and committees; and to further encourage a results-based approach, a more effective evaluation system, and further de-politicization of the Organization.

It has been an honor. Thank you for your attention, and your support.