



An Comhchoiste um Ghnóthaí an Aontais Eorpaigh

Tuarascáil Taistil

Comhdháil Idirpharlaiminteach

Réigiún na mBalcán Thiar a Athrú – Dearcadh Parlaiminteach maidir le Ról agus Todhchaí Phróiseas Aontachais AE

Sóifia, an Bhulgáir

5 Deireadh Fómhair 2018

Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

Travel Report

Interparliamentary Conference

Transforming the Western Balkans Region - A Parliamentary Perspective on the Role and the Future of EU Accession Process

Sofia, Bulgaria

5 October 2018

[32ENUA0019]

BACKGROUND

On 10 September 2018, the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs received an invitation to the Interparliamentary conference “Transforming the Western Balkans Region - A parliamentary perspective on the role and the future of EU accession process”, held in Sofia on the 5 October 2018, organised by the European Parliament and the Bulgarian National Assembly. At the Joint Committee meeting of 19 September 2018 it was agreed that Senator Gerard Craughwell would travel to attend the conference in Sofia on behalf of the Joint Committee. Senator Craughwell was accompanied by the Policy Advisor to the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, Stephanie Bollard.

Between March and May 2018, the Joint Committee on European Affairs held a number of meetings to discuss the European Commission’s Enlargement Strategy, which was published in February 2018. The Joint Committee discussed the European Perspective for the Western Balkans with the Minister of State for European Affairs Helen McEntee, the Deputy Director-General of the European Commission’s Directorate General of European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Mr Maciej Popowski, the European and Foreign Affairs Minister of Albania, Mr Ditmir Bushati, the Ambassadors to the UK and Ireland of Albania and of Kosovo, and the Deputy Ambassador to the UK and Ireland of Montenegro.

MEETING WITH BULGARIAN IRISH FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Senator Craughwell and the Ambassador of Ireland to Bulgaria HE Michael Forbes met with members of the Irish Friendship group of the Bulgarian National Assembly on 4 October 2018. The following members were present: Ms Anna Alexandrova (Chairperson), Ms Neli Petrova, Mr Vladimir Volov, Mr Tasko Ermenkov and Ms Igljika Ivanova-Sabeva. The meeting was also attended by Mr Nastimir Ananiev, former Member of Parliament and previous Chairperson of the Irish Friendship group.

The meeting was held in the buildings of the National Assembly of Bulgaria. At the meeting, it was discussed that Ireland and Bulgaria were both small countries which had common interests, and that they could learn from each other. The group agreed that relations between Ireland and Bulgaria could be furthered through facilitating exchange visits and establishing a Bulgarian Friendship group in the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Senator Craughwell thanked the Bulgarian members for their support for Ireland during the Brexit negotiations and emphasised how small countries needed to support each other in building a stronger Europe.

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

OPENING ADDRESS

Ms Ekaterina Zaharieva, *Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria*

In her opening address, the Deputy Prime Minister emphasised the importance of bringing the European Parliament and National Parliaments together to have meaningful discussions on important issues. She stated that holding this conference was a sign of Bulgaria's commitment to the Western Balkans, and was part of continuing the priorities of Bulgaria's 2018 Presidency of the Council of the European Union. She commended Macedonia and Albania on the European Council's decision to start negotiations on their accession in 2019, congratulated the Republic of Macedonia on the decision of its parliament to support the country's name change and expressed hope that a resolution could be found for relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Mr Yavor Notev, *Vice-President of the National Assembly of Bulgaria*

In his opening address, Vice President Notev discussed the importance of the Western Balkans for a solid and united Europe. He reminded the conference that the Western Balkans European Perspective was launched in 2003 with the Thessaloniki conference, and that it was still in progress. He stated that the Sofia Declaration was a strong commitment from the EU, but that funding needed to be available to implement the reforms which were necessary for the Western Balkans region to progress.

SESSION ONE: EU Western Balkans Summit, Sofia Priority Agenda, Berlin Process Summit and the Way Ahead: Continuing Support for Western Balkans EU Accession Process

Ms Dzhema Grozdanova, *Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria*

Ms Grozdanova stated that there have been improvements in relations between states in the Western Balkans region, but that there are still residual problems. She outlined that Bulgaria was continuing its support for its neighbours in the region, but political problems in Albania and the Republic of Macedonia could not be overcome without support from the people.

Mr Andreas Schieder, *Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Austrian National Council*

Mr Schieder emphasised the need to keep enlargement on the European agenda, outlining that the Austrian Presidency has continued it as a priority, following the Bulgarian Presidency.

Mr Cristian Sorin-Dumitrescu, *President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Senate of Romania*

Mr Sorin-Dumitrescu discussed Romania's support for the Western Balkans, stating that enlargement would contribute to democracy and stability in the region.

Mr Ognian Zlatev, *Head of the European Commission's Representation in Sofia*

Mr Zlatev emphasised the role of national parliaments in the accession process, noting the important role of parliaments in assuring implementation of the *acquis* and consulting with citizens on the necessary reforms.

DEBATE

Senator Craughwell congratulated the Bulgarian Parliament on successfully hosting the conference. He stated that the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs felt that it was important to send a representative to Sofia to show its support for the Western Balkans. He explained that the Joint Committee viewed enlargement as a positive, especially in the context of Brexit, and noted that the Joint Committee had engaged with Ambassadors from the Western Balkans as part of its work on the topic of EU enlargement.

In the debate that followed the first session, delegates from **Albania and Montenegro** expressed their **frustration** with the speed and unpredictability of the enlargement process. Delegates from the national parliaments of **Greece, Hungary, Romania, Croatia and Italy** expressed their **support** for the Western Balkans. The Vice-Chairperson of the Lithuanian Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, questioned the appropriateness of a long-term enlargement strategy given how quickly the international political situation can change.

SESSION TWO: The Role of National Parliaments and the European Parliament for Strengthening the European Perspective of the Western Balkans

Mr Christian Buchmann, *Chairperson of the EU-committee of the Austrian Federal Council*

Mr Buchman outlined the importance of active interparliamentary and multilateral dialogue, and of sharing best practices between parliaments, emphasising the important role of parliaments in implementing reforms. He also discussed the importance of involving the Western Balkan states in interparliamentary fora such as COSAC.

Mr Stefan Musoiu, *Vice-Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania*

Mr Musoiu stated that 2018-2019 was a window of opportunity for the Western Balkans to progress. He expressed Romania's support for enlargement, and discussed how accession was transformative for Romania. He emphasised the importance of parliamentary oversight in ensuring democratic legitimacy during the accession process.

DEBATE

Senator Craughwell outlined the Irish government's commitment to pre-accession support for the Western Balkans, and the Irish parliament's support of that position. He encouraged the Western Balkans to consult with and seek support from Member States which have been through the EU accession process already, including Ireland. He noted that Ireland has sought support from other countries regarding its unique situation as a result of Brexit, and that Ireland would like to offer its support to other countries.

In the debate that followed the second session, delegates from the national parliaments of **Portugal, Slovenia, Italy and Hungary** expressed their **support** for the Western Balkans. The delegates from the national parliaments of Hungary and Italy discussed **interparliamentary exchange programmes** they had taken part in with the Western Balkans countries, while the delegate from the national parliament of Portugal expressed the need to strike a balance between caution and progression.

A **Belgian** parliamentarian stated that EU enlargement was not on the agenda of his parliament, that other issues such as Brexit and Trans-Atlantic trade relations had taken precedent. He expressed his personal opinion that it was more important for the EU to sort out issues closer to home before broadening the Union again.

Delegates from **Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo** stated that they wished to become part of the EU, but that there were frustrations with the speed of the

accession process. Delegates of all of the countries of the Western Balkans expressed how important the prospect of EU membership was to stability in their states and in the region, but that they needed to see progress to maintain public support.

The delegate from **Macedonia** stated that the lack of certainty regarding EU membership was causing fatigue across the Western Balkans region, and that more direct engagement and concrete policies were needed from the EU. He stated that the Western Balkan countries were important partners to the EU, but in lieu of a credible EU perspective there was space for third parties to play a role, filling the gap left by a lack of EU engagement. The delegate from **Albania** emphasised the importance of acknowledging ongoing issues in the Western Balkans region, stating that whitewashing over the problems faced by the Western Balkan countries would not benefit anyone. The delegate from **Kosovo** highlighted the need to facilitate dialogue between Western Balkan countries, as well as between the region and the EU.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

Ms Livia Járóka MEP, *Vice-President of the European Parliament*

In her keynote speech, Vice-President Járóka stated that the EU needed the Western Balkans and that the Western Balkans has a lot to offer the European Union. She stated that the European Parliament understood the frustrations and concerns of the Western Balkans, and recognised that progress was too slow. She emphasised that there were a lot of opportunities to engage with not only the European Commission, but also the European Parliament and NGOs on the ground in the Western Balkans. She discussed the need for EU-Western Balkans collaborative projects, and to ensure that the EU pre-accession funding was used to actively fund the region's future development, through anti-poverty measures and education.

SESSION THREE: Transformative effect of EU accession process on the region – challenges and achievements

Ms Julie Ward MEP, *European Parliament*

Ms Ward discussed the need for reconciliation and stability in the Western Balkans region. She stated that nationalistic rhetoric was beginning to grow in the region, and that it was important to promote justice, rule of law and democratic value in order for the region to face difficult past and move forward. She emphasised the need to support civil society groups that are working on regional cooperation projects on the ground, and to promote education and intercultural exchange.

Mr Fatmir Curri, *Kosovo Civil Society Foundation, Pristina*

Mr Curri suggested that despite high public support, there has been frustration in Kosovo with the EU accession process, and this has led to some backsliding on reforms. He stated that civil society groups had been ignored by the European Institutions, and that civil society groups were asking for transparency in the accession process.

Ms Simonida Kacarska, *European Policy Institute, Skopje*

Ms Kacarska stated that there has been a lot of talk on the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans in the last year, but not a lot of action. She outlined that there has been a loss of enthusiasm for the European Project, and that it was regrettable that the countries of the Western Balkans had not been included in the Future of Europe debates.

Ms Sidonja Manushi, *Albanian Institute for international studies, Tirana*

Ms Manushi stated that the EU perspective for the Western Balkans should be realistic, and have key milestones. She outlined that the process was taking too long, and that public support couldn't be taken for granted. She expressed the view that if accession negotiations were opened for one country, they should be opened for them all.

Ms Jelica Minić, *European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade*

Ms Minić stated that there was a lack of communication on or from the EU in the Western Balkans, and that there was a risk that the influence of third countries in the region would increase if the EU did not engage. She asked that more sectors be opened to the Western Balkan countries, outlining that much can be done before official institutional integration.

Mr Momčilo Radulović, *European Movement in Montenegro, Podgorica*

Mr Radulović expressed frustration that Macedonia had shown courage in signing up to the agreement with Greece to change its name, but that it had not been rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations. He stated that this was hypocritical on the part of the EU, and that the Western Balkans countries needed consistency. He outlined that if negotiations were opened and did not progress, they could always be stopped.

Ms Lejla Ramić–Mesihović, *Foreign policy Initiative, Sarajevo*

Ms Ramić–Mesihović stated that the economy of Bosnia-Herzegovina was growing and that the country was making progress. However, she explained that the peace accord implemented in the country conflicted with its accession progress, as its constitution was

"discriminatory", even though the EU was actively involved in the implementation of the peace accord.

DEBATE:

In the short debate that followed the third session, delegates from the national parliaments of **Portugal, Italy and Croatia** stated that it was important to support civil society contributions in the Western Balkans, but that there were also other issues besides enlargement that were on the European agenda, such as Brexit and migration. A delegate from Italian parliament stated that it was **important to pursue enlargement while also supporting existing EU Member states.**

SESSION FOUR: Importance of Interparliamentary and Regional Cooperation for Speeding Up Reforms in EU Acceding Countries

Mr George Pirinski MEP, *Member of the Committee on Budgetary Control and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs*

Mr Pirinski discussed how the Future of Europe debate includes the whole continent, not just EU Member States. He stated that in his opinion a cohesive approach was needed to the Western Balkans European Perspective, and that negotiations should be started with all countries at the same time.

Dr. Milan Brglez, *Member of Slovenian Parliament, representative of the South East European Cooperation Process Parliamentary Assembly*

Dr Brglez discussed the work of the South East European Cooperation Process, and noted that work on the European Perspective for the Western Balkans had slowed down as the EU has had to deal with other challenges.

Mr. Damir Mateljan, *Member of Croatian Parliament, representative of the Presidency of Central European Initiative Parliamentary Dimension*

Mr Mateljan stated that the enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans remained unclear, but that Croatia supported the accession aims of the Western Balkans, and was open to further cooperation. He emphasised the importance of offering the Western Balkans a solid European perspective in order to prevent third countries taking a stronger role in the region.

Mr. Goran Svilanovic, *Secretary General of Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo*

Mr Svilanovic discussed the work of the Regional Cooperation Council, focusing on cooperation within the South East European Region. He stated that there was already regional free trade in goods, and that there was a need to expand this to services. He noted that there were ongoing negotiations between the South East European states on issues such as mobile network roaming and the mutual recognition of qualifications.

Mr Gjergj Murra, *Executive Director, Western Balkans Fund*

Mr Murra discussed the work of the Western Balkans fund as a grant giving organisation which funds regional projects. He stated that it is a positive example of an organisation functioning well in the region.

JOINT COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS

Senator Craughwell discussed the proceedings of the conference and his meeting with the Bulgarian-Irish Friendship group with the Joint Committee at the meeting of 17 October 2018.

The Joint Committee concluded that it was beneficial to understand the mindset and the frustrations of the candidate and potential candidate countries of the Western Balkans. The Joint Committee support reiterated its support for the European Commission's enlargement policy, and its belief that it is important to provide a realistic European perspective to the Western Balkan countries.

The Joint Committee will continue its work on the Western Balkans and will continue to monitor the progress of the European Commission's Enlargement Strategy.



Michael Healy-Rae T.D.

Chairman, Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

5 December 2018

Interparliamentary Conference

**TRANSFORMING THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION -
A parliamentary perspective on the role and the future
of EU accession process**

**with Members of the European Parliament
and the Pre-Accession Countries' Parliaments**

Organised by the **European Parliament**
*(Democracy Support and Election Co-ordination Group
in cooperation with the Committee on Foreign Affairs)*

and the **National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria**

Sofia, 5 October 2018

Venue : Hall 3 , National Palace of Culture (NDK)

Sofia (Bulgaria)

PROGRAMME

8:15 – 9:00 Registration

In the Chair:	Mr Eduard Kukan, MEP, European Parliament
----------------------	--

9:00 – 9:30 Opening of the Interparliamentary Conference:

Mr Yavor Notev, Vice-President of the National Assembly of Bulgaria

Ms Ekaterina Zaharieva, Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria

**9:30 – 10:45 EU – Western Balkans Summit, Sofia Priority Agenda, Berlin Process
Summit and the way ahead: continuing support for Western Balkans EU
accession process**

Ms Dzhema Grozdanova, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs,
National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria

Mr Andreas Schieder, Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the
Austrian National Council

Mr Cristian-Sorin Dumitrescu, President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs
of the the Senate of Romania

Mr Ognian Zlatev, Head of the European Commission's Representation in
Sofia

Exchange of views

10:45 – 11:15 *Family photo and coffee break*

In the Chair:	Mr Eduard Kukan, MEP, European Parliament
----------------------	--

11:15 – 12:30 The role of National Parliaments and the European Parliament for

strengthening the European perspective of the Western Balkans

Mr. Christian Buchmann, Chairperson of the EU-committee of the Austrian Federal Council

Mr Stefan Musoiu, Vice-Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania

Representatives of EU national parliaments

Representatives of Western Balkans parliaments

Exchange of views

12:30 – 14:00 *Lunch hosted by the National Assembly of Bulgaria (Forum restaurant, National Palace of Culture)*

In the Chair:

Mr Petar Petrov, MP, National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria

and

Mr Eduard Kukan, MEP, European Parliament

14:15 – 14:30 **Keynote speech by Ms Livia Járóka**, Vice- President of the European Parliament

14:30 – 15:30 **Transformative effect of EU accession process on the region – challenges and achievements**

Ms Julie Ward, MEP, European Parliament

Representatives of Western Balkans parliaments

WB6 Advocacy Group representatives:

Mr Fatmir Curri, Kosovo Civil Society Foundation, Pristina

Ms Simonida Kacarska, European Policy Institute, Skopje

Ms Sidonja Manushi, Albanian Institute for international studies, Tirana

Ms Jelica Minić, European Movement in Serbia, Belgrade

Mr Momčilo Radulović, European Movement in Montenegro, Podgorica

Ms Lejla Ramić–Mesihović, Foreign policy Initiative, Sarajevo

Exchange of views

15:30 – 16:45: Importance of interparliamentary and regional cooperation for speeding up reforms in EU acceding countries

Mr George Pirinski, MEP, Member of the Committee on Budgetary Control and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

Dr. Milan Brglez, member of Slovenian parliament, representative of the South East European Cooperation Process Parliamentary Assembly

Mr. Damir Mateljan, member of Croatian parliament, representative of the Presidency of Central European Initiative Parliamentary Dimension

Mr. Goran Svilanovic, Secretary General of Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo

Mr Gjergj Murra, Executive Director, Western Balkans Fund

Exchange of views

Concluding remarks

Departure of participants