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**Speech by HR Catherine Ashton,
at the Civil Society meeting in Belgrade**

**"The EU and the Western Balkans
in a changing world"**

Thank you for the invitation to meet with you today. Dialogue with civil society is an essential element of the EU's engagement around the world; even more so when it comes to our closest neighbours.

I am happy to be in Belgrade and to be visiting the Balkans at this early stage of my new responsibilities as EU High Representative. The Western Balkans are key to the EU.

But before I turn to the EU-Balkan agenda let me first sketch the wider context in which we all operate. It may seem a digression but bear with me as it might help to explain why I believe so strongly that security, the rule of law, the European Union and the need to shape our own future, matter so much. None of us can afford to be left behind.

Let me begin by saying something about the foreign country that is the most important of all. That foreign country is called the future.

Think back. Last year we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which symbolized the end of the Cold War. Think about what has happened since then.

- The Chinese economy has grown exponentially. India is catching up. Brazil is a success story. And even Russia has managed to get itself included in this group though it is a different sort of country.
- In the same period the Internet has taken off. Mobile phones are now almost universal.
- The polar ice has melted more than ever before in human history and we have suffered a global financial crash such as we have not seen before.

All these events tell us that our world is quite different from anything we have seen before. All these events are global events - also something we have never seen before. The scale of change in China, the interconnections of Internet and the financial system are the future that we see but do not understand.

P R E S S

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In this 20 year period Europe has not done badly. We are not completely whole and not completely free. But we are much better off than we were 20 years ago - at least most of us are.

I am not sure if that is true of people in this country and in your neighbors. You have all suffered the worst kinds of personal tragedies and collective insecurities.

These kind of troubles make victims of innocent people. They arise when there is a disturbance of the state, either through war or through civil war.

The state is there to protect people and to provide them with security. The security of our lives, our possessions and our families depends on the law. And the law depends on the state.

If you want to have some certainty in your life you have to know which state you belong to. You have to have some certainty that the state that you live in, where you own your house, where you work, is going to exist in 20 years time. The more certain you are that it will still be there for the days of your grandchildren the more comfortable and secure you can feel.

The insecurity in this part of the world in the last years has been because of the uncertainty of states and of their boundaries. For the sake of everyone's future that has to end now and permanently. I believe that we are all on the right track and that this can be achieved.

But the state itself is no longer enough in the world I am describing. This is a world of continents, not of small countries. Brazil is three times as big as any country in Europe. The United States accounts for a quarter of the world's GNP. China has a population of 1.3 billion. India may overtake it.

In this world the small and medium-sized states of Europe cannot provide real security. That is why the European Union is essential for our future. Young people cannot be confined in the narrow space in one country any more. I am delighted that people in Serbia no longer need visas to visit the rest of Europe.

We need big markets if we are going to have certainty about jobs and our future prosperity. We are going to need a big weight in international affairs if we want to deal on something like equal terms with the USA, India and China. All of these things are possible but only through the European Union.

So this is the wider canvass as I see it. This is why the rule of law, the European Union and looking to the future matter so much – everywhere but especially in this part of the world. Having described the big picture, let me focus more specifically on the Western Balkan region.]

To define and grapple with the future one has to understand the past.

Where do we come from?

We should never forget what happened in the 1990s: the years of war, of refugees, of European divisions.

Both the EU and the region have come a long way since then. We know where we want to end up – with all the peoples of the Western Balkans in the European Union. And we have charted the way there, with a tailor-made policy and clear conditions.

The core of EU policy for the region is the Stabilisation and Association Process. This means on the one hand a stabilisation process after the tumultuous 1990s and on the other it is about ever closer association leading towards eventual accession into the EU.

This approach is inspired by the pre-accession process and experiences with Central and South East Europe. At the same time, it sets out specific conditions for the Balkans, such as regional cooperation and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

The European Security Strategy of 2003 already put it clearly: "the European perspective offers both a policy objective and an incentive for reform".

It is in the Balkans that the EU launched its first ever crisis management operations, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Ever since it has been a challenge to find the right balance between political conditionality and crisis management, between "local ownership" and "international governance".

Where are we now?

Compared to the 1990s, we have achieved real progress. The Balkans today is a different place.

Slovenia is already a well-established member of the EU; Croatia is close to concluding its membership negotiations.

The Commission has proposed to start accession talks with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and is preparing its opinions on the EU membership applications of Montenegro and Albania.

Serbia, the biggest country in the region has, as you all know, recently applied for accession to the EU.

Meanwhile, visa liberalisation has taken place with most of the countries in the region, with others due to follow this year. We want the peoples of the Western Balkans to feel – and be – part of Europe.

The EU is drawing on all its foreign-policy instruments in this region. Military and civilian CSDP missions have been concluded successfully in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. And the ones in Bosnia-Herzegovina are evolving in response to changing realities on the ground. In 2008, we launched our biggest civilian mission ever, the rule of law mission in Kosovo: EULEX.

At the same time, important challenges remain. Good neighbourly relations are essential. Regional cooperation is emerging but it is still at an early stage.

Last but not least, the countries in the region need to do more to resolve outstanding bilateral issues. Many border disputes remain unresolved; trade issues still exist which should be a matter of the past, with everyone joining CEFTA. Judicial cooperation on fugitives is a real problem; and the pending cases before international courts show the depth of lingering disputes and animosities.

The way to Europe passes through European ways of solving disputes. Through dialogue and with eyes set on a common future within the EU.

Let me talk about some our specific challenges now:

We welcome Serbia's application for EU accession as proof of the commitment of the Serbian government and people to EU integration and our common values. I am pleased that EU accession receives such high public support.

I hope you will be able to maintain this enthusiasm. As you know, the accession process is a long and hard journey. Constant reforms are required. This might be difficult sometimes. But it will be rewarding in the end - as it has been for all the countries that have joined the EU since its creation.

Cooperation of Serbia with ICTY remains central. We welcome the significant progress that has been achieved and hope that the next report by the Chief Prosecutor Brammertz will be as positive as the last one.

I am also pleased that President Tadic started an initiative for a Parliamentary resolution to condemn the massacres that took place in Srebrenica more than ten years ago. This is an important

step in coming to terms of the crimes committed and dealing with the ghosts of the past. Across Europe, we have learned that one has to be open and self-critical when dealing with the past.

We understand that Kosovo remains an important issue for Serbia. However, different views on the status of Kosovo should not prevent us from moving forward in solving practical issues. In particular, regional cooperation must move forward. Kosovo must be enabled in a pragmatic way to participate in regional cooperation initiatives.

Kosovo is an integral part of the EU's Western Balkans strategy. The EU may have left the status issue to individual member states. But the EU as a whole is clear that the future of Kosovo is European.

We have committed important resources in Kosovo, including our biggest CSDP operation. In turn, Kosovo authorities need to do a lot more to deliver on their commitments and improve the lives of all their people. The EU will be present, helping, advising and monitoring. And we look forward to the day that Kosovo and Serbia will have solved their differences.

Let me now turn to Bosnia and Herzegovina, from where I have just arrived.

Bosnia and Herzegovina too has come a long way since the conflicts of the 1990s. Infrastructure and institutions were rebuilt, and some of the wounds of the war have started to heal. It has seen some economic growth over the years. It has signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement and visa liberalisation is in reach.

But numerous challenges remain. Everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina wants to join the European Union – every citizen, and most elected leaders it would seem. But the spirit of compromise to get there is plainly lacking at the political level. Let me be clear: Bosnia and Herzegovina can only join the European Union as one country, by speaking with one voice, and by respecting individual human rights and the different cultures of the constituent peoples.

Politics of division and flirtations with secessionist rhetoric are as harmful as they are pointless. The EU will never accept the break-up of Bosnia and Herzegovina; we look forward to seeing the country instead as a member of the EU one day, with strong entities working within a single functional state.

Bosnia and Herzegovina will elect new leaders this October, who will lead the country for the next 4 years. This will be a crucial period.

I have encouraged the Bosnian voters to think hard about what they want from their leaders during this period. It is a period where Bosnia and Herzegovina could – potentially – reach candidate status and move irreversibly on the track to Europe. But this will not happen if the current "politics as usual" continues. As ever: great opportunities go hand in hand with tough choices.

Montenegro, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are also advancing in the right direction. In all these countries the EU worked hard to demonstrate that the European perspective means something concrete already now. The biggest achievement in that regard was visa liberalisation. Besides Serbia this was also granted to Montenegro, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia last year.

The Government in Skopje is working on moving the country towards the European perspective. Concrete progress and a settlement regarding the so-called 'name issue' would be extremely helpful.

Albania has over the years seen important progress too. However, current political difficulties are endangering further progress. I must say frankly that I am a strong supporter of political dialogue and not boycotts as a way to find political solutions.

Where do we go from here?

As I said already: the EU is determined that the future of the whole region lies in eventual accession to the EU. Progress on that path depends on the commitment to reform at home. We still face important challenges: good governance, rule of law and human rights. And bilateral issues have to be solved and regional cooperation must be further strengthened.

We are working with the countries in the region which do not at the moment benefit from visa liberalisation to allow them to fulfil all necessary conditions to achieve this soon. Indeed, we are working with the entire region to facilitate people-to-people contacts.

Together with local leaders, as well as civil society, we have to strengthen our ability to explain what the EU means, today and tomorrow.

We will have to recognise that the integration of the whole region into the EU will take time. But we are backing you up with all our available foreign-policy tools.

Our message is clear: "the EU is with you until you are in the EU".
