



BULGARIA'S EUROPEAN JOURNEY



Summary of the discussion evening at Gallery Studio Pulchri in The Hague on January 23, 2018

Organizing entities: Foundation Oost-Europa-Projecten (STOEP)
Association Netherlands - Bulgaria (VNB)

Moderator of the event: Karel van Kesteren, president of the VNB, former Dutch ambassador to Bulgaria.

Mr. Karel van Kesteren welcomes the about 45 participants and explains the background of the meeting: the start of Bulgaria's EU presidency during the first half of 2018. Bulgaria is among the EU member states that are not so well-known in The Netherlands. The idea of the event is to enhance the level of knowledge and awareness in The Netherlands about the qualities of this fellow EU member and the challenges it faces.

The theme of the event is, just as that of the exhibition, "**Bulgaria's European Journey**". Under this over-arching theme, two clusters of topics were addressed:

Bulgaria and the European culture and Bulgaria and the European values.

For each of the two clusters, two experts gave a short introduction, with subsequently reactions from members of a panel of experts and from the audience. This way, a view on Bulgaria's current position in the broader European context was outlined.

Van Kesteren used a quote several times that became a separate theme of the evening: 'In Bulgaria everything is better than you think'.

Cluster ONE, Bulgaria and the European culture

Ms. Désirée Krikhaar, art historian, gave a very interesting and inspiring presentation on the history of Bulgaria, that goes back to the year 5000 b.C. (the gold treasure, found in Varna). Thracians, Greek, Romans, all left their traces in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian state was founded in 681 and is one of the few states which never changed its name. The creation of the Cyrillic alphabet by the monks Cyril and Method was an important milestone in the history of the Bulgarians, together with accepting Christianity in 864. The Renaissance started in Bulgaria in 1259, well before it began in Italy. This all makes clear that Bulgaria has been a part of Europe from the start. In a way, the journey of Europe started from the Balkans, according to Désirée Krikhaar¹.

Ms. Tsveta Andreeva, expert at the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in Amsterdam, outlined the relationship between European cultural policy and national policy. Her attention was focused on the importance of cultural heritage policy and the importance of cultural capitals. Cultural heritage, being important for its historic value, is also of economic importance and is part of sustainable development. 2018 is European year of cultural heritage. Heritage preservation and protection are also a point of attention during the Bulgarian presidency. Bulgaria puts the focus on the Balkan during its presidency. It plays the

¹ Ms. Krikhaar's email address is dmd.krikhaar@tiscali.nl

role of facilitator across the region, a glue and this is of importance for the whole of Europe.

EU is an important market for cultural products and a lot of new programs aim at making it more accessible.

Cultural capitals have a role in promoting cities and regions, as in 2018 Leeuwarden in The Netherlands. Plovdiv is one of the two European Cultural Capitals 2019. It gives the city new chances to present its rich old and modern culture.

The members of the panel gave a reaction:

Ms. Rada Yakova, visual artist, stated that many people think rather negatively about Bulgaria, having in mind the publications when Bulgaria started the Presidency this month. She is convinced that we can improve the image through art and exchange of views, like we do at this discussion evening.

Ms. Radina Dankova, visual artist, said that art can bridge the gap between Bulgaria and Europe.

Mr. Jaapjan Rijlaarsdam, president of the Foundation Netherlands - Romania, shared that his organisation organises exchange programs for students between The Netherlands and many other European countries. This gives them a better view of the importance of European cooperation. He told that the students from Romania and Bulgaria often discovered in The Netherlands how much their two countries have in common. Interaction and exchange of views and experiences help the growth of understanding and bring cultures closer to one another.

Mr. Rumen Alexandrov, Ambassador of Bulgaria in The Netherlands, gave his reaction to the speakers and the members of the panel. He mentions that last year 130.000 tourists from The Netherlands visited Bulgaria. 3.000 Bulgarian students are studying in The Netherlands. So the ties between the two countries are getting stronger. It is logical that Prime Minister Rutte will visit Sofia next month. It is the first time in 19 years since Bulgaria has been visited by a Dutch Prime Minister.

Cluster TWO, Bulgaria and the European values

Dr. Ekaterina R. Rashkova, researcher on public governance, political scientist, affiliated to the University of Utrecht, pointed out that, in terms of values, Bulgaria faces three challenges: firstly to align the individually strong traits of the Bulgarians (they are resilient, perseverant, friendly) with their less positive attitudes as society; secondly to accept rule of law, equality, valuing the 'other' and thirdly the view of the social good (there are things which belong to everybody, learn to value them!).

Ms. Rashkova pointed to differences in the relation between the government and the citizens in different EU countries. In The Netherlands, the state strives for a better society through laws, that are generally respected. Respect for the law has started to grow only recently in Bulgaria.

In the Ottoman Empire but also during communist rule people had a different view of the state: it is 'someone else', not the 'res publica', but something to fight against. These days the state tries to do better by making many rules. Some think too many...

The education of children now stresses the value of a democratic society, the value of equality, the value of rules, including the rule of law. Slowly it is put into practice.

Ms. Jolanda de Boer, public prosecutor, makes clear that there is a good cooperation between the ministries of Justice and the police of Bulgaria and The Netherlands. Most problems are related to prostitution in Amsterdam. Women are seduced to come to The Netherlands and end up as prostitutes, who are often maltreated by their pimps. Since the accession of Bulgaria to the EU, cooperation between Bulgaria, Belgium and The Netherlands to prevent the abuse of women has become much easier. Childcare in Bulgaria is better than in most other countries. Providing good information can prevent excesses.

The members of the panel gave a reaction:

Mr. Aernout van Lynden, journalist and lecturer, states that the time that it takes to perform a transition is mostly underestimated. Many students are leaving Bulgaria. To stop this, better economical circumstances are required. Audacity is needed, where people are often too cautious.

Mr. Theijs van Welij, advisor European Affairs, tells about his first visit to Bulgaria when he was a student. In those days Bulgarians had little ideas about what Europe means. Among positive experiences, he told of the answer of his question to a policeman what the maximum speed was: 'You'll find out the next time we meet!'

Ms. Tsveta Velinova, journalist, expert on European cooperation, sees a slow but steady change in Bulgaria in terms of good governance since the accession to the EU. Ten years of Progress Reports and Technical Reports by the EC show that. She also pointed out the importance of such events as this discussion evening and exhibition where cultures and values come close to each other.

From the audience two reactions:

Ms. Tsveta Andreeva warns for shocking developments in the realm of human rights, such as omission to condemn domestic violence.

Mr. Rumen Alexandrov points out that many students are returning to Bulgaria after finishing their studies abroad. He sees a positive change in the mentality. On the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, a mechanism that should help Bulgaria (and Rumania) to catch up in areas such as quality of justice and the fight against corruption and organised crime, the ambassador states - supported by Van Kesteren - that he would prefer to see an EU wide system of monitoring of the rule of law.

Conclusion

Mr. Karel van Kesteren summarizes in short the main points of the speakers and thanks them for their willingness to contribute to this important discussion.

If you have questions, please feel free to approach one of the organizers:

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