

**Alija Izetbegović's speech at the First Congress of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA)**

**Sarajevo, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1991**

“These are truly unusual circumstances and an unusual moment in time – unusual, unfortunately, in the negative sense. Bosnia and Herzegovina and its citizens, and thereby the Muslim people too, are undergoing the most dramatic moments in the past hundred years of the country’s history. It is a matter of war and peace.

Bosnia has known both war and peace in the past. What makes the current situation exceptional is that the war we are threatened with would be no ordinary war. It would be total war, and many of the chief actors in the events taking place are not aware of this, or pretend to be unaware. The Army is strolling around the length and breadth of Bosnia, as though everything was just so, and some irresponsible cartographers, wholly unaware that they are sitting on a powder-keg, are drawing new maps and partitioning Bosnia. It is as if the borders of Bosnia, 300 years old and more, created by the political shifts of tectonic forces during a long and turbulent history, were not to their taste, as if they were merely administrative, arbitrary and as if the ones they are now drawing in smoke-filled party offices are the true, historical borders. But if powder-kegs explode, everything will vanish in a cloud of smoke and disgrace: the cartographers and the generals, and all the parties and their leaders, all the laws and institutions, and the greater part of everything that has been built up in this region by the painstaking labours of dozens of generations. Because they have the misfortune to be indestructible, all that will be left is three bloodied and defeated peoples, half-crazed and degraded to the limits of barbarism.

Confronted with this bleak picture, our party has opted for peace and the avoidance of every risk of conflict. And the greater the danger, the more, and the more resolutely, will we opt for peace...We need to do everything to avoid conflict, for if it should come to this – since it will be no ordinary, limited conflict – everything becomes meaningless. We have fully understood this. Others must understand it too. Our option for peace is more, therefore, than the ordinary love of peace. It is a sense of responsibility in the finest sense of the word.

The SDA has the right to its own specific aims and interests. But in striving for peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it represents equally all the citizens and peoples of the Republic, for the maintenance of peace and the avoidance of conflict is supremely in the interests of each and everyone in this country. Our advocacy for the survival of Yugoslavia, in the early days, was

motivated by this interest: the survival, that is, of a particular form of state community now and to come. It seemed to us that this was the only way to find a way out of the crisis by political means and for everyone to obtain something, if we could not all have everything we wanted. We believed that every other route, in which secession and 'a rump Yugoslavia' were mutually linked and interdependent, led to violence and conflict. Unfortunately, we were not deluding ourselves. We continue to believe, though it is now somewhat utopian, that some form of community of the nations (republics) that formed Yugoslavia is both desirable and possible. This is why we accepted without reservation the Hague document, that opened up such a possibility...Those who did not want to revive any kind of Yugoslavia either now or in the future, either in the old or the new European bases, rejected the 'Hague Paper'. They were the Slovenes and the Serbs. Unlike the usual pattern, the Slovenes did so this time quite openly, the Serbs covertly. The Slovenes rejected the idea of any kind of new Yugoslavia in favour of independence. The Serbs rejected the proffered Yugoslavia in favour of 'Yugoslavia'. Their Yugoslavia, of course, was not Yugoslavia at all, and that was the primary reason for its being unacceptable to us. The second and more important reason was that the future structure offered to us (formulated in the so-called Belgrade initiative) was not democratic. We could live with anyone, in any kind of community, on condition that it is a democratic one, but democracy in this region, to all appearances, will be reached only through a long process in a rather distant future.

In such a situation, a sovereign Bosnia and Herzegovina in a free union was for us the only guarantee of our living in dignity and freedom. This is true not only for the Muslim nation, but also for the Serbs and the Croats. Given the population structure, such a Bosnia and Herzegovina must have a special relationship with Serbia on the one hand, and Croatia on the other, regardless of whether these two republics (states) have themselves any kind of mutual connection. We believe that this could be resolved. The Serbs must not have the feeling that they are cut off from Serbia by state borders, nor the Croats from Croatia. This would mean that the Serbs would not need passports at the Drina nor the Croats at the Una.

Serbia and Croatia are nation-states. Bosnia and Herzegovina is not, and can therefore only be a civil republic. For it is not Serbs, Croats and Muslims who live in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but a national blend of these peoples, and others too, of course, in smaller numbers. Anyone who talks of national self-determination (in the ethnic sense) must explain how this principle, which is in itself not in dispute, can be applied to such a mixed population as we have, not only here in Sarajevo for example, but also throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the real question is not how to achieve national self-determination, but how to achieve the self-determination of a population of mixed nationalities. There is an answer to that – the historical formula of Bosnia as multi-confessional, multi-national, multi-cultural community. Why spoil something that has been created by a confluence of historical circumstances and which has functioned well, and in addition which represents a humane, democratic and – if you will – European solution? Why change it, even if it were possible to do so? And especially if it is impossible without violence and bloodshed, and if the alternative on offer is a retrograde concept of national autocracy?

I therefore invite our Serb and Croat fellow citizens, and our Serb and Croat neighbours, and their leaders, to seek a fitting way out of this situation, one based on equity and reason, so that our peoples may be spared the suffering that we have been witness to these days.

Let no one try to subjugate us, for we cannot be subjugated, nor to deprive us of our rights, for one day we shall regain those rights. We neither love life more than others nor fear death more than others, and our wounds pain us equally.

We have proclaimed our neutrality in this war, for it is a dirty fratricidal war in which we cannot and do not need to soil our hands. We have refused to send our young men to the military, for this is not a war for freedom. In so doing we have saved the lives and souls of many of our people: their lives, because they have not been killed, and their souls, because they have not killed. We have so acted as to be neither executioners nor victims. This stance of ours has gained the recognition and support of all people of good will. It has immeasurably enhanced the reputation of Bosnia in the world. At a time when you are justifiably ashamed of some of the events taking place in this region, you can say with pride, if you are in a foreign country, that you are from Bosnia. Out there, that means that you are for peace, democracy and human rights.

[...]

I shall end this brief speech by addressing the Muslim people. Like us today, a small nation once found itself faced with the same dramatic choice: to bow its head, or to hold it proudly aloft – to be slaves, or to remain free people. The poet of that nation responded with these famous words, with which I shall conclude my speech: ‘I swear to God Almighty that we shall not be slaves!’”