

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Opportunity Amidst Crisis: Consolidating the European Future of the Western Balkans

President of Serbia Boris Tadić Speaks at Columbia

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we find ourselves at a moment of global transformation,” Serbian President Boris Tadić said as he leaned against the podium on the stage of Columbia’s Rotunda Auditorium in Low Memorial Library. Tadić spoke slowly, enunciating, and periodically gesturing with his hands, “the international system seems to be undergoing a paradigm shift, in many ways comparable in scope to 1945 and 1989,” he said, adding that the economic crisis has “produced a new set of global circumstances” sure to redefine international relations.

Elected in 2004, Tadić was already an established figure in Serbia’s political scene. In the 1980s, while obtaining a degree in social psychology from the University of Belgrade, he was actively involved in the Former Yugoslavian dissident movement, and arrested for organizing lectures against the Communist Party. Since then he has served as the Minister of Telecommunications in former Yugoslavia and Minister of Defense in the Council of Ministers of Serbia and Montenegro, among other important posts.

In the beginning of his speech, Tadić highlighted Columbia University’s longstanding connections to Serbia, a tie also outlined by Dean John Coatsworth of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia, in his introduction. Both speakers referred to Serbian scientist Mihajlo Pupin, who graduated from Columbia College in 1883 and returned as a lecturer in 1889.

“Let me quote an old friend of Mihajlo Pupin,” Tadić said. This “friend of Pupin” was Woodrow Wilson, and Tadić recounted his famous line: “Democracy is not so much a form of government as a set of principles.” Tadić called this quote “an appeal” to consider our changing global situation. According to the President, the international community needs to come to a “global consensus,” and the decisions made during this pivotal time will have “far-reaching consequences for generations to come.” Tadić emphasized the importance of international law: “No one should be above it, no one should stand beyond its

reach and no one should feel at liberty to declare an exception to its jurisdiction.”

Following these pleas to the global community, the President introduced the major topics of his discussion, voicing his determination to join the European Union and his anxiety over the case of Kosovo’s independence, which is currently on the docket for the International Court of Justice, with a decision expected sometime in 2010.

The “central strategic priority” of the Serbian government, is to join the European Union, Tadić said. He believes that Serbia belongs to the E.U. not only because of “geography, heritage and economic prosperity,” but also because of shared principle values. “Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe remains incomplete, the task is unfinished. The reason is simple, enlargement benefits everyone. Values binding us to one another are strong and just,” Tadić said.

Ethnically Albanian Kosovo declared itself separate from Serbia on February 17, 2008, a step widely recognized by the international community, including the United States. “Serbia will never, under any circumstances, implicitly and explicitly recognize Kosovo’s independence,” asserted Tadić, looking straight at the audience. He took pride in the fact that Serbia responded “to this secession with the utmost responsibility and the ultimate restraint,” ruling out the use of force, as well as the imposition of economic sanctions on the breakaway territory.

Tadić related Serbia’s appeal to the U.N. General Assembly, which voted last October in favor of asking the International Court of Justice to give an advisory opinion on the legal soundness of Kosovo’s separation from Serbia. According to Tadić, the pending decision will set a precedent for the rest of the world, concerning the “attempted secession of an ethnic group.” He contends that it is dangerous to recognize the independence of Kosovo because it will provoke the many other separatist ethnic groups into seceding and result in global chaos. “We have so many Kosovos

around the world. If they succeed at ethnically motivated attempts at secession, what kind of world will we live in tomorrow?" demanded Tadić.

"The Bush administration's decision to recognize Kosovo, was a significant setback to the renewal of our ties after the return of Serbian democracy on October 5, 2000," Tadić recounted, noting that Vice President Biden's visit to Serbia this spring has animated the desire to improve this relationship to a point where the two countries can "agree to disagree" on the Kosovo issue.

Biden was the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit Serbia since before NATO's 1999 bombing campaign geared to remove Serbian troops from Kosovo. Tadić remarked that Biden's visit has already led to increased military cooperation, a strengthened joint effort to fight global terrorism, as well as economic cooperation. "All of this is framed by America's strong support for Serbia's E.U. integration," Tadić said.

"As the strategic anchor of stability in the western Balkans, Serbia will invest even greater efforts to complete the democratic transformation of our part of Europe so we can rise together and succeed together." These efforts include strict anti-discrimination laws and ethnic minority protection, as well as continuing to preserve the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina and all other UN member states.

Tadić mentioned the importance of reconciliation with its neighboring states, emphasizing the importance of "political determination to renounce war as a tool of regional statecraft." He also guaranteed Serbia's dedication to "telling the truth" about the "horrible bloodshed" in its past, and Serbia's commitment to full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal of Former Yugoslavia. He stressed the importance of arresting the two remaining war criminals.

When asked by an audience member about Serbia's failure to arrest war criminal Ratko Mladić, commander of the armed forces of the Bosnian Serbs during the Balkan wars, Tadić responded that the government was doing everything in its power to capture the criminal.

General Mladić oversaw the Srebrenica Massacre in 1995, the largest mass killing in Europe since the Second World War, and remains the most wanted war criminal in Europe. The Serbian government has been promising to seize and arrest him.

After longstanding rumors that officials have actually been protecting the criminal, video footage of Ratko Mladić surfaced on Bosnian television this June. The footage is said to span over ten years and depicts Mladić in Belgrade and other parts of Serbia enjoying life among family and friends. Serbian officials claim that this footage is dated.

A member of Mladić's government-ordered personal guard unit has confirmed that Mladić was under government-supervised protection until at least

2002. The failure to hand over Mladić has been a major obstacle to Serbia's acceptance into the E.U.

"I express even today my determination and the determination of the Serbian government to capture Ratko Mladić and to send him to the Hague Tribunal," Tadić affirmed, mentioning that out of forty-six war criminals, the Serbian government has arrested forty-four, including two previous Serbian presidents: "I always joke that I am the only Serbian president who is a free person," Tadić laughed. He specified that the arrest of Slobodan Milosević had been a far more dangerous action for the Serbian government than it would be to arrest Mladić.

A student from the School of International and Public Affairs asked at what point the President will be ready to apologize for the crimes committed in Kosovo by the Serbians in the late '90s. The President responded that he has already done it. That Serbia was not the only guilty party; many innocent Serbians had been killed by Bosnian soldiers as well. "I am the only president in the region who has apologized to others. There were victims during the war on all sides, and this is the simple truth," Tadić said.

The President faced a question regarding the cancellation of the Gay Pride Parade scheduled for this past Sunday due to threats from militant right wing groups. This was to be the first Pride parade in Belgrade since 2001. "Who really has the power in Serbia?" A Serbian student asked, pointing out that the ultra-nationalist thugs were able to thwart the parade despite the liberal anti-discrimination laws recently passed by the government.

Tadić responded that the government was simply looking for a more suitable place, other than downtown Belgrade, where the Pride Parade can be held. There have been discussions of moving the parade to a more remote location where participants would be out of the line of danger.

"Your own regime was brought to power in Serbia because of demonstrations in downtown Belgrade, and not in some field, and in every country that I've heard of these kinds of protests are held in the streets, in central areas in the city," the student pressed. The President closed the conversation by saying that it is the government's responsibility to prevent problems. "We have to respect people who are going to work, we can't close off streets, we need to provide really good conditions for everyone to express their opinions," he said.

Another challenge aimed at President Tadić concerned a controversial media law passed in Serbia at the end of August, limiting media freedom and enforcing heavy fines on journalists for certain violations. The President responded that there are some unfortunate remnants of Milosević's regime, but that the government will have to "solve some problems" before it can completely free the media.

“Some media actually supports this law. But, if it is going to be a problem for our democratic values this law will be changed.” Tadić said.

When asked what particular steps the Serbian government was taking to recognize the genocide that was committed in Bosnia and Kosovo, the President responded that in his view, this was a war criminal act, not genocide, and that it was up to the court to decide

whether it was genocide or not. “Serbia will not recognize this as genocide unless it is the decision of the court, and I am sure the court will not decide that,” the President said, noting that there were 2,000 Serbs lost in the war.

*Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner*