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### Macedonia and the Balkans in the 21st Century

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# Speech

## MACEDONIA AND THE BALKANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

**Presented by Her Excellency Ljubica Z. Acevska\*  
Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia**

Ladies and gentleman and Dean Conison, I am greatly honored by the invitation to speak before you today and the opportunity to share my thoughts and views on current and future aspects of the political and economic situation in the Balkans, particularly the Republic of Macedonia. I would like to thank the Valparaiso International Law Society and the Illinois State Bar Association for the opportunity to be here this afternoon and talk about the future of Macedonia and the Balkans. Additionally, I would like to thank Makedonka Papuckoski<sup>1</sup> for this invitation for me to be here today.<sup>2</sup>

First, I would like to provide you with a geographic and historical overview of Macedonia and the Balkans. Of course, today more people know about Macedonia than they did before March 23, 1999 when the chaos started in Yugoslavia and in Kosovo. Macedonia is in the heart of the Balkans; it is located in southeastern Europe, to the north of Greece, west of Bulgaria, east of Albania, south of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and directly south of Serbia and Kosovo.

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\* Her Excellency Ljubica Z. Acevska, Ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia has represented Macedonia since its independence in 1992. Initially, she served as the U.S. Representative of Macedonia until 1995 when she was appointed as Macedonia's first Ambassador to the United States. As Ambassador, she has forged a closer relationship between the United States and Macedonia and has paved the way for future communications through her involvement with various state bar associations and the ABA Central and Eastern European Law Initiative.

<sup>1</sup> Introduction by Makedonka Papuckoski, Co-Chair, International Law Society; Student Representative, Illinois Bar Association; and Articles Editor, Valparaiso University Law Review.

<sup>2</sup> When Makedonka first extended the invitation, I agreed and said that I would love to come speak at Valparaiso University School of Law. She contacted the Embassy on a regular basis to make the arrangements. However, I was too busy to at the time. Her continued persistence and determination throughout the year, which I admired, finally created an opportunity for me to come to Valparaiso. I am confident Makedonka has a great future ahead of her because she is able to convince people to get things done.

Macedonia has a population of 2 million people. The ethnic breakdown of Macedonia is about 67% ethnic Macedonian followed by the 23% ethnic Albanian population. Macedonia's population also includes about 4% ethnic Turks and 2% ethnic Serbians in addition to its other national minorities. The major religion is Macedonian Orthodox and the official language is Macedonian. Macedonia encompasses the ancient land of Alexander the Great.<sup>3</sup>

In recent history, territorial land claims of Macedonia have been the cause of two Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913.<sup>4</sup> It was stated at the beginning of this century that the Balkans create more history than they can endure. Unfortunately, this statement proved to be undoubtedly true. The Balkans are still burdened with ancient quarrels and historical disputes. During this troubled century, the Balkans initiated the two wars both earlier and at the end of this century, one world war and two major international interventions. In Bosnia and Kosovo, enormous numbers of innocent victims, refugees and displaced persons still continue to be a major threat to international security.

What are the reasons for such violence in this region? To answer this question, it is necessary to look back and analyze a period of almost 15 centuries starting with the arrival of Slavic tribes in the Region, their relations with the native population and their internal struggle for domination. Then, the impact of the Turks conquering the region, which resulted in a five-century rule of the Ottoman Empire, and the spreading of Islam must be considered. Finally, the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at Versailles, the atrocities of the ethnic hatred during the Second World War, followed by the 45 year long reign of Communism, and violent dissolution of former Yugoslavia also played consequential roles in shaping the Balkans.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible to make such a comprehensive analysis with the limited time that I have at my disposal today. So, I will just underline the fact that the roots of misunderstanding, distrust and conflicts in the Region seem to encompass a wide range of issues including religion, culture, and national and territorial land claims. These issues still continue to be a major obstacle for achieving lasting stability, democratization and prosperity of the Region. As a result, numerous

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<sup>3</sup> See generally ARRIAN, *THE CAMPAIGNS OF ALEXANDER* (Betty Radice ed., 1971). See also MALCOLM R. ERRINGTON, *A HISTORY OF MACEDONIA* (1990).

<sup>4</sup> See generally FRED SINGLETON, *A SHORT STORY OF THE YUGOSLAV PEOPLES* (1985).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

wars were initiated in the Balkans leading to a frequent manipulation of the borders, thus leaving large national entities divided between two or more states. The most recent history in Kosovo undoubtedly confirmed that any attempt for another border change in the Balkans is analogous to opening Pandora's Box, thereby proving to be a very real threat to the international security.

So maybe we should ask ourselves: where should the countries of the Region and the international community find the answer or the model for good inter-ethnic relations, good-neighborly relations, peace and cooperation; a model for successful preventive diplomacy; and a model for solving conflicts via political dialogue rather than the barrel of the gun? The answer may lay in the heart or the crossroads of the Balkans in the small, landlocked and peaceful Republic of Macedonia.

Throughout history, Macedonia has frequently been a victim of the aspirations and power struggles for domination over the Balkans by its neighbors and other countries. However, Macedonia has been frequently referred to as "an island of peace and stability in a hostile neighborhood," as evidenced by the Republic of Macedonia peacefully and legitimately gaining its independence in 1991 following the violent dissolution of the former Socialist Federation of the Republic of Yugoslavia. Macedonia was the only former Yugoslav Republic that refused to take part in the wars waged in Yugoslavia this decade. Since the break up of former Yugoslavia, four wars have been fought on that territory, none of which have been fought in Macedonia.

Very much aware of the existing territorial aspirations and policies for forceful changing of borders in the ethnically intermixed Balkans, the Republic of Macedonia is firmly committed to strictly follow the principles of democracy, political independence and resolution of all problems by peaceful means and dialogue, on the basis of equality, mutual respect and noninterference in the internal affairs of other states. Particularly aware of its influence and importance for the stability and prosperity of the state, the Republic of Macedonia devoted special attention to the advancement, protection and respect of human rights. Most importantly, the emphasis was given to the protection and promotion of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, which constitute one third (23% ethnic Albanians) of the overall population of the country. Consequently, the protection of minority rights has been constitutionally guaranteed and regulated by a clear and comprehensive legal framework, which fully corresponds and even surpasses international standards.

Furthermore, the maintenance and development of good inter-ethnic relations was the constant priority of all political forces in the Republic of Macedonia. For example, since the independence, every Government has been a coalition of Macedonian, Albanian and other minority based political parties. The most recent example from the last November's parliamentary elections is the biggest proof for this attitude, showing a realistic and visionary approach. Namely, although having won the necessary majority to comfortably form a Government, the coalition of Macedonian parties invited one of the ethnic Albanian parties to participate in the Government.<sup>6</sup> The offer was accepted, and now the country is governed by large inter-ethnic coalition.

At this point, allow me to quote the Deputy Secretary of State, Mr. Strube Talbott, who in his speech about the "Balkan Question" at the Aspen Institute few months ago stated:

Macedonia deserves special care and attention. It's a brave, young independent state that has made a real and promising effort at establishing multi-ethnic democracy and thus, so far, in escaping the worst pitfalls of the nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

This quote reflects the attitude and the long-term policy of the United States towards Macedonia.

I am also confident that the international community, and the United States as the dominant world power and the leader of the free world, have finally learned the lesson that it is much easier and substantially cheaper to prevent an eventual conflict, than to stop an ongoing conflict to enforce peace and then help in reconstructing the involved country or countries.

That is precisely why I think it is of utmost importance for the international community and the United States to act now and help the further democratization and reforms in the Balkan countries. In turn, this would create conditions for their faster economic revival and prosperity, their integration in the Euro-Atlantic organizations, which

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<sup>6</sup> The November 1999 Parliamentary Elections in Macedonia resulted in a coalition government between the Macedonian opposition parties VMRO and the Democratic Alternative with the PDP, a conservative ethnic Albanian political party.

<sup>7</sup> Strube Talbott, speech at the Aspen Institute, *The Balkan Question and The European Answer* (August 24, 1999)

(full text available at [http://www.aspeninstitute.org/asg/asg\\_publications\\_st82499.asp](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/asg/asg_publications_st82499.asp)).

will ultimately eliminate the factors that may contribute to further conflicts. Focus should be on creating a Greater Europe for the new Millennium, and not on creating a "greater this or that country."

I am proud to be able to say that since Macedonia's independence in 1991, the United States acknowledged the peaceful and constructive attitude and behavior of the Republic of Macedonia on an international and domestic scene alike, and supported in every possible way the efforts of the Macedonian leadership for establishing a stable, democratic and peaceful country, with excellent record of inter-ethnic cooperation and harmony. Unfortunately, not all the countries in the region have the same attitude as the Republic of Macedonia. The recent conflict in Kosovo is a strong reminder of the terrible consequences resulting from a wrong minority policy. The fact remains that these consequences ultimately affect a wider region and, almost as a rule, countries that least deserve to be affected and destabilized.

For example, as a result of the current crisis, the Republic of Macedonia suffered tremendous economic hardships and social pressures. It was extremely burdened by the effects of accommodating more than a 350,000 refugees from Kosovo, upsetting an already delicate ethnic heterogeneous population. This amounts to almost 17% of the population; in U.S. terms, that would be the equivalent of 30 million refugees coming into the United States within a few weeks. I think even the United States would have a hard time dealing with that type of a growth within a few weeks. Additionally, Macedonia suffered economic hardship because of the complete stop of trade with Yugoslavia, its biggest trade partner and only transport corridor to Western Europe. Also, the cancellation of business contracts on behalf of Western partners (out of fear from the instability in the Region) resulted in a rise of the unemployment rate to almost 40%. The Republic of Macedonia is in danger of becoming the biggest victim of the Kosovo conflict if civil unrest ensues from the economic and social hardships.

The pressure of accommodating such a large number of refugees was tremendous for Macedonia. Being in a difficult economic situation and undergoing a process of comprehensive reforms itself, Macedonia had to spend money from its fragile budget to provide for the refugees. I was a direct witness to this effort during my visits to the refugee camps and I can tell you that I am enormously proud of the humanity and care demonstrated by Macedonia and its people. As a reminder, during the Kosovo crisis, the country proved to be an even bigger ally to NATO than some of its full-fledged members, allowing more than 30,000 NATO

soldiers to be stationed on its territory, which is twice the number of its own armed forces. Also, being a continuous and zealous advocate for the use of political dialogue and negotiation as the only means for addressing all outstanding international issues and problems, the Republic of Macedonia is particularly proud that the agreement which ended the conflict in Kosovo was achieved on its territory, proving once again that the Republic of Macedonia is a country of peace.

That brings us back to the original question: should the only success story in the troubled Region be left alone to cope with the problems it is facing as a result of the crisis, or should the international community provide substantial and immediate assistance, thus making a point that any country adhering to the values of peace, democracy, respect for human rights and international cooperation, will be ultimately rewarded for its efforts and deliberations?

The Republic of Macedonia needs economic assistance, and especially in the form of foreign investment. It is without any doubt that the best way to protect the political and economic sovereignty of Macedonia is to give a hand to the resurgence of its natural and human resources and endorse its economy into the European market integration. Any delay may prove to be a mistake with unpredictable consequences.

Ladies and gentleman, the chance for a long-lasting peace in Kosovo and the Balkans is now at hand. Simultaneously with the peace-keeping efforts, the international community must implement a comprehensive economic plan for the reconstruction and development of the Region, because it is obvious that the absence of economic and social stability was one of the major, if not the most important factors, contributing towards the growing current tensions in the Balkans. After the end of the war, there were NATO trucks going to Kosovo. Frankly, I believe that there should have been trucks with monetary aid going in.

The recently adopted Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe seems to be an excellent starting point for the accomplishment of this goal, but its implementation must be at a much faster pace. The countries in the region, particularly Macedonia, wholeheartedly accepted the idea of the Stability Pact, and have initiated a number of cross-border projects in the area of infrastructure, telecommunications, and other areas for the reconstruction and development of the involved countries. Even more important, these projects were a result of a much desired and strongly

suggested regional cooperation among the neighboring countries of the Region.

Unfortunately, the general feeling of strong hope and optimism regarding the desired results of the Stability Pact is slowly starting to fade, as a result of the extremely slow pace of its implementation. I believe that it is a very dangerous thing that may ultimately lead to a feeling of abandonment from the West among the countries of the Region. This may prompt unpredictable economic or political behavior on the part of frustrated participating countries, which may endanger the current delicate security balance. Therefore, the timely implementation of the Stability Pact should be an immediate priority of the international community.

Finally, there should not be a doubt in anyone's mind that the long-term solution from the problems in the Balkans is its inclusion in the European Union ("EU") and North American Treaty Organization ("NATO"). The inclusion of the Republic of Macedonia and other countries in the Region as an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic mainstream will transform the Balkans from a source of tensions and conflicts into an integral part of democratic, united and prosperous Europe. Europe must be a home for all of Europe and not just the West European countries.

We are currently at the very important threshold of the course of the world history. A century, or more accurately, a millennium plagued with wars, destruction, and millions of victims is behind us. However, an opportunity for a century and a millennium of peace, integration and global welfare is ahead of us. Whether we will take advantage of that opportunity and provide a safe and prosperous environment for our children and successors will, in many respects, be determined by the way we deal with the current conflicts, crises and trouble-spots around the world. We must establish, implement and defend more successfully the democratic principles and values, and develop long-term preventive strategies.

United Nations ("UN") Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in a recent "Economist" article, stated:



International commitment to peace must be just as strong as was commitment to war. The commitment to peace cannot end as soon as there is a cease fire.<sup>8</sup>

I will go further and say that international commitment to economic development must be as strong as NATO's commitment to war. Again Macedonia is an example, and should be a model. For instance, Macedonia employed preventive deployment. At the early stages of the Bosnian war in 1992, there was great concern that fighting might spill over into Macedonia. Our President at the time, Kiro Gligorov, requested UN peacekeepers be sent to Macedonia. The UN agreed and, more importantly, the United States participated in that employment. As a result, Macedonia's peace and stability can be credited to President Gligorov for having the vision to lead the country along the narrow, crowded path. I commend him for identifying a potential crisis in the early stages and taken steps to prevent it. President Gligorov's actions demonstrate that early warnings must be heeded and appropriate responses must be implemented.

Another instance in which the Republic of Macedonia resolved a potential conflict peacefully is the efforts of resolving the name controversy between Greece and Macedonia via political dialogue.<sup>9</sup> I think both Macedonia and Greece deserve a lot of credit for resolving the disagreements via political dialog rather than through the barrel of a gun. As tense as relations between Greece and Macedonia were, they are improving on a daily basis.

Furthermore, Macedonia is an excellent example of a country affording human rights to all of its citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious background. We have the disastrous effect of not doing so in the Balkans. Also, Macedonia is an example of humanity and solidarity as demonstrated during the Kosovo crisis in our response to the refugees. Macedonia has done its part since September 1991, not only by remaining peaceful and stable while allowing a massive influx of refugees but also by contributing to the regional stability by being a reliable ally of NATO. The purpose of President Clinton's visit to Macedonia this past June was to reiterate U.S. support for Macedonia. I

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<sup>8</sup> Kofi Annan, *Two Concepts of Sovereignty*, ECONOMIST, Sept. 18, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> The name controversy pertains to Greece objecting to the Republic of Macedonia referring to itself as "Macedonia" because Greece annexed a territory known as Aegean Macedonia earlier this century in the Balkan Wars and fears that Macedonia may seek back this land, populated by ethnic Macedonians.

will also note, that Macedonia is the first country in that region that the First Lady visited.

It is now time for the international community to be more responsive to the Republic of Macedonia by providing serious economic assistance to the country and also to the other Balkan countries. Economic prosperity is the key to the political stability in the Balkans in the new Millennium. Economic assistance is very necessary today; I am not talking about aide, I am talking about trade. Macedonia would like to one day be able to provide economic assistance to other countries and not to be a perpetual aid recipient. Although I mentioned the need for economic assistance, it is more vital and beneficial for the region to secure foreign investment. Macedonia has had some success securing such investment, as it has entered into agreements with such entities as the Overseas Private Insurance Corporation and EXIM Bank.

Macedonia historically has been the crossroads of east, west, north and south making it attractive for investment. In addition to its population of two million people, Macedonia's location is in the center of a market of over 60 million people. Investment opportunities are available in the overall infrastructure, telecommunications, banking, agriculture and in the high tech industry. I would encourage investment in the Balkans to help the Balkans be changed from a region of chaos to a region of prosperity.

We all live in a global village and what happens 6,000 miles away impacts the United States. We have to work to leave the Balkans of the 20th century in the 20th century. The word Balkanization should have a new definition, which defines harmony, and not the current definition, which invokes thoughts of chaos. In the following century and millennium, the Balkans should be part of Europe. Furthermore, Europe should embrace the Balkans, especially the Republic of Macedonia, a country committed to democracy, peace and progress.

So, what will the Balkans be like in the 21st century? I am optimistic about the future, but we must all work together. Young people are the future. They have a great opportunity to create a future of peace and prosperity at home and abroad. I hope that bright, young people like Makedonka Papuckoski will be engaged to help Macedonia, the land of her ancestors, and also her home, the United States. There are many opportunities for young lawyers to assist. The field of international law is growing in both the private and public sectors. The peace agreements, which have been drafted in the Balkans in the past few years, should

keep many lawyers busy for many years to come. There are still problems in the Balkans that need to be addressed, such as bringing stability to Kosovo and bringing democracy to Serbia and other issues. Finally, lawyers will be needed to draft business contracts arising from increased economic activity.

As I have tried to illustrate, Macedonia is a true success story in the Balkans and, if this model is emulated, the Balkans will be peaceful, especially if the Macedonian model is applied to other trouble spots in the world. We spoke about chaos in the Balkans this past decade, yet, though I use that phrase, it is not held to be true of Macedonia. Macedonia is a part of the Balkans and yet has been able to avoid the problems that plague its neighbors with astute leadership and assistance from the international community.

I reiterate, to the benefit of other countries, as well as for the Balkans, economic assistance must be given immediately because tomorrow it will be much more expensive. Likewise, for the Balkans to be peaceful and stable in the 21st century, it is important that they are integrated in the European union and into NATO.

When I was a student like you at Ohio State University, I heard an Ambassador speak. Although I did not agree with much of what he was saying, I kept thinking that it would be great to be an Ambassador. I can assure you from experience that it really is a fantastic job—a dream job. I would encourage you to consider becoming Ambassadors. Whatever career you pursue, the most important thing to remember is that you should have a vision, a goal, and pursue it with great vigor, regardless of the obstacles, for nothing is impossible and that includes having a Balkan region that is democratic, peaceful, stable and prosperous in the 21st century.