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I was hugely impressed by your reaction. There was nothing ambiguous in it: it was a reaction full of outrage and indignation. I know that your life has been threatened. You are a courageous man, and I pay tribute to you for that.

It is good to recall that, while I was in Zagreb two weeks ago, twelve people were arrested and charged with crime.

It is a real pleasure to have you here, Mr President. I will say no more. I know that my colleagues are anxious to hear your speech, and that you have kindly agreed to reply to a number of questions. With great pleasure, I give you the floor.

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Mr MESIĆ (*President of the Republic of Croatia*) It is my great pleasure to have been given the opportunity, as President of the Republic of Croatia, to be your guest and to address the parliamentarians of the first political organisation to be created after the horrors of the second world war in order to preserve and promote individual freedoms, political freedom and the rule of law, the fundamental values of genuine democracy, and political pluralism,

Today, fifty-one years after its foundation, we are aware that the Council of Europe is the most European political organisation on our continent. Almost all European states have become its members and thereby accepted the commitment to foster and disseminate our common values.

One of the greatest examples of the noble activities of the Council of Europe was the adoption of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the fiftieth anniversary of which we will mark in November.

Let us be candid and admit that in spite of the optimism inherent in human beings, few believed that the Council of Europe would undergo such a swift transformation from a cold war institution into a forum for dialogue between the east and the west, and, eventually, into a truly pan-European organisation. We have thereby come close to fulfilling the wishes of the great British statesman, Sir Winston Churchill, who in 1946 publicly asked himself, "And why should there not be a European group which could give a sense of enlarged patriotism and common citizenship to the distracted peoples of this turbulent and mighty continent? And why should it not take its rightful place with other groupings and help to shape the onward destinies of men?"

The openness, generosity and perseverance of the Council of Europe ought to be a model for other European political organisations. In particular, I have in mind the European Union, within which there is undoubtedly awareness of the necessity to accept new members, but there are also, for economic and other reasons, those who oppose expansion to include some former socialist states on our continent. I am convinced that partial solutions, such as the admission of only some countries to the European Union, would represent a major injustice to the already long-suffering nations at the rim of western Europe. Indeed, I believe that all states which have seriously taken the road towards comprehensive Europeanisation should be given a genuine prospect of association with the European Union - a political, economic and defensive union in which small nations will have their place and be able to contribute to the common cause.

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Among the countries that have seriously tackled that challenging project, I can without hesitation include Croatia, whose road to fully fledged membership of the national community has been, as we are all aware, extremely hard. Let us remember Tito's Yugoslavia. As one of the six republics of the Yugoslav Federation, Croatia decided to turn its back on communist ideology and socialist self-management and to transform its society along the model of western European democracy and market economy. However, the hegemonic and nationalist forces in Belgrade opposed Croatia's freedom-loving aspirations, and then resorted to armed aggression. At that time we already knew that its aim was not the preservation of Yugoslavia, but the creation of an ethnically clean greater Serbia - an insane, uncivilised and, fortunately, failed project.

The war imposed by the Yugoslav national army and the Belgrade leadership, the temporary loss of one third of our national territory, the massive ethnic cleansing, the unfortunate conflict between the Croats and the Bosnians and the provision for hundreds of thousands of refugees ^{and} a huge number of casualties - have significantly slowed down the process of democratic transformation and thwarted the healthy economic transformation of Croatia. My last visit to the Council of Europe, in 1993, in my capacity as Speaker of the Croatian Parliament, reflected all of the complexity of the situation in Croatia at that time,

With major efforts, our country has nevertheless succeeded in emerging from the armed conflict as a victor. With the establishment of territorial integrity - a process which took seven years - the conditions were finally created for the liberalisation of Croatian society. Unfortunately, the former Croatian Government did not have the strength - perhaps not even the will - to promote further democratisation of society and the economic reforms so badly needed by the impoverished and long-suffering Croatian population.

The parliamentary and presidential elections in January and February have shown that Croatia's citizens are not prepared to follow a path focused on the past. Instead, they have shown that they look to the future. They have clearly expressed their wish for a rapid implementation of urgent social and economic reforms, thereby demonstrating the vast democratic potential of the country. They have shown that they want a European Croatia - a Croatia of tolerance, human rights, prosperity and economic growth.

I feel great pride in the fact that the citizens of my country are ready to bear the burden of such challenging and comprehensive economic and social transformation. Unfortunately, the restructuring of the economy will initially result in considerable lay-offs; later, however, it will certainly generate new jobs and a more advanced working environment. The Croatian Government is well aware of the gravity of this unrewarding and unpopular task. It is well aware that the development of a modern and efficient economy is correlated with the continued and successful democratic transformation of its country. Only prosperous societies, or those promising to become prosperous, can be a sound foundation for the strengthening of democratic order and the rule of law, as well as a barrier against political extremism.

In that regard, Croatia counts on foreign assistance - and that needs no particular emphasis. Although it does not suffer privation, Croatia will require the knowledge and the capital of foreign partners and international organisations to ensure a fast and efficient transformation of its economy. I want to use this occasion to point out that Croatia expects neither charity nor gifts, but rather direct foreign investment in its respectable natural and economic resources. The importance of such support is demonstrated by the example of

In Albania, reforms are moving forward. Relations are constantly improving at a bilateral level. Our government has concluded a number of agreements with our friends there, which will prove beneficial to both peoples. We have intensive and fruitful co-operation through joint regional projects under the Stability Pact. To our south, co-operation with our friends in Greece continues to improve in all areas of mutual interest, especially with regard to new economic initiatives that take place between our two states almost weekly. There is also excellent co-operation with another Nato member country from our region, the Republic of Turkey.

My friend President Petar Stojanov from Bulgaria recently visited my country. Our two countries have signed nine different bilateral agreements covering a variety of issues. Those agreements will enhance the positive environment for co-operation between the two countries.

The Serbian regime in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is the main obstacle to stability in the region. We must all redouble our collective efforts to bring Yugoslavia into the family of European nations, where its citizens want to be (and where they belong).

In Montenegro, local elections were recently held, which verified the reforms and the democratic path taken by President Djukanovic. That country needs our support and encouragement. It deserves it, and it is the right thing to do.

The position in Kosovo is improving despite the seriousness of the situation. It is necessary to build a democratic and multi-ethnic society, and to respect all human rights and freedoms, including the rights of all ethnic groups. We are concerned about the violence and the large number of inter-ethnic incidents, because tensions may spread out into neighbouring countries. Therefore, we think that KFOR should increase its presence and activities on the border in order to prevent any possibility of a spill over of the violence into neighbouring countries, and to prevent organised crime and extremism from spreading throughout the region.

How does all this relate to the Republic of Macedonia? Many have called my country an island of stability, and at times that has been true. The Republic of Macedonia is the only country in the former Yugoslavia to have avoided war and bloodshed. However, I do not want my country to be only an island of stability. I want the Republic of Macedonia to be part of a peninsula of stability in southeastern Europe.

How can we build that peninsula of stability in southeastern Europe? There are some common ways of doing (that to which most freedom-loving states subscribe.) In our own countries, good relations with our neighbours, continued economic co-operation, improved political co-operation and enhanced cultural and educational ties will all lead to greater stability. All states and all peoples of the region have a duty to involve themselves in such activities.

Outside our own country, the international community can support the Republic of Macedonia and our neighbours in our efforts to create greater stability and to become exporters of that stability. The Stability Pact is an excellent basis for the development of neighbourly co-operation, but a major effort is needed to give the Stability Pact greater impact.