

Kritische Stimmen im Publikum merkten daraufhin an, dass Rumänien ja auch nicht Teil der Eurozone sei, es nicht auf der Fluchtroute liege und angesichts der großen Abwanderung aus Rumänien in den Rest der EU ein „Rumāxit“ von sich aus mehr als unwahrscheinlich scheine. Nichtsdestotrotz fand Jiglauschließendes Plädoyer, dass Rumänien als den „*bad student*“ der EU zu brandmarken nur kontraproduktiv sei, viel Zuspruch. *In the end*, ertönte es in Teilen des Publikums, sei es um Rumänien ja in der Tat doch gar nicht so schlecht bestellt. Das Symposium konnte die Licht- und Schattenseiten Rumäniens auf jeden Fall verdeutlichen.

■ North Macedonia's Foreign Minister in the German Bundestag

The Western Balkans after the Settlement of the Name Dispute Accomplishments, Challenges, Perspectives

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Report by Christian Hagemann, Munich

□ On 14 May 2019, the Foreign Minister of North Macedonia **Nikola Dimitrov** gave a talk at the Bundestag's Paul Löbe Haus on the invitation of the Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG) and the Europa-Union Germany. The Minister's presentation focussed on the political situation in his country, the name deal with Greece, and his outlook on the developments in the region. In the large Europasaal, an audience of about 90 people heard an interesting presentation and following discussion, hosted by SOG Vice President and Member of the Bundestag, *Manuel Sarrazin*, and competently presented by *Adelheid Wölfl*, Southeast Europe correspondent of the Austrian daily 'Der Standard'. The event took place against the backdrop of the resolution of North Macedonia's name dispute with Greece, the most recent presidential elections in the country that were won by the ruling coalition, and the prospect of opening EU accession negotiations before summer 2019.

In 2017, the change of government in Skopje had opened the door for the solution of the country's decades-long name dispute with Greece. After its historic settlement in the realm of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, North Macedonia is now on the path towards NATO and EU accession, however, with varying prospects: On the one hand, joining NATO seems to be a done deal as several countries have already ratified North Macedonia's accession protocol. It is thus expected that the country will become the alliance's 30th member state in 2020. On the other hand, starting accession negotiations with the EU is the more important, but still also more difficult task: The recently published EU enlargement progress report recommended the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia, but only if the European Council confirms this recommendation. North Macedonia will be able to finally start the talks that were promised to the country since 2009 (but blocked as a result of the name dispute).¹

1 The EU Commission recommended on 29 May 2019 opening accession negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania.

The opening of accession negotiations is seen in North Macedonia as the most important payoff from changing its constitutional name, and thus also a crucial promise the government must deliver to its voters. The most recent elections have shown that while the ruling parties are still the leading political force, their support in the population has waned from about 600,000 votes in the name referendum in 2018, to around 430,000 votes in the second round of the presidential elections in 2019. The government in Skopje thus dearly needs something tangible to present at home to its voters to overcome the populations' politics and crisis *fatigue* and to show that its efforts eventually lead to progress.

Still, opening EU accession negotiations in 2019 seems currently anything but set in stone: While countries like France and the Netherlands have in the past signalled limited interest in the acceleration of the enlargement process, also some members of the German Bundestag seem not convinced to start negotiations as soon as possible. Also, quiet a few doubt the application of the merit-based 'Regatta principle' that would allow for a differentiation between EU candidates and open negotiations with North Macedonia independently of what is happening in other countries with the same status (i.e. rewarding its progress more quickly).

Accomplishments behind, challenges ahead, perspectives in question

Minister Nikola Dimitrov focused in his talk not only on the situation in North Macedonia, but also considered the situation in the wider region and especially the current state of the EU's transformative power. Starting with the situation in North Macedonia, Dimitrov stressed that from his point of view the people in the Balkans are often very proud of their history, but at the same time fail to 'produce enough future'. He stated his government's goal to turn North Macedonia into a proper European democracy which is also the only tool to keep the next generation at home and from emigration. In this context, Dimitrov stressed that the easiest way to deal with an emotional issue like the name dispute had been to leave it as it is. However, such a policy of what he called 'shallow nationalism' would have failed to bring progress and benefits to the people, and only served to defend a misunderstood 'national interest'. Such a policy based on the use of fear and mistrust had dominated his country over the past years and failed to produce any results.

In contrast, the Minister underlined that his government had a 'European approach' to the problem: Making a compromise, learning in the process to trust each other, and to care about the most fundamental needs of the other. Dimitrov highlighted that an issue like the name dispute cannot be resolved by one side winning, but only by taking into account the basic needs of one's neighbour and by thinking more about the next generation than the next election. "For our region that is famous for sitting in the trenches of history, it took some courage to walk out." After the name deal, his country has now finally achieved the Euro-Atlantic perspective after years of sitting in the waiting room. This perspective is domestically very popular, and at the same time the only way to go, as trade and investments come mainly from the EU and especially Germany. As if to overcome any doubt in his government's achievements, Dimitrov quoted the most recent reports on his country by Freedom House, the Venice Commission, OSCE/ODIHR, Reporters without Borders and the Economist's Democracy Index – all praising the improvements achieved in North Macedonia.

Taking a broader look at the EU's enlargement process, Minister Dimitrov further stressed that the region's whole future is European, and that the lion's share of work to achieve this goal is rightly on the shoulders of the Western Balkan politicians. To him, Europe means normalcy, decency, accountable politicians, fight against corruption, and a democracy where you can say what you think. At the same time, these aspects are the basis of and foster economic

development. Interestingly, Dimitrov perceived the Western Balkans not as a region outside of the EU, but rather as a "non-EU island" surrounded by member states. After the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia is finally only surrounded by friends, just like Germany from the early 1990s onwards, he stated.

Still, to improve the situation in the region and to foster the EU integration process, the Minister also stressed that it takes rewards for those who perform in the right direction. For North Macedonia, he expects to receive the best reports ever in its history. Against this backdrop, Dimitrov stressed that if the EU would nevertheless refuse to open accession negotiations with the country, which is only the start of a very long journey, the message to the region would be very clear: "Think twice before you make a brave decision, and before you put all your political capital in for making a move towards good neighbourly relations." From his point of view, the EU should be very strict on expecting progress from the candidate countries – but if there is a demanded progress, this progress needs to be rewarded. He stressed that "if you reward merit, there will be more merit; if you reward politicking, there will be more of this". Dimitrov warned that the process might fail in case there is a lack of reward visible.

After underlining the willingness for reforms of his own government and the achievements of the past two years, Dimitrov stressed in the direction of the EU and especially Germany that North Macedonia expects progress into the direction of EU accession for its efforts. There is a demand for German leadership from the perspective of the region, the Minister said. While his government managed to settle a very old dispute because it wanted to make a difference, other countries in the region now observe very closely what will follow from this engagement. "How our compromise is treated will be a message to the capitals in Serbia and Kosovo as well: it will be a message to the region."

"If the EU ignores our progress, it is no longer possible to speak about enlargement as an existing policy"

The subsequent discussion was then kick-started by Adelheid Wöfl. She opened the debate with a statement that North Macedonia was for her the only example in the Western Balkan region of a state that creates confidence and hope for a better future. She then asked Minister Dimitrov how the solution of the name dispute had been possible and how the necessary trust was built together with the Greek side. The Foreign Minister underlined the relevance of self-confidence and the impression among his fellow government members that this moment was their generation's last chance to find a solution to the problem. While the relationship with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias had not been as good from the start, Dimitrov had used the first official visit abroad to deliver the message to Greece that there was a chance to overcome the blame-game, and the outlook for Athens to have in the future a cooperative European neighbour at its border in the North. After some time, the relationship between Kotzias and Dimitrov shifted from being on antagonized sides to being on the same page, that is in support of a solution against the adversaries of a compromise.

Drawing on the focus of his speech, Wöfl continued with the question of what would happen if North Macedonia was denied a start of EU accession talks. Dimitrov underlined that from his point of view a start of accession talks is very likely, as the stakes are simply too high to postpone the process even further. Drastically, he said that if the EU would ignore North Macedonia's progress, it would be no longer possible to speak about enlargement as an existing policy. For North Macedonia, it is crucial to receive a level playing field for competing with those already in the process like Serbia and Montenegro. He stressed that the decision

this year is only the start of a very long process, and that North Macedonia will eventually enter the EU under circumstances when it is beneficial for the EU to have it as a member and not as a burden. Opening EU accession talks would support the view in the region that "doing the right thing actually works". To Wöfl's follow-up question, Dimitrov continued that the tool of conditionality applied in the wrong way would leave the government weaker, and work to the benefit of other international actors present in the region as well as nationalists in the country.

Asked for the take-away lessons for neighbouring countries, Minister Dimitrov stressed that also his now very good relationship with Kotzias had not always been like this. He admitted that they also had their doubtful moments and yelled at each other, however, never did this in public. The Minister underlined it as crucial that both sides must put all their cards into the process in order to make it succeed, and to find a solution that brings the key interests of both sides together in one formula. At the same time, he also pointed at the relevance of working with one's own constituency at home and to convince it that a solution is feasible, which is a difficult task if topics have been abused for a long time. Finally, he stressed the confidentiality of the process as a crucial point, as positions quickly become red lines once they have been discussed in public.

"Leaders of the region should not strive for 'greater' countries, but for 'greater Europe'"

Moderator Wöfl then shifted the attention away from North Macedonia's experience and turned to the greater Western Balkan region, asking for the relevance of turning away from ethno-nationalism also with a focus on the Serbia-Kosovo relationship. Dimitrov took up in his answer indirectly the issue of border changes when he underlined that the focus on some kind of 'greater' countries in the region was fundamentally flawed and that all should rather strive for a 'greater Europe'. It thus would take a visionary patriotism that is about the issues the region really faces such as creating competition based on capabilities instead of party loyalties and fighting clientelism and corruption. Changing borders without addressing the other issues would not help as the children of the region would not live within these borders, but rather somewhere else. From Dimitrov's point of view, the inability to deliver on crucial issues is the main reason to use the flag of nationalism, and the region must understand that societies demand things that matter instead of using these issues on and on. Again, he stressed that rewarding North Macedonia for 'Prespa' would be a very concrete way to support policies beyond

On Wöfl's final question on the potential developments after NATO accession – also regarding Russia – Dimitrov explained that joining NATO is unfinished business for his country that should have been achieved long ago. NATO would mean stability and predictability, and even if Russia would not be impressed of this, it is still the sovereign decision of his country, and the strive for more stability a legitimate one for every country.

After these first questions, Adelheid Wöfl opened the debate for the audience and collected questions that sometimes had more the character of statements. The first statement from the audience underlined the waning support for the government of North Macedonia as reflected in the high number of votes the opposition received in the first round of the presidential elections on 21 April 2019. The questioner then asked whether the Foreign Minister saw a potential challenge from Turkey to North Macedonia's NATO accession as the country had refused to extradite Gülenists. In a similar manner, a representative from the Slovenian Embassy used his time mainly to congratulate Dimitrov on the Prespa Agreement and to

underline his country's strong support for the start of EU accession negotiations. He then added the question for reform priorities in the next months. The final question from the first round from an IPS scholarship holder from Bosnia and Herzegovina was whether society in the Western Balkans really understood that the EU was not only about the economy, but also about shared values.

Dimitrov responded that it is crucial to connect the EU to the daily lives of citizens, and that his government had already achieved to turn the country from a recession in 2016 towards higher growth that was also already felt in increased salaries. He still stressed that this was not enough, and that people needed to see more accountability also at the local level and change not only in government but also in the judiciary. While the government of North Macedonia has increased transparency of subsidies granted to foreign investors, progress now would be important in the areas of health and education. Referring to the final question, Dimitrov underlined that Europe is in his country not only associated with economic success, but also with the rule of law. Regarding Turkey, he suggested diplomatically that there will be a solution in the interest of both countries.

The next round of questions from the audience focused on the sustainability of reforms in North Macedonia, the countries position on North Stream 2, the state of infrastructure in the country, and whether any land swap was off the table now, posed by an expert from the FU Berlin and from the EU, together with a statement from the Croatian Ambassador who underlined also his country's support for EU enlargement. On the issue of the land swap, Minister Dimitrov praised the initiative of inviting the region to debate this issue in Berlin on 29 April 2019. He repeated his position that the change of borders would not help in any way to resolve conflicts, and that everybody should rather focus on 21st century solutions and creating a region without borders. On the other questions, he added briefly that North Macedonia was planning to improve connections for traffic in the east-west direction, while the north-south axis was already at a rather high standard. When it comes to gas, North Macedonia is so far only connected to Russian sources from Bulgaria but is now also planning to diversify and to receive supply from Azerbaijan.

The Minister finished on a positive note concerning the sustainability of reforms and the outlook for the rest of the year. He stressed that at the beginning of his term, the problems of North Macedonia seemed too big to deal with, but still an agreement was found with Greece. He lauded that Alexis Tsipras had the courage to do this even though he didn't have to. And even as the incentives on the side of North Macedonia were bigger, also his government had to take a lot of courage to invest in the process of solving the name dispute. For the outlook, Dimitrov underlined that the EU would most likely open accession negotiations, as otherwise not rewarding North Macedonia would mean that the EU had hardly any leverage left in the region. On the other hand, he showed some optimism that also oppositions in Skopje and Athens will soon accept the applied changes and will thus not pose a fundamental challenge to the solution. "As Stoltenberg said, having friends is a good thing, and we will convince people that this is the right thing to do." On this optimistic note, Adelheid Wöfl closed the discussion and stated the hope that North Macedonia will be able to finally leave Europe's waiting room, taking into account the high number of friends the country apparently has today in Europe.