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### Lilyana Pavlova, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU: Bulgaria Returned to the European Agenda the Theme of the European Perspective of the Western Balkans

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**What is your assessment of what has been done since the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU? What has Bulgaria managed to prove to the other EU member states? What image of EU President Bulgaria has built?**

Bulgarian foreign policy, including as an EU memberstate, is not a seasonal phenomenon. Priorities and actions in this area are not for six months, but based on lasting values and interests - peace, cooperation, good neighborliness, democracy, rights, freedoms and the rule of law. These are the principles and values at the heart of the European Union. They are reflected in the priorities of our presidency, its motto and its messages. The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU was a chance for Bulgaria to become more visible, to release its image from demoralized clichés. I think we have achieved this among our partners in Europe.

It is best to speak with concrete examples. The Bulgarian Presidency has adopted a number of important legislative acts in various fields. We appreciate the dedication of the Bulgarian team in every sphere and the efforts that have been made to advance the negotiations on various issues, taking into account the positions of each country and we have been able to offer mutually acceptable and balanced solutions.

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One part is in the field of environmental protection and Energy and Climate. For example: the Regulation on the monitoring and reporting of carbon dioxide emissions; An Effort Sharing Regulation to Achieve the EU Climate Goals and the Energy Efficiency Directive for Buildings. These are important regulations because they are related to the introduction of modern and clean transport, and the buildings in which we live and work, are built so that the use of energy is efficient and environmentally friendly.

The digital single market is an extremely important sector in view of the development of technology nowadays. In this regard, it is particularly tangible for citizens to come into force of a regulation which puts an end to the geographical blockage. Achieving a political agreement with the European Parliament (EP) on the Digital Single Gateway Regulation is also a big step to make it easier for businesses and citizens. It provides full access to a wide range of on-line procedures for assistance in relocating, working, retiring, training, or establishing and doing business in another country. In order to modernize the European copyright framework and to adapt to the requirements of the digital age, a negotiated position has been reached on the Digital Single Market Copyright Directive.

The [European Open Science Cloud Council](#) have been adopted, bringing together existing and emerging data infrastructures and offering a virtual environment. We finalized negotiations with the EP on the European Code of Conduct for Electronic Communications and on the Regulation on the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications.

In the field of security: the EU Traffic Information and Authorization Regulation (ETIAS). This act is particularly important for the security and protection of the EU's external borders.

In the social field, the adoption of the Posting Workers Directive was undisputedly successful. This directive was discussed in trialogues (between the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council) during three EU presidencies. The talks over the past months have been long and heavy, but the necessary balance has finally been achieved. The Directive establishes the principle of equal pay for equal work in the sphere of services, which applies in the same place, with guaranteed legal certainty for the citizens.

### **What are the successes of the Bulgarian Presidency - through the eyes of Europe and the country of Bulgaria? Do you think that our country succeeded in making the priorities set for the presidency a topic that would be a permanent feature of the European agenda?**

The feedback from the organization and the results of the Presidency are positive.

We have been highly rated by all partners, both at Member State level and by various international and European institutions. We can safely say - Yes, we can and we know. I agree that Bulgaria plays an active role within the EU within its capabilities. The Presidency has been a chance to shape the European agenda and we have used it fully in many areas - EU finances, employment and social policy, the digital market and society, consumer protection, energy and the environment, foreign policy and enlargement.

Confirmation that we have worked in the right direction is the fact that the next few presidencies will continue to work on the same lines, not just Austria and Romania, but also Croatia, which will take over the EU Council presidency in 2020, will organize the next summit with the countries of the Western Balkans.

In recent years the EU has been focused on responding to emerging crises. The Bulgarian Presidency has tried to redirect the Union's attention from crises to the future, especially the deeper processes of transformation of Europe's economies and societies. The geopolitical situation also has a lasting impact. The Bulgarian contribution in this respect is in several directions - a debate on the next Multiannual Financial Framework; a strong social Europe; young people in the debate on the future of Europe; developing the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Let us not forget that the Bulgarian Presidency is working actively and has succeeded in reforming the EU electoral law (the Election of Members of the European Parliament) and setting the dates for the European elections between 23 and 26 May 2019.

### **What are the benefits for our country after the Presidency of the Council of the EU?**

Benefits for Bulgaria are several. On the one hand, the Bulgarian administration has been working hard and constantly demonstrating and building up capacity, knowledge and skills to negotiate and work with European colleagues from different institutions, evolve and achieve decisions on complex legislative documents. This is an exceptional advancement and acknowledgment of the high level of professionalism of Bulgarian employees.



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From an economic point of view, Bulgaria has become the center of more than 280 events, which has contributed greatly to the business sector in the sphere of services. More than 36,000 delegates participated in the events of the calendar of the Bulgarian presidency and they all recounted how pleased they are and how they rediscover one EU member state in another light and how they will come again on a private visit. And this is also a plus for tourism.

From there, we can say that the image of Bulgaria has improved. We have succeeded in strengthening the eyes of both the EU and other countries (because we have had visits from Asia, Africa and the US) that we are a serious and worthy partner.

As a media coverage, the facts are impressive - over 130,000 online views, over 1,500,000 social media views, more than 1,250,000 video and photo views, 4 videos for Bulgaria have been produced, and more than 130,100 articles and media coverage in 127 countries. The cultural program was also impressive with the official opening in Sofia and Brussels as well as the ongoing and closing events. We have combined history, national heritage and the future of digitization. And all these facts lead to political benefits. Bulgaria posed serious questions to the European agenda and all the achievements proved that Bulgaria strongly reaffirmed its position on the security and stability of the EU. We are proud to say that we have fulfilled our mission, but we continue to defend our motto that united we stand strong and continuing to work for the unity of Europe.

The Bulgarians also gave their final word: 62% of the population think that we have done well and 19% - very well, while 44% say that Bulgaria has achieved international recognition and prestige, 30% - popularity and interest to Bulgaria by European citizens, and 22% consider that there is an economic effect from the growth of visitors.

### Did the Western Balkans remain aside due to the migration crisis and the security crisis in Europe?

Bulgaria returned to the European agenda the theme of the European perspective of the Western Balkans. The issue of EU enlargement is not part of our priority. Many times we repeat that every country in the region needs to achieve certain results, there are conditions which each country has to meet in order to start negotiations for accession and then to become a member state, and we do not want to give false expectations to people. I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that Bulgaria took the role of a regional leader, putting the Western Balkans as a priority of its presidency of the EU Council. There are events which will remain in history - Athens and Skopje managed to resolve the 27-year name dispute. It is no coincidence that even their prime ministers received recognition and awards at the Munich Security Council on 15 February this year.

For a long time, we have not seen so many bilateral and multilateral meetings of our partners in the Western Balkans, loaded with so good will for cooperation and constructivism. The first concrete initiatives for regional economic cooperation in the energy, infrastructure, digital area were signed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia. We can say that the Presidency has brought us the wind of change in our share of Europe, the positive change. We drew the path to the Balkans towards the EU. Namely here, in Sofia, on 17 May we made a decisive step forward! We have begun to talk honestly and openly, trust is being restored, and that is very important. Prime Minister Borissov has united in Sofia the leaders of the member states, the countries of the Western Balkans and leading financial donors and partners. I would also like to remind you of the March 26 meeting in Varna of the EU-Turkey leaders.

The question of the European future of the Western Balkans has been absent over the past five years at the EU table. Not only did we set it up, but we also won support and a long-term commitment. Bulgaria showed goodwill and solidarity with its neighbors and can reasonably rely on mutuality. Let us not forget that the Austrian and Romanian Presidencies have also placed the theme, and the Croatian Presidency, as I have already mentioned, also expressed the will to organize the next Summit in this format.

The Western Balkans are part of Europe and may be repeated, but we must work together for the unity of our continent.

Each of the countries in this region has to go through a difficult road.

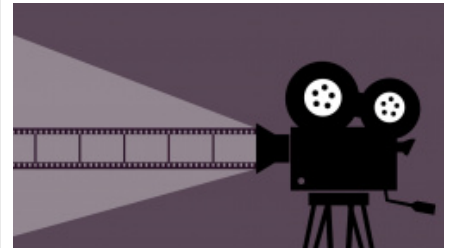
Accession will require unanimity among the 27 EU Member States. Accession is a process that moves not from a calendar but from a reform. The sooner the countries in this process "write their homework", the sooner we will welcome them in the common European home. However, during the Bulgarian Presidency, after difficult negotiations, we succeeded in bringing together the Member States around the Enlargement Conclusions, which set a specific time perspective for starting accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia.



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Their European "prospect" means that in their efforts they will not be alone. The EU will be there and will support them - both economically and politically. In this respect, the Bulgarian concept of the connectivity of the Western Balkans and the EU is fundamental. Economically, infrastructurally, educationally, digitally, and as everyday contacts, they must be increasingly connected with the EU, unnecessary barriers has to fall. It is a process that will improve the lives of the citizens of these countries and build lasting public support for their European path of development. On the other hand, this process will improve the trade and investment environment, reduce the root causes emigration to EU countries. I think that Member States are aware of their deep interest in the European perspective of the Western Balkans. If Europe is not there, there will be someone else. And it can cost us a lot. The world will not wait for Europe to overcome its "fatigue" of the enlargement and to regain its "appetite" for it. Other major international players never get tired and have an incessant interest. Our choice is simple: do we want this region, which is historically, geographically and culturally part of Europe, to return politically to its bosom, or do we prefer it to remain an isolated and lasting source of insecurity, instability, threats? Prime Minister Borissov made a comparison that the total population of the Western Balkans is less than Romania - 17.5 million. And their Gross Domestic Product equals the Slovak. However, their development potential is enormous. Their integration is entirely within the reach of the 505 million EU.

It is important to note that, on our part, this was not a limited effort, and after the Presidency, we continue to support our neighbors in a different way and at different levels - both expertly through exchange of experience and good practices, and of a highly political level. Two concrete examples I can give are: Firstly, on the initiative of Prime Minister Borisov there are regular meetings between Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Greece to discuss cooperation on strategic projects and initiatives for the region.

Moreover, recently National Assembly ratified the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) Protocol on the accession of the Republic of Northern Macedonia.

### **What were the biggest difficulties and challenges you faced during the Bulgarian Presidency?**

During the six months and before and after, as part of the Trio presidencies (with Estonia and Austria) I can share the main challenges.

In the field of justice and internal affairs, we can highlight the work on the reform of the Common European Asylum System, part of which is the Dublin Regulation. We are the fifth Presidency, seeking agreement on this difficult issue. Our contribution is that we have completely changed the philosophy of the legislative debate, which has been reduced to disputes about the transfer of migrants and quotas. The Bulgarian proposal addresses the issue in all its aspects - border security, the return policy of illegal immigrants, the treatment of the problem at its root, European aid to the countries of origin of migration. Solidarity with countries exposed to strong migratory pressure is an important element of our proposal and it goes hand in hand with responsibility. Work on digital market and public legislation is also complex, especially in the areas of copyright, audiovisual media services, cyber security, telecommunications.

### **Do you think that the votes of no confidence to the government have darkened our European Presidency?**

In Bulgaria, as a democracy with leading principle of government and as a parliamentary republic, the opposition is in its constitutional right to declare votes of no confidence to the ruling majority.

However, I do not think that this have darkened our European Presidency. Our country has assumed tremendous responsibility with national, European and international weight. We resisted despite the obstacles, difficulties or uncomfortable environment. And this is part of political governance, duties and statehood. We are convinced that the present government contributes to the positive growth of our country. The whole organization, coordination, holding the European Presidency was tense but satisfying, because once again we proved that we are sustainable, strong and professional. We are convinced of the correctness of our actions, and the citizens of Bulgaria and Europe have confirmed it.

### **What is your opinion on the Mobility Package?**

Heavy road vehicles have a major role to play in the European Union's economy, employing about 3 million people employed in 600 000 businesses. The effective functioning and competitiveness of these businesses are vital to the formation of the European Union's GDP and to the creation of jobs. The sector deserves a fair and clear legislative framework

at EU level which is expected to encourage the further development of the sector and the smooth functioning of the single internal market by ensuring realistic and enforceable rules.

This is an extremely difficult legislative proposal, where there is a clear distinction between Member States in two groups. So far, it is clear that the search for a solution will remain for the upcoming European Parliament elections (the Council of the EU, representing the Member States, has adopted its position, but the European Parliament has still not accepted its entirety in the package, which is why negotiations between the institutions can't begin). This is the good news, as contradictory legislative initiatives adopted at the last moment by the European Parliament's work, mean that Europe can not show unity in resolving important issues.

The Bulgarian national position is fully formed through an open dialogue and takes into account the expressed opinion of the transport industry, representing more than 61,000 households in which at least one person works as a heavy goods vehicle driver.

The controversial texts are protectionist, divide Europe and violate the EU's basic principles of a single market, free movement of people and protection of competition. There is a need to improve social rights in the area, respect for fundamental human freedoms, privacy and the rights of drivers. There is a risk of mass bankruptcy of Bulgarian international carriers if disproportionate rules and additional administrative burdens are imposed.

The Bulgarian side is for common rules for international freight transport, but not for those that are disproportionate, discriminatory and imposed at all costs. Finding balance and practical texts is key to achieving a compromise on the Mobility Package I. I hope that with joint efforts, this will happen after the next European Parliament is formed.

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