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European Center for Peace and Development
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Fifth ECPD International conference
**NATIONAL AND INTER-ETHNIC RECONCILIATION, RELIGIOUS
TOLERANCE AND HUMAN SECURITY IN THE BALKANS**
– RECONCILIATION AND HUMAN SECURITY –
*Brioni Islands, Croatia,
October 29 – 30, 2009*

GREETING ADDRESS

*by the President of the Republic of Croatia
H.E. Stjepan Mesić*

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Guests,
Dear Friends,

I have an extremely pleasant task to address this respected international conference. After the expiry of my presidential term in one hundred or so days, I will be glad to devote myself just to the topics that are also on your agenda, under the joint name “National and Interethnic Reconciliation, Religious Tolerance and Human Security in the Balkans“.

Namely, those are the topics on which I was frequently and openly speaking during the past ten years. I wish to remind you that Syrian President al-Assad came to Croatia at the end of the month during which I met with Egyptian President Mubarak in Zagreb, while in Jerusalem I met with the highest officials of the State of Israel. So, within just one month, extremely important views on the Middle East were exchanged – and the comparison of the Middle East with our Balkan lands is frequently of utmost significance when interethnic reconciliation and religious tolerance are in question. And we have certain knowledge and experience in these matters. In this short address, I wish to remind you of only my two recent presentations concerning this issue. Those are my speech in Jerusalem, under the working title “Encountering Tomorrow“, and my speech in the School of Democracy in Supetar, on the island of Brač, when I addressed the participants of the Igman Initiative with the topic: “Is Identity Possible Without Hatred and Intolerance?“. Both presentations, as well as the other ones related to the topics of peace and security, both in the world and in the Balkans, can be found on our web-site: www.predsjednik.hr. Let me quote a short excerpt from my presentation on the topic “Crisis as the Source Chance“ – which, I believe, fits very well into your conference:

“The post-war situation in the new states, established after the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation, was very crisis-prone – apart from hatred, all communications, from transport to telephone and postal ones, were cut off, but this provided the scope for research and gave us a chance for a new beginning.

Namely, it became clear that such a situation could not persist over a long term, that the propaganda war should be stopped, that the stereotypes on which intolerance was built should be eliminated, that joint life, which had once existed in the common state, had to be restored, but on new foundations, involving the independent states and the peoples living in them. To that end, the crisis appeared to be the source of chance. I think of the chance to show to what extent we are able to overcome the past, defy historical myths and revisionist history, face the reality and accept that we must continue to live our lives in that reality.



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Side by side for – I will quote the well-known saying – one cannot choose his family and neighbours. All of us, I think of the states established in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, lived on the same soil, nobody could run away – although for some time the Croatian propaganda was feverishly trying to prove that we had nothing to do with the rest of the region. Consequently, it was necessary to create the basis for a new joint life and to rebuild the destroyed bridges, which had existed for decades. This was the chance arising from the crisis and the wars in which tens of thousands of people had perished, while hundreds of thousands had been forced to flee their homes.

We began to seriously use this chance only after the year 2000. Until then, so-called normalization was reduced to inter-state contacts, while at the same time there were attempts to avoid the repeated rapprochement of the citizens. The phrase “we are not like them“ was still used in the service of politics, which did not want any repeated rapprochement, failing to realize that we – if we wish to join a united Europe – are simply destined to rapprochement.

We were still far from realizing that the phrase “we are not like them“ could also be understood as the “wealth of differences“ or, in other words as the reason for a better and, in this case, repeated acquaintance and building of mutual trust and understanding. Since 2000 – I wish to repeat this – we have turned a new page. And we have achieved some results or, in other words, we have used our chance. Today, the borders between the former Yugoslav republics are practically open, we trade with each other, while Serbian tourists come again to Croatia for holidays.

I am far from saying that an idyll has already been achieved. There are still incidents, hate speech can be encountered in the media on all sides, exponents of revisionist history did not surrender, they are loud and aggressive, but the current situation cannot be compared to that in 1995. It is now crucial not to allow regression, the return to such a situation. Instead, it is necessary to persistently and consistently continue using the chance for a new beginning.

I must be objective and say that there are some things in this context which do not give grounds for optimism. This especially refers to the interethnic relations in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the position of the Serbian leadership on the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence. Spinning one’s wheel or, what is even more dangerous, returning to the old situation could open Pandora’s box of crises and conflicts in South East Europe once again.

During the ten years of my presidential term, I did whatever I could in order to defy resistance and misunderstanding, so that the crisis could be used as a chance, that we could base our relations in the territory of the former Yugoslavia – both the inter-state relations and the relations among the peoples – on a new and sound basis. I will devoted myself to achieving this aim even after the expiry of my presidential term, because I simply cannot imagine to leave the chance that has arisen from the crisis unused or missed.“

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I hold that everything I have said and quoted is sufficient for an introduction. So, I wish all of you – the host and his guests, especially the foreign ones – a pleasant stay in Istria, the region in which tolerance and hospitality can serve as a model to others. Consequently, I wish you a successful work and pleasant stay.

Thank you.



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