



Address Before a Ministerial Meeting of the Regional Cooperation Council

by H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia,
Sofia, 27 February 2008

Mr. Secretary-General,
Dear Mr. Busek,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Arising out of a European commitment to invest in the future of Southeast Europe, and created to channel regional cooperation, the Stability Pact has helped us all come a long way. We have taken to heart the fact that regional cooperation advances our interests and helps to strengthen our values. We have moved closer to Europe. And we have embraced the principle of reconciliation designed to help us overcome a divisive recent past.

Today, the Regional Cooperation Council takes over from the Stability Pact, marking the moment when we establish regional ownership over the mechanisms of cooperation in Southeast Europe. Today, *we alone* become the changemakers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

But something has recently triggered a debate in the region about just how far cooperation can go.

As you know, on February 17th, the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of our province of Kosovo and Metohija unilaterally, illegally, and illegitimately declared independence from the Republic of Serbia.

A heavy burden of responsibility has been placed on Southeast Europe. It is our duty to embark on a common task, by preventing decisions taken outside the region from once again pulling us apart.

Unfortunately, some participating states have chosen to associate themselves with this act of unilateral secession that has made our region more unstable, more insecure, and more unpredictable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A peaceful demonstration of close to half a million people took place recently in Belgrade that condemned the forceful partition of Serbia. Unfortunately, a few thousand hooligans attacked several embassies, looted stores, and damaged government buildings. We have condemned these acts of vandalism, and will prosecute the offenders to the full extent of the law. Let me take this opportunity to once more express my profound regret to my colleagues whose diplomatic missions were affected by the violence. We will do our best to make sure this does not happen again.

We all know that emotions have run high throughout the region since Kosovo's Albanians illegally attempted to secede from Serbia. And we know that a revival of the debate about the legitimacy of other internationally recognized borders has been triggered. This is very lamentable, all the more so since it was entirely avoidable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From the perspective of the Republic of Serbia, the RCC represents the voice of the region, and that voice is not, I am sorry to say, as unified as it should be. This puts us in a quandary. A question is posed: how to proceed? The answer lies in consensus. And in the absence of a *new* consensus, we are fortunate enough to be able to fall back on the one already in existence.

Existing practice, in other words, must guide us forward.

And existing practice dictates that Pristina's participation in the RCC be maintained in full compliance with Resolution 1244, that is, as UNMIK/Kosovo.

Serbia has no intention to obstruct the important work that needs to be done in advancing and deepening regional cooperation. But the minimum requirement, from our perspective, for us to continue going forward, is for the procedural status quo to be maintained.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The postulate of regional cooperation in Southeast Europe—as in everywhere else in the world—rests on the inviolability of borders and on the full observance of territorial integrity and sovereignty of internationally recognized states. Our European aspirations will not be advanced by quarrels and disagreements, but by the forging of consensus, rooted in a knowledge that we are charting a course toward positive, secure interdependence.

Serbia will not back away from this vision.

Serbia will never recognize the declaration of independence of our southern province.

Serbia will remain whole and free: Kosovo shall remain a part of Serbia forever.

Thank you for your attention.

February 27, 2008

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

One Nation, Indivisible

By VUK JEREMIC

Belgrade, Serbia

THE international system that has brought unprecedented prosperity to the world since 1945 is based on rules that apply without exception. This system is supposed to protect the basic, legitimate national interests of every country, whether rich or poor, strong or weak. Its binding principles include the sovereign equality of states, the respect for the territorial integrity and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders.

Yet on Feb. 17, the Serbian province of Kosovo, which has been under United Nations administration since 1999, unilaterally declared independence from my country. This illegal act has, unfortunately, been recognized by the Bush administration and some European countries including Britain, France and Germany. Others in Europe — including Greece, Romania and Spain — have withheld recognition, as have most other leading global and regional players, including Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Israel, Russia and South Africa.

As things stand, the number of countries that will recognize an independent Kosovo will plateau at around 40, leaving it unrecognized by a vast majority of the close to 200 members of the United Nations. This includes, of course, the Republic of Serbia.

A peaceful demonstration of close to half a million people in Belgrade last week condemned this act of illegal secession. Unfortunately, a few hundred hooligans attacked several embassies, including that of the United States, and looted stores; they even attacked my ministry. Our government has condemned these acts, and will prosecute the offenders.

The case against recognition is based not only on the Security Council's 1999 resolution reaffirming Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo, but also founded on the view that the international system has, as a result of this hostile act by the Kosovo Albanians, become more unstable, more insecure and more unpredictable.

Here's why. Recognizing the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia legitimizes the doctrine of imposing solutions to ethnic conflicts. It legitimizes the act of unilateral secession by a provincial or other non-state actor. It transforms the right to self-determination into an avowed right to independence. It legitimizes the forced partition of internationally recognized, sovereign states.

It violates the commitment to the peaceful and consensual resolution of disputes in Europe. It supplies any ethnic or religious group that has a grievance against its capital with a playbook on how to achieve its ends. It even resurrects the discredited cold-war doctrine of limited sovereignty.

A historical injustice is being imposed on a European country that has overcome more obstacles since we

democratically overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 than most other nations have in a much longer time. Recognizing Kosovo means saying, in effect, that Serbian democracy must be punished because a tyrant — one who committed heinous deeds against the Kosovo Albanians in the 1990s — was left unpunished. Such misplaced revenge may make some feel better, but it will make the international system feel much worse.

To act out of a false moral imperative to right a supposed historical wrong will contribute neither to international security nor to the region's prospects of European Union membership. It is time to take a step back and examine the damage done.

If we can find a creative way to step back from the abyss that is Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, we could not only salvage the credibility of the international system, but even strengthen it through a re-commitment to its basic principles. Some will say that it's too late to put the genie back in the bottle. I don't believe that's true, because it's never too late to forge a prosperous future for all stakeholders to share.

What is absolutely certain is that trust needs to be rebuilt and values must be reaffirmed. The way forward lies in coming together and securing an agreement between the two parties: a negotiated, compromise solution to Kosovo's future status that addresses the legitimate right to broad self-governance for Kosovo's Albanians, while preserving a democratic Serbia that is whole and free, integrated into Europe, and engaged with a world set aright through prudent statecraft.

The legitimacy of the international system hangs in the balance.

Vuk Jeremic is the foreign minister of Serbia.

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