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Vice President Joe Biden

Address to the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina

May 19, 2009

Thank you, Speaker Belkic. I see familiar faces from my many visits here as a Senator.

It is an honor and a privilege to return as Vice President of the United States.

President Obama and I recently completed our first one hundred days in the White House.

We are pursuing a far-reaching domestic and foreign policy agenda, listening to our friends and allies, rebuilding relationships and re-establishing American leadership in the world.

This is my third trip to Europe in four months.

President Obama made his first overseas trip to Europe in April.

This early emphasis on Europe was no accident.

We chose to spotlight the importance that the United States places on our European partners... and to energize those partnerships to address the challenges that we face together.

This is why I am so glad that my good friend Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, is here today.

The English Author Rebecca West once wrote that entering Sarajevo was like "walking inside an opening flower."

That was true once, and it is again.

I remember flying into this city in 1993, seeing the large homes on our approach to the airport, and realizing that the homes had become shells, empty except for the snipers who had taken up residence.

In town, we saw buildings destroyed, the tops blown off, the sides pockmarked with bullets.

In 2001, the last time I was here, change seemed slow in coming.

It was in January, and it was winter. And it still felt as if the spring would never arrive.

Today, as I flew in, I saw something different – a city that is building again.

I saw cranes and construction.

On the streets, there were cars and shops and people walking freely.

As your city and your country continue to rebuild, to build and to grow, I want to talk today about how this country, this region, Europe, and the community of nations can grow towards one another.

Over the next several days, I will travel from here to Serbia and then to Kosovo. Our Deputy Secretary of State, Jim Steinberg, just visited Macedonia and Montenegro.

Our message is clear: the Obama-Biden administration will sustain and re-energize the long standing American commitment to a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace.

The door is open for the countries of this region to be a part of that Europe – and the United States will help you to walk through that door.

Many states in this region are already on the move:

- In April, NATO Heads of State welcomed Albania and Croatia as new members of the Alliance.
- Macedonia will join NATO as soon as the name dispute with Greece is resolved.
- Montenegro is making steady progress on an ambitious reform agenda that will ensure the quickest-possible integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

When I travel to Belgrade tomorrow, I will tell President Tadic that the United States wants to build a new partnership with Serbia.

And we want to see Serbia take its rightful place in Europe as a strong, successful democratic state playing a constructive role in the region.

Serbia and the United States disagree on Kosovo.

We do not expect Serbia to recognize Kosovo.

But we do expect Belgrade to cooperate with the European Union and other key international actors on Kosovo, and to look for pragmatic solutions that will improve the lives of its people – Serbs and Albanians – and avoid making them victims of political disagreement.

Kosovo recently celebrated one year of independence -- and continues to progress as a multi-ethnic democracy.

This independence, while young, is irreversible, and critically important to this region's stability – and progress.

The United States is committed to a democratic, multiethnic, independent Kosovo.

And we expect Kosovo to remain committed to powerful protections for all communities and their members, including the Serb community. That commitment is a key to Kosovo's future.

But this era of progress is not without peril.

As you well know, letting go of the past is a daily struggle – it is tempting to fall back on old patterns and ancient animosities.

Embracing the future is hard work.

It requires persistence, commitment and the recognition that compromise is not a sign of weakness – it is evidence of real strength.

It is that kind of strength that I want to talk about today.

It is that kind of strength that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its leaders must summon if a country that has known so much pain is to make a final leap to peace and prosperity.

A decade and a half ago, war tore this country apart and left at least 100,000 dead... and millions homeless.

The genocide at Srebrenica brought home the unspeakable savagery of that war to the world.

It was a call to conscience.

My country – for too long on the sidelines – could no longer stand by.

With our European partners, through the combined use of NATO's military power and diplomacy in an American city called Dayton, the war was brought to a halt.

The hard work of building a new Bosnia began.

America takes pride in our commitment to a peaceful, successful, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For nearly 15 years, America has been sending our sons and daughters to you – tens of thousands of troops, diplomats, military and police trainers and experts in a wide range of areas to help your country and its citizens.

With our NATO allies and partners, we have devoted blood, sweat and treasure to ending the horrific violence that

engulfed your country and to helping you recover and rebuild in peace.

Americans feel that we have a stake in your success.

We feel that we have earned the right to speak honestly, even bluntly, in a country that captured our hearts.

Today, we are worried about the direction your country, your future, and your children's future are taking.

For three years, we have seen a sharp and dangerous rise in nationalist rhetoric designed to play on people's fears, to stir up anger and resentment.

We have seen state institutions – which must be strengthened for Bosnia to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to advance toward EU and NATO membership – openly challenged and deliberately undermined.

We have witnessed attempts to roll back the reforms of the last decade -- the very reforms that prompted EU and NATO to open their doors to the citizens of this country.

We have heard voices speaking the language of maximalism and absolutism that destroys states -- not the language of compromise and cooperation that builds them.

The results are predictable – deepening mistrust between communities, deadlock on reforms, and dangerous talk about the country's future that is reminiscent of the tragedies the people of this country have worked so hard to overcome.

This must stop.

Let me be clear: Your only real path to a secure and prosperous future is to join Europe as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Right now, you're off that path.

To get back on track, you need to work together across ethnic and party lines so that your country functions like a country –and so that you interact with the rest of the world as a single, sovereign state.

You can do that as a state with two vibrant entities. We're not telling you how to organize yourselves, so long as you protect the rights of all the peoples of Bosnia.

Any sovereign state requires a few basic things. Here are some examples:

- The state needs to control the national army.
- It must prevail where there is a conflict between state and local laws.
- It requires an electoral process that does not exclude any ethnic group.
- The state must have the power to raise revenue.
- And it must have the authority to negotiate with the EU and other states and implement its obligations.

You can follow this path to Europe.

Or you can choose an alternative course. But you need to understand the consequences.

At best, you'll remain among the poorest countries in Europe.

At worst, you'll descend into ethnic chaos that defined your country for the better part of a decade. And you will be judged harshly by history and your children.

The choice is yours. If you make the right choice, we will stand with you.

Making the right choice means that the leaders of this country must stop the pursuit of narrow ethnic and political interests instead of the national interest. You must resist challenges to your sovereignty or territorial integrity.

You must focus your talent and energy on issues of undisputed interest to all Bosnians – creating jobs, growing the economy, educating your children. You must accept that Bosnia needs checks and balances to protect the interests of all constituent peoples and minorities.

Each of you has a responsibility to exercise your power in a manner that reassures every member of the community. You must examine your conduct within your governing institutions and ask yourselves: are we building trust or feeding fears?

Working across ethnic lines to forge the complicated and sometimes unpopular compromises required for Euro-Atlantic integration is difficult. But it is the only way forward.

And it is a path you have already shown you can travel – on defense reform creating a unified military, on rule-of-law reforms required to pursue justice for all citizens regardless of ethnicity.

And most recently, in March, for the first time, you amended your constitution to resolve questions on the status of the Brcko District. This issue was too hard to resolve at Dayton. Yet you, the elected representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, were able to come together and pass overwhelmingly an amendment enshrining Brcko's status.

This is the approach – this is the spirit of compromise – that you need to confront Bosnia's remaining challenges.

Among the most urgent challenges is completing the objectives and conditions established by the Peace Implementation Council for the closure of the Office of the High Representative.

The new High Representative, Valentin Inzko, is here today. He has the United States' full support – and now he must have yours.

The United States will stand behind OHR so long as it remains in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we will not agree to its closure until after the agreed reform agenda – the five objectives and two conditions – is completed.

The international community must be satisfied that all levels of government are prepared to fully comply with the Dayton Peace Agreement – and that their leaders are prepared to abandon rhetoric and actions that would threaten or violate the Peace Agreement – before the international community presence and role here can change.

In my view, the children of this country deserve a democratic Bosnia in which all live in peace and cooperation inside Euro-Atlantic institutions. You owe that to them.

Everyone wants the quiet blessings of a normal life for themselves and for their children, one in which they can travel freely throughout this continent, pursue their economic dreams, and live their daily lives as part of a modern, democratic, and tolerant society.

A prosperous, secure, democratic future inside the Trans-Atlantic community is not a guarantee or a gift. It must be built through hard work and compromise.

And it will not happen if you perpetuate the divisions that have plagued Bosnia in the past. History must not be the anvil upon which new hatreds are forged.

Some of your political leaders and many citizens of Bosnia understand this and are already acting on it. Late last year, Sulejman Tihic addressed the Republika Srpska parliament and reassured the citizens of that entity that Bosniaks are prepared to work within the Dayton framework to build a better future for all Bosnia's citizens.

Many others are working for that better future. With us today are NGOs and members of civil society – Including the Research and Documentation Center; the Center for Civic Initiatives; and CIVITAS – who shore up the foundations of democracy and tolerance.

Here, too, are lawyers and jurists building the rule of law. And journalists, who courageously challenge nationalist myths and expose corruption. Their work is as noble as it is necessary. In the end, we cannot escape history. We cannot forget it.

But neither can we allow the shadows that darkened so much of the end of the last century to stretch into this one. When he was a young child, Hajat Avdovic left Sarajevo as a refugee and came to America. He succeeded in school and sports. His father, Erol, is a journalist who accompanied me here on Air Force 2.

Hajat wrote a wonderful poem about his native Sarajevo. I want to quote from it now:

Mosques, churches and temples once lined
Your beautiful landscape
Sometime ago your bridges connected
Generations of lives, of Muslim, Croat and Serb
Sometime ago, you were more than just a news story
More than just a city, more than just a name
Sometime ago, you were the heart
The heart of a nation

But the cannons rolled in one morning...

And just like that,
Bullet after bullet,
Mortar after mortar,
Bosnian after Bosnian...
In the words of Suada Dilberovic
"Oh please tell me this is not happening in Sarajevo"
But it was,
We all fell

We fell
But,
We never lost
We never lost our city
We never lost our heart
We never lost our native Sarajevo
This is the story that still needs to be told

Yes, this is the story that still needs to be told.

The story of Sarajevo.
The story of Bosnia.
The story of your future.

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