

EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

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„Imagine the new Western Balkans“

Visit of Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, Ms Ekaterina Zakharijeva

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It's a stony path but let's try to use this stones to build bridges not walls, underlined the Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, Ekaterina Zakharijeva. 'Imagine the new Western Balkans' was the topic of the exclusive discussion with the Bulgarian Minister. On Thursday, 26th April the Bulgarian Minister spoke about the importance of the EU- and regional cooperation and encouraged the European Union (EU) and its decision makers to work closely together with the countries of the Western Balkans.

Dr. Hans-Gert Pöttering (Member of the Senior Political Advising Board on the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and former President of the European Parliament) outlined Bulgaria's progress towards his current EU Presidency in his opening statement and emphasized the country's significance for the EU. After a short introduction of **Dr. Hardy Ostry**, Head of the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Minister took the floor.

Challenges and Opportunities

The event has provided an opportunity to ask ourselves: How could the "New Western Balkans" look like in the next twenty years? Which is the vision of a Europe that we want to live in? The Bulgarian Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zakharijeva demonstrated that some

years ago, Bulgaria was also neither part of the EU or the NATO and the region was characterized from war wounds, poverty and nationalism. But today, the country stimulates a positive demographic trend, attracts young people and is a sovereign state in the Western Alliance Policy.

Zakharijeva emphasized that there is "still a lot to do" up to a potential EU accession. This is also reflected in the reform process, which is characterized by "ups and downs". Obstacles such as the unresolved bilateral conflicts among the countries must be tackled, even with the support of the European community. Above all young people who are affected by the sometimes high unemployment, a path out of the lack of prospects must be pointed out to exclude an increasing emigration.

At the beginning of this year, the EU Commission published its Western Balkan strategy which contains a best-case scenario for these countries to join the EU by 2025 under conditions. The Bulgarian EU Presidency supports the ambitious target for the candidate countries, but as promising as the opportunities are, so various are the challenges that have to be overcome before joining the EU. The Western Balkans shouldn't only be a priority for the Council Presidency but also in the long run ahead, the minister said. A credible European perspective for the whole region is necessary for the sake of security and stability of the EU itself.

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The enlargement and transformation process is a tool with no alternative, so Zakharieva.

which "we are always grateful," said the Bulgarian Foreign Minister.

New Paths

Despite the hurdles, the Western Balkan is ready to "build bridges", in order to overcome problems and eliminate and unresolved bilateral conflicts to take a common path towards the European Union. Furthermore, this decisiveness has been demonstrated by the rapprochement of Macedonia in the dispute over the name with Greece, according to the Minister.

Influence in the Balkans

It is no secret that Turkey and Russia want to extend their influence in the region. It is about military alliance policy, political spheres of influence and economic hegemony. Also China is very active in the centrum of Eastern Europe. Therefore, it is all the more important that a rapid integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU takes place. "I think that it's really time [...] that the Commission recommends to start negotiations", so the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria.

Dialogue as an essential component

The forthcoming Western Balkans Summit, hold on 17th May in Sofia, as an initiative for an dialogue facilitation between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans, is expected the same by both sides. The core objective of this meeting of Heads of State or Government of all EU Member States and the leadership of the six Western Balkan partner countries is to furthering neighborly relations. A project on whose urgency Zakharieva also appealed in her impulse speech. Not least, the Western Balkan Summit, as a platform for dialogue and debate, paved the way for Bulgaria to become a member of the European Union. A fact for