

**Democracy as an Effort**  
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**USAID/Bulgaria Closing Ceremony**  
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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was invited to say a few words at the official closing of the United States Agency for International Development in Bulgaria, the first title that came to my mind was “Democracy as an Effort.” When change began, democracy for us was mostly about revolution – from Portugal’s Carnation Revolution, to Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution, to Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. Eighteen years later, we already realize that democracy is most of all a constant effort made by citizens and institutions. The post-communist countries, including Bulgaria, were lucky not to have been left alone in this process. The international assistance for laying the foundations of liberal democracy and market economy came early and was timely. The United States was among the first countries to get involved. American public organizations such as USAID, non-governmental organizations and an impressive number of individuals made a long-lasting and systematic effort to elucidate and support this social order which, without doubt, remains the choice of the larger part of humanity.

USAID left visible traces in Bulgarian social life. Today we hardly remember it, but through their programs a whole variety of previously unknown concepts, such as “rule of law,” “local government initiative,” “transparency”, and “entrepreneurship promotion” entered the Bulgarian vocabulary and practice, and are today the foundation of the state. Some of the terms which had no equivalent in the rigid vocabulary of socialism remain untranslated even today: probation, mediation, microcredit. Nonetheless, real and recognizable models of social interrelations were established and took root behind them. Other key concepts are still waiting for our society to mature enough in order to work out its own formulations: “constituency” is not the same as voters, and “accountability” is not just a bookkeeper’s term.

USAID was, of course, much more than an educational program. The ideas for reforms were fueled with the powerful financial support of the American taxpayer. This was directed toward governmental and non-governmental organizations and through it the pillars of democratic life started to acquire some density. As a person who has been involved in securing financial support for community initiatives for more than five years now, I would like to emphasize an important peculiarity. USAID’s programs were concrete, systematic, and long-term. It was exactly that steady, persistent insistence on seemingly formal norms and practices, the repetition of certain types of approaches, the investment in a circle of partners, that yielded the results we can see today. The program assisted the creation and strengthening of governmental and non-governmental institutions that turned into the material bearers of ideas. The Foundation for Local Government Reform, the Center for the Study of Democracy, and the community foundations in Stara Zagora, Pazardzhik, Gabrovo, Yambol, and Chepelare are just a few of the prominent long-term partners of the American program. Scores of people who are

the real social capital, the human legacy of the initiative, were prepared in the course of that work, and they not only keep, but magnify, distribute, and stabilize the presence of ideas.

To extol USAID is far from my intention. There are perhaps mediocre results and even clear failures among the enormous number of supported projects. That is a part of the work of every organization. From the point of view of Bulgarian society, however, the failures were in some sense as important as the successes. The grand social project to transform the overall economic, social, and political model passes through trial and error, through adaptation of the principles and forms of developed democracies to the local environment and traditions. The usefulness of that experience became particularly evident as a second mighty power – the European Union – engaged itself with supporting democratization in the post-communist countries. In the beginning of the accession talks, Bulgaria already had an experience with many initiatives and projects key to membership, already tested or initiated with the help of USAID.

I will close my remarks with a somewhat unusual emphasis on still incomplete processes. Today, Bulgaria has a decent legal structure and a dynamic economy. What we still lack is the awareness of what it means to live in a democracy – that thing which we call political, legal, and economic culture. Acquiring that awareness is part of the notion of democracy as an effort, which I began with. Pessimists consider that generations have to pass in order to fulfill that goal. We, the optimists, saw that a well-strategized program with thoughtful financial support can achieve dramatic development. After our American partners leave, the baton should be taken by all of us who remain – the Bulgarian institutions and the Bulgarian civil society. The government has to be an example of effectiveness and adherence to the principles of the lawful state, and of ethics and the sense of responsibility alike. The responsibility to ensure justice for all citizens. The responsibility to provide material support to other countries which are still at the outset of democratization. The responsibility to create conditions for the existence of an active civil society – not only the legal framework, but also the mechanisms for financial support to organizations that uphold human rights, fight against corruption, and promote citizen participation in decision-making. And the non-governmental organizations, on their part, have to prove that the generous assistance of our American partners has helped strengthen democracy's sole guarantor – civil society.

Thank you for your attention.