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Opening address by Ambassador Dimitrios Kypreos
Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia
at the Regional Conference of the Ministers of Interior and Ministers of Justice

“Facing the Challenges of Organized and Serious Crimes in the Western Balkans”

Belgrade, 28 September 2009

Distinguished Guests,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

We are meeting here today to discuss a formidable challenge that organized crime poses to the region and to each of the countries that is represented here. All of us will speak of the job that still needs to be done. But I offer you, before you launch into discussing specific legal, logistical and other problems today and tomorrow, to pause and consider how unlikely such a gathering would have seemed only a decade ago.

Only six years ago, Serbia’s Prime Minister fell victim of an organized crime conspiracy. For a moment, complete capture of state institutions by criminal groups of influence seemed a realistic possibility. Today, only a few kilometres away from here, Serbia boasts one of the best equipped courtrooms to handle the organized crime trials. The perpetrators of this and other crimes have been brought to justice.

Just a decade ago, the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia have ended. The suffering of the peoples of this region has poisoned the relations of the new states with suspicion and fear. Today, prosecutors and police officers have established professional links, and the politicians are engaged in permanent communication. You sit together in this room, in Belgrade, mobilizing yourselves to achieve even closer coherence in your efforts to fight organized crime.

Not so long ago, the countries of this region – emerging from war, blockade, and breakdown of the Socialist economic system – teetered on the verge of state failure. Today, the whole region is drawing itself closer to the European Union.

We shall not take this progress for granted, but neither should we congratulate ourselves with what is achieved and diminish the rigor of our efforts.

Quite the contrary.

The efforts that the countries of the region have made now begin to deliver tangible results. Visa liberalisation with the Schengen group of countries, free trade agreement with the EU is a reality for some of your states and a short-term perspective for the others.

New liberties, new possibilities of networking offer an opportunity for the Western Balkans to once again become a place where people travel, work, chose to live across the borders in this region, but also in the wider European area. But as the openness grows, so should increase the understanding of common security and the ability to combat the organized crime structures that consistently grow in their complexity and sophistication.

It is essential therefore, that the States tackle the organized criminal groups by being at least equally organized and coordinated, and that they respond to the regional and transnational nature of organized crime through regional coordination of efforts to prevent and to repress these crimes.

I am proud to say that the OSCE, having field presence throughout the Western Balkans, has stood by the governments of this region in most, if not all, efforts to improve regional co-operation, especially in field of organized crime. We have supported the entire spectrum of actors and institutions that are involved in combating organized crime.

- We worked with the police, prosecutors and judges to improve their capacities, but also helped link the law enforcement professionals from across the region.
- We helped the Ministry of Justice in writing new legislation and devising modern tools to protect witnesses, seize and confiscate assets acquired through organized crime, drawing on best European practices.
- We also worked with prison administration to make sure that criminals convicted on organized crime charges are not able to run their criminal networks from the prisons.
- Just recently, we have been working both with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice to refresh the framework of combating organized crime through a comprehensive Action Plan.

Fostering regional co-operation in all these areas has been our essential goal. I can compliment the prosecutors, police and the judiciary for making steps towards each other

– often bravely overcoming a difficult heritage of the past history. Their professional attitude has helped many people in the region to feel more secure, and assisted their countries in making the impressive strides that I have mentioned in the opening of my speech.

I can not stress this enough – the regional co-operation should continue and expand. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that such ideological breakthroughs as establishment of the Balkan-wide arrest warrant are seriously discussed at the political level. Certainly, it might take years to arrive to such result, but the broaching of this subject already shows determination and political daring.

While we speak about co-operation, I want to welcome representatives of Italy, Austria, Germany, other EU states. Their support to Serbia's efforts has been essential. To give just one example – Italy's experience in fighting organized crime helped us advise Serbian authorities on witness protection, special detention regime, asset seizure and other legal and practical elements that the Italian judiciary and the police learned through painful and at times tragic process of combating similar crimes.

Let me highlight that for OSCE, organized crime is not only a matter of security. It has been establishing as a conventional wisdom in the Organization that it is also a social problem and a problem of governance.

We are an Organization that stands for standards of human rights and governance, and the good laws are only as good as their implementation is. We believe that challenges to security like organized crime can not be addressed at the expense of human rights or of the due legal process. To the contrary, success is intrinsically linked to those fundamental principles.

One of the characteristics that set organized crime apart from ordinary crime is that it resists detection, investigation and prosecution through intimidation, violence, but also through corruption.

The more accountable, transparent and developed democratic institutions are, and the stronger the rule of law, the more successful the states will be in countering the organized crime. That is why we work closely with Serbian authorities to draft the necessary laws, but also invest significant efforts in making sure that there are necessary professional and logistical resources to implement these laws.

Later this afternoon, you will be addressing many of these problems in detail. In conclusion, I want to praise Minister Malovic and Minister Dacic for the work they put into combating organized crime, and into organizing this regional event. I want to stress that to me, our Mission's key success is in developing close partnership with Serbian institutions – both governmental and civic.

I wish you all success your deliberation. We must send a clear and important signal today to those involved in organized crime that we stand together, work together and become increasingly sophisticated in understanding and countering the threat that they pose. The OSCE is standing by your efforts, appreciates the success that has been made, and is ready to support the steps that are still necessary to make.

Thank you.