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President Bush Meets with Prime Minister Stanishev of Bulgaria

Oval Office

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PRESIDENT BUSH: Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to the Oval Office. It was about a year ago that I had the great pleasure of visiting your beautiful country, and I want to thank you for the warm hospitality you showed and thank you for giving me a chance to welcome you here to the Oval Office. We had a very extensive conversation --

PRIME MINISTER STANISHEV: Indeed.

PRESIDENT BUSH: -- and that's what you'd expect among friends.

First, I want to congratulate you and thank you and your government for the role you have played in the Western Balkans. You've been a constructive force for stability, a constructive force for hope. You've projected a hopeful future and -- for the people in Kosovo and Serbia. And I want to thank you for that. It's really important that there be leadership in the neighborhood, and you've provided it.

Secondly, I want to thank you very much for your nation's strong contributions to helping others realize the blessings of liberty, whether it be in Afghanistan or Iraq. I fully understand how difficult these issues can be. On the other hand, you understand how hopeful the world can be when people live in free societies. So I want to thank you and I want to thank the people of your country for the sacrifices that you have made.

Thirdly, we talked about a mutual concern, and that's energy: How do we get more energy on the market; how do we help others, our respective countries and others, realize the blessings of additional energy supply? I mean, we're in a world that is -- where supply has exceeded -- where demand has exceeded supply. There's high prices. Both our countries -- the people in our countries are wondering what do we intend to do about it.

And so we had a good discussion about the diversification of energy supply. I really appreciate the Prime Minister's discussion about nuclear power. Prime Minister, we're trying to expand nuclear power here in the United States of America because it's clean, it's renewable, and it will help us become less dependent on hydrocarbons.

We talked about two other issues that are of importance to the Prime Minister and the people of his country. First, we talked about visas. I fully understand the concerns of your people when it comes to visas. On the one -- we're helping, we're part of a very important coalition; we're allies, and yet we don't get treated the same as other people within the EU.

PRIME MINISTER STANISHEV: It was a good breakthrough.

PRESIDENT BUSH: And today because of the Prime Minister's hard work, there has been a breakthrough on the visa waiver, as an important step toward achieving the same status as other countries in the EU. And I want to congratulate you on that. Thank you for your hard work and thank you for your care about the people of your country.

Finally, I applauded the Prime Minister for his and his government's work on dealing with corruption. I reminded the Prime Minister that all of us have got a responsibility to deal with corruption. When we find corrupt officials in the United States, we expect them to be, within the rule of law, be dealt with. And that's what you're doing. And

the people who ultimately benefit from that decision are the people of your country. They -- I know they appreciate your tough stand. Nobody wants to have a government where it looks like a few benefit at the cost of many.

And so your tough stance have made a big difference. I'm proud that you're here. I want to thank you for it. You're a good, young, strong leader, and that's said from an old guy. Welcome.

PRIME MINISTER STANISHEV: Thank you. Well, thank you, Mr. President, for the good words about Bulgaria, indeed. And my assessment is that our relations have reached the level of strategic partnership. And I see no contradiction in this with our good behavior and our contributions to the European Union.

PRESIDENT BUSH: That's right.

PRIME MINISTER STANISHEV: I think Bulgaria proved in the last several years that we can be good contributors of stability for NATO, we can be active in the European Union, and we can develop our excellent relations with the United States -- because it is amazing that in 18 years, our countries have reached this level of trust, confidence. And from this point of view, I appreciate your very strong leadership role in the support of the reform process in Bulgaria.

It is never easy. It requires a lot of efforts, persistence. Results do not always come overnight. But they develop, and everyone who comes to Bulgaria after several years of absence is saying the country has made great progress. And the United States have always been very helpful in this process.

I must say that we see our role in the region as a country which is bridging and guaranteeing stability both for the Western Balkans and for the broader Black Sea area, which are very important, because without stability in the Balkans, without European perspective and NATO perspective for these countries, we cannot speak about real prosperity and democracy in the region. The region has many wounds from the war in former Yugoslavia, and they have to be healed. And the international presence is very important, and the European perspective, as well.

And we also see the importance of the Black Sea area, both politically, from the point of view of security issues and from the point of view of energy issues. And I appreciate the dialogue which we had on diversification of energy supply, on nuclear energy. Bulgaria will be developing our nuclear facilities, not only the new ones, but there are many other projects where American companies can participate in nuclear issues, but also in thermal power plants, many other energy projects, because we want to be indeed a hub of energy stability in the region. We want to be enough independent; we want to be exporter of energy.

We are good partners in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Kosovo. And Bulgaria really is not simply a beneficiary of our membership in NATO or the European Union, but we are a contributor, because we know our responsibilities and we shall not give up on these responsibilities because there are many challenges around the world. We have to overcome them together with our friends and partners.

I thank you very much for this support and for the American experts who worked on this declaration on visa waiver. You, Mr. President, were the first to say that this is not a normal situation, when two nations have such confidence, when we have 200,000 Bulgarians living in the United States, more and more Americans coming to Bulgaria, to have this obstacle for normal human contacts. There is a way to go. There is work to do. But we shall do it together, and I believe that the sooner we achieve -- make our business, the better for the citizens of our two countries.

And finally, thank you also for the supporting the reforms in the fight against organized crime and corruption. Bulgaria is a nation which became member of the European Union, which is modernizing. Our economic growth is excellent. Our performances in economy are good. And we see the reform in the fight against organized crime and corruption, the judiciary reform, as a very important further precondition for our economic growth, and for the development of the nation.

And I remember that last year you supported the establishment of the new State Agency for National Security. I can say with satisfaction that it is already operational, it works excellently with American services, and it has operations which are bringing concrete fruits. But there is work to do.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you for coming.

PRIME MINISTER STANISHEV: Thank you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you all.

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