

Remarks of U.S. Ambassador Kate Marie Byrnes at the Economist “Western Balkans Summit”  
October 1, 2019  
Skopje, North Macedonia

It’s a real pleasure to be here today as part of such a distinguished panel.

I’d like to start by noting that there is something very timely about the topic of this panel—setting aside regional rivalry and insecurity in the Western Balkans—and something very appropriate about having this gathering in Skopje for the first time, since North Macedonia is setting an example for how to set aside regional frictions and start looking forward. It hasn’t been easy, and the work here is definitely not yet complete, but it is important to recognize the role this country is playing in furthering progress not just in the region, but more broadly in Europe.

Secretary of State Pompeo will be in the region later this week in part to recognize just that. He will be visiting Montenegro, NATO’s 29<sup>th</sup> and most recent member, followed by North Macedonia, which is slated to become the 30<sup>th</sup> NATO ally as soon as the ratification process is completed. Through this visit and other recent steps such as the recent appointment of Matthew Palmer as a special representative for the Western Balkans region, our country is signaling that the U.S. remains intently focused on the Western Balkans, as a lynchpin in our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace.

What has made this possible is the courageous step by the leadership of North Macedonia and Greece to negotiate the Prespa Agreement, which has set a standard for the rest of the region in how to resolve outstanding conflicts and move forward.

There are already several concrete steps that have been made possible by this agreement, beyond the unblocking of North Macedonia’s path to NATO membership and EU accession talks.

We have been pleased to see intensified collaboration throughout the neighborhood. Earlier this year Greece and North Macedonia signed a Comprehensive Defense Cooperation Agreement that paves the way for a bilateral strategic dialogue, policing of North Macedonia’s airspace by the Greek Air Force, and a wide array of other practical measures designed to enhance defense ties between the two countries. In June Bulgaria hosted troops from Albania, Greece, North Macedonia and the United States for Operation STRIKE BACK 19, a multinational exercise designed to improve interoperability between participants. And, North Macedonia hosted the impressive Decisive Strike exercise here this summer at the Krivolak training area.

While much of our focus has been on the progress made on the security and policy front, there are significant economic benefits as a result of this agreement, not least of which is expanding the possibilities of cross-border economic cooperation on regional issues such as energy. There’s renewed impetus, for example, to build the interconnector, which would allow North Macedonia to draw natural gas from suppliers in the Greek distribution network, including from the U.S.

The potential for this project is great—and could eventually even include extending to Kosovo, thus providing cleaner energy for a region that suffers from pollution as a result of increased fossil fuel use—which, I might add, is another obstacle to growth. And the stability that these agreements—and membership in NATO, and eventual membership in the EU—promotes the stability that foreign investors are seeking when they consider where to invest.

This is all to say that, from the U.S. perspective, significant change is afoot, and Prespa has definitely been a watershed moment not just between the two signatories, but really region-wide. That said, North Macedonia still has a lot of work cut out for it. Continuing to strengthen rule of law, and ensure that corruption cases are prosecuted regardless of the perpetrators' status or position, are critical to demonstrating the maturity of this country's democracy and its ability to create solid institutions that stand the test of whatever political winds might blow.

So to sum up my thoughts, I'd like to stress that the U.S. remains very engaged in the region, and recognize both the potential, and importance, that this region has for Europe. Prespa really was a huge step forward, but this is not a time to be complacent, we need to keep up the momentum and the United States will continue to be a partner in that effort.

Thank you!