



B-Team champion


Bulgarian MEP **Ilhan Kyuchyuk** talks Brexit, Balkans, and battling populists.
Photography by Bea Uhart

YOU SPOKE AT A DEMONSTRATION AGAINST BREXIT DURING THE JUNE EU SUMMIT MEETING, WHY ARE YOU AS A BULGARIAN WORRIED ABOUT THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE UK FROM THE EU, AND ARE YOU CONFIDENT THAT A DEAL CAN BE REACHED BY MARCH 2019?

In the words of UK Prime Minister Theresa May, 'Brexit means Brexit', but it also means lower growth in the

UK, fewer jobs, less social protection and less money in the UK state coffers. Ultimately, that will mean a weaker UK economy with less to spend on social welfare, security, research and development and more. An economically, politically and socially weaker UK will mean a weaker European Union once it loses such an important member state.

The UK government's approach to →

A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, smiling. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark blue tie with small white dots. The background is a plain, light grey wall.

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INTERVIEW



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the negotiations has been variously described as ‘having your cake and eating it’, ‘cherry picking’ and ‘magic thinking’. The government still seems intent on securing a ‘bespoke deal’ that grants them the best of all worlds. What is lacking is what the British are normally known for – pragmatism and sure-footed diplomacy. They have approached the talks as if we were warring parties, not close partners for over 40 years.

Theresa May’s red lines have been gradually erased as reality bites. She will soon run out of time and space to kick the can down the road. There are many issues, including highly intractable ones, such as the Irish border issue, that need to be solved.

It is rational to consider that the no-deal scenario, with the prospect of approaching a cliff edge on 29 March next year, will focus the UK government’s mind on achieving a sensible outcome. But the Brexit hard-liners seem oblivious to the dangers. They are playing poker with the nation’s future and the UK may still sleepwalk off this cliff.

WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN CONCERNS CONCERNING THE RIGHTS OF EU NATIONALS LIVING IN THE UK?

Possibly as a result of EU pressure, the UK government appears to have softened its approach to granting ‘settled status’ to EU citizens living in Britain. But the open, welcoming climate that Britain was known for deteriorated significantly after the referendum. Remember, it was Theresa May who instituted the ‘hostile environment’ policy in her previous incarnation as Home Secretary.

The task of registering more than three million EU citizens living legally in the UK is huge and perhaps beyond the capacity of the Home Office. The lack of a population register until now means the authorities will have to start from scratch. There have been many instances of EU residents in the UK being told to pack up and go; they were even threatened with deportation. When that happens, the

individual does not have the time – or necessarily the money – to appeal against what may simply be administrative errors. It is no coincidence that the number of doctors and nurses willing to be recruited from other member states has collapsed.

DO YOU THINK THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT IS DOING ENOUGH TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF UK NATIONALS LIVING IN THE EU, AND WHAT MORE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE DONE?

If Theresa May had unilaterally declared, as soon as she became Prime Minister, that all EU citizens in the UK would be allowed to stay unconditionally, the EU would have followed suit. That would have resolved huge difficulties and uncertainty for British people living in the EU.

I have heard stories about the incredible difficulties facing some British people on the continent. Families face being split up, people likely to lose their livelihood, couples from different member countries under huge strain, those whose partners are from outside the EU that risk becoming illegal immigrants and so on.

No one considered the impact of Brexit on ordinary Brits. The issue of onward movement for UK citizens allowed to stay in one country but not yet to move to other EU countries needs to be sorted out. The European Parliament is looking into these issues, and in particular those of us in the ALDE group are pushing for a solution.

WHEN DO YOU THINK BOTH BULGARIA AND ROMANIA CAN REALISTICALLY JOIN SCHENGEN?

It is not about realism, it is all about what we want for the future of the European Union. More integration, where we respond to the expectation of our citizens by common European decisions or more division, where every country is encapsulated in its own national interest. The first requires the membership of all countries in Schengen and the eurozone.

The second will only lead to the rise of nationalism. We should not forget how nationalism, intolerance and ethnic confrontation have destroyed our societies. We must avoid this happening again. We should give EU citizens stability and prosperity. Unfortunately, the lack of confidence in Bulgaria and Romania by some of the Schengen area countries does not help us explain the importance of EU project.

YOU HAVE SUPPORTED THE START OF TALKS ON THE ACCESSION OF BALKANS STATES TO THE EU. WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT FOR THE EU, CONSIDERING THERE IS OPPOSITION FROM SOME MEMBER STATES?

The Western Balkans and the EU share geography, history and current challenges. The ultimate goal is to complete Europe’s unification, which will only be possible if the countries of the Western Balkans accede. On that score, we have to praise the efforts of the Bulgarian presidency to put the Western Balkans at the centre of EU agenda. The May summit produced an honest and objective assessment of progress made by the region’s six countries, but has also offered them real hope for their path to EU membership. We have not had an EU-Western Balkans summit since June 2003 in Thessaloniki. This was too long; the lack of an unequivocal commitment to the region was rather discouraging to those countries. This is why, during the plenary debate on the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency I stated that in order to achieve real progress, countries need a clearly-defined plan, and Brussels must prepare a concrete timeframe. Otherwise the approach of distinguishing between favourites and outsiders may breed deeply-seated prejudices in the European community that would be hard and painful to overcome.

Six months later I am pleased to see that we are one step closer and for four of the countries the map seems to be drafted. Of course, we should not forget Kosovo and Bosnia Her-

zegovina, and I hope the upcoming presidencies will continue the hard work for the full integration of the region.

It is therefore essential that the countries of the region continue to implement major reforms, so they can meet the required standards on their path to the EU. The governments must demonstrate resolve and strong commitment to the enlargement process, because a sensibly managed process is in the interest of both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. The historical contradictions in the region, best described in the first Carnegie report 'Unfinished peace', can only be resolved by means of full membership of all six countries through a skillfully and prudently-guided enlargement process.

BULGARIA JUST COMPLETED ITS FIRST EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY, HOW DO YOU THINK IT HANDLED THE RESPONSIBILITY?

As with every EU presidency, it takes time to make clear and objective assessment. Also, we must separate the priorities in two categories: national, proposed by the member state in charge; and common, European priorities on the other. In this context, the general impression is that Bulgaria had a very successful presidency, because it succeeded in achieving results on its own set themes, the Western Balkans for example. However, on the other side, despite the significant progress on numerous legislative files, we still have in front of us many



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crucial issues that will need to be decided for the common future of the EU. Europe remains in a difficult and complicated situation. There is no significant progress on Brexit. Until very recently, there was no clear decision on the refugee crisis and it is still unclear how we can handle migration in Europe. Moreover, the Union's budget for the period 2021-

2027 continues to be at the negotiation table. Simultaneously, there is considerable tension between Russia and the US. The admission of extreme nationalists into the governments of some member states, further divides the European Union and undermines the values it has set and strived on.

WHAT WILL YOUR POLITICAL/POLICY PRIORITIES BE FOR THE REST OF YOUR TERM, AND WILL YOU BE STANDING AGAIN NEXT YEAR?

As a member of the foreign affairs committee, I will continue working to keep the enlargement of the Western Balkans as

a top EU priority. As a European patriot and a Liberal, I will continue to support the British people in their struggle to remain European and to help EU citizens defend their rights in the

process. Multicultural dialogue and human rights are part of my political DNA and I will not stop supporting the ongoing battle of the political centre against populists on either fringe of the political spectrum. We have to counter their lies with truth and their efforts to mystify the political elite in Europe with clarity of mind and word.

In our political party, we have a well-organised internal nomination procedure and it is not yet clear what the MRF list for the next EU election will look like. Should my party place me back on the list and Bulgarian voters give me their confidence, it would be an honour to return to and work for this beacon of democracy. ★

