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Interview - Lyubomir Kyuchukov

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Lyubomir Kyuchukov is a career diplomat and politician. He served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, a member of the Council on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration to the President of Bulgaria, a member of the National Security Council, and as ambassador to the United Kingdom. He was a member of the Board of Editors of International Relations and Novo Vreme magazines (Sofia). Currently Mr. Kyuchukov is Director of the Economics and International Relations Institute (EIRI) and member of the Board of the Bulgarian Diplomatic Society.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

Everywhere – as far as debates and research are concerned. Unfortunately almost nowhere – if we think about new ideas and visions for the world's future, at least in a mid-term perspective. It seems that we, as mankind, are lagging behind in understanding our own progress.

The objective developments are so condensed in time, that we rather ascertain the results than lead the processes. Under the pressure of revolutions in technology, information, and communication, the protective shield of national states cracked down. All of a sudden people and nations felt unprotected. The sense of vulnerability increases their fears of the other, of the different one, urges them to seek security and protection at a lower, sub-state level – the one of commonness in religion, ethnicity or group interests; and against the other, the different, regarded as a threat which, in its extremity, took the shape of international terrorism. Fragmentation – of both states and societies, turned out to be the other face of globalisation. And new division lines do not necessarily follow national borders.

What we need now is a vision for future global governance – which should be rather different from the existing international order. And most important: find a way to live together rather than look at each other behind walls – physical or virtual, religious or ethnic ones.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what or who prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The most positive event, that shattered the very basis of our perception of the world, was the unification of Europe after the end of the Cold war. The negative one – the fact that war (a very hot one) is back in Europe. Not just as a fact – in former Yugoslavia and in the post-Soviet space. But rather as a way of thinking – becoming again a possible, admissible and even a legitimate vehicle for solving international conflicts. Which in itself is a major setback in the political mindset in Europe after WWII.

In the beginning of August Bulgaria and Macedonia signed a partnership agreement, which was the culmination of nearly 18 years of diplomatic work between the two countries. What processes led to the signing of this agreement?

In late 2008 Bulgaria handed to the Government of the Republic of Macedonia the first draft of the Good-Neighbourly Relations Agreement, meant to build upon the ideas of the bilateral Declaration, signed by the prime-ministers of the two countries in 1999. I am very much satisfied that at last the Agreement has been signed – because it was me in my capacity of deputy foreign minister and my team in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who launched the idea and

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drafted the text.

The Gruevski government in Skopje was not interested in signing such an agreement, looking for national consolidation mostly on the basis of nationalism. And this was not unexpected. All Western Balkan countries, especially those, who achieved their first modern statehood, faced a very complex task. They had to blend two contradictory processes into a strategic unity. On one side they had to engage in a border-building process, i.e. affirming their newly acquired independence. On the other side, and in parallel, they had to prepare for and accomplish an absolutely reverse course of action – pulling-down-borders, as an inevitable transition to EU membership, thus getting ready to transfer part of their sometimes still immature sovereignty to Brussels. This fragile balance was lost when the EU abandoned enlargement as its main priority.

Bulgaria's approach was not consistent either. For a certain period, Bulgaria also showed no interest in pursuing this goal before suddenly declaring it as an unconditional requirement for our support for the Republic of Macedonia's EU accession.

So it was the change of government in Skopje and the pragmatic approach of the one in Sofia that made the signing possible. Plus the general anxiety of the international community about the aggravation of security situation in the Balkans as a result of the escalation of confrontation with Russia, the war in Syria, the migration crisis, and the rise of nationalism in the region.

In light of the agreement are you optimistic about future relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia?

Yes, I am a moderate optimist. The stalemate with the Agreement became an obstacle for the development of the whole complex of bilateral relations – not just the political ones, but also business, trade, cultural, scientific, etc. Now there is a new impulse for co-operation. I do hope that hate speech will be abandoned or at least limited and people-to-people contacts could create the necessary networking foundation for positive bilateral relations in all fields.

How do Macedonia's neighbours view this partnership and what can we expect from them?

The signing of the Agreement was welcomed by both the international community and the region in general. It stabilised the positions of the Republic of Macedonia in its relations with Albania, it gave the Macedonian government the necessary space for maneuvering in the negotiations about the name with Greece, and it strengthened its efforts to re-define the country's relations with Serbia. But mostly – it was an important step in improving the perspectives of the Western Balkan countries to EU and NATO membership.

What are the biggest obstacles that Macedonia faces in its attempts to join the EU and NATO?

Internationally it is blocked by Greece and in fact, this is the only obstacle to the Republic of Macedonia's NATO accession. The final Declaration of the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, when Croatia and Albania joined the Alliance, stipulated that the Republic of Macedonia will not have to apply once again for membership when the name issue is finally resolved, the decision being already taken *sub condicio*. By the way, this was a Bulgarian proposal. In more general terms – The Republic of Macedonia will have to overcome the international isolation inherited by the former government.

The domestic challenges could turn out to be even more difficult: the country will have to return on the road of painful reforms, fight corruption, harmonise its legislation, etc. All this against the background of a politically and ethnically divided society and a decline in the social welfare of the population.

How would a Macedonian membership of the EU and NATO affect internal divisions?

An EU and NATO membership will be a strong stabilising factor for The Republic of Macedonia. Accession is not an act, it is a process. It will focus governmental efforts and public energy during the pre-accession negotiations, thus diminishing ethnic and political tensions in society. Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration will undoubtedly help

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consolidate its statehood. NATO membership will also reduce the risks to the country's security, including eventual destabilisation by neighbouring states, other regional or global players – both members and non-members of the Alliance.

Bulgaria will hold the Presidency of the European Council from January 2018. How will it use that role in relation to the European integration of the Western Balkans?

Bulgaria has declared the Western Balkans a main priority of its presidency. I do hope that in practical terms this will mean negotiating and endorsing an ambitious Road Map for the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region – with engagements and responsibilities for all the parties involved.

What do you think of the EU's policy in the Western Balkan region?

I call the current developments in the region AEDS (Augmented EU-Deficiency Syndrome). It will be disastrous for both Europe and the Balkans if the question "When?" is reduced to an "If" – as far as EU membership is concerned.

Integration or nationalism – these are the two alternatives for the region. And this is the big challenge to, and the enormous responsibility of, the EU – not only for the future of the region but for the stability and security of the continent itself and its role as a global actor. This could be put in other words: consolidated amorphousness of the Balkans and regional instability is the rather disturbing alternative to EU membership for the Western Balkans.

Questioning or even postponing the EU perspective for these countries could dry up the impetus for reforms and leave local nations frustrated and isolated, facing their internal divisions and regional rivalries – at a rather low level of national stability and regional security. Without a tangible EU accession looming for all the Western Balkans countries, the region also faces the challenge of being torn apart by different geopolitical pressures and interests. Then it might face the risk of turning into either a buffer-zone or a front-zone between the East and the West, between Europe and Asia, between Christianity and Islam.

The EU is everything that a Western Balkan country would strive for. For the countries of the region EU membership equals peace (coming back to the post-Yugoslavian wars), it brings security and stability – both national and regional. It means values and integration. And, most important, it means hopes and chances for a decent and prosperous life.

From a regional perspective the full integration of the countries of South-Eastern Europe to the EU seems to be the only long-term solution for centuries-old rivalries, ethnic, religious, political, cultural tensions and conflicts, nationalism and territorial clashes, dissolving all these into a larger entity, where even state borders seemed irrelevant – until recently.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Learn from our mistakes! Know the facts, analyse the processes, think globally – the future of mankind is at stake.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Tanchev. Alex Tanchev is an Associate Features Editor at E-International Relations.