

**Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Countryman  
Roundtable with Print Journalists from Macedonia  
Skopje, October 26, 2010**

**Ambassador Reeker:** Certainly, a friend to the region, a friend to me and to our team and we were just delighted when he could take over the South Central Europe portfolio as Deputy to Assistant Secretary Phil Gordon. I think some of you had the chance to talk to Phil when he was here in May so we were very pleased that Tom would come out. With him, I just want to point out Paul Pfeuffer, who some of you also may know from years back, who was for a long time the Desk Officer for Macedonia in the Office of South Central Europe on variety of things, a lot of focus on Kosovo, so he came down with Tom from Pristina this morning and they head off to Brussels later tonight, well, technically tomorrow. I think maybe we'll let Tom say a couple of words about his first visit here, we had a couple of meetings, and then really just get to your questions and the chance to chat [on the record, unless there is something Tom wants to talk about in a different form, we can work on that too.]

**DAS Countryman:** Thanks for coming at the end of the day, I appreciate it and look forward to answering some questions. Let me say at the beginning that Secretary Clinton took the opportunity of her visit to Sarajevo and Pristina and Belgrade two weeks ago to emphasize that the United States remains present and committed in the Balkans, that we were here in all of these countries during the darkest days of war, and we're here today and we will continue to work with all the friends in the region as they work towards their future in NATO and in the European Union. She could not visit every country. She chose to visit the countries where the issues were most acute, most immediate, and that was, as you saw, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. At the same time, she asked me to come out here as soon as possible to reaffirm the strength of our partnership with Macedonia, and our shared interest in advancing the important issues that Macedonia faces, which are not only the name issue, not only the maintenance of a functioning multiethnic political system in Macedonia, but also the building, the continued work on building the rule of law in Macedonia, and building the independence of the judiciary and the confidence of the citizens that their human rights, and economic rights, and civil rights are protected by the state. That's why I came, that's what we talked about today, and I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

**Question:** Maybe you have heard that some days ago Mr. James Pardew was here in Macedonia and he gave a statement, which was personal, but still had some influence in Macedonia. He said the United States is not seriously engaged in helping Macedonia to solve the name issue. How do you comment this?

**DAS Countryman:** I don't know exactly what Ambassador Pardew said. I like him, I worked with him, he is a serious and capable diplomat - and without knowing exactly what he said I don't want to say if I agree or disagree. What I would say is that the United States is actively involved in encouraging the governments of Macedonia and Greece to address this very difficult issue.

**Question:** Can you answer one question, which is maybe not expected. In the past two-three years we could not see an official meeting of a senior American diplomat – Secretary of State or even Undersecretary or President or somebody. Is there any message or it is just coincidence?

**DAS Countryman:** I expected this unexpected question. If we have a message, we usually deliver it clearly, orally, directly, face to face. The fact that there have not been these meetings at the high level, which I know are important to other countries, should not be taken as a signal that Macedonia has no

crisis, or Macedonia has no friends, or Macedonia can't fit into the Department of States' schedule. To make any of those conclusions I think is unjustified. If that's what we meant, I would tell you.

**Ambassador Reeker:** Deputy Secretary Steinberg actually came here last year. You said there've been no meetings for two or three years. Just to make sure - Jim wouldn't want us to forget him.

**Question:** At your meetings today with officials, did you address the name issue at all? (unintelligible)

**DAS Countryman:** If I said no, nobody wanted to talk about it, would you believe me? It is a subject that is uppermost on the minds of Macedonian politicians and Macedonian journalists for good reason. It's important. We consider it important. So, yes, we did discuss it. I did not come here with a new idea or a new proposal for the Government of Macedonia to consider. I came here to continue to deliver the message that Ambassador Reeker delivers here, that Ambassador Smith delivers in Athens, and that we deliver in Washington, which is a solution to this important issue will require difficult compromise and it must be done by the two parties and it must be done in direct dialogue in a respectful dialogue and in confidence, not through, pardon me for saying this, not through the newspapers and the media. And we strongly believe that is the only way this will get resolved. I do believe in the seriousness of both Governments in their readiness to address this issue. More than that, it's not up to me to say. It's up to the two governments to say how close or how far away they are.

**Question:** Is there any behind the scene negotiation? (unintelligible) I heard that the United States was helping the representatives there from the Greek and Macedonian side to reach some maybe compromise.

**DAS Countryman:** There exist channels, the Macedonian Ambassador in Washington is authorized to speak on this issue. Correct?

**Ambassador Reeker:** He goes to New York.

**DAS Countryman:** Mr. Nimetz is in New York. We keep in good touch with him as well. I don't know if this is what you are referring to. I hope there are many contacts between the two governments and that they are finding a way to discuss this, as I said, respectfully and confidentially.

**Question:** (unintelligible) the name issue in Macedonia outside the problems with Albanians (unintelligible) implementation of the Ohrid Agreement. How much you are informed about, how much the Agreement is implemented?

**DAS Countryman:** The short answer is – YES, I am concerned about that. The focus on the name issue, whether it is on the part of the Government, or the opposition, or the Parliament, or the media, or the United States Embassy – inevitably reduces the attention that can be paid to other important goals. And foremost among them is – as you've described it – continuing the faithful implementation of the Ohrid accords in fact as well as in spirit, achieving a multi-ethnic democracy with equal rights for everybody. We did discuss this today with various people. The Government remains committed, I think all the parties here remain committed to doing that but it requires careful attention from all the parties, both the government and the opposition parties. In addition I worry that the focus on the name issue detracts from the other reforms that this Government needs to make if it is to progress towards the European Union. And as I said everywhere else I stopped, in Tirana, in Podgorica, in Belgrade and Pristina – the most important issues for every state in this region are not border and constitution and

status and name. The most important issue is rule of law. Some day the name issue will be settled, Macedonia will be in NATO and will be working towards joining the European Union. And I firmly believe that for Macedonia, like every other state in this region, the hardest part of getting to the European Union will be achieving European standards in the rule of law, in independent judiciary and in guarantees of citizens' legal rights. So, there is important work that's been done, both on implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, which is an everyday topic - it's not something you do once and then say we're done, it's an everyday topic - and the implementation of what the Embassy tries to help with - projects that advance the European standard in the legal system, in the judicial system. I do worry that we lose attention on these points when we focus only on the name issue as if it were the only obstacle, the only difficulty that Macedonia faces.

**Question:** I saw your interview for B-92 in Serbia. You openly said that United States supports Serbia in a European way to go forward. That is not a Washington thing. Usually you say – we don't put things in European politics, but this time you openly and strongly support Serbia in this way. What about Macedonia? Do you have the same message?

**DAS Countryman:** I am happy to repeat it again. Yes, we have the same message that the United States strongly believes in the European Union future of Macedonia. In that interview on Saturday I was talking about the decision that was made by the European Union yesterday to approve the application of Serbia so that they could start the 10,000-page process of preparing for the European Union. And because that question was in doubt, we did do something that we don't always do - which was to make clear to all the European Union states that in our opinion Belgrade was actively seeking to fulfill its commitment to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. So, there is a very specific statement on a very specific timeline in that case. But I am happy (to say) every day - I'll go to Brussels tomorrow and I'll climb on top of a church and announce from the top floor - that the United States supports Macedonia's European Union aspiration.

**Ambassador Reeker:** If I can Tom, just to add, I mean, this is something - maybe it has become so old that you don't notice - but I talk about it all the time. We still have 25 million USD a year in US taxpayer funded assistance programs and it's entirely focused on helping Macedonia meet the criteria for European Union membership, for the accession process. We do that in harmony with the whole strategy for that is developed obviously with Macedonia as a partner but obviously looking with the other donors, including the EU itself, with that focus. Sometimes there are things that may be outside of purely EU.

**Question:** I know that, but it was the momentum for candidate to be for Serbia. We have the same situation, not the same but the next step, negotiations, we need that support, but we don't ... (unintelligible)

**Ambassador Reeker:** I was in Brussels three weeks ago. I went to Brussels for a week. Part of it was a conference of all US Ambassadors there but I, as I did last year, met with EU contacts specifically, often at their request, to discuss exactly this - our common interest and efforts, seeing Macedonia move forward in the process and addressing the issues involved in the reform. Reform is necessary for that, not just the name issue.

**Question:** About the NATO membership. What can Macedonia expect from the Lisbon Summit? And having in mind that there are many reports that the name issue could also be a regional problem or can reflect on regional stability as well as on Macedonia's internal stability?

**DAS Countryman:** Those are two very different questions. What should we expect at Lisbon, which is now just three weeks away, I don't know? I don't know if there will be dramatic news at Lisbon or not. I think this depends upon the work of the two governments involved, but I have no special news or special insight to give you, I am sorry. Is it a matter of regional stability? There is not a crisis here right now. Even in Kosovo right now they are going to elections as the President has resigned. These are things that you can call a governmental crisis but they are not a crisis in the sense that we all lived with, in the 1990's, when we thought about the words Balkans and crisis together. It's not violence. It's not an immediate risk of violence or war. But can we improve the stability of the region by bringing Macedonia into NATO. Our answer is YES – and I think it's exactly the same logic that all of the parties in the Republic of Macedonia have embraced, which is membership in NATO is a means of reassuring our citizens about the future of our country as a democratic western country where all of our rights are protected. That's what NATO membership means to a lot of people here and to make a complex issue very simple, that's why we believe that Macedonian membership in NATO will improve the stability, not just of this country, but of the region.

**Question:** Two times during this conversation you stressed the rule of law and citizen rights. (unintelligible) Macedonia these days is strongly criticized for lack of freedom of the press, lack of freedom of expression in general. Do you have any comment about this issue?

**DAS Countryman:** First, I am surprised that I've only mentioned it twice, because in every other city I stopped and I mentioned it at least three times every hour. I did not come to give a report card for the Government of Macedonia. There are many other organizations that perform that role. I can, of course, say that freedom of the press is a primary responsibility of any government. Responsibility for the press is the primary responsibility of the press and we wish to encourage both of them and we do this very directly with the Government in Macedonia or in any other country as needed.

**Question:** I have in mind the situation in Bosnia, situation in north Kosovo, situation in Macedonia. There are some skeptics who think that the international community is not committed to solving the problems here only because they don't know what's going to be with the future of this region. What do you think about this?

**DAS Countryman:** I think those skeptics are wrong. Getting to a peaceful, stable, functional society in Bosnia-Herzegovina is hard. It is difficult and nobody in Sarajevo or in Brussels or in Banja Luka or in Washington can write a plan and put it on the table and say – problem solved. It takes commitment of all the parties in Bosnia-Herzegovina and it takes the continued engagement of the European Union, of the United States and of other actors to make it happen. The United States is determined to stay there and to make it happen and I think the same is true of the European Union. Same thing for northern Kosovo, this is now a dialogue between the Government of Kosovo and the Government of Serbia facilitated by the European Union. The United States will support this dialogue. It's not our dialogue to control, but we will certainly support it. The topics there are the entire - it's not just northern Kosovo - it's the entire range, the entire definition of the future relationship between Belgrade and Pristina. The fact is both sides have agreed to have this dialogue, they have agreed that they will be serious and creative and practical, so I feel optimistic that they will make some progress and they will do it exactly because the European Union has taken the lead. Same thing in Macedonia, although I don't think you should compare any domestic situation in Macedonia to the situation in Bosnia Herzegovina or in northern Kosovo. There may be something similar but I don't believe it is the same immediate risk of violence that you can see in Kosovo or in Bosnia. But again, we are here, we are not going away. We'll

continue to help the Macedonian Government and all the parties here on the tasks that they themselves have identified as essential, including the everyday implementation of the Ohrid Agreement - in fact as well as in spirit.

**Question:** My question is some kind of a follow up to the name issue. It seems that at the present moment, the process is in the real deadlock, because I think from July 2009 there is nothing concrete on the table. Yes, I agree it's up to the governments of both countries finally to get constructively engaged in the negotiations and to try to find a solution. But there are analyses that without real support or real engagement of EU and US there isn't a possibility really to solve this issue. What is that bigger engagement of US? I think all here have in mind the engagement of Mr. Daniel Fried. It was several months before and several months after the Summit in Bucharest when Mr. Daniel Fried as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs was some kind of a parallel mediator between both sides and had series of meetings between him and the ministers of both countries. And when we, let's say, compare now the engagement of this administration with the interest of the previous administration, I think it is obvious that now we can see less attention from Washington about this issue. What is your analysis? Do you believe that really, only the two governments, of course, with mediation from Mr. Nimetz, can reach a solution or you share this view that it is necessary that we should have the EU and US assistance?

**DAS Countryman:** You used two verbs – support and engage. The United States supports the efforts of the two governments. The United States is engaged in the efforts of the two governments to communicate with each other. Now, I won't speak for the European Union, you'll have to ask them. Dan Fried is a long time friend of mine, one of our very best diplomats and he put his heart and his soul, in support of the White House and the Secretary of State, behind an effort to come to an agreement. He did not succeed. It's not because he did not try hard enough. The problem is that difficult. Some people, I'm sure ... let me say this ... Trying hard and visibly trying hard is not the same thing as succeeding. I do believe that success will come from the two parties and I do believe that in past efforts, including Ambassador Fried's heroic efforts in 2008, that the two parties relied too much upon the United States and not enough upon themselves. I do think it's possible to solve this, I do think that the United States is supportive and engaged - and when it's necessary we will be more actively engaged. I may not give you a call to tell you that we are more actively engaged - because more visibly engaged is not always more successful.

**Question:** Maybe you can tell us, you had a meeting today with our Prime Minister. Did you hear from him that maybe soon there will be some progress on the name? Recently there was a statement from Mr. Gruevski that in the meetings he has with Papandreou, there is no progress. Do you expect that there could be progress in these contacts between the both sides?

**DAS Countryman:** I have to let the Prime Minister speak for himself on this issue.

**Question:** We are getting constant feedback that maybe, on the negotiation table, there are other things which are at the bargaining between Washington and Athens, perhaps that's the problem - why the name issue cannot be settled - or it will be solved in a bad way for the Macedonian side. I can assure you, this has come from a very high instance in the (unintelligible) that Athens has other things for bargaining - and if they do that, they will get a better solution for the name issue. That was the story that (unintelligible)

**DAS Countryman:** It's a lovely story. It fits with the point of view of a lot of people, that this is not about an issue between two countries, that it involves much grander and more complicated geo-strategy. I don't think so. I literally have no idea what you're referring to, and believe me, I'm in a position where I would know if there were any such discussions.

**Question:** Do you think that Kosovo is excluded from the opportunity to be a member of NATO, having in mind that Kosovo is not allowed to have its own army?

**DAS Countryman:** At this point, the question is premature. We are very focused on, number one, helping Kosovo to build a successful democracy. The Constitution that the Republic of Kosovo has is one of THE most advanced constitutions in the entire world in terms of protection, of ethnic community and individual rights. Number two, we're focused on having them succeed in their dialogue with Belgrade in solving very practical problems related to everyday life for the citizens of Kosovo. And number three, we hope that that dialogue with Serbia - well, even before the dialogue begins and even before it finishes, we will continue to seek more recognition from the international community for Kosovo, so that it can fully participate in all the international organizations where it has an interest. Those are very immediate tasks that we are working on actively. NATO and the conditions under which, in the future, Kosovo might be ready for NATO or not, this is years away. I'm just trying to deal with the next few months.

**Question:** What is your impression, is the Macedonian government really convincing when they say they want to find a solution for the name issue? Do you have the impression that they do not want to find a solution?

**DAS Countryman:** The answer is yes, they are convincing. We are friends, I accept the word of the Government that they are working on it - and I accept the word of the Greek Government that they are serious about finding a solution. That doesn't make it easy. It's necessary for both governments to be serious, but that's not sufficient - it still is hard.

**Question:** What do you think about the Greek red lines? Are they acceptable as a compromise and what do they think when they say we have these red lines? How can we negotiate? We are not in the same position, we are not equal in these negotiations.

**DAS Countryman:** I don't have the Greek red lines. They haven't given me a copy of them.. I don't know if they came from the Government or if they came from a newspaper. I've got no comment on how the Greek Government approaches these negotiations, I've got no comment on the red lines, or the pink lines, or the blue lines of the Macedonian Government. I just urge all of them to keep talking and to focus more on what is possible (rather) than on what is impossible.

Thank you very much for taking the time. I look forward to seeing you next time I come back here.

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