

50th Atlantic Treaty Association General Assembly
1-3 December 2004, Rome

Address at the Opening Session
by
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Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

I am very glad to be with you today in the ancient and beautiful city of Rome. I would like to extend a warm gratitude to our hosts – the Italian Government, the Italian Atlantic Committee, and especially to Dr. Emilio Colombo and Dr. Fabrizio Lucielli for hosting and organising the 50th General Assembly of the Atlantic Treaty Association (ATA). To me personally this edition of ATA General Assembly is a memorable event – for at least two important reasons.

First, the location of this year's Assembly bears a special significance for me. In this very city, 8 years ago, I was elected vice-chairman of ATA by the 42nd General Assembly. It was a great honour for me, and an unique experience. At the time, I happened to be the first representative of Central and Eastern Europe to be elected to such position.

Second, the timing of the 50th General Assembly is also a very special one. It is, by far, not the first General Assembly of ATA that I attend. But it is the first General Assembly where I am finally able to say: "Bulgaria is in NATO now!" We are now a full member of the Alliance. And the Atlantic Treaty Association has been a great friend and aide on the way towards achieving this strategic goal of my country. Thank you all for that!

In 2004 we celebrate the 50th anniversary of ATA and, like each anniversary, it is a time for jubilation, but also a time to remember. Let us remember the role that ATA played in the last 15 years for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Let us be straightforward on that: **NATO enlargement after the Cold War is a big success in which ATA has a fair share.** The Association has served as an agent of positive change. It became a forum to refute misperceptions and gain, in exchange, a clear understanding of the role of NATO both as an alliance against common threats and a community of shared values. It helped us prepare for the benefits and the responsibilities of being Allies.

I am confident that soon the three NATO-candidates from the Balkans - Albania, Croatia and Macedonia - will become members too. Bulgaria strongly supports them on the way to a full-fledged NATO membership. To us, the continuation of the Alliance's "open door" policy and the inclusion of the whole of South Eastern