

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my distinct pleasure to have an opportunity to address the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative in Zagreb today.

The Republic of Serbia wishes to indicate its appreciation to our host for its commendable organization of this event, and would like to acknowledge the hard work of our Chairman in promoting the enhancement of the Initiative's activities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My country has consistently attached special importance to regional initiatives, providing as they do myriad opportunities for regional cooperation among its member-states in various fields.

The Republic of Serbia fully supports the proposition to reorganize the Initiative's roundtables with a view to making their work more efficient and more responsive to the practical needs of the member-states, and agree with the Chairman's proposal that they should tackle economic issues such as SMEs, transportation, tourism, culture and education, as well as environmental protection. Here let me single out the importance of establishing a regional approach to fire-fighting, with an emphasis on forest fires that frequently affect many of our countries during summer months.

I am pleased to confirm that the Republic of Serbia continues to be in favor of the establishment of a Permanent Secretariat of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative. We appreciate the Italian Republic's offer to host it in Ancona, and support the candidacy of Ambassador Grafini as Secretary-General. We also maintain our support for UniAdrion, the mechanism of inter-university cooperation.

I wish to make a further point: While there remain differences of opinion on how to tackle the issue of organized crime within the context of the Initiative, I emphasize the strong position of the Republic of Serbia that this is an issue that must remain at the forefront of attention. We must also find ways to cooperate more efficiently in suppressing the grey economy that acknowledges no borders. We believe that we should agree to further elaborate the mechanisms on cooperation during the forthcoming Greek chairmanship. In this context, let me wish the Hellenic Republic all success as it assumes the role of chairman of this important regional organization.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Adriatic and Ionian area comprises one of the most important maritime and commercial regions of the Mediterranean world—formed around a basin that opens like a fan towards what the Romans termed “*mare nostrum*.” Since ancient times, our region has been seen as an important cultural crossroads, a bountiful blending of West and East, North and South. Today, the Initiative’s member-states are distinguished by whether they are members of the European Union or not. Happily, this feature is a temporary one, for we all agree that our common future lies in the EU.

In that sense, regional cooperation is a prelude to Europe, a preparatory stage to the comprehensive integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. By consolidating our commitment to act in concert on a whole host of issues of common interest, regional initiatives such as this one help us all gain greater familiarity with the *idea* of Europe in the 21st century—an idea that aims to fuse national interests to the common values of the unprecedented historical enterprise that has come to be the European Union.

But Europe is more than the embodiment of an idea. It is a Union of sovereign states in which decisions are made without acrimony, and where consensus is the order of the day. Where compromise and concession are built into the system, and where solidarity for less developed areas of the Union is presupposed. In Europe, justice is blind and the rule of law is supreme. Corruption and organized crime are shown no quarter. Individual liberty stands tall, and care for the more vulnerable is a praiseworthy virtue, not a sign of weakness. And the reconciliation of nations can be safely completed to the benefit of the generations to come, in the name of those who are with us no longer.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The April 29th historic signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and my country has enabled us to pronounce that the contours of Serbia's future in Europe have at last been solidly traced. And the decisive victory of pro-European forces in the May 11th

parliamentary election signals our national confirmation to pursue a political course that rapidly leads to full membership in the European Union.

While we all have a role to play, I believe that Serbia and Croatia have a distinct responsibility to lead the region together to its European future.

It was not always this way. Think back to Vukovar and the dreadful events that took place there. And think back to the ethnic cleansing of more than a quarter of a million Serbs during Operation Storm in 1995.

That was a dark time—one that should never again be repeated.

But in this decade, we consciously chose to turn the page.

Without forgetting the grievances and deeds of the past, we chose to concentrate on building for a future in which our two countries, together with all other Western Balkan states, would come together in the European Union.

This took courage, and it took vision.

And the results achieved were very encouraging, for our bilateral ties had begun to improve in recent years. Issues of concern—from minority rights to property restitution—had started being properly addressed, and reconciliation was proceeding in the right direction. We were on our way to fully normalize this crucially important relationship, and assume our rightful place as the twin engines of regional cooperation and democratic stability.

And then came Croatia's unfortunate choice to recognize the unilateral, illegal and illegitimate declaration of independence of the Assembly of the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo and Metohija—in clear violation of the United Nations Charter, in contravention of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), and in opposition to the Helsinki Final Act.

This attempt at secession by the Kosovo Albanians strikes at the very heart of the binding principles of the international system—principles such as the respect for the territorial integrity of states, and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders.

As a result, our region's painstakingly constructed security architecture has been called into question.

At the same time, a precedent that does fundamental damage to what we're trying to create together regionally is being established.

It did not have to be this way. Bilateral fissures, regional fault lines, international divisions—all of this could have been avoided, had political foresight prevailed.

How do we overcome the erroneous choice to sacrifice the region's 21st century geo-strategic priorities on the altar of maximalist, 19th century communal aspirations?

I propose that we recall the principles that drive decision-making in Brussels. I'm talking about compromise, concession, and consensus-building.

And I propose that we make a concerted effort to realign our behavior in accordance with the standards of the international system built on the foundation of the United Nations Charter.

Serbia will, for one, continue to make full use of its diplomatic and political arsenal to ensure that Kosovo will not join the world community of sovereign states, and thus not acquire this ultimate status of international legitimacy. As such, it will remain unattractive to foreign investment, and incapable of preventing its freefall to failure—without the engagement of Belgrade.

When the underlying implications of such an outcome sink in, I believe that a new window of opportunity will open up, one which will pave the way for the commencement of true negotiations on Kosovo's future status—serious negotiations that continue until a compromise is reached—a compromise that all legitimate stakeholders can abide by, and one that is confirmed by the United Nations Security Council.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Regional cooperation in general—and this Initiative in particular—is rooted in the European dedication to resolve differences harmoniously through dialogue, not discordantly through confrontation.

Serbia remains deeply committed to participating in the stewardship of the bedrock principles of Europe.

And that is why we remain steadfast in our determination to fashion an historic compromise

agreement with the Kosovo Albanians, to solidify the democratic gains made, and to propel our entire neighborhood forward to rapid European membership.

I remain hopeful that the boldness and vision needed to see these objectives through to their successful completion can be brought to the surface in time. For when all is said and done, I believe that there has never been a more opportune time for all the nations of our region to sincerely come together, as partners, in peace and reconciliation.

I thank you for your kind attention.