A Response to the Interview with Mr. Gjorge Ivanov, President of the Republic of Macedonia

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President Gjorge Ivanov of the Republic of Macedonia fairly describes his country’s achievements in affecting a peaceful separation from the Yugoslav Federation, overcoming the effects of the brief flare up of ethnic violence in 2001, and redefining itself as a democratic polity committed to a distinctive model of inclusiveness based on the premises of multinational integration, tolerance, and the rule of law. These accomplishments, impressive by any standard, contrast sharply with the less than stellar track records in these regards of many other nations in the Southeastern European region, and in Europe as a whole. It is probably correct to assert that Macedonia has not been fairly rewarded for these advances. Aspirations to join the NATO alliance are currently blocked by the obdurate opposition of its Greek neighbor. An agenda for association with the EU is moving forward at a snail’s pace. Balkan regional issues have been pushed well off the radar screen of the world’s great powers, who seem content to preside over the fragile status quo rather than to engage more substantially on behalf of real transformation. To some degree, President Ivanov owes his electoral mandate in the spring of 2009 to accumulated popular frustration with long delayed progress on the front of international integration, and the absence of discernable positive effects within Macedonia itself. The disintegration of Socialist Yugoslavia now lies nearly twenty years in the past, but the Republic of Macedonia, despite its achievements and together with many of its neighbors in the Western Balkans, remains locked into Europe’s most underdeveloped and marginalized sub-region, condemned to a kind of geopolitical limbo.

Macedonia’s achievements are certainly worthy of note. No country in the Southeastern European region, including war-ravaged Bosnia and Herzegovina, has had to deal with a more complex and potentially explosive cocktail of ethnic diversity and economic challenges, aggravated by international
animosity and neglect. Skopje’s ability to sustain an agenda for domestic inclusion and international integration under these difficult circumstances might fairly be described, mutatis mutandis, as a model that others might well learn from, if not emulate.

President Ivanov’s remarks point to the regional and international environment as the greatest source of threats to Macedonia’s future progress. The emphasis corresponds to optimistic evaluations of independent Macedonia’s domestic achievements, but it is perhaps too one-sided. Despite its ability to ward off the kind of worst case breakdowns that have plagued neighboring republics, Skopje confronts a great deal of domestic insecurity which it has been only partially successful in mitigating or overcoming.

Building in some measure upon the legacy of the Yugoslav period, Macedonia has succeeded in constructing an open economy that is integrated with regional and global markets and significantly dependent upon cross border commerce. The economy has grown slowly but steadily since the mid-1990s, with inflation kept under control. But like all states in the region Macedonia has been negatively affected by the global economic crisis, making it more difficult to address imposing structural challenges. Macedonia’s GDP per capita, slightly above $9000 at purchasing power parity according to IMF tabulations, is one of the lowest in Europe (above only Moldova and Albania in the Southeastern European region). Unemployment is estimated at around 35%, with over 20% of the population living below the poverty line. Corruption and an inefficient legal system place barriers in the way of balanced development, with an estimated 20% of GDP derived from gray and black market activities. Macedonia’s rating of 0.808 on the United Nations’ Human Development Index places it within the High Human Development category on a global scale, but is also one of the worst in Europe (above only Moldova, Ukraine, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian Federation, and Albania). Relative underdevelopment can easily become a source of increased socioeconomic friction and renewed political instability.

Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy with an executive government, unicameral legislature elected by popular franchise, and independent constitutional court. Since independence it has carried out several orderly transitions of power. Nonetheless Freedom House’s Freedom in the World index places Macedonia in the ‘Partly Free’ category for both political rights and civil liberties. The 2009 report cites a relative downward trend due in particular to harassment and violence directed against political activists during the country’s June parliamentary elections, which independent observers rated as the least fair in the country’s history. The political party structure remains