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"Partners in Transition: Lessons  
for the Next Decade" Conference

Warsaw, Poland

10/5/99

PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

**"Partners in Transition: Lessons for the Next Decade" Conference**  
**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**Warsaw, Poland**  
**October 5, 1999**

I'm delighted to be here with all of you. It is a pleasure to see in one room so many people committed to the democratic transformation that has been taking place over the last ten years. It is unimaginable that just ten years ago, much of the energy and accomplishment represented in this room would not have been possible. The world looked to the Berlin Wall—where once armed soldiers stood guard—and saw young people dancing. Brothers and sisters were united and families restored. In Prague, where tanks once crushed the hopes of thousands, workers and students were gathering and demonstrating without fear. And where once dissidents were led away as prisoners in handcuffs, now they served as presidents leading free republics. And I am particularly pleased we are joined here today by the president of Bulgaria, whose voice has meant so much in this transition and who has given all of us courage and, with his leadership, has really rallied the people of Bulgaria to a better future.

Now ten years ago, the United States shared in the celebration and euphoria that swept so much of Europe and into Central Asia, but we know very well that the story and the struggle did not end there. In fact, in many ways it was just beginning. Because when the foreign TV crews had packed up their cameras and their satellite trucks, the world's attention turned to other events. The people of Central and Eastern Europe, of Russia, the Baltics, and Central Asia, were left alone with grim choices and frightening challenges. You were left with no clear map to the future. And there were many questions on the minds of those who looked out and saw a different landscape as to how it could be navigated successfully. Would you find the will to endure massive job losses and triple digit inflation on the path to free markets? Could you overcome decades of repression, dictatorship, and distrust to build a democracy that served and answered all people? Could the principles of democracy take root in societies where ethnic tensions, once suppressed by the Iron Hand of Communism, were re-emerging?

Choosing the path of democracy, free markets, and freedom required great vision, courage, and moral leadership. Ten years ago it was not the obvious choice, nor was it the easiest. But today in so many of your countries, there is no question that the path of free markets and democracy is the right choice. I have been privileged to visit many of your countries and I have seen firsthand the struggle and the possibilities of reform. I have met many of the people and the organizations represented in this room and have seen with my own eyes how you have contributed to the transformation that is occurring. Certainly I have seen that here in Poland. This nation is a testament to the fact that democratic and free market reforms, when decisively and thoroughly implemented, do work. It's been three years since I last came to Warsaw, and in those years, much has changed. New businesses and shopping centers are moving into neighborhoods. New cars are crowding once empty streets. Cell phones are ringing in cafes, parks, and sidewalks—that's an annoying indication of progress. But all of them are signs that a new middle class, the backbone of any democracy, is emerging.

I was very pleased that Hannah (Gronkiewicz-Waltz) would introduce me and make the comments she made, because certainly the role that the bank has played in this society has been central. But the success has not just been commercial or economic. New local governments are being chosen and democracy is getting closer to the people. Dozens of newspapers, magazines, and radio stations are reporting the news and openly praising or disagreeing with the nation's leaders. I've just come from the Lauder School, where countless Jewish children and families are once again learning and singing about their heritage. There is a wonderful air of tolerance and respect that is fueling a lot of the changes that are occurring. I met this morning with a group of women entrepreneurs in a factory. While the women I met marketed a variety of products and services—from cosmetics to language lessons—each of them had worked hard to thrive in the market economy. And they told me of their struggles and their accomplishments. I was pleased that several of them mentioned USAID programs, because America is proud of the role that we have been able to play in this transformation. And nothing better illustrates the successes we have seen in Poland than the fact that we have created a new NGO, the Polish-American Freedom Foundation, out of the assets of the Polish-American Enterprise Fund.

I know there are similar stories of hope and progress all across the region. But I also know the past decade has been difficult and has, along with the success, created and seen a lot of pain. You are in the middle of a transition, but you face the same complex issues that globalization brings to us all: dealing with the challenge of reforming pensions and social security; of finding ways to make health care efficient and universal; of training workers for jobs in the Information Age. For many, the path of reform has not yet led to greater freedom or greater prosperity. Senior citizens are asking, "What good are free markets when our hard-earned pensions are worthless?" Workers are asking, "What good is democracy when the closure of our factories has left us without the jobs and skills to gain new opportunities; when we have traded ration coupons for soaring food prices?" Teachers are asking, "What good is democracy when paychecks don't arrive on time and our children are hungry at home?" And yet for all of these problems, I know that people have not lost faith or given up. They understand that reform is the answer to all of these problems and that, to help reform succeed, we must work together and look to each other as partners in this transition. The United States is committed to being such a partner.

We also have to look to civil society, because building democracy and prosperity does not happen overnight. In my own country, we've been striving to perfect democracy for 225 years. It took us more than ten years to draft our constitution; almost 90 years to rid our nation of slavery; almost 150 years to give American women the right to vote. And even longer to ensure that all of our citizens are equal under the law. Each triumph in our American struggle to live closer to our ideals was only possible because of our civil society: ordinary citizens who spoke out against slavery or for women's suffrage and Civil Rights, those who organized grass-roots NGOs that would bring about change by bringing people together. We knew that the real changes had to occur in the hearts and minds and actions of ordinary men and women. And that is what is happening in your countries as well. These changes have to be rooted in the real life experiences of people.

I remember, as though it were yesterday, a conversation I had in Siberia with three generations of a Russian family. The grandfather and grandmother had worked at one of the

academic centers and had been very esteemed members of that community: the grandfather, an applied mathematician; the grandmother, a research librarian. Their two daughters were now teaching English in local schools and their son-in-law was starting a new business. Their two grandsons were learning both English and Russian, and how to use computers. For the grandparents the transition was extremely painful. The grandfather kept saying to me, "I don't understand how we get along in this new economy. It doesn't seem like there is respect for learning. It doesn't seem like our values have really stood the test of time. And I remember so well that even though we couldn't travel much and our options were limited, we were safe. And now we don't feel safe anymore. Someone stole my bicycle. That never happened before."

His two daughters spoke up: "But father, don't you remember we used to have to get up at two o'clock in the morning and stand in line for butter and milk? Now we have so many more things than we could have ever dreamed of. And we"—meaning her sister and herself—"we have traveled to the United States and to Europe. We know about the world."

And the grandmother said, "Yes, but they stole our bicycle."

In that one conversation, you could see and feel the tension: an older generation who had always talked about and dreamed of democracy, living with the costs that come with change; and a younger generation looking toward the future. Well, that is being acted out in countless kitchens and workplaces around the world, and certainly here in this region most acutely, because we understand very well that the changes that are required are built person by person, institution by institution.

You know, when de Tocqueville came to the United States back in the 1830's and traveled around what was then a very young country, what he noticed more than anything was what he termed "habits of the heart." That somehow, this rather unusual group of people that found their way to the shores of the new United States had developed and were developing habits about how to associate with one another, how to make economic success occur, how to be self-governing. And as I said, this did not happen overnight, and it is still ongoing. But it is those "habits of the heart" that must be instilled.

I was pleased when Slovakia's "OK 98" was recognized, because that epitomizes civil society in action. I remember very well my visit to Slovakia when the government was, at that time, attempting to shut down civil society, to outlaw NGOs. And the NGOs fought back, and spoke out, and organized themselves, and convinced people to go to the polls and vote—35 non-governmental organizations working together to ensure fair elections. Now you know how difficult it is to get two groups working together. To have 35 working together was a real testament to the commitment to civil society. They marched 3,000 kilometers across the country. They held rock concerts—a sure way of getting young people involved. They ran TV commercials, they dropped leaflets, they organized debates—and it worked. They can claim much of the credit for the freely elected government that is now serving in Slovakia, and I'm looking forward to visiting there tomorrow.

So it is that kind of commitment that is required in these times. And I have seen that commitment in every country that I have visited and that is represented here. In Kazakhstan, I

met with a group called the Association of Young Leaders, who are teaching about the importance of voting and becoming involved in one's community. In Kyrgyzstan, I talked to NGOs who joined forces to publish a newspaper to teach citizens the lessons of democracy. In Russia, I met with women who are starting their own businesses and, through their economic empowerment, are understanding more how to be active in the life of their society. In Estonia, I've met with people who came together to create a clinic that would offer a broad range of health services for women. And in Ukraine, I met with citizens determined to stop the trafficking of women. In Hungary, I met with those who are working with the Roma community to overcome obstacles to education and employment. In Bosnia, I sat with women and men who have come across their ethnic divisions to help rebuild their shattered lives. In Bulgaria, students and professors of the American University, who are committed to making it a front-ranked institution, are every day working to expand the boundaries of the learning and potential available.

I know that there are many such examples and there are many individuals who exemplify those examples. But there are also many people who have paid the ultimate price in the last ten years—through assassination, through imprisonment, through many other kinds of distress—those who have fought hard for democracy and feel that they have not made enough progress.

Often, at moments of great change, it is tempting to turn back. I think often of the story in the Bible of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Now even there you can imagine people who had been enslaved for generations, thinking they were on the way to the Promised Land. But it was hard. There were many obstacles along the way. So when Moses went up to receive the Ten Commandments, what happened? Well, many of the Jewish refugees fleeing from Egypt got together and decided they needed a committee to go back; that they wanted to return; that, as bad as things had been, at least it was a known evil. So the Back-to-Egypt Committee was formed. And when Moses came down with the Ten Commandments, he was met by people who said, "This is too hard. We can't do this anymore. Let's go back to slavery. At least there, we get our bread three times a day, we know what our job is, we don't have to think for ourselves, we don't have to break new ground."

Well, that is in the Bible for a reason. It tells us about human nature. It describes to us what happens in every generation any time there is great change. There are always those who want to "go back to Egypt," or, in this case, to turn the clock back on freedom and democracy and economic empowerment. What you have done, and what we stand with you to do, is to continue along the path, to continue moving forward. Because you know that at the end of that path there is a better alternative, and that the price is worth paying. The path of reform may be long and it may be rocky, and the goals may not be reached in the next decade or even the decade after that. But it is still worth the journey. So many of you know that and exemplify what the words behind me mean. So I am very privileged to be here as a representative of the United States, as someone who supports the work of USAID and the United States Government in assisting you along this path. I want you to know that the President and the government of the United States both understand how difficult the path is, but also fervently believe that the rewards are more than worth the struggle. You are the ones making the transition, making the change.

This morning at the roundtable discussion with women entrepreneurs, one woman told me that despite the difficulties she had confronted in making her business, she understood that "we are the opportunity." I liked that, because we are the opportunity, every one of us. So I congratulate and commend you for what you have done, what you have made happen in your homelands, the miracles that already occurred. And I will pledge to you that the United States will stand with you as you continue to make decisions that will lead to elections being commonplace, not remarkable; free markets that will function effectively and be the engine for powering the dreams of so many people; and a civil society and a democracy that holds out the reward that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be so much better than the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been for many of the brave and courageous people you represent.

Thank you all very much.