

## WELCOMING ADDRESS

Ivan Sedlak\*

*Mr. Chairman, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen, honoured delegates,*

*I have the great honour to welcome you on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and in my own name. Our job today is to answer a very important question raised by Academician Stevan Karamata, Chairman of the conference, in his address, and this is the position of an ethnic group -- the Goranians -- and other non-Albanians living in the extreme south of our state and the southernmost tip of our autonomous province of Kosovo-Metohija.*

*It is well known that the Republic of Serbia, which is to say Yugoslavia, is the only one of all republics of the now defunct Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia to have retained the concept of civic state of all her people. Where the position of the various ethnic communities is concerned, we have every right to assert that Yugoslavia and Serbia are multiethnic, multicultural, and multi-confessional environments, where the policy of equality of ethnic communities has attained full prosperity and full justification.*

*When we speak about the policy of ethnic equality, we take as our point of departure several segments. One of the main segments and commitments of this policy is that most ethnic communities and ethnic groups living in these lands are autochthonous, that they have lived here for centuries and, on the basis of this, are citizens of Serbia and Yugoslavia with full rights in every sense of the word.*

*As opposed to this concept, a concept of mono-ethnic states is surviving in the Balkans and among the former republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (now independent states), where the*

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\* Minister in charge of human rights and national minorities in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, in April 2000.

*specific characteristics of the ethnic communities are respected inadequately (or not at all), or where representatives of individual ethnic communities (who have lived for centuries in this region) have been driven off their lands. Bearing in mind that the international community has decreed that human rights and the rights of ethnic minorities are the highest political criteria for assessing the level of democratisation of a society, the question arises: Why did we have the events of 1999 -- the NATO air strikes -- and the intensification of violent changes of the ethnic structure of the population in our southern province?*

*Yugoslavia is a state where every ethnic community has all rights according to the highest European and world standards. This fact can be easily proved by analysing all international documents in this field, which have been embraced and incorporated in the legal system of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its Republic of Serbia.*

*In comparison with other states, Serbia and Yugoslavia have gone even further. The state has accepted to finance all rights of the minorities and ethnic communities. Yugoslavia, that is to say Serbia, provides schooling in the languages of the minorities (elementary, secondary and high education). Similarly, it provides financing of media in the languages of the ethnic communities from state coffers. This situation has existed throughout Serbia, beginning with the northern province of Vojvodina, down to our southern province of Kosovo-Metohija.*

*In Vojvodina, the ethnic communities have been satisfied with this level of rights and the exercise of these rights. The same applies also to Kosovo-Metohija, except for a section of the Albanian ethnic community who entertain separatist ideas.*

*What we have in the southern province, then, is not a struggle of the ethnic Albanian community for enhancing and promoting human and minority rights, but a struggle for territory, a struggle for re-tailoring the borders, a struggle for creating a Greater Albania. Instead of a multicultural, multi-confessional, multiethnic Kosovo-Metohija, the indigenous populations, people who have lived here for centuries and been respected here for centuries, have been placed in a position where they have to leave their ancestral homes and abandon everything they have earned -- let us hope only temporarily -- or to retain only what is enough to keep body and soul together. This is the case with all non-Albanians -- Serbs, Romanies, Turks, Goranians, Muslims, and others. Until recently, they have had all rights in Kosovo-Metohija, but now they*

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*have been stripped of the fundamental human rights -- the rights to life, to freedom of movement, to private property, etc.*

***T**he purpose of this conference, therefore, is to explain who has lived in the župas (roughly: districts) of the Šar mountain range in Serbia, who lives there today, and what this means for our multicultural, multi-confessional, and multiethnic Serbia and Yugoslavia. We hope and trust that the results of this conference will help shed light on the position and rights of the ethnic communities living in Kosovo-Metohia.*