

Council of Europe

North-South Center Award Ceremony

Speech by H.E. Mr. Boris Tadic, President of the Republic of Serbia

Lisbon, 27 March 2012

Dear President of the Republic of Portugal,

Dear President of the Parliament of the Republic of Portugal,

Dear Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe,

Dear President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,

Dear Chair of the Executive Committee of the North-South Center,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the Members of the Bureau of the North-South Centre and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for the opportunity to join you and Ms Belhassen here today. But I would also like to thank you for recognizing that we all – living in the North and living in the South- are one world, coming closer and closer to the point where we will share same opportunities and problems, same hopes and fears.

To be recognized today together with Ms. Belhassen is a great honor for me.

Her global leadership for human rights, her commitment to giving voice to those who often find themselves without a voice has empowered millions around the world.

Ms. Belhassen, you are a rare and exceptional beacon of justice and righteousness and a global inspiration to all.

And to be recognized on behalf of Serbia, this is an honor my entire nation shares.

I understand this is the first time an active head of state has been awarded. This only shines a brighter spotlight on Serbia's evolution within the Western Balkans as a force for regional stability and reconciliation, international justice, democratic values and as a protector of human rights.

It's been more than a decade since Serbia chose to break from a terrible past and travel a new path forward.

And we have never looked back.

It has been a choice, a national choice; one supported at the ballot box and as part of an on-going national dialogue.

It is a choice we reconfirm each and every day as we continue to assist the democratic transformation of our region and as we work with our neighbors to ensure the Western Balkans is a region of stability.

And for Serbia, it has been important that this path has been one of our own choice.

Just as Ms. Belhassen's life work has been to ensure that the unrepresented, those relegated to the shadows have a voice and a chance to choose their own path, their own destiny...

That has been our direction in Serbia as well.

Change that takes a firm hold in one's heart; change that lasts and passes from generation to generation; change that alters the course of nations;

This change must come from choice.

As nations and citizens of the world, we are all defined by the choices we make.

These choices open doors and close others.

These choices require sacrifice by those who may see little benefit for themselves but whose choices and actions alter the futures of those yet unborn.

These choices determine our paths and our partners on this path.

It is by these choices that people judge us and come to know us because these choices bring clarity to what we believe and what we value.

Serbia has celebrated more than a decade of democracy.

Our journey over that time has not been an easy one but it has been the right one.

And all along this journey we have faced choices that have defined who we are as a people and who we will become as a nation.

Becoming an official EU candidate is a very important moment for Serbia—a visible milestone on the road our citizens chose to take in October 2000.

We will continue our efforts so that Serbia is able to receive, by the end of the year, a date for the opening of negotiations for full membership in the EU. This is something we deserve, in fulfillment of existing, established criteria. Opening of accession negotiations will represent the moment in which the process of European integration of Serbia will have truly moved past the point of no return.

Serbia will stay the course on reforms and remain a partner to all in the region. Our activities are centered on the consolidation of peace in the region, and on modernizing our society. This is rooted not only in European values we share, but in knowing how to defend our identity and in making sure our business community is able to be as competitive as possible in the international marketplace.

The citizens of Serbia are those who should be primarily credited for the country's official candidate status. They are the ones who have had to bear the burden of the demanding reforms we have been implementing.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Serbia aims to be an active member of the international community—on the Old Continent especially—and to develop the best possible relations with the countries of the Balkans.

Thus, it is a great honor that Serbia will chair the OSCE in 2015. We will use that opportunity to confirm once again our dedication to the comprehensive process of reforms, as recognized by all the OSCE participating States from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

We in the Western Balkans have a difficult task ahead: to resolve a number of problems inherited from the 1990s. That is why it is critically important for all the countries in the region to unconditionally condemn and prosecute war crimes and those who committed them.

Serbia has not only arrested and extradited to the ICTY in the Hague 46 indicted war criminals, but has condemned the terrible war crime in Srebrenica through a Declaration on Srebrenica passed by our National Assembly. We have also condemned the regional policies of violence and hatred, and on that basis launched the process of regional reconciliation. I believe that all the processes that followed—including my visit to Srebrenica, Bratunac, Vukovar and other places where the innocent became victims—has greatly contributed to raising the level of trust and stability in the region.

Dear friends,

I wish to underline an issue of great importance not only for Serbia, but for the stability of the entire region. This is the problem of Kosovo.

Serbia will never recognize the unilateral declaration of independence by the ethnic-Albanian authorities of our Southern province of Kosovo.

We do not want a frozen conflict, however. This serves no one's interests, least of all ours. As a matter of fundamental principle, we are dedicated to finding a peaceful and just compromise—a sustainable solution and comprehensive settlement to the problem of Kosovo. Only such a solution can contribute to the genuine reconciliation and lasting peace between the peoples of the Balkans.

This is why I have initiated four points plan that includes a special status for Northern Kosovo, a special status for most important Serbian churches and monasteries in Kosovo, full implementation of decentralization provisions for Serb majority areas in other parts of Kosovo as well as security guarantees for them and the issue of property of Serbian companies and individuals in Kosovo. I believe this plan represents strong basis for reaching a kind of solution I mentioned few moments ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A full commitment to fight organized crime is one of the most important priorities of the current Government of Serbia and we will stay the course—come what may.

We inherited a highly developed set of networks which posed a grave threat to the foundations of democratic society. As a result, we needed to ensure the coordinated participation of all political, security and intelligence institutions in the fight against organized crime.

And so it has been.

Together with our EU and American partners, Serbia has fought a systematic war against organized crime and actively participated in a number of operations which produced very encouraging results.

Serbia has chosen stability and dignity and we have chosen to accept and embrace the responsibility that comes with our place in the international community.

A place that continues to strengthen and grow and which was recently recognized with EU Candidate Status and our future integration into Europe.

Serbia's story is that change through choice is possible.

My nation has missed many choices during 1990s, but still has many choices left.

All nations do, all people do.

It is the common challenge we all face.

That history is never complete. One chapter leads into the next, no future, no fate is written in stone.

Each day we are called to reconfirm and often times defend, what we believe and what we value.

I am convinced that the Serbian nation deserves to enter into a period that will give it a new chance and a new opportunity to secure its stability and prosperity. I am equally convinced that as an official EU candidate, Serbia finds itself on the right road to secure a safe future for all its citizens.

Once again, I thank you for the award that I accept on behalf of the Serbian nation and in the name of all the citizens of Serbia.

Thank you very much.

