

“Securing Peace and Stability in the Balkans:
European Perspectives and International Law.”

Remarks Delivered to the London School of Economics and Political Science

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Faculty and Guests,
Dear Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Professor Rajak, thank you for that warm introduction. It is a great privilege to be the first ever Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia to address the London School of Economics and Political Science.

I would like to begin with a few words about the European Union’s place in the interdependent world of the 21st century. What we can all notice is that the international system is in the midst of a transformation, in some ways comparable to 1945 or 1989.

As a number of increasingly influential actors actively maneuver with the intent of repositioning themselves on the world stage, Europe must find a way to play a more pronounced role in global affairs. With the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, this becomes a realistic possibility.

Yet one of the key pre-requisites for the Union to be able to confidently pursue strategic interests beyond its borders is to ensure stability within its own geography. In my opinion, this cannot be done without rapidly advancing the membership perspective of the Western Balkans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia is the region’s pivot country—its indispensable geo-strategic anchor, uniquely placed to act as the EU accession accelerator for the entire neighborhood.

We are a strong promoter of regional economic integration through institutions such as the Central European Free Trade Accord, or CEFTA—the chairmanship of which we will take over on January 1st, 2010.

Serbia is the transportation and trading hub of the Western Balkans. We will continue to prioritize the improvement of the free-flow of goods and services throughout the region, as well as to encourage the development of environment-friendly and carbon-neutral technologies, in line with European standards.

In addition, Serbia will soon strengthen its centrality to the region's energy grid. We already are a key actor in the production and distribution of electrical power. With the completion of the South Stream pipeline, we will become one of the focal points for the safe and reliable supply of natural gas to the Balkans and Central Europe, for decades to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My Government's central strategic priority remains the achievement of full and rapid membership in the European Union.

Our domestic debate about where we want to go is over. Two national elections were held in Serbia last year—one presidential, the other parliamentary. For our country, these were referenda on how to interact with the world of today. Our citizens were given a clear choice between two diametrically opposite ways forward. And they decided to cast their vote for a European future. Twice.

Serbia has worked very hard to get to this point. In the face of numerous obstacles and against overwhelming odds, we have consolidated our democracy, eager to take our rightful place at the table of Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few days ago, the EU formally placed my country on the so-called "White Schengen List." This means that the citizens of Serbia will finally start traveling freely throughout the Continent, starting on December 19th of this year.

As important as visa liberalization is, however, we mustn't stop there. The next step should be the un-freezing the Interim Agreement with the European Union, paving the way to our membership application.

Certain misgivings have been expressed by those who believe the EU should take an enlargement break after Croatia. With all due respect, we strongly disagree with this point of view. This is no time for diffidence. Should a decision be taken to put the rest of the Balkans on standby, the cost to Europe's credibility would be immeasurable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia aims to join the Union not out of fear of being left behind—and not only because we have an important role to play in consolidating regional peace. We also seek EU membership out of pride and confidence in our capacity to make contributions to broader European goals.

Over the past few years, our European vision has been complemented by a strong determination to pursue a carefully calibrated and active foreign policy, aimed at engagement with nations throughout the world, near and far.

In the interdependent global environment of the 21st century, Serbia's membership in the EU could help stabilize Europe's strategic relationship with Russia, as well as increase understanding and cooperation with many Non-Aligned Movement member states.

I do not wish to suggest that our accession will decisively result in a more influential, globally dynamic European Union. But it is also no exaggeration to say that our contribution to pan-European priorities may not be limited to regional affairs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nevertheless, the immediate task before us is to figure out ways to overcome the remaining challenges in the Western Balkans.

Let me start with Bosnia and Herzegovina. First off, I want to underline Serbia's absolute commitment to our neighbor's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

We are working to encourage representatives of all the three constituent peoples to agree on necessary reforms, with the aim of accelerating Bosnia's EU accession—a strategic priority for all.

We have made it clear that we will support whatever arrangement is acceptable to the parties, stressing the need for pragmatism and compromise.

Consensus-building is a core 21st-century European value and decision-making principle, aptly illustrated by the fact that on important institutional changes, all must give their consent. Sometimes this takes longer than one would like, as the Lisbon Treaty ratification process reminds us. But at the end of the day, agreement is reached—enabling everyone to move forward together.

This principle has also guided our approach to resolving another challenge to regional stability: UDI—the February 17th, 2008, unilateral declaration of independence by the ethnic-Albanian authorities of Serbia's southern province of Kosovo and Metohija.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We responded to Kosovo's UDI responsibly and with utmost restraint, in a way designed to overcome differences, not entrench them. 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.

From the very outset of this grave crisis, we ruled out the use of force and sought to compartmentalize the political fallout.

At the same time, Serbia made sure the local population—irrespective of ethnicity—did not fall victim to status disagreements. We worked closely with the UN and the EU on resolving practical matters on the ground in a status-neutral manner, to the benefit of all residents of the province.

In addition, we turned to the instruments of peaceful adjudication. Our decision to contest Kosovo's UDI 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.

By pursuing an active yet non-confrontational approach to UDI, Serbia in effect put forward a new model for ethnic conflict resolution in the 21st century—one that could be applied anywhere in the world where the divides are deep, the historical burdens heavy, and the issues involved go to the very heart of defining one's national character.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few days ago, the International Court of Justice began the crucial oral phase of its hearings on Kosovo's UDI.

This is the first time in history that the Court will rule on the legality of an attempt at secession by an ethnic group from a UN member State in peacetime.

It is also the first time all five Permanent Members of this Council are participating in a proceeding before the Court.

The total number of states that are presenting their views in The Hague is a record for the ICJ, exceeding even the figure in the cases involving the legality of the use of nuclear weapons.

There is therefore little doubt that the Court's conclusions will have over-arching consequences for the international legal order.

Objections have been raised to the entire exercise by those who claim that UDI is irreversible. In my view, that's like someone saying a court should not involve itself in a suspected arson case, because the house has already burned down.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The International Court of Justice is not a peace conference. It is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. Its job is to determine whether UDI accords with international law.

Once the Court hands down its opinion, an opportunity will be created for a dialogue that can produce a mutually-acceptable, viable solution to the future status of Kosovo—one that will not recklessly sacrifice geo-strategic priorities of all, on the altar of communal aspirations of a single party.

We are focused on creating a set of circumstances where the incentives for coming together in agreement will outweigh all other considerations.

I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people get surprised by our flexibility—once we get back to the negotiating table, for our intent is not to triumph, or to subjugate.

As Johnson wrote to Boswell, “life cannot subsist but by reciprocal concession.” I can’t emphasize this enough: the chance to overcome the UDI dead-end through compromise must not be squandered.

This should not be seen as a contest where a winner emerges, as a game to see who was right, or as a chance to demonstrate who does greater honor to his past. And even though the LSE’s motto is *rerum cognoscere causas*—“to know the causes of things”—it’s not about that either. It’s about overcoming their effects in the 21st century. It is about the future, about assuring long-term prosperity, and—perhaps above all—it is about demonstrating that Serbs and Albanians are capable of making a joint contribution to the consolidation of the security of all of Europe.

Thank you very much.