

## **Lunch Address of Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of Macedonia**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

Republic of Macedonia was in a deep political crisis in 2015-2016. There was an authoritarian regime, state capture, tensions with neighbors and internal polarization. Macedonia became a point of geo-political interest.

I took upon myself, as leader of the biggest opposition party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, to initiate a project "Truth about Macedonia". I revealed wire-tapped materials that exposed a system of corrupt governance and gross abuse of power. I expected that the politicians in power will resign in three days. However, it took us two and a half years going through many challenges to overcome. The culmination of the crisis and our personal struggles for freedom and democracy came on 27 April 2017. After a new-formed majority in Parliament elected a new Speaker, a well-organized mob of 3-4,000 stormed the parliament and tried to lynch us.

I thank the courage and calmness of my fellow MPs from different parties and ethnic groups and the few security guards, that we calmly withstood the violent attacks, heavy blows and bloody injuries. I also thank God that we all survived.

We managed to overcome because we were united to protect our basic democratic values and standards.

In addition, during our struggles we were open to civil society for cooperation. We engaged in joint mobilization to motivate citizens to rise in defense of democratic rights and freedoms and rule of law. This opened our path towards changes. We changed an authoritarian regime in elections and with our resolute will to restore democracy. However, overcoming the crisis was only half of the story. We desperately needed to open new perspectives. Thus, we created a system of good governance that is based on four pillars.

Inclusive governance is the first pillar. This means we are strongly determined to build independent institutions, rule of law that is equal for all and to have inclusive and accessible public services.

The concept "One society for all" is our second pillar. This is a civic based concept to bridge ethnic divisions. There should no longer be ethnic and nationalistic polarization. We lead by example to implement the concept. We have integrated Albanians in my party, in the party structures, as MPs and as candidates in local elections, and strengthened the cooperation with Albanian minority parties. At the local elections in October, 2017, we gave the opportunity to

Albanians to vote for ethnic Macedonians candidates and to ethnic Macedonians to vote for Albanians. It was a successful first attempt.

Today, I am proud that an Albanian woman from my party is a Mayor in a small municipality that was battle ground in the inter-ethnic conflict in 2001.

The third pillar of our good governance system is equitable growth. We introduced policy measures to battle poverty and to increase the standard of living. In the first six months of the government we increased minimum wage, increased accessibility of public services, introduced more programs for self-employment, increased incentives for SMEs, and provided equal opportunities for domestic and foreign investors. Today the government in Republic of Macedonia is supporting up to 50% of any new investment in the country.

The fourth necessary pillar is to be friends with our neighbors. We bring new spirit in relations with neighbors. Open dialogue to address the issues. Build bridges for cooperation based on mutual trust and respect; always trying to get win-win.

With Bulgaria, we signed Treaty on Friendship. Without foreign mediation. There were many fears, but now we have concrete results: Trade among the two countries is up for 12 percent. This is a good example and encouragement to improve bilateral relations for others in region.

We had Intergovernmental sessions (G2G) with Bulgaria and Albania. We had fruitful officials visits in Serbia and Kosovo. With all neighbors we focus on economic cooperation, trade, infrastructure.

We are in very advanced stage in talks with Greece over the “name issue”. Hope to find solution soon. We have positive environment between two countries and frequent meetings.

Dear Friends,

Republic of Macedonia has no alternative for EU and NATO integration. Over 75 percent of the citizens support EU and NATO integration. We share same values. We proved that RM is a committed partner, during EU migrant crisis and many NATO missions since 2002.

Our ambition is invitation to join NATO and to open accession negotiations with EU in 2018.

We are ready both politically and institutionally.

We are encouraged by EU Enlargement Strategy. We implemented conditions set by EU in 2014/2015 and have a clear recommendation. We deserve individual assessment and prefer a merit-based approach.

We are also encouraged by NATO Open Door Policy.

Euro-Atlantic integration means consolidation of political reforms. Euro-Atlantic integration is also stimulus for economic growth.

Dear Friends, let me conclude,

Republic of Macedonia is “success story” in 2017. We made a quantum leap: from “captured state” to improving democracy.

Internally, we succeeded to Improve relations with opposition. The biggest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, is back in Parliament. We are building mutual support for reforms and maintain a good cohabitation with President Ivanov.

Our state contributes to regional cooperation, stability and security of the Western Balkan region.

However, if EU and NATO future is uncertain, then there may be negative consequences for Macedonia and for the region. This is the lesson that we learned.

We saw that status-quo brings erosion of democracy and lack of economic opportunities.

Less internal cohesion, leads to increased nationalism. Negative influence from third parties increases.

Balkans had difficult past, but we are creators of our future. We need leadership. To create a new Balkan future. We need join efforts from the leaders in region, but also from the leaders in EU. It is our responsibility to recognize the moment. Time is now. We want a better future for our countries. We want to contribute to a stronger EU.

Thank you.