



MACEDONIAN PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATION

of the United States and Canada

2003 MPO Convention Keynote Address

Ambassador Butler urges MPO Members to Visit, Invest in Macedonia

Below is the Keynote Address given at the 82nd Annual MPO Convention by the Honorable Lawrence Butler, American Ambassador to the Republic of Macedonia. The 82nd Annual MPO Convention was held over Labor Day Weekend in September 2003 at the Hyatt Hotel in Columbus, Ohio.



Hon. Lawrence
Butler

Chestit Illinden I sto godini Makedonksa drzavnost! (Congratulations on Illinden and 100 years of Macedonian Statehood!).

A belittling phrase that captures the essence and spirit of Macedonia's potential today.

It is a pleasure for me to have this opportunity to share with you my perspective on the very promising transformation that is underway today in Macedonia. I will emphasize two messages: commitment and cooperation.

Since arriving in Skopje as the American ambassador a year and half ago, I have witnessed how far Macedonia's people have come and have seen the tangible progress that they have achieved. The commitment of the United States in actively supporting Macedonia as she stays they course of democratic reform - - and continues to build a modern, vibrant, multi-ethnic society in a secure and stable environment - - has helped to achieve substantial results.

While challenges lie ahead and much more remains to be accomplished, Macedonia's progress is real and irreversible.

One year ago, Macedonia's free, fair, and peaceful elections ushered in a new multi-ethnic coalition with a strong progressive agenda – a coalition committed to cooperation both among its parties and with the international community. Prime Minister Branko Cervenkovski, along with coalition partner Ali Ahmeti, made the right decision for Macedonia – the only right decision – by embarking on a program of normalization and cooperation, making implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement their highest priority.

I know that many of you sitting here in this lovely ballroom reacted when I said Cervenkovski and Ahmeti. I want you to recall those thoughts as I proceed.

Cervenkovski's and Ahmeti's dedicated efforts in the past year have paid off for Macedonia and Macedonians – of all ethnic identities.

The hard work under the Framework Agreement has significantly enhanced stability in Macedonia, strengthened its democratic institutions, and the rule of law, and thus restored Macedonia on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration and eventual EU and NATO membership. Their commitment and cooperation have given the land of your ancestors a new lease on life, a totally new perspective consistent with Macedonia's European and NATO aspirations.

Security and stability are the underpinnings of a democratic society and the foundation for economic growth and prosperity. Ethnic and cultural diversity will ensure the vitality Macedonia needs to thrive in today's globalized world.



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Macedonia's committed implementation of the Framework Agreement has allowed it to achieve essential benchmarks of progress. Just several weeks ago, for example, the State Department lifted its travel warning, which for two years had cautioned Americans not to travel to Macedonia due to instability.

Lifting the travel warning sent a powerful signal to potential visitors and investors around the world that Macedonia has closed the chapter on the 2001 crisis and is again making tremendous strides forward.

I won't stand here and deny that isolated pockets of difficulty remain, but the extensive process made in restoring state authority and rule of law throughout Macedonia can – and will sweep away the remaining challenges.

Deepening stability at home means that the Macedonian leadership can finally look forward and refocus its attention and resources on critical issues of long-term importance for the Macedonian people. The government this year has been able to accelerate Macedonia's preparations for NATO and EU membership.

President Bush speaks from his heart of America's enduring commitment to a Europe whole, free, and at peace. We believe that every European democracy that seeks NATO membership and is ready to share NATO's responsibilities should be welcome in our Alliance. Macedonia's future lies in NATO, and we are working with its people to help them achieve their aspirations.

Under the auspices of the May 2003 Adriatic Charter, co-signed by the United States, Macedonia has taken the initiative to reinforce cooperation with Croatia and Albania to undertake regional initiatives needed to bring their nations into the Euro-Atlantic family.

At the end of September, Foreign Minister Ilinka Mitreva will host another important conference with her counterparts from Albania and Croatia that will focus on expanding individual and cooperative defense reform endeavors. Macedonia's candidacy for NATO membership ultimately will be evaluated on its own merits, but cooperation with neighbors is a basic value of the NATO family. The work of Macedonia and its partners under the Charter will enhance the security, prosperity, and stability of the entire region.

In yet another sign of Macedonia's progress towards these shared goals, EU's "Operation Concordia," will depart Macedonia in December, an early Christmas present to the citizens of Macedonia since it reflects Macedonia's increasing self-sufficiency in providing for its own peace and security.

The people of Macedonia want and deserve a future of peace and prosperity, in a unitary state within Macedonia's existing borders. Critical to Macedonia's success will be economic reforms that lead to growth.

We see clear signs that this government is committed to move forward, to stimulate the economy and to actively promote economic trade development. The government's vigorous fight against the scourge of crime and corruption that drains away the energies and earnings of Macedonia's hardworking citizens and its enforcement of the principles of transparency and accountability must remain as top priorities. Prior to last year's election, unbridled corruption threatened to destroy the country from within. The government is fully dedicated to a dynamic, modern business climate that is conducive to investment and entrepreneurship.

Macedonians are looking ahead. They are looking to a future where economic prosperity offers an improved quality of life. A future where good, well-paying jobs are a reality and economic indicators are solid and promising. They want a future where personal goals and professional goals and professional aspirations are within their reach and attainable within their own borders. They want a future like the one you here today have helped create in America.



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My extensive travels throughout Macedonia give me a unique insight into what really matters to Macedonia. I've had the opportunity to engage with Macedonians from all walks of life. I hear their views, concerns, hopes and fears on a variety of topics. From business executives, students and street vendors in Skopje to entrepreneurs and artists in Bitola, farmers in Gostivar and community leaders and working mothers in Kocani, I have heard first hand what is on the minds of Macedonians.

I don't think it will come as a surprise when I say that the consistent message that rings loud and clear is the economy. Macedonians believe their country's poor economic plight is the single most important issue confronting them today. They know economic prosperity is vital to the future of their own country.

Getting Macedonians to work is a major goal of U.S. assistance. We are helping to create better business strategies, stronger financial institutions, improved products and services, expanded production, and more successful companies that will make Macedonia more competitive in today's global markets.

Several important U.S. assistance initiatives designed to help the government address Macedonia's economic challenges are in full swing – and important results are beginning to show.

Macedonia's Stand-By Agreement with the IMF is one of the government's most considerable achievements this year. Just last week, the IMF in its mid-year review concluded that Macedonia has met all of the end-June performance criteria. The agreement has paved the way for IMF financing, triggered the release of millions of dollars in international donor funds, and serves as a powerful sign that Macedonia's fiscal policies are on the right economic track. In making the difficult decision to implement an austere fiscal policy now, Macedonia is building long-term economic credibility.

Exports and global competitiveness are fundamental to Macedonia's economic recovery. USAID's Macedonia Competitiveness Activity project, a \$12 million four year economic strategy targeted to key business clusters is developing Macedonia's domestic, regional, and world competitiveness. Two of these clusters – lamb and cheese exports and tourism – are receiving assistance from world-class experts on competitiveness.

By working together – cooperating – and creating common visions, these sectors can dramatically improve profitability. Macedonia has the capability to produce high-value products and compete in specialty market niches offering high-end goods.

The Macedonian Competitiveness Activity is already making an impact. Two Macedonian construction companies last month were added to Bechtel's short list of pre-qualified contactors as part of the U.S.'s \$400 million reconstruction plan in Iraq.

The U.S. deeply appreciates the support of the Macedonian government in Operation Iraqi Freedom and NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. The Macedonian Army soldiers now in Baghdad and Kabul are working alongside U.S. and coalition forces to ensure stability, and have received high marks for their strong performance. Their extraordinary contribution in preserving freedom instills immense pride in all Macedonians.

Progress is taking shape in other key sectors as well. Macedonia took a huge step forward by becoming a member of the World Trade Organization last year. Through WTO membership, Macedonian products now compete on a level playing field. The Macedonian government continues to embrace U.S. assistance efforts of support as Macedonia harmonizes laws and practices in line with its new WTO commitments.

Macedonians themselves are at the forefront of leading their country; to effect the essential, broad changes that are necessary for Macedonia to achieve its full and rightful potential among European countries.



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Recently, 23 distinguished Macedonian leaders inaugurated the Macedonian National Enterprise and Competitiveness Council. Dedicated to leading Macedonia's efforts of building broad-based prosperity, the Council last month established three goals: double direct foreign investment by 2005, increase exports by 50 percent by 2006, and achieve a high rating from the World Economic Forum for global competitiveness. Lofty, but achievable goals.

Furthermore, Macedonia is preparing a new Company Law, which will be the centerpiece of all further commercial legislation. This new law will be compatible with European commercial legislation and will accelerate business registration and operations, as well as better protect shareholder and debtor's rights. In the past several weeks, the Ministry of Economy proposed legislation prohibiting managers from taking away the voting rights of employee shareholders.

In nurturing prosperity and productivity, the government must lead by example. Central and local governments are working side-by-side with each other on creating fair and balanced taxation, streamlining services, and establishing transparency in budgetary and treasury processes.

These highlights provide only a glimpse of the revitalization and transformation now underway in Macedonia. There are significant advancements in local government reforms, the judiciary, community initiatives, and education.

In preparation for the next generation of civil servants and public officials, the Macedonian government is grooming tomorrow's leaders, who will inherit the responsibility to shape, define, and guide Macedonia through the 21st Century. An effective government necessitates transparency, accountability and responsiveness to meet the rights and needs of its citizens.

On September 9, the doors will open for the first graduate class at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate Center for Public Policy and Management in Skopje. Twenty-two Macedonian graduate students will for the first time earn a masters degree from an American institution without leaving home. The Macedonian government's generous \$350,000.00 contribution along with a sizeable U.S. grant, demonstrates what can be accomplished through a strong partnership.

What can the Macedonian Patriotic Organization do for Macedonia? What is my challenge to you tonight?

The answer is: Visit and Invest. Cherish your memories of the past, preserve your culture, but come and see what today's Macedonia has to offer, and then invest in Macedonia. I've brought with me packets of information about specific investment opportunities and how to get started. Our Embassy – your Embassy – is standing by to assist you in the process.

You've heard me highlight the promise and potential of Macedonia – and you know the spirit and greatness of the Macedonian people. Things have changed dramatically – for the better. Macedonia's future lies with economic development, with economic prosperity, employment opportunities, and exports of Macedonian products. Not with ethnic strife and violence or false divisions of peoples and borders.

Kako sega, povtorno za arno da se vidime! (See you again for another nice, pleasant occasion!)