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Transcript

Serbia's Future in Europe

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Author, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-2012*

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Ivica Dačić (translated from Serbian):

Ladies and gentlemen, as always on these occasions, I was given a speech to deliver – and as always, I'm not going to stick with my speech. I wish to briefly, in a nutshell, introduce myself. I'm a prime minister of a country which has a long, difficult and glorious past, but also a prime minister of a country which has significant problems, which is in a historical moment when decisions are made in regard to its future. It is, of course, my great honour to speak to you here today in the shrine of foreign policy thought. Serbia has been for many years a main ally to Great Britain in the Balkans. I just said to the minister of foreign affairs, Mr Hague, that next year we are going to mark a century from the beginning of the First World War, and that Serbia wishes to actively participate in the celebration of this event.

We have a desire to stop and prevent the revision of history but I have to tell you that the fate of Serbia has always been to be stuck between the east and the west. As our spiritual and religious leader said: Serbia has always been west of the east, and east of the west. At the time of the Ottoman rule in the 13th and 14th centuries, you called us the gatekeepers – that is, we were the keepers of Christianity in regard to the Ottoman Empire. For five centuries we have been conquered from the Turkish side, and Christianity has divided into the eastern and the western, Catholic and Orthodox believers. This was a c-section that went through the Balkan region. For many years this was a dividing line between Turkey and Europe. During Ottoman rule we suffered great losses in regard to loss of human life. We lost the majority of our population on historic Serbian territory, such as Kosovo, because this was a place where Serbia confronted Turkey, in Kosovo. This is when the Serbs and the Turks confronted each other, because no other nations were living there.

The situation now, 600 years later, is, as you know, different. Albanians compose 90 per cent of the population of Kosovo and only 10 per cent are Serbs. Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan three days ago in Kosovo stated that Kosovo is part of Turkey. In the First World War, Serbia lost almost half of its male population. Can you imagine what a devastating blow this is for one nation? In the Second World War, we had 1 million casualties. Serbia was at the time – the Yugoslav state was on the Allies' side, on the winners' side. At the end of the 20th century, Serbia has been the great loser. It came as a great loser from this. GDP today is only 65 per cent what the GDP used to be in 1989.

Serbia has lost time, and allowed Serbia to become a synonym for something bad, in comparison to some others who became full-fledged members or candidates for membership in the EU. If someone in the 19th century could even imagine or contemplate that Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia would be members of the European Union before Serbia, I think that no one would believe this assumption. For this reason, Serbia today has no time to lose or to spare.

A year ago the new government of Serbia was elected. Regardless of the fact that for formal membership in the EU, a long and difficult journey awaits us, we think that it is in our national interest to take its rightful position in the European community of nations. But regardless of the fact that Serbia has been part of Europe, even a hundred years ago – you can derive this from everything I said. It was a European hero; it was the winner of the Great War – respected, celebrated even. And then it vanished, a new kingdom was established – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a conglomerate of different nations, interests and aspirations which dissolved by the end of the 1990s. Eighty years later, Serbia became a state again. On the one hand, who stands 10,000 kilometres away from the Balkans seems like a trick – now you are here, then you disappear from the political scene of the world.

Serbia today has a new beginning. It is a state in which borders are being disputed and questioned. A state burdened by its past, with a glorious past but also a past which has been condemned. A state which has not been fully assured of its heritage and identity. A state which has been impoverished with sanctions and wars and transitions which have not shown very positive results. It was more plundering than rightful and just, and of course criminal privatization. This is now the state of play and the consequences of the situation we found a year ago.

For this reason, the central issue is not, when will Serbia become a member of the EU? The central issue is: when will the European Union enter Serbia? In order to reach this level, which does not have to be dictated from Brussels or any other capital or city in Europe, it is important for us to build a system to change everything in Serbia that does not work. This change needs to happen not only in Serbia but in the entire region of the Balkans. If this is not true, the whole peninsula will forever remain in the shadow. In Europe, people will lead discussions and in the Balkans people will lead wars. In Europe, people will work and in the Balkans people will die from poverty. In Europe, nations will respect each other even though they don't like each other, and in the Balkans they will kill each other. I'm sure that we in the Balkans don't want this.

Again, we had a lot of casualties. Our economies are devastated. Allies and friends, I think that no one still has. But we cannot wait. Europe has its own misfortunes and its own priorities and it has its own people which it needs to take care of. For this reason, our main priority of the government of the Republic of Serbia – the ultimate goal, as I said – is not when will Serbia become part of Europe but totally the opposite: when will Europe come to Serbia? When will we be able to live as all other normal people? In all of this, Europe will need to assist us.

But we won't have this if we don't demonstrate the desire to do so. For this reason, it is important each institution that we build on this path, each European screw which we install into our system – and this is the dream and the reality of the government of the Republic of Serbia at this moment. For Serbia to be able to do this, it needs to be respected, to regain its dignity, to regain its fate and its own powers, to regain its international position.

Also allow me to draw your attention to something: it's very important that Serbia has partners in the West, but it's very important also that the Western countries have partnership relations with the biggest nation and country in the Balkans. Those who know Serbia, who know its past and who are aware of its past and who know the sentiment of our nation, they know that each and every Serb in one ear is listening to the voices from Moscow and in the other ear what London is saying. But London is silent. We cannot make a connection – for almost a decade.

I call upon Great Britain and London to take its rightful position in our region. The last British prime minister who visited Belgrade was Margaret Thatcher. We wish to be partners. I don't want to have great expectations, because Serbia cannot be a huge and great partner to Great Britain, but in the framework of what we mean and signify in the Balkans and what we meant back in history, I'm sure that we expect the development and enhancement of our bilateral relations with Great Britain. For this reason, this visit pleases me greatly.

We will have a business conference which is dedicated to investments – that is, the possibility for greater investments in Serbia, British companies in Serbia. On the other hand, discussions that we will have with British officials are also very important because this morning we have heard that there is going to be a hurricane. I hope that we weren't the cause of this hurricane. Tomorrow I'm about to open the London Stock Exchange, I hope there is not going to be a crash after my opening. If we survive this, it means that we have a chance to develop good bilateral relations.

Once again, I would like to underline that I believe in Serbia and I call upon you to believe and to applaud Serbia like that. I'm ready to answer any questions that you may have. I never turn a blind eye to this because this is part of my duties. I call upon you to be as active as you can in this dialogue which I'm going to lead with Misha. Thank you.