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SPEECHES



US Ambassador English speaks at the University of Sarajevo

Remarks by Ambassador Charles English
University of Sarajevo

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Doctor Caklovica, distinguished professors, students, and friends, good morning. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today about the direction of foreign policy in the Obama administration and what it means for the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Tomorrow America celebrates the bicentennial of the birth of President Abraham Lincoln, our greatest American. Lincoln guided our nation through one of its darkest hours, and he ensured that the principles found in the Declaration of Independence were adhered to and applied to all. Because of him and those who came after him and fought for these ideals, I am proud to say that on January 20, 2009 America inaugurated its first African-American

President.

President Obama, like President Lincoln, inherited the Presidency in midst of crisis. And as Lincoln did, in his inaugural address, President Obama outlined these challenges, a plan for meeting them, and offered hope. On the steps of the Capitol, President Obama also underscored several core principles that will guide his administration's foreign policy for the next four years.

- First, he made clear the ideals of our founding fathers, who "drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man," would underpin his foreign policy. As President Obama rightly observed, "those ideals still light the world."
- Second, President Obama pledged renewed American leadership based on these enduring ideals. "America is a friend of each nation...and we are ready to lead once more," he promised.
- Third, President Obama emphasized the importance of diplomacy. America's "power alone cannot protect us...[America's] security emanates from the justness of our cause; the force of our example; the tempering qualities of humility and restraint, " he asserted.
- Finally, Obama made clear that he will not waver in his defense of America, and he issued a clear warning to those "who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocent people... [America] will defeat you."

These are the core principles that will guide President Obama's foreign policy: a foreign policy founded on American ideals; a commitment to American leadership; an emphasis on American diplomacy; and, a readiness to defend American interests when they are challenged.

These principles have been underscored by Vice President Joseph Biden and by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton as they have begun to reach out to America's friends and allies in Europe, Asia and around the world.

But I am sure that the question you have is "what does this mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina?" One thing is clear: the United States will remain a true and steadfast partner to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ideals

America's ideals have underpinned America's policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and our engagement here for the last fourteen years. My government has always believed in the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have had unshakeable confidence that you want to overcome the ethnic divisions that have plagued your country for so long, and that you want your children to live in a tolerant, multiethnic, democratic, and prosperous Bosnia. That has been the goal that has guided my government since Dayton. The Obama administration will bring in policymakers with fresh perspectives, but the underlying commitment of the United States to a prosperous and democratic Bosnia and Herzegovina will not waver.

It would be a mistake to take our commitment to a tolerant, multiethnic Bosnia for naiveté about the challenges confronting your country, or to assume that the Obama Administration will abandon the pragmatism that has been a hallmark of our foreign policy here over the last fourteen years. We will remain realistic. We know that, because of Bosnia's history, ethnicity will continue for some time to play a larger role in political life here than it does in most of the world's democracies. The degree of decentralized decision-making, always an important question in democratic government, takes on a special significance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We know that Bosnia will never have the huge state-level apparatus found in some Western European countries; nor should it. We know that a stronger, more functional and efficient state must also be, to an important degree, a decentralized state with appropriate ethnic checks and balances.

During his inaugural address, President Obama made clear that compromise in the service of our ideals and ambitions is no vice, and that progress is impossible if politics is dominated by "petty grievances and false promises, recriminations and worn-out dogmas." These words were directed at the American body politic, which from time to time has been bitterly and self-destructively divided, but they are no less applicable to Bosnia.

For too long, politics here have been trapped in recrimination and worn-out dogma. There has been a steady and alarming rise in nationalist rhetoric over the last two and a half years. The Serb, Croat, and Bosniak political leadership have all professed their commitment to Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic future, but in practice they have failed to adequately pursue the path of Euro-Atlantic integration.

This must change

Either Bosnian leaders can cultivate division, encourage animosity, and pursue narrow ethnic agendas that will take the country on a path toward disintegration, instability, and perhaps, violence, or leaders can point the way to a more hopeful future that can only be achieved through painful -- and sometimes politically unpopular -- compromise.

In this context, my government welcomed the Prud Agreement as an example of constructive dialogue aimed at resolving the political gridlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina. You cannot solve the difficult issues confronting this country without a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and compromise, but as we stressed last November, political agreement must lead to tangible change.

My government has also been heartened by the words of Sulejman Tihic. He has urged his fellow Bosniaks to shift their focus away from grievances rooted in the past and to pursue the path of compromise with Serbs and Croats that can lead to a brighter future for all Bosnia's citizens. This is a healthy political instinct and one that the United States will support.

Leadership

Almost fourteen years ago, the Dayton Peace Agreement stopped Bosnia and Herzegovina's savage war, which had left 100,000 dead, including the victims of the 1995 genocide in Srebrenica, and millions homeless. This was a seminal moment in American foreign policy. My country has played a leadership role in Bosnia ever since.

We invested over a billion and a half dollars in rebuilding your country, in creating proper institutions and in supporting the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes. We have pressed vigorously for

Dayton's implementation. We have supported the creation of civil society groups, a free press, and independent judicial institutions -- all of which are critical to democracy and the rule of law -- and stood by them when they have come under attack from hostile political forces.

Our engagement in Bosnia will continue, but American leadership will not always assume the form it has in the past. 2009 is not 1999. The agenda confronting your political leadership has changed. The focus is no longer solely on Dayton. Today, the focus is on implementing the measures required for Bosnia to join NATO, and particularly, the EU.

It is a sign of your country's progress since 1995 that the political agenda is shifting from one centered on Dayton to one centered on Europe. It is also only natural that Brussels and the institutions of the European Union will assume a more prominent role in Bosnia as your country moves closer to realizing its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This does not mean Washington will end its engagement in Bosnia. As President Obama stressed in his inaugural address, his administration will rely on "sturdy alliances" and work closely "with old friends" to address shared foreign policy challenges. This includes Bosnia. More "Europe" in Bosnia's future does not imply less American commitment to Bosnia's success.

While the U.S. looks to the transition from OHR to EUSR, we are not there yet. The U.S. will support the transition to EUSR not as an end in itself, but because of what it says about Bosnian leaders' commitment to compromise and a shared future. The best way for Bosnian politicians to demonstrate that they are prepared to cooperate and make necessary compromises for Bosnia's future is by fully satisfying the so called "5 plus 2" agenda for closing OHR. The U.S. will not be satisfied with -- and will not agree to -- "lowest common denominator" solutions or empty agreements that do not satisfy both the letter and spirit of the requirements set by the PIC.

Let me be clear: we are not going to allow political leaders to provoke a crisis or block implementation simply to keep OHR open, but at the same time, political leaders cannot refuse to implement the 5-plus-2 agenda and expect OHR to close anyway. Their failure to reach the compromises necessary to implement 5-plus-2 would undercut their argument that local leaders are ready to assume political responsibility and force us to reconsider the role OHR should play in Bosnia.

Diplomacy

We have always wanted Bosnians of all ethnic groups to take ownership of the country's long-term development. Robust international engagement has been required to implement Dayton because your country's political leadership failed to take the ownership of implementation, including the associated reforms.

We supported the creation of many of the state-level institutions that exist today in order to provide the institutional capacity required to implement the competencies provided to the state under Dayton. We could not expect the state to manage immigration, refugee and asylum policy without a State Border Police or a Foreigners Affairs Service. Nor could the state regulate inter-entity transportation without a Ministry of Transport and Communications. These and other state-building reforms were not designed to punish anyone, as some political leaders have suggested. Nor did they, as others have implied, constitute an illegal transfer of competencies from the entities to the state.

We recognize that state-level institutions do not always function as effectively and efficiently as they should. But the solution to this problem is to fix them, not take them apart. It is also irresponsible to politicize state-level institutions either by seeking to undermine public confidence in them through rhetorical attacks or by using them to pursue narrow ethnic interests contrary to their fundamental mission and purpose to serve all citizens equally. The actions of political leaders, of those they nominate to serve in state-level structures, and of other elected representatives must be guided by what President Obama called in his inaugural address "the spirit of service." They must also be guided by -- again as President Obama said -- by "a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves" -- in Bosnia's case the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of all of its people.

Our diplomacy in Bosnia will be guided by the same energy and engagement that have guided it over the last fourteen years. The emphasis on diplomacy called for by President Obama is not a call for passivity. Political leaders here can expect to continue to hear from us both publicly and privately. We are not going to impose

solutions on Bosnia as your country takes up the challenges associated with preparing for NATO and EU membership. We cannot -- and do not want to -- dictate the outcomes of a constitutional reform process. That is something that must be agreed by citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the elected representatives of all three constituent peoples.

We do know that a democratic, peaceful, and prosperous Bosnia firmly anchored inside Euro-Atlantic institutions is impossible if certain conditions are not met.

- First and foremost, Bosnia must remain one, sovereign country within the borders recognized by the United Nations in 1992, and reaffirmed and guaranteed by the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995.
- Second, Bosnia must have functional and efficient state-level institutions, including an independent judiciary, with the capacity to meet commitments associated with membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions.
- Third, Bosnia must constitute a single economic space where capital and labor can flow throughout the country, and that flow is governed by economic needs and the market rather than ethnic politics and prejudices.

Of course, the political leaders of this country must also meet the accession requirements for NATO and the EU -- as NATO and the EU define. That means fulfilling the obligations associated with NATO's Intensified Dialogue, implementing the SAA, and meeting the requirements laid out in the European Partnership Agreement. The track record of your leadership meeting even the most fundamental of these requirements has been poor and it must improve.

Defending Our Interests

Clearly, the agenda of compromise and progress toward the EU and NATO is a hugely challenging one for Bosnia, especially given the current political climate, with its frequent stalemate and constant inter-ethnic political strife. But what is the alternative? Other countries might languish for years in political stalemate without suffering severe political consequences, but recent history suggests Bosnia does not have that luxury. The cost of stalemate and failure in Bosnia would not just be further stagnation. It might be instability and renewed conflict.

At times, some of our interlocutors in Bosnia have told us that they believe Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats do not want to, and cannot, live together within a single state. They have characterized Bosnia as a "marriage" among the three constituent peoples that simply is not going well despite the best efforts of those who entered into it, it is time, they have said, to accept the irresistible forces of history and the inevitability, at some future date, of the need for a divorce. I question and I reject the assumptions, many of which strike me as self-serving, that underlie this fatalistic description of Bosnia's future prospects.

First, while it is certainly true that the weight of recent history hangs heavily over the country, Bosnia is not a 15-year old concept; it is not a 15-year old country. Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, and others have lived here, peacefully and as neighbors for much longer. Hatred is not inevitable. The job of leaders is to lead, and when they rely on nationalist rhetoric and seek to perpetuate nationalist myths, they are not leading. Second, it is dishonest to claim that you have tried to make Bosnia work when you have devoted your time and energy to delegitimizing and undermining the state. Just as it is dishonest to claim that you are prepared to work cooperatively to resolve differences when you refuse to offer constructive solutions to problems and refuse to compromise. Third, I wonder if those who argue that divorce is inevitable really understand the consequences of pursuing an agenda that takes this as its premise. Do they honestly believe that the divorce they seek will be uncontested? This country has already experienced the tragic consequences of miscalculation and the pursuit of all-or-nothing political agendas. It cannot and must not be subjected to such a set of circumstances ever again.

Fourth, and finally, in my time here I have met many Bosnians who believe in a tolerant, multiethnic Bosnia and who live their lives accordingly. These Bosnians want their children to grow up in a society where diversity is valued and individuals are, to paraphrase a great American, judged not by their ethnicity, but by the content of their character. These citizens are a living rebuke to political leaders who argue that this country's future will inevitably be shaped by the demons of its recent past.

Bosnia's political leaders have a clear choice to make about the type of future they wish for themselves and their constituents, and my government has an interest in the choice they make. My government's commitment is to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina with whom we share a vision of a country that is tolerant, modern, safe and prosperous. We are prepared to work with your political leadership to help you realize that vision, but as President Obama stressed in his inaugural speech, we are also prepared to protect and defend our interests should leaders here make choices or pursue agendas at odds with them.

Close

President Obama's message has always been that of hope, bringing people together and bridging differences. For Bosnia-Herzegovina I know this is not an easy thing to do. The road ahead will be difficult. Bosnia can move closer to its Euro-Atlantic destiny, but it will require political leaders with courage. It will require that they build consensus and forge compromises.

Just as this is a momentous time for the United States, this is a momentous time for Bosnia. It is a time of danger but also of opportunity. Bosnia's political leadership must seize it. I challenge them, as President Obama has challenged the American people, "to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises... to choose hope over fear, and unity of purpose over conflict and discord." Thank you.

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