

Remarks by Mr. Thomas K. Yazdgerdi

Director, Office of South Central Europe, U.S. Department of State

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Thanks to the United Macedonian Diaspora for inviting me to speak tonight and to Meto for that introduction. I also want to recognize Minister Janakieski, Minister Naumoff and Ambassador Acevska, who served as Macedonia's first ambassador to the U.S., and to congratulate Lou Vlasho who will be honored later tonight with the Global UMD Macedonian Heritage Public Service Award.

Let me start by congratulating UMD for your 10-year commitment to advancing Macedonian-American friendship with the U.S. and preserving the communities. Of course – and I can say this here in front of the UMD community—our people-to-people connections are the lifeblood of our bond. Through your work—from local communities and university campuses in states like Michigan, New Jersey and Ohio to the halls of Congress – UMD is building new bridges between Macedonia and the U.S.

It's hard to believe how far we've come since UMD first opened its doors 10 years ago. At that time, the wounds of the 90s wars were still fresh and the promise of Euro-Atlantic integration remained an aspiration for most countries. Today 10 years later, we see that the vision of Euro-Atlantic integration—NATO and EU membership—can be realized; that past grievances can be overcome; reconciliation is possible; and the dream of a “Europe whole, free and at peace” is achievable.

But that dream can only be complete when Macedonia is fully integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions. The United States fully stands by our pledge to support Macedonia's NATO aspirations but the name issue has represented a barrier to its accession—and to advancing its EU membership—for far too long. Progress is hard in a region so complex, where memory and milestones matter so deeply. We know that. That is why we actively encourage both Macedonia and Greece to work diligently, cooperatively and imaginatively to resolve the name issue so that

Macedonia can take its rightful place in the NATO family. We will welcome that day.

We want Macedonia in NATO not only because it met the membership requirements back at the Bucharest Summit, although it had. Not only because it contributes more to our shared security than it consumes, although it does. We also want Macedonia in NATO to build on the proud security partnership U.S. and Macedonia already share. Almost three thousand Macedonian troops have served alongside U.S. forces in ISAF in Afghanistan; almost 500 in Iraq; in peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon. Macedonia voted with the international community in the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's sham annexation of Crimea; joined the global coalition against ISIL; and passed legislation to make Macedonia a "no go" nation for foreign fighters who seek to join ISIL's murderous ranks. Macedonians say that: "A good friend is recognized in times of trouble." The spirit of that proverb has been at the core of the Macedonian-American security relationship for more than a decade.

Even as we maintain our strong security ties – the bedrock of our bond – we recognize the economic potential of our relationship. Macedonia continues to grow, create jobs and attract new investment and dynamism from beyond its borders. The diaspora community is empowering that growth through its creativity, resourcefulness and global ties.

They do so for a simple reason: as Macedonia's face to the world, they recognize better than anyone the country's potential. But that potential cannot be fully realized without hard work to shore up the principles of inclusion, connection and dialogue that have undergirded UMD's work for a decade.

That is why we must work equally to guarantee our shared principles —the source of our economic success and the gateway to Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic future. It is important that all people from Macedonia—ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Albanians, Turks, Roma, and Vlachs [*vlak – a as in father*]*— are fully included in the political and economic life of the country. As Secretary Kerry said in his Macedonian national day statement last month, the country's diverse population*

is a “source of strength that continues to offer ideas, energy, and drive to move Macedonia and the region forward.”

And we must work together to preserve and protect all the values – rule of law, free markets, human dignity— on which our transatlantic community is based. That means remaining vigilant that our governments are clean, transparent and accountable. That means protecting the space for civil society, media freedom, judicial independence and minority rights.

Groups like UMD have a special role in this. By forging links between communities in Macedonia and the U.S., Canada and the EU, they have the power to promote dialogue and reform even when—perhaps especially when—change is difficult. The 21st century will belong to those countries whose political systems are democratic, pluralistic and inclusive. We must work every day to guarantee that secure, democratic and prosperous future together.

As Assistant Secretary Nuland said when she visited Macedonia in July, “realizing Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations is a priority for the United States.” Our governments—and our people—work toward this goal because our friendship is rooted in history, family and mutual respect. This work—this friendship—is at the heart of our enduring relationship and we welcome the partnership of UMD and others to sustain it.

Congratulations on all UMD’s success and I wish you all the best for the next ten years.

Thank you.