

VISIT UNDER EU PRESIDENCY

BULGARIAN VISIT FOR THE EUROPEAN PRESIDENCY

This trip was for the former members of the EP led by our Brigitte (not Macron or Bardot) but Langenhagen. The group consisted of 19 former members from the UK, France, Germany, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Spain, Czech Republic, Finland, and Poland from 5 different political parties.

It was a particularly moving visit for me. I first went to Bulgaria campaigning for the first free elections after the Berlin Wall came down, then as an official observer in my role as Vice-President of the Bulgarian Delegation in the EP. I was guided by Stefan Tavrov, future Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to London, Rome, Paris and UN; he is still involved in European Politics. I subsequently wrote and took through all the Bulgarian Reports for accession while I was on the Foreign Affairs committee under the Chairmanship of Otto von Habsburg. We had meetings with Ms Monika Panayotova Deputy Minister for EP relations and FMA member. Extremely probing questions were asked and the themes that wove their way through from the start were the preoccupation with the West Balkan Enlargement, plus of course all the old chestnuts. A mixture of late 19th century

combined with imposing communist architecture make up the grand Parliament Buildings, with spacious extra wide corridors. All the buildings are hung with interesting paintings of high quality from different periods and are well worth a visit in themselves. We should not forget that the EP has a very fine international collection of art too, well worth a visit.

Enlivened debate ensued the Bulgarian Foreign and European Affairs committees, with the Chairs Ms Dzhema Grozdanova and Mr Kristian Vigenin, as well as with the Bulgarian Vice-President Ms Iliana Iotova (former MEP).

Mentioned were Dublin Agreement 2007 needing reform, lack of clarity of the Budget, concern on Human Rights, too much bureaucracy and red tape, main crisis not economic but moral values. Possibly these are not new problems.

There followed a little light relief and cultural experience with a visit to the ancient city of Plovdiv in Southern Bulgaria; conquered by Thracians, Macedonians, Romans and many others.

Plovdiv has a state opera house and company run by Luciano Di Martino an inspiring Italian who had been for several years in Germany. He organised a stunning recital with Mr Mark Fowler, Ms Svetlana Ivanova and Ms Evgenia Ralcheva, they sang arias from La Boheme and La Traviata, accompanied by Ralitzia Boteva on the piano, in a sensitively restored period house. Bulgaria is renowned too for its world class singers and musicians. This brought big smiles from all the rather exhausted former MEPs that had been listening to serious

politics until' now.

I mustn't forget between all the debates and culture Bulgaria is famous for its cooking and wines. We were spoilt throughout.

The final day we visited the Military Academy, founded in 1912.

The surrounding park with magnificent trees a hallmark of Tsar Ferdinand as in Exinograd and Varna. He loved nature. Prince Ferdinand of Coburg came to the throne in 1886 following Prince Alexander of Battenberg, with the influence of his mother, the daughter of the last King of France he ruled Bulgaria for over 30 years.

Back to modern times our former very distinguished Finnish Member, Henrik Lax delivered a tour d'horizon a la Julian Amery. He reminded us of the importance of the European Elections next year. Will UK citizens have a vote? The pressure Europe continues to face with major flows of refugees and migrants that have come to stay. Economic progress to enable the EU to sustain its legitimacy, confirm its values and defend democracy. The Single Market, the Crown Jewel of the EU, will suffer a serious blow, if Britain as the consequence of BREXIT, leaves the customs union.

Thank you again to Brigitte, Elisabetta and her team, and our Bulgarian hosts, especially to Mr Hristo Kraevski, Permanent Representative of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria to the European Parliament, for the faultless organisation.

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BULGARIA STILL AT A CROSSROAD

Entering the nostalgic world that is Sofia, with its 19th century buildings and garden restaurants, I could not believe that 10 years after EU accession, which was the last time the FMA group paid a visit, this country seems still to be under the influence of the old political rulers. With a per capita GDP of € 8064 - Germany's, by comparison, is € 41936 - it still has one of the highest poverty rates in the EU: 21.8%.

Because our visit related to the Council Presidency, it was more of an effort, amid the hustle and bustle, to get to speak to important politicians. At the Foreign Affairs, Europe and EU Funds Committee, Members' statements made it difficult to get answers to our raft of questions. Ex-MEP Monika Panayotova, now Minister for the Council Presidency, was receptive to questions and willing to provide solid answers and gave a well-put-together speech on the Presidency's objectives and priorities.

Bulgaria's Vice-President Iliana Jotova - we owed our meeting with her to our Secretary-General's organising skills - was also receptive to our questions and stressed her commitment to democracy and

human rights.

We had an interesting time at the Rakovski Military Academy, where our foreign policy speaker, Henrik Lax (Finland), addressed the audience with the demand to keep solidarity of all EU Member States to the sanctions against Russia.

Unfortunately, there were no questions from the audience of male and female officers.

What does Bulgaria expect from the EU - in addition to sources of funding?

While 16% of the population are in favour of leaving the EU (according to the Financial Times), many democrats who identify with the western world are hoping for political change through more contact with the West (Erasmus programme).

EU subsidies (Cohesion Fund) are also being improperly used, however, as can be seen from funding allocations made to pro-government print media and broadcasters in order to 'build a media environment'.

In addition, according to journalists, the big newspapers, bought by oligarchs, report only good news about their proprietors, especially during election campaigns. Bulgaria has slipped to 111th place on the Reporters without Borders World

Press Index.

As investors can find cheap labour, but not skilled workers, foreign investment has begun to decline, as it has in Romania too. Skilled workers have apparently already left the country, with 67 000 of them, or 1% of the population, heading for Germany alone.

The dissatisfaction of Bulgarians with their parties and politicians - corruption proceedings - can be reflected in the fact that 33% of them voted in favour of founding a new party.

That being so, the European Commission should carefully consider any further EU enlargement that would include the West Balkans. The Bulgarians also take a very critical view of Serbian accession.

The proposal to admit Bulgaria into the Euro Zone is even more controversial because of its preparedness for the euro. Without sustainable convergence, going beyond meeting the nominal criteria, there should be no further consideration of admission; and that includes joining the Banking Union beforehand, which would act as a supervisory body - something that the Bulgarian Government rejects. On an excursion to Plovdiv, with its Roman amphitheatre, there was speculation as to whether cultural links are not more important than involvement in every single EU undertaking.

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A moment of the meeting with Iliana Jotova, Vice-President of the Republic of Bulgaria

WHEN LESS CAN BE MORE

Despite many successes over the years, the EU faces exceptional difficulties: in some parts democracy seems attacked; refugees and economic migrants cause tension about immigration; the Eurozone could be unstable; Putin's Russia poses a threat; and the Trump presidency is unpredictable. Yet opinion surveys indicate the EU is in fair shape. Late in 2017, opinion polls showing EU membership is a "good thing" attained 90% in Ireland. Even Czechia, Greece and the UK showed over 55% positive views. But wait a moment! Did not the UK in 2016 vote narrowly for BREXIT? Are not Far-Right, Eurosceptic parties gaining ground in ten Member States from Finland to Hungary? Public support cannot be taken for granted. In the UK most MPs are pro-EU but took the advisory Referendum as mandatory. With withdrawal negotiations resembling an acrimonious divorce, UK companies are increasingly protesting at looming economic damage. All is uncertain and, though unlikely, it is not

impossible that circumstances may arise in which the UK Parliament will insist that the Article 50 letter is withdrawn. As one of the first elected MEPs in 1979, I reflect nearly as much on the future of the Union as on the massive wound which Britain seems about to inflict on itself and its partners. Politicians and Commission alike should pay very close attention to the patches of growing dissatisfaction with the EU in various States. These trivial 'infections' can grow, as the UK found to its cost. As with the ageing of the human body, over the years there can be an accumulation of small errors which eventually proves fatal. A former Bulgarian Foreign Minister reminded us during the recent FMA visit to Sofia that the *raison d'être* of the EU is to secure peace, stability and prosperity for its Member States. The EU is indeed an amazingly successful achievement. Yet we see the risks. What should the Union do secure the support of its citizens in all Member States? In 1984 Parliament agreed my

amendment, supported by Altiero Spinelli, to include subsidiarity in the Draft Treaty on European Union. It was later included in the Single European Act, but despite efforts over the years it has proved difficult to apply. One reason for this lies with the EP. Parliament normally goes along with the decisions of its specialist committees, quite naturally full of members deeply concerned with the issues covered by those committees. The rest of us, always busy, normally shrug our shoulders and vote obediently to support our experts' recommendations. But this has a cost. Without better mechanisms to enforce subsidiarity and proportionality than exist today, the EU suffers from an accretion of detailed laws, some with unexpected consequences. A distinguished British Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, years ago complained that the EU irritated its citizens by interfering too much in the 'warp and weft' of daily life. It remains a fair point. In any democracy power should be left as close to local people as possible. We should use subsidiarity and proportionality more strongly, ensuring the EU acts in a minimalist manner with its existing powers; but also including new fields, notably defence, where we can more effectively act together. Perhaps thus we can retain public support in all Member States, and keep the Union strong.

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The FMA Delegation during the visit at the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria

BULGARIA: 'CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL'



A moment of the recital with the soloist Svetlana Ivanova in Plovdiv

Before departing, we were received by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Sofia. This foundation is close to the German CDU, mainly financed by the German Parliament, and is represented on all continents. It maintains social networks and organises conferences, seminars and workshops in order to promote European and Christian Democratic values. The director, Thorsten Geissler, has an extensive knowledge of the Bulgarian society. We were very pleased that he was willing to share his interesting insights with us. According to Thorsten Geissler the population and the political class are generally very much pro-European. As a EU member Bulgaria wants to participate in the Schengen Agreement and claims to meet all criteria. The country is a mixture of European and traditional Bulgarian values. Of course, foreigners working with local people have to deal with all kind of cultural differences. Political

life is in our perception very direct and confrontational; the people are polite, but straight forward and against aggressive arguing. In Bulgaria there are less powerful NGOs as in Western Europe, thus civil society can still improve. Bulgaria is a democratic country and media freedom is not restricted by law. However, the press is controlled by some tycoons, who strongly influence political debates. Most people receive their information by watching television, which is dominated by entertainment programs with hidden political messages. At the same time social media are popular and WIFI is everywhere. The young generation does not depend on information from traditional media. Surveys underline that corruption is widespread, hindering economic development and structural improvements. Parliament has recently passed a new anti-corruption law, and a Council to combat corruption has been set up. But the Council remains certain that they will tackle the problem with concrete results. They should be supported. Also, the Bulgarians tend to refer to the situation in Italy, Greece and Spain. "Why do you blame us more than them?" Especially Sofia and some other big cities have good job opportunities, but salaries are still lower than in Central or Western European countries. In the past ten years, about one million Bulgarians have left the country; these mostly well educated people are now missing. They could form the critical mass, which is indispensable.

Since as a FMA-delegation we met several women in top positions, we were curious to learn if this was the reflection of the overall situation of women in politics and society. According to our interlocutor things are changing for the better, but the most powerful political positions are still in the hands of men. In the economy women have almost no top positions. At the family level domestic violence is still a great problem, like in many other Balkan States. Many Bulgarians are still grateful to the Russians because they liberated them from the Turkish occupation. The Orthodox Church of Bulgaria maintains strong ties with her sister church in Russia and usually follows its positions. Overall, despite of all the challenges, Thorsten Geissler remains optimistic about the future because "Bulgaria has a high potential of ambitious young people". Also Bulgarian's Presidency has successfully set the agenda. Especially by drawing the attention of other governments to the Western Balkans. Moreover, all the meetings and conferences were professionally chaired.

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GEORGI RAKOVSKI MILITARY ACADEMY



Georgi Rakovski Military Academy

Extracts of the speech by Henrik Lax during the visit of the FMA to the Georgi Rakovski Military Academy on June 5th 2018.

“The evolution of the EU [...] has much been carried by its ability to further the economic interests of its member states and enhance peace and stability on our continent. Prosperity has allowed the union to become the world leader in promoting and defending human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The ability to deliver security and prosperity to its citizens will also be crucial for the future of the union. We are, however, facing challenges of magnitudes not seen before, problems which no single Member State is able to solve on its own.[...] The union can be successful in

reforming itself to address these challenges only if it has the support of its citizens. Support, however, can be generated only if the problems are brought up to an honest and serious debate in each and every Member State. To put it mildly, our national leaders have been much reluctant to foster debates on the future of the union with their electorate. [...] The European elections next year provide a golden opportunity to make the European citizens aware of the most critical threats to our common future, and how these dangers could be met. I urge you all to demand that your leaders and candidates in the elections commit themselves to find sustainable solutions on the European level. [...]”

The full article is available at www.formermembers.eu

‘Georgi Stoikov Rakovski’ Military Academy

The ‘Georgi Stoikov Rakovski’ Military Academy is the oldest military college in Bulgaria. It was created by virtue of an act adopted by the Bulgarian National Assembly on 1 March 1912. It has contributed not only to the formation of the Officer Corps, but also to the building of the new Bulgarian State in the spirit of European values.

The Academy gives military personnel and students the possibility to study for Master’s degrees in the career fields of national security, psychology and military affairs.

The Academy’s primary task is to provide training in line with the processes under NATO’s comprehensive transformation and the Common Security and Defence Policy being developed in Europe, and with the application and implementation of modern interdisciplinary joint training norms and standards at strategic and operational level for officers (employees) in the security and defence system.

The ‘Georgi Stoikov Rakovski’ Military Academy has been a key pillar of military education and a guarantor of Bulgarian statehood for 106 years now. The Academy is not only Bulgaria’s oldest military college, but also the country’s most authoritative centre for the training of future military and civil leaders in the security and defence field.



FMA Delegation with Dimitar Tashkov, Deputy Commandant of RNDC, during the visit to the Georgi Rakovski Military Academy