

Women of the 21st Century Conference
National Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria
October 11, 1998

First Lady Hillary Clinton's Remarks at the Opening of the Conference
**Women of the 21st Century: Transcending boundaries to Sustainable Development in
Southeast Europe**

**Ivan Vazov National Theater
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I am delighted to be here today to help open this important conference: *Women in the 21st Century Transcending Boundaries to Sustainable Development in Southeast Europe*.

Mr. Panitza, I want to thank you for chairing this open session and I want to thank all of the women who have joined us here, at the head-table, who have come from each of their countries to be part of this conference. I want to thank the President who opened the conference with his strong remarks about its importance. And of course, to our hostess, who has done so much to make this conference happen.

Mrs. Stoyanova, Mrs. Kostova, Mrs. Sokolova, thank you for the hard work you have done making this conference happen, working tirelessly to lift up the lives of women and strengthen the future of this region.

I also want to thank our American Ambassador, all the conference organizers, the delegates and the people of Bulgaria for giving me such a warm welcome when I arrived here about six o'clock this morning. Although I have only been here a few short hours I already feel quite at home.

On my way here I thought back to a conference of women from Eastern and Central and Southern Europe held in Vienna a little over a year ago. It was there that I heard a powerful speech given by a Bulgarian woman, who may be with us today – Julia Maleeva-Berberyan. She talked about how she and her daughters became world-class tennis players even while the wall of communism separated them from the world. How she refused to defect. How she swore to God that she would help resurrect her country. Which she did. First as the President of the Bulgarian Women's Union and now as a Member of Parliament. I am pleased that she and eight other women from that Vital Voices Conference in Vienna are here today. And I am pleased that so many of you, from other countries in this region, who have also through the years stood firm on behalf of freedom and social justice and prosperity and stability are also here with us.

The countries represented here may be at different points on the path of progress. But you have already undertaken courageous struggles for freedom. You should be proud of the economic reforms that are taking route and the civil society that is rising up. Proud of the democracies that are being built up and the barriers between nations and citizens that are coming down. And proud that despite your different cultures and pasts you are setting an example at this conference of how people can defy history to re-write it together.

Now, clearly this road out of history toward the future is not always smooth or easy. Now the old structures of communism and authoritarianism are in rubble. The new economic, political and social organizations are just taking place.

And I want you to know, every one of you, every country represented here, that the American people, the American government, and the President of the United States will stand with you as you press ahead to meet the challenges before you. Because in this new global economy, people around the world, not just in Southeast Europe, are asking some of the same questions. How do we ensure that democracy and free market economies produce better lives for all people, especially those people often forgotten on the margins of society. How do we bolster civil society and encourage real citizenship? How do we give women who often bare the brunt of changes the tools of opportunity to be full participants in building a strong, stable Southeast Europe?

Now many of the answers to these questions are right in this room, in this magnificent theatre, and that is why this conference comes at such an important time. It is appropriate that we talk about raising women's voices here, in this National Theatre. I must confess that being on the stage here, I am tempted to join the many people who've come here to perform. Many came to sing. However, in the interest of preserving the strong friendship and my welcome, I will not do that. But I know that within the walls of this theatre there have been some beautiful, magnificent women's voices, including the Mystery of Bulgarian Voices who have taken my country by storm. But I believe that nothing can compare to the powerful voices that I hear today, voices from Bulgaria and Albania, from Greece and Romania, from Slovenia and Turkey, Macedonia, the former Yugoslavia, leading voices in education, economic development, government, the media and non-governmental organizations, voicing tackling issues like human rights and violence, voices of every age, men and women, all blending into a powerful chorus that is making it clear for all to hear. Democratic progress depends upon the progress of women. A vibrant civil society depends upon the full contributions of women. Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights.

Recently, we've been reminded again why this chorus of voices is so important. In this theatre, right now, are people who've overcome tremendous obstacles to be with us today. One is Sonya Leith, the President for the fund of an open society in Yugoslavia. She has shown great courage in coming here today from Serbia. And in this room also are two courageous women who visited with me this summer at the White House. I hope they will tell you what they told me about their work to help the victims in Kosovo. I hope that Aphrodita Kalmanti tells you about the media program for young women she started and the sights and the sounds from Kosovo that she is bringing to the world as a correspondent for the Voice of America. And I hope that Dr. Dabrana who is pediatrician tells you what it's like seeing women and children coming down from the mountains, scared and sick with disease and malnutrition, often needing access to more medicine than is available. Sometimes needing a shoulder to cry on.

Those of us with the voice and the power to use must speak out for the ethnic Albanians who are suffering in Kosovo. We must speak out for the two hundred and fifty thousand people forced from their villages, most of them children, with the people who are living without healthcare, or

proper shelter, without a home they can return to or a school they can attend. With winter fast approaching, we must speak with one voice to end what is both a humanitarian crisis and a violation of humanity. And as we do so, we must not forget that we have this power to speak in a democracy because of the courage of so many who came before us, of so many women who came before us, the wives and mothers, sisters and daughters who literally kept families and communities together during years of communist oppression.

I think of women in Albania where their families couldn't afford to buy a washing machine or a refrigerator, the women joined with friends and neighbors to create a common fund to buy household equipment. Today these funds are recognized as credit unions which are used around the world as tools of economic empowerment. I think of Lina Konstantin, a Romanian woman jailed after a Stalin-ist era trial and now in her late eighties designing children's books. In her memoirs she explains how women in confinement will tap quietly on the walls to communicate with one another in their jails. And she called their bonds a fine story of human solidarity, of feminine solidarity. I think of Blaga Dimitrova who is at this conference, an activist, poet, and former Vice President of Bulgaria. In one of her poems she writes and I want to thank her because this is such beautiful description of what we are doing here today. She writes, "That's why there are so many poets among women in my land, the mute whose speech is suddenly restored will rend the air with a moan or a shout, centuries of silence crying to come out."

All of us have heard stories about such heroic women who sacrificed to break these centuries of silence. Now and always it is our turn and our opportunity. In their names we must gather the courage to raise our own voices not just to further our own careers and lives, but for the countless women who have no voice. It is our turn to be not only the healers of families, but also the builders of civil society and democracy. I have met such women building democracy all over this region.

In Romania, at a place where women were at one time forced to have children, their privacy violated, their bodies not their own, NGOs are now working to give women access to better healthcare, including family planning. In Macedonia, women are building democracy by creating resource centers to help women win political office.

In Croatia, women are bringing families back together who are separated by war and acting as mediators between former colleagues who are trying to re-establish business ties. In Greece and Turkey, women are not only working to advance their causes at home, but applying those lessons to help others throughout Southeast Europe.

In Slovenia, the first NGO-run shelter for domestic violence victims was opened a year ago. Women are building democracy throughout the region. Again in Albania, a network of more than 8000 rural women are learning about dairy farming and business and enjoying not only better salaries, but higher status. And women are building democracy right here in Bulgaria. Later this afternoon, I will meet with a group of NGOs who are safeguarding the rights of the disabled, protecting the environment, and guaranteeing freedom of the press. All of these women and countless others who could not fit into this theatre are part of a movement of women who are building democracy and civil society all over our globe. I've met such women in

countries on every continent; in South America and in Asia, in Africa and in Europe, and in Australia, and certainly North America and in my own country.

I also met them at the United Nations conference in Beijing where I remember very clearly the banners that were created by women from all over the world. Woven into those banners were the dreams of women who practiced different religions, dressed in different clothing, and talked in different languages. But they spoke the same mother tongue, the same language of freedom, justice, and dignity. What better time to recommit ourselves to these basic rights than in this year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Now many of the women I have met around the world know nothing of this declaration and its promises that women be treated with dignity at home and at work, in parliament and school. But women know, they know in their hearts and souls in spite of everything they may be told by culture, custom and tradition, that they too are endowed with God-given rights as surely as they were born into the human family. And the reason women want these rights is not merely to make a statement, not just to be part of a political movement but because women want our dignity respected as members of families and countries and because we want to help build a stable, prosperous, democratic world. There is a lot of progress being made. I will be meeting with a group of women here tomorrow who with a little assistance and a lot of dreams and determination have started their own business. One of the best ways we can help women is to provide them with credit so that they can have incomes that will enable them to participate in the economy and add to the well-being of their families. Many women are also taking their rightful seats in government, from Romania's chief advisor, to the President, to Macedonia's Minister of Education. And we know that women are excelling in every part of life today. Think of your own woman here in Bulgaria who touched the world when she brought home the gold for Bulgaria in the high jump during the 1996 Olympics.

I will never be able to jump, even a little bit off the floor, but I know that what went into her victory was the same kind of determination, hope, skill, and hard work that it takes to meet any goal. And that is what I hope this conference will focus on. If this were a conference where we just came together and shared ideas, it would be a step forward, but not enough.

If we are going to fulfill the promise of democracy, then we have to do more than just meet and talk together. We have to ensure that men and women have equal access to tools of economic growth. We have to be sure that they are given the opportunity with their education and access to healthcare to be able to make their own contributions. And we have to be sure that economists and government officials start recognizing the economic contributions that women make to every economy. Much of the work of women, both in the home and in the informal economy is not counted in a country's Gross Domestic Product.

I remember once being in Africa and talking to an economist there, a male economist, who said to me, "Well, you know, women have no real economic role to play in the African economies that are emerging." And I replied, "Well, you know, I have only spent a few days in Africa, but everywhere I looked, I saw women working. I saw women in fields, I saw women carrying water, I saw women in the markets, I saw women building their own homes. Now tell me

exactly what they were doing if they were not contributing to the economic well-being of their country?"

So we have a lot of work to do on the economic front. Both to respect and value the work women have always done and to open up to the formal economy to accept the contributions of even more women. We also have more work to do in politics. Women through NGOs and political parties, through the ballot box and the soap box, and in every single level of political process must be heard. And more women must be encouraged and given the assistance they need to take the courageous step of being active in the political process.

We also have to ensure that women are safe from violence. You know it does not matter if a woman is harmed by a stranger or her husband. We cannot allow either kind of violence to occur. We cannot allow domestic violence to be dismissed as cultural or explained away as a family matter. It is a crime. And throughout the world it should be punished with the full force of the law. Domestic violence holds back countless numbers of women. It destroys their spirits, it tells them they are worthless, and it does not give them courage to be the full people they should become.

We must also work for the day when women are no longer trafficked like drugs and sold into modern-day slavery. You know that that happens throughout our world. And just as we have worked hard to rid the world of the drug trade, we must also work hard to stop those who would trade human beings. I want to congratulate the Bulgarian government and its people for recognizing the horrors of trafficking and enacting a law to stop it.

If we are to fulfill the promises of democratic and economic and political progress, then we have to work together regionally and internationally. Just as we are doing today. I am pleased that my government has contributed more than 30 million dollars in the last year alone to strengthen democracy in Southeast Europe by building civil society, decreasing ethnic tensions, supporting schools, and NGOs, and promoting an independent media. In fact, in the audience today are the president, educators, and students from the American University of Bulgaria, which in its short life has attracted young people from most of the countries represented here today.

Because of the progress that is being made, I am pleased to announce today that as part of the United States' Democracy Network Program at the United States Agency for International Development, I wish to announce a fifteen million dollar grant in new funds to foster civil society in this region, including six million dollars to support NGOs in Bulgaria alone.

I am also pleased to announce today a new mentoring and training program in which women leaders like yourselves will be invited to come to the United States to learn more about business management and networking among leaders. We will help create business associations in this region to follow up on this conference with action to help meet its goals.

Now, all of our dreams about what can come from a conference and from this kind of cooperation require a great deal of hard work. My own country has learned, over many years, that democracy is hard work. It is a never-ending struggle. And its success ultimately depends

not just on laws and governments and institutions, but on attitudes and values. And getting along with people with who we have profound differences, and the lessons we teach our children about other people, about their religions, their races, their ethnic identities as we tuck them into bed at night, or as we teach them in our classrooms. Democracy puts demands on each and every one of us. And if we are to take advantage of extraordinary opportunity we have at this point in history, then we have to promise ourselves that we will not be discouraged. We will not lose heart. This struggle for democracy, for freedom and its fruits, is one that will always be with us. But the progress that has been made in this region is a beacon of hope and inspiration to people all over the world.

The voices raised here must be joined by those from communities everywhere. And we must reach out of course to men as well as women, to young leaders—boys and girls, to make sure they understand the struggles that led to this point and the history that can never be permitted to be repeated.

A few years ago in Bosnia, I met a group of women who in the aftermath of that war had come together to rebuild their lives, their families, and their communities. One of them gave me a sculpture of a woman. It's about this tall. And like many women, she is standing very proudly. But embedded in her knee are pieces of shrapnel. Real shrapnel that had been collected off the streets and out of the fields of that conflict. They are tangible symbols of the war and the pain she has endured. But on her heart is her hand. And on her hand is a dove. And on her face is a confident smile. And I look at that woman with that smile and that shrapnel. And I think if she could talk, if that small statue could just have a voice, she would say something like, "Despite the past, I will dream and work for my children to live in peace."

I keep that sculpture in my office. I look at it whenever I want to be reminded of the great price so many women have paid to bring justice, peace, freedom, and democracy to themselves, their families, and to all of us. And I look at that woman whenever I want to be inspired; inspired as I am today by what women can accomplish when we have the courage to put aside our differences, the differences that history has given us, not that we have made ourselves.

And if we share a commitment to create a world where all of our children can live free from violence, full of hope for the future, with the opportunity to reach their own God-given potential, and this will be a world we are proud to call our own. That is what I hope for all of us. That is what I hope for this conference and all of you who have come here to be part of this. With leaders such as yourselves leading the way into that new future, I know it is possible. And there are countless women, and men, and children, who are hoping you do not lose heart, but persevere, because together we can make this a more hopeful, brighter future for all of us.

Thank you very much.