

Aleksandar Vučić

Prime Minister, Republic of Serbia, Belgrade

Dear friends  
ladies and gentlemen,  
Mr. Commissioner,  
Mr. Vice Chancellor,  
Legendary Governor,

thank you for having us here and I am not as charming as my predecessor Ivica Dačić and it is not going to be that interesting as it was two years ago.

Last year I was not able to come here because of terrible floods which happened in our country. First of all I would like to thank to all our Austrian friends that were very supporting to help us out a lot and to change the situation and we will never forget your assistance and your great support. Thank you my dear friends.

I do my best to be as brief as it is possible. If someone would ask me whether this glass is half full or half empty as I told you I am not a very charming person I would always say it is half empty and that's about Serbian people feelings towards European Union. Of course, we still have majority of the people but there is a drop of popularity of European Union in my country.

There are several reasons for that. In my country there are more political reasons than economic reasons for that. It's always seen and yesterday there are some very same reasons as my Georgian colleague has already mentioned like those statements that there would not be any enlargement within five years, but we have repeated these sentences for thousands of times and I think that Commissioner Hahn is really fed up with listening to all of us criticizing the same statement.

But there are some other important issues. We don't face unprecedented growth rates in all our countries in Western Balkans. We don't face great anti-corruption for it, at least I am very dissatisfied with the efficiency in

Serbia and believe me it is not a better situation in all the other countries. We know that we have to do much better in the future.

I know that there are a lot of things that must be fulfilled to reach European Standards and I am not asking to get something for my country that we did not deserve. And that was the reason that we first of all last year after winning it was a kind of – I thank you professor Lendvai for saying that it was a kind of landslide victory because for the first time we were not promising our people an easy life and easy solutions which are very present still in our region.

What I promised to our people was tears and threats and a lot of work and we started after we faced this terrible floods and after we succeeded to recover from those floods, we started to deliver on really economic reforms. We passed new labour law supported by European Union and the Venice Commission as well and when I visited my friend Matteo Renzi in Rome six months ago and he was proposed by the Venice Commission to do the changes in Italian labour law like Serbia did it. You know it was a great honour for Serbia.

Then we passed new bankruptcy law, new property decision law, new construction permitting law and you would see this year because we have rumours but not only rumours but the informations from the World Bank we were on the position of 91st place regarding doing business, now we will be in a position better than 41 or 40 this year because of all these changes.

Than we started with something that people did not like even to hear particularly not to be provided to deeds which was fiscal consolidation measures. We in the past acted very responsibly and in 2008 when the crises started in entire Europe we actually started to raise our public salaries, public wages and pensions and it cost us a lot because of our terrible public debts and our terrible fiscal deficit and we had to be prudent.

My proposal was to cut public wages for 10 per cent and to cut pensions either and you can image how difficult it was and I think that we were the only country in the region that did it, that delivered on that. We started with

the austerity measures, we were not seeking and we were not searching for easy solutions.

I still don't know how but people believed in that. People believed in that although it was absolutely, everything which was proposed was completely the opposite of everything that people were hearing and were listening to in our region – not only to mention the case of Greece but of all the others from the region of Western Balkans.

It is very easy, these ideas of easy solutions were very easily spelt over into my country as well. But actually we started those reforms and we got an arrangement with the IMF, and we passed the first revision because we had very good results which means that we cut off fiscal deficit from 70 per cent last year and so far we have 1.6 to 1.7 per cent of fiscal deficit and it won't be bigger than 2.9 to 3 per cent by the end of the year. That is a kind of not a bad result.

Of course, there are many many other things that we will have to face with and I have no illusions that it would be very easy to deliver on many important stuff in the future.

There is one very important thing that bothers me a lot, that frightens me from time to time, and I am not going to speak about big topics although I have to respond to those people and to my friend Commissioner Hahn's words and because he was very kind and he really understands the situation in Serbia and in Western Balkans. It is not easy always to understand our very complex situation. Something that bothers me a lot is the issue of regional stability.

Serbia really invested a lot into that regional stability because all these economic measures won't show any results without regional stability, without preserving regional stability. Why I am saying that? You saw what happened in only seven hours fight in Macedonia, 28 guys died. Seven hours! We cannot have even that kind of an example even in the Ukraine. Seven hours – 28 died.

I was listening very carefully the rapporteur from Holland and I was very satisfied that people from Bosnia were keen not to be mentioned here, but I would like to see more of a stability in Bosnia itself. These are – if I may say today, if a dare to say – even a big, bigger problem than the problem between Serbs and Albanians. Although our relationship is very complex it is not easy to define it. It is not easy to resolve all the problems but for the first time ever I went to Albania very recently. After 68 years Premier Rama visited Belgrade. Last time when we spoke to each other it was in 1946 when Tito and Enver Hoxha met each other in Belgrade. Can you image that?

I think that we succeeded to establish that kind of a dialogue between Serbia and Albania and we have the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština.

And why I was saying that we do face a kind of job of popularity of European Union in our country. The fact is that our people they always feel and they always see – it does not matter whether we are right or not and I am always ready to admit that there are lot of things to be done in our country and I am very much aware to follow our homework –, but our people they do see that there are some kind of moving targets for us and they know something which is true, which is not a kind of impression that we do have to face tougher conditions than let's say Romania and Bulgaria, that's the fact, and we are not running away from that, we will do our job, and even today we will then be the poorest country of EU if we would become a part of EU.

We will do our best to have an economical and sustainable and viable country and market and I think that with these reforms we will be able to achieve very good results in the very near future but the thing that I am afraid of is preservation of stability within the Western Balkans and I am not sure whether we need bigger interference, a bigger involvement of EU-countries or not.

I don't know what we can do on that or to master on that. I am not pretending to know everything and to know even many things but we need a kind of support for that let's say core network, transportation network in the Western Balkans or if we going to get nothing from EU because Serbia is apart of

those countries that will have one tenth of that budget that Johannes was mentioning, just let us know because we are speaking about the very important highway between Niš und Priština. If you cannot finance it, it is okay, let us know. We will do it from our budget, not a big deal and we are not seeking for your money. I did not come here to ask you to give us many of money of Austrian tax payers. No! We earn our money.

We will do our best to secure and to build before that a viable market economy and to attract more and more investors from Austria, for Austria is one of the biggest and one of the most important partners of Serbia and we see our future within European Union. We do appreciate a lot of Austrian's friends and we are very satisfied that Johannes Hahn is the Commissioner for Enlargement and they don't hide it. He knows, he understands Western Balkans. He can understand our differences from the past.

You know even today when you ask just an ordinary guy in Austria about the role of Gavrilo Princip, that was the guy for all the others that assassinated archduke Ferdinand in 1914, they would say that was a Serbian terrorist, if you ask every single guy in our country, even if you ask myself, I would always say that guy was a Serbian hero because he was fighting for his freedom and for the freedom of the Serbs and some other nations of the Western Balkans, but really it doesn't matter.

We think that we are very close to Austrians, we think that we belong to the same type of society and I will tell you why European idea is a still winning idea in Serbia. It is a very easy respond and I am not going to respond on that question in front of you.

That question might be well just choose the type of society you would like to belong to. If you put a question like that the answer to respond is very simple. That's what I have heard actually from the Danish ambassador to Serbia and that's why it is always easier to respond to all the others that I enter European-oriented in my country.

I thank you very much for not mentioning anything from my biography because people, you know, when they want to be very kind to me they

always do their best to forget to say something about myself. That was very bad in my political biography. I am not ashamed of that. I was very honest to my people in Serbia. I was confessing all my mistakes not hiding them. I can do it even here, not a big deal for me. I think that people appreciate it, my sincerity and my honesty.

I always say the same. I have no different stories in Moscow, Washington, Vienna or Brussels. When Putin was in Belgrade I was saying in front of Putin when I didn't see many of your European colleagues from European Union that would doing the same, I was saying to him that the strategic all of Serbia was and will always be to be a part of the European Union.

After I made a statement of our necessity to diversify our gas hoses I was really attacked by some of Russian media which was not the case with many of European leaders and we are still not a new member state.

Also here I can tell you and not to hide anything that, yes, we would like to preserve a very good traditional relationship with Russia and that's it and that has nothing in common with our European path because our real path is our strategic, and yes, we would like to have very good friendly relationship with Russia in the future as well.

We would like to just hear whether you count on Serbia in the future and to have very sincere respond, that is something that we need because people in Serbia they see that we are always in a way blackmailed on Kosovo issue, sorry the time, I am very open and very honest with you because actually we finished with it.

With the screening process with the best grades in the region, we were ready to open, let's say, Chapter 32, eight, nine, ten months ago, and we would be ready to close it into two months. We still did not open a single chapter because some countries in Europe they still wait for us to fulfil something on Kosovo issue and I can tell you even after that Brussels Agreement after Priština had their own elections we succeeded and it was all our initiative to sign justice and traditional agreement which was more difficult for us to sign it than Brussels Agreement itself, then an implementation plan on that

Agreement, then to resolve the problem of civil protection issue, municipal budgets issue. On the administrative line we would say they would say crossing border points to be resolved in a way that you asked us and there are a lot of issues.

I think we did not lose our time and that we were boosting actually friendship within different countries and among different countries in the region.

I can tell you also that I think I am always doing my best to criticise first of all ourselves and you will never hear us a single bad word from myself about Albanians, Bosnians, Croatians and all the others, I am not here to criticise anybody except ourselves. At least I think that we had the fewest number of stupid statements and I have always been – many stupid statement coming from the Balkans – and don't forget it, everything and many wars also started in the Balkans, and we need always only one spark that might enlighten something even more stupid.

I want to thank you for your dedicated work, Commissioner Hahn, I want to thank you Mr. Mitterlehner, Vice Chancellor of Austria, for helping us a lot, and particularly encouraging many investors to come to Serbia, we hope to host you very soon in our country.

Regarding political stability of Serbia so far it has not been many problems. We hope that we will be able to preserve it and with your support, with your help, if we will be able to preserve regional stability, have no doubts that economically will not only survive but will be able to recover our country and to recover all of the countries and to deliver better results to all the people in the Western Balkans.

Sorry that I bothered you a lot. I thank you very much once again for listening.