

Round Table Discussion  
Sophia, Bulgaria  
October 11, 1998

PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Round Table Discussion  
October 11, 1998  
Sophia, Bulgaria**

Well, I want to thank Ambassador Bohlen and all of our participants. And I look forward to hearing more about what each of you said, both what you are working to achieve and challenges you confront. It is a great pleasure for me to be in a country well-known for its tolerance and among the few that I have seen during this transition that have been so open to non-governmental organizations. That has not been the case in every country and I am sure there are difficulties and challenges that I would like to know more about. But in comparison with many other transition countries Bulgaria sets quite an example with its respect and appreciation for the NGO community.

I think it is appropriate that we gather here at the Shalom Jewish Community Center, which has also done so much to serve at the community "Meals on Wheels" delivered to the elderly, to many other important tasks. It is something that I believe we have to repeat over and over again. Which is why I am so pleased that the Ambassador suggested we have this discussion this afternoon. Because non-governmental organizations and citizen participation are critical building blocks to any sustainable democracy. And whether it is women's rights, the environment, disabilities, free elections, or civic participation, all of the things that you have mentioned here -- those are all essential parts of inculcating democratic values and then translating them into the practical day-to-day work of building, and maintaining, and furthering democracy.

That is why I was pleased this morning to announce at the Conference earlier that the United States government, through USAID, would be providing an additional financial support for NGOs here in Bulgaria, a six-million-dollar commitment that will help support and sustain Bulgarian NGOs, and additional money that will go to NGOs throughout the region. Because what you have already achieved, I think, is not only significant for Bulgaria, but serves as an example to other NGOs and countries in this region. Now if I could, Ambassador, I would like to hear more about what each of these groups is doing and what challenges they face -- whether you are advocating against domestic violence, or whether working to adopt a new law on non-profit organizations.

I know that the path is never easy, whether it is my country or yours, on behalf of NGOs and civic participation, and particularly if you represent unpopular causes, or minorities, or issues that provoke opposition in the larger community. Then that makes it an even greater challenge to be able to sustain your position and move forwards. So,

I would like to learn more about what it is you are doing and how you assess your progress, and what challenges you face, and what lessons you have learnt, and how you could share those with others.

*Mrs. Clinton:*

**Q.** This question is for the Bulgarian Association for Free Elections and Civil Rights. What has been your experience with citizens' level of participation in elections? Was it high in the beginning and has it dropped? How do you intend to try to keep citizens' interest and participation up? It's a big problem in our country and it's a problem everywhere.

**Answer:** (Inaudible)

*Mrs. Clinton:*

**Q.** I can't let the last question go by without asking about the environment, which you know is a critical issue in the entire world. And one of the challenges we face is educating people about what is happening with the environment, because we take our environment for granted unless something so visible happens that we are then forced to act. And so in your training efforts on the environment, what have you found is the most effective way to get people's attention -- short of a disaster, you know -- in their own backyard?

**Answer:** (Inaudible)