

Ambassador David Geer Speech for Ambassadors' Conference 12th January 2023

Dear President Pendarovski,
Dear Deputy Prime Minister Marichijkj,
Dear Ambassador Halili,
Dear Members of the Council of Ambassadors,
Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour, once again, to address this distinguished forum. Last year proved to be a year of great challenges and dangers. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine sought to wipe out Ukrainian independence and freedom. It sought to re-write international law replacing respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity with the law of "might is right". It sought to divide allies exploiting perceived weaknesses in organisations such as the European Union that are based on democratic accountability and consent. It failed and instead encountered a remarkable level of unity of purpose among allies. Allies not united by concepts of "East and West", as the title of this discussion suggests, but bound together by a belief in international law, fundamental principles of respect for human rights and the value of multi-lateral cooperation. We can be proud of the achievements of many in the international community in support of Ukraine over the past year, including Mr President, this country, which has provided exemplary moral and 2 practical leadership on what can already be seen as one of the defining issues of our time. But most of all, Madam Ambassador Dir, Russia encountered the remarkable determination and resilience of the people of Ukraine who have demonstrated day after day, night after night what it means to cherish freedom and the right to choose the future of your own country. The events in Ukraine have resonated throughout Europe and beyond. In the European Union they have created a sense of urgency to how we see wider Europe and how we view the Western Balkans in particular. And so, in 2022 we saw remarkable steps forward: candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova; a European perspective for Georgia with conditions for candidate status; candidate status for Bosnia Herzegovina; real progress on the extension of a visa free regime to Kosovo. And, certainly not least, the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and with Albania. Of course, there is no room for complacency either in Ukraine or the Eastern neighbourhood. Or here in the Western Balkans. We saw over the holiday period heightened tensions in Kosovo with serious risks of spill over into violence. But what I think we can say is that – as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine – there is renewed momentum in the enlargement process. This is not about short-cuts in the process (skipping on

reform) but recognising the many ways in which we are bound together – on values, trade, development and security. And how together we can most effectively address the key issues of our time: climate change and the Green Agenda, peace and security, international competitiveness and trade, connectivity, migration. The list is long. So where are we now? As you know last year North Macedonia opened negotiations with the European Union. The Intergovernmental Conference that launched the process was 3 followed by the start of the screening process, which is proceeding well. The challenge now for North Macedonia is to use the momentum I have just described to advance decisively on the country's European path. For this, a number of things need to happen. First and foremost, North Macedonia needs to continue to demonstrate real progress on reform. There is simply no short cut here. Words are not enough. The country needs to align its laws and practices to those of the European Union. And implement and enforce these standards. This is for the Union about ensuring that North Macedonia is able to take on the responsibilities of membership and for North Macedonia to be able to compete within the EU on an equal footing with other Member States and reap the benefits of membership. This work begins and ends with what we call the "fundamentals" in the enlargement process. This includes building the domestic institutions necessary to guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. In particular, this means meaningful and visible action to combat corruption. Including by developing a judiciary and the prosecution fit for purpose; strengthening oversight of the executive through parliament and specialised independent institutions, fostering the work of civil society and the scrutiny function of the media. The opening of accession negotiations last year marked a qualitatively different stage in the relationship between the European Union and North Macedonia. One requiring greater rigour and scrutiny of the progress you are making in implementing of EU-related reforms. That is why – faced with a number of developments at the end of last year suggesting that the reform process in some key areas was going into reverse – we chose to speak out about failures in these key areas. Because our discussions today – as exemplified in the screen process 4 – are increasingly about how, when, and who. Practical questions about the precise steps you are taking which will eventually lead to your sitting at the table of the European Union as an equal and sovereign Member State. Now, the agreement brokered by France which led to the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia last year reflected the bilateral commitment given by this country to Bulgaria to amend its constitution to include a specific reference to citizens who selfidentify as Bulgarian. That is of course a sovereign decision for this country to take. But, it is clear that in order to maintain the momentum that has been achieved to-date in the accession process, the change to the constitution does need to be made. This would

allow the process to move on with the opening of clusters. It is simply not realistic to believe that this step can be avoided and that somehow – magically – the accession process would continue apace. And when you look at the substance of the matter, it is hard to see where the real objection lies. After all, this country has a generally positive trackrecord of inter-ethnic relations. Including one, or more groups into the protection of the constitution would not touch on the identity of the country or its essential interests. You do not lose your identity, language or history on the way to the European Union. Indeed other EU Member States have similar constitutional protections explicitly included in their respective constitutions. Take Croatia which lists 22 communities within its constitution¹, including Bulgarians, including Macedonians, including Albanians. Nor do I believe it realistic to place any hope in the renegotiation of agreements painstakingly reached todate. 1 Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Jews, Germans, Austrians, Ukrainians, Rusyns, Bosniaks, Slovenians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Russians, Bulgarians, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Turks, Vlachs, Albanians

5 Can the country achieve its goal of EU membership by 2030? This mostly depends on the country itself. The task is significant. The extent of the reforms needed is substantial. Yes, Mr President, there will be ups and downs, even on the European side. But the course is set and the EU's promise is firm. And this is a promise based on a hardheaded assessment of mutual interests and needs. So, in order for North Macedonia to achieve this goal there has to be real political determination across the political divide and across the institutions of the state and across, business and civil society. As I have said on many occasions, enlargement has to be a national project. Because there will be many challenges on the way to the European, some technical, some related to capacity, yes – some will be about confronting vested interests directly, some political, including fatigue here in the country, not helped by the relentless flight of people to the EU and other countries where jobs and better living conditions beckon. But this is a small country. The tasks ahead are achievable. You have already made progress in many areas and in some areas you are even ahead of others who have been negotiating for some time already. And there are other, similar sized countries that are now EU Member States that provide excellent examples of how to move ahead. Finally, there is also a huge residue of support for this country within the European Union and its Member States, as well as in the international community. We will be with you every step of the way. But it is not for me to seek to persuade you. It is for you to act now with determination and with the conviction that the European Union is your future. The way is open. There is momentum. Your future lies in your hands.

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