

TRANSCRIPT:

**WELCOME SPEECH OF PRESIDENT PETAR STOYANOV
AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH AND 1ST ANNUAL MEETING OF CGDC
05-21-2011**

Your Royal Highness, Presidents, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, My Dear Friends

Allow me once again to welcome you and to say that it is a great honor and pleasure for me and for our board to have you together with us today. Thank you very much for coming. Allow me now to invite our Founders of the Foundation to join me. Please Dr. Fasslabend, Mr. Stantchev, please, Dr. Schwimmer, where is Mr. Etienne Declercq? Please join us. And allow me to present the Founders of our Foundation starting with the Secretary General Mr. Stamen Stantchev, who is from Bulgaria like me, Mr. Stantchev. The next one is Dr. Werner Fasslabend. Dr. Werner Fasslabend served as the Minister of Defense of Austria during my time I can say so. Mr. Walter Schwimmer, who served as Secretary General of European Council, Mr. Declercq, a very good friend of us, international entrepreneurial from Belgium. So, would you like to take your seats please.

So, ladies and gentlemen once again on behalf of the founders and board members of the Center thank you. Thank you very much for being with us today and for sharing your views about the main topic of the conference.

Allow me to start with some thoughts how we have reached our decision to develop the Center for Global Dialogue and Cooperation.

The raison d'être for our center of dialogue among government officials, entrepreneurs, nongovernmental organizations, as well as civic and religious leaders, is in fact to launch a new approach to international relations between people of different ethnicities, religions and cultures.

Therefore we have dedicated our first conference to the Western Balkans. All of us want to see the Western Balkan as a model for stability in our region.

My country is in the heart of the Balkans, moreover, the name of the Balkan Peninsula stems from the name of the biggest Bulgarian mountain, the Balkan Range. And I should confess that the terms "Balkan" and "Balkanization" used to carry a special maybe from time to time negative connotation, which in the old political vocabulary meant fragmentation, continuous confrontation, coup d'état, etc. But over our long shared history this has not been our shared truth.

However, after the Cold War and during the transition process in the Western Balkans was long and difficult accompanied by the brutal and disastrous conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

Because of that the Western Balkan countries remained outside the process of EU enlargement.

And while their neighbors like Hungary and later Bulgaria and Romania met the EU membership criteria and benefited from the European funds, the Western Balkan countries held negotiations for the peaceful settlement of military conflicts. Thank God this is already in the past. Now Slovenia is a member of the European Union and all countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania aspire to join it.

During that process, one thing became evident: The EU accession and the economic prosperity in the Western Balkans are linked to inclusive dialogue, successful cooperation and mutual trust on a governmental level and this is very important among to be mentioned and among the citizens in the region.

The ethnic and religious diversity in such a small territory is unique in Europe: I think that the Western Balkans is the only place in Europe where Muslims Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Jews have been living together for centuries. And, we should say now that the periods of peace and stability were much longer than the periods of war.

The conflicts after the dissolution of former Yugoslavia brought mistrust and hatred. People who lived side by side and spoke the same language took up arms against each other. The war made its heroes. Some of them are no longer remembered with a feeling of national pride. Ladies and gentlemen I am convinced that peace has yet to make its heroes – people who overcome differences and create trust among different religions and ethnicities. The new heroes of the Western Balkans should be people who want to look to the future rather than turn back to the past.

Today more than ever before the Western Balkan citizens (and please note that I refer to citizens not only to the states) can offer an inspiring example of stability, cooperation and collaboration.

I am convinced that a potential EU membership, the removal of borders, the free movement of people, goods and services will gradually eliminate old enmities and hatred. The path to EU membership provides exceptional possibilities for stimulating mutual cooperation and trust not only among the candidate countries but also among the citizens in each of them.

Today the vast majority of Western Balkan citizens believe in this. Their confidence in the European future of the region is supported not only by pragmatic motives - the obvious economic benefit of mutual cooperation and collaboration, but by the aspiration for dignity and for the logic of the European history.

It is absolutely unacceptable to consider the Balkans a region historically prone to continuous conflicts and confrontations. It was frankly speaking not in the Balkans but in the heart of Europe that the most devastating war in the history of mankind broke out only 80 years ago and its tragic consequences forced former enemies to cooperate first on economic and later on political terms. Thus the formula for the EU turned into the most efficient formula for peace, stability and growth in the world.

As a citizen of a state labeled in the past as the most “loyal satellite” of the former Soviet Union and today member of the EU I can say that the past 22 years may prove to be among the most interesting period in mankind’s history – and for sure the most unpredictable.

Events like the two world wars during the last century were certainly far more dramatic since they caused enormous disasters and atrocities to mankind. However both wars were predictable. Moreover they were part of the logic of that time.

This was not the case with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Only a few years before that one of the wisest men of the American foreign policy I remember that very clearly Henry Kissinger warned his compatriots to be very well prepared for a long and exhausting Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Actually in 1989 communism was gone but not the skepticism of Eastern Europeans. The idea that we can join the EU sounded unbelievable.

And allow me to share with you a joke from my time when I was the President of the country. The joke is following. The President of Poland asked God, “When is Poland to join European Union?” The God’s answer is: “Unfortunately, Mr. President, not in your term.” Then the President of Bulgaria, it’s me, asked God: “When is Bulgaria to join the European Union?” and the discouraging God’s answer is: “Mr. President unfortunately not in my term.” So but now Bulgaria is a member of European Union and everything could happen and today ten Eastern European countries are EU members and all Western Balkan states are candidate or potential candidate countries. Of course we, the Eastern Europeans continue to face a lot of difficulties, but one thing is sure -there is no way back.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The recent events in Northern Africa caught the world unprepared as did the fall of the Berlin wall. These revolutions carried out by a new generation of young idealists, inspired by democracy, united by Facebook and excited by the notion of opening up to a wider world, have thrilled observers everywhere. These young people pleaded for universal human values which are not only Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist. They are values which underlie all religions that bring together different nations, cultures and civilizations.

These past 22 years, after the lifting of the Iron Curtain were really remarkable.

They started with the collapse of the Soviet Empire and ended with the recent events in the Northern Africa and the Arab World. The politicians and analysts are facing an exceptional challenge today.

We live in a world which cannot be explained by any of the existing paradigms. In the past during the Cold War we explained the world as a bipolar model – a world of peaceful coexistence between the democratic West headed by the USA and the totalitarian East headed by the Soviet Union. The fall of the Berlin Wall buried this paradigm - I hope forever.

The second paradigm was based on the understanding that the fundament of our civilization are human rights and freedoms while there are other traditional civilizations whose history, culture and traditions not consider human rights and freedoms a top priority. The recent history swept away this paradigm.

I also believe firmly that recent history is connected to the technological revolution and globalization that has helped millions of people in the world to become aware of their uniqueness as human beings.

The culture and traditions are really very-very important, but despite cultural differences there are universal aspirations for liberty, dignity, for political systems that listen to, respond and respect the will of the people.

When developing the Center for Global Dialogue and Cooperation we kept this in mind. It is in our interest to support the people fulfill that vision and I believe we have the capacity to do so. How do we want to achieve this?

CGDC is built on two pillars: inclusive dialogue and cooperation.

An inclusive dialogue is open to diverse people, thinkers, politicians, business people and interested citizens. We are convinced that enhancing a fruitful dialogue amongst them will open new possibilities, foster out-of-the-box approaches and create innovative solutions to social and economic challenges. Moreover, we are convinced that inclusive dialogue is the key to sustainable growth and prosperity.

An inclusive dialogue, offers us a forum to have candid discussions while continuing to focus on where we are going to cooperate effectively.

Our work really begins with our commitment to better understand one another, to build trust between each other, and to work to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation. We all know that misperceptions linger from time to time between politicians and business people. The fact is - businessmen and politicians have much to gain from cooperation and clear rules and this cooperation is good for growth, prosperity and stability.

We are also working to build greater understanding and trust to foster stronger ties between business communities and students. That includes our Study Program in Public Governance – I am very proud to say that, ladies and gentlemen, the Center for Global Dialogue and Cooperation committed to 13 scholarships for students from the Western Balkans for the next five years. In September last year I and Secretary General Mr. Stantchev, reached an agreement with the Clinton Global Initiative on this. It is a program to boost educational exchange and to create new links between the next generation of leaders in the EU and the Western Balkans. I am really looking forward to meeting with the first students from our region from the Balkans.

Now more than ever, success depends on our ability to translate good words into concrete actions on the issues that matter most.

The starting point for our Foundation is our commitment to the stability and growth of the region. But sustainable economic development is not just the absence of instability; it is also the presence of opportunity. Like the opportunity to receive an education and find a job, to live in a safe environment and to have access to the basics of life. So many innovative solutions to social and economic challenges look for partners to leverage their ideas.

We will strengthen our cooperation by leveraging our assets. Let me explain this: Our biggest assets are our friends. As I look around I can see statesmen, politicians, high ranking government officials, business people, religious leaders and great thinkers and above all devoted people and good friends. You are our greatest asset.

We want to invest our time, our energy, our know how, and our passion. Having said this, we want to invest ourselves in people, in their dreams and in their future – together with you. Thank you very much for coming, thank you for your attention. Thank you very much.