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STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY MR. STJEPAN MESIC PRESIDENT OF CROATIA

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Distinguished high representatives of UN member countries,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the particular privilege of being the first speaker at the beginning of the second part of the United Nations summit devoted to information society. I am a lawyer by training and a politician by vocation. Therefore, I obviously cannot be expected to present a technical contribution on our topic. However, what I can or, indeed, must do as a politician is to present my thinking not only about information society but about information as such, the availability of information, about the need to know more and more on everything at all times - and about the possible implications of such a state of affairs for the development of human society, for our current civilization.

I fully agree with the appraisal presented by the Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan. He said that this summit is unique because unlike other similar meetings it does not deal with global threats but considers, rather, the best use of benefits provided by the information era. However, while agreeing with the Secretary General, I would like to extend and relativize his appraisal.

Let me explain: the unimaginable development and progress of engineering and technology, primarily in the field of communications, has really ushered in a new period in the history of humankind. We have undergone a historic transformation, and that is not a mere phrase. Our lives and life styles have changed thoroughly and irreversibly, and we may not even be fully aware of that.

What was but recently science fiction has become reality. What was first developed for defence requirements or, in simpler terms, for war, today serves peace and provides a new dimension and new quality to the life of millions throughout the world. An inconceivable volume of information has become available to an until recently incredible number of people. Internet is providing access to a world of information on anything we can imagine, including things we did not even know.

This brings us to the point where I would like to supplement and relativize the appraisal of the Secretary General. Information society has opened up access, to put it simply, to all information on everything. However, what it does not provide is an evaluation of the reliability and authenticity of offered information. We are flooded with data, we think that we know and that we can find out everything about everything, but do we know what these so easily accessible

information are like?

My second point: it is true that we have access to information on everything, but have we ever thought whether information on us is available to others as well? Have we ever thought who are the others and what they could start to do with information about us? Recently I read in a Croatian paper the results of a poll in which readers were asked whether they were afraid that Internet might be used for disclosing their private data. Almost 40% replied that they were afraid of that possibility, meaning that they considered it realistic.

This is precisely why I would like to elaborate on the appraisal of the Secretary General with which - let me repeat - I basically agree. Our conference is really not concerned with global threats; it studies instead the potential of something which can rightfully be called a global blessing. At the same time, however, we should not ignore the fact that information society also conceals a potential which can turn the blessing into a nightmare. I am not being a pessimist. I am simply a realist and I think we should keep an eye on something that is absolutely possible.

Today the collection of information is simpler than ever before. The spreading of information is easier than ever. The same applies to the need to find out as much as possible about many people, which is greater than ever in an age affected by global terrorism. Information are becoming the foundation of power, position and influence, they underlie the threat facing our civilization but also its defence. Information and their malignant form - misinformation - are becoming a powerful weapon in the fight against political opponents, against business competitors but also against persons having different views.

The fight for information is becoming a mortal combat, a struggle which decides who will survive and who will succumb, who will get a lucrative contract and who will go bankrupt, who will organize a monstrous diversion and who will foil it, who will 'sell' his policy to the public and who will be profiled as being dangerous and unacceptable in the eyes of the same public.

I am talking about total availability of totally uncontrolled information and about their possible manipulation. I am also talking about the temptation which any government will find it difficult to resist over a long term - the temptation to use the benefits of information society in order to enforce full control over its citizens and all persons residing in its territory. I have no doubts that such control will be enforced, and it is already being enforced with a completely legitimate goal - to reduce the danger from global terrorism. This is the beginning - but where is the end? Where can the end be?

You may disagree with me, but that is how I look at things. You may think I am opposing the free flow of information and private initiative. Nothing could be more mistaken. In my public appearances I have always upheld the citizens' right to timely access to true and complete information on any matter of their interest. I have always claimed that personal, private initiative is the driving force of development in any field. But I am definitively against turning freedom or private initiative into a fetish - regardless of consequences.

Yes, everybody is entitled to publicly expressing his or her thoughts. But everybody is also entitled to finding the truth about any matter of interest. Because of this nobody should have the right to use Internet for wrong or fabricated data. As a politician, in this context I have particularly in mind false interpretations of historical events, because in the information era such misinterpretations have become available to everyone and have turned into a means for spreading political propaganda of the worst kind, racism and chauvinism.

Yes, every state has the right and indeed the duty to defend itself and its citizens from the dangers of global terrorism. However, no state has the right to use its defence as a pretext to jeopardize fundamental rights and freedoms immanent in the democratic society in which we live and to which we aspire.

This is why I am taking advantage of this opportunity and of this forum, and inviting you to consider the possible reconciliation of freedom of information on the one hand and, on the other hand, the need to introduce some kind of supervision of the information which current technology and communications are bringing virtually into our very homes.

I invite you to consider the need to introduce supervision of the possible enforcement of total control over everything and everybody, and to avoid the abuse of such a possibility.

Information society is a reality. It is the outcome and the achievement of the human mind and it can - to quote once again the Secretary General - improve the quality of our living, learning, communicating and doing business. We have entered this society unprepared and we still have to acquire the habit of living in it. We must learn how to use the chances it offers so that it really becomes a blessing rather than a nightmare, in the service of Good and not of Evil.

Information society gives us instruments for better mutual knowledge and closeness. It can provide an incalculable contribution to the assertion of human freedoms and rights, to the promotion of the ideas of democracy and tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation. But there is also a dark side of the potential offered by information society, and I took on the duty of drawing attention to it.

The theme of this summit is a major challenge for everybody. I have understood this challenge as an invitation to share my thinking with you - but also to share my fears.

Thank you for your attention.