

Interview - Ognian Zlatev

Written by E-International Relations

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Ognian Zlatev has been Head of the European Commission's Representation in Bulgaria since 2013. He has been working for the European Commission since 2011 when he started his career as the Head of Communications Unit at the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Prior to this he was a board member of Bulgarian National Television. He founded and managed the Media Development Centre there until 2010. Mr Zlatev has worked as an expert at UNESCO, the World Bank and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in areas such as media self-regulation and press freedom in countries in transition across the Western Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucasus region and the Middle East. He has also served as Director of the Information Centre of the Open Society Institute in Sofia, as the manager of the BBC Centre in Bulgaria, and as an exchange officer at the British Council in Bulgaria. Since 2014, he has been chairing SEECOM (South East Europe Public Sector Communications Association), the first professional organisation in the region of this kind. Mr Zlatev holds a Master's Degree in Classical Studies from Sofia University and has additional qualifications in Political and Strategic Communications.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening within the European Commission?

From our perspective, Bulgaria could play a very positive role as an "honest broker" in the important negotiations due over the next six months. There are many legislative proposals currently under discussion in the European Council and we believe that all of them are important. To name just a few that will occur during the Bulgarian Presidency: the EU will start debating the future of its multiannual budget after Brexit – 27 member-states must agree on how to fill the British contribution gap and whether to increase the current level of the budget which is currently about 1% of the EU's GDP; we will also continue the discussions of key reforms of the Common EU Asylum system and the Single Market, by upgrading it to a Digital Single Market.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The world has changed dramatically in the past several years. The EU faces multiple challenges such as global warming, the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, the war in Syria, the conflicts in Africa, the military aggression of Russia towards Ukraine and Georgia, the 2015 migration crisis, the rise of nationalism in many countries, the policy change in our ally the US, and Brexit. The good news is that we, in Europe, proved to be resilient and we are working on a new set of measures to tackle the weaknesses of the past. The European Commission proposed many steps, to make the Union more efficient, more secure and more democratic. For instance, in 2017 the member-states agreed, for the first time in EU history, to sign a common defense cooperation agreement (PESCO). We have also established a European Defense Fund that will create incentives to cooperate on joint development and acquisition of defense equipment and technology, co-financed from the EU budget. The Commission has also urged the completion of the Eurozone's architecture with the creation of the European Monetary Fund and the post of European Minister of Economy and Finance. Last but not least, we have a brand new common migration policy on the table. A new European border and coast guard agency is up and running to protect the external borders of the EU. At the same time, in the spirit of solidarity, we managed to relocate more than 32,000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other EU member states.

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What is the biggest accomplishment for Bulgaria since it became part of the EU 10 years ago?

As the EU President Jean-Claude Juncker said, since the very first day Bulgaria joined the European Union, it is behaving like a founding member whereas other founding members are not always behaving as such. Since joining, Bulgaria has achieved a great deal, especially in the sphere of the economy, which has grown 3.9% in the past year. Government debt is below 30%, which is very low, even compared to countries that already adopted the euro. If we take the so-called gross domestic product at purchasing power parity per capita index, we'll see that it is growing very rapidly vis-a-vis the EU's average for the 2006-2016 period. This means Bulgarian citizens' real income is better than before and people can buy more goods and services than in the past. Alignment with EU standards brought positive developments in other spheres as well, such as environmental protection, free and fair competition, regional development as well as in mobility, education, culture and many more. European funding has been able to compensate for some national financing deficits in areas like scientific research, where Bulgarian scientists are participating in joint European projects. Hundreds of Bulgarian students study in other European universities because of the Erasmus+ program. Being an EU member has resulted in a more open-minded and educated society and youth.

How will the Bulgarian Presidency of the European Council tackle the rising trends of Euroscepticism and division within the Union?

I dare to disagree – although anti-European parties gained some support, they failed to reach executive power and we saw pro-European candidates winning in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and many other countries. Following the Rome declaration, we see 27 nations that are even more united and resolved to continue their common path, even without the UK. Therefore, the Bulgarian Presidency's task is not so difficult when it comes to unity. Of course, there will always be differences on certain legislative proposals but I am confident that Bulgaria can successfully play the role of an honest broker and seek consensus among member-states. I think that all capitals share an understanding that we are all in the same boat and the only way to move forward is together.

Is Bulgaria planning to reach out to the Western Balkans during its six-month presidency? If so, how?

The enlargement process is a key strategy for the European Union. We remain committed to supporting the transformation of the region for the benefit of all citizens. The enlargement policy is a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe – it is undoubtedly in our own interest. Therefore, we welcome Bulgaria's incentive to host a special summit in May between the EU and Balkan leaders. We hope to send the message of unequivocal support to the prospective EU members of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo. We must make sure these countries keep up the pace of reforms and do not lose track. The EU can provide pre-accession funding, focusing on the fundamentals of the rule of law/human rights, economic governance and the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform. At the previous summit in Italy in 2017, there was an agreement on an action plan to develop a Regional Economic Area, which would consolidate a market of some 20 million people, and will attract investment and generate growth and jobs. The European Commission announced a substantial connectivity package, totaling €194 million in grants, and leveraging investments of €500 million, for seven new regional projects to improve transport and energy links within the Western Balkans and the EU. All these measures should be implemented in order to show our Balkan friends we have not forgotten them.

One of the priorities of the upcoming Presidency is to increase competitiveness and ensure economic growth. How are young people going to be involved in these processes?

In most of our legislative incentives we indeed focus on widening young people's potential. Many of the dossiers, during not only this rotating presidency, contain specific measures to improve education and skills and aim to tackle youth unemployment. A key moment during the following months will be the discussion of the future EU multiannual budget. Its dimensions and policies will determine how far the EU is ready to go in terms of boosting its economic competitiveness and social protection. For instance, we shall keep financing the Erasmus+ program, providing opportunities for more and more young people in the EU to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad.

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To follow up on the Gothenburg Summit, the European Commission has adopted new initiatives to improve key competencies and the digital skills of European citizens. A particular focus is placed on promoting entrepreneurial drive and innovation-oriented mindsets in order to unlock personal potential, creativity and initiative. Moreover, the Commission is recommending steps to foster competencies in science, technology, engineering and mathematics and motivate more young people to embark on a career in these fields.

We also have a Digital Education Action Plan that outlines how the EU can help people, educational institutions and education systems to better adapt to life and work in an age of rapid digital change – by supporting schools with high-speed broadband connections, scaling up a new self-assessment tool for schools on the use of technology for teaching and learning. Additionally, Europe needs more and better vocational skills as 40% of European employers report that they cannot find people with the right skills that help growth and innovation. Our incentive to boost apprenticeships in Europe will be a major subject of discussion. It is part of the New Skills Agenda for Europe, launched in June 2016. It also ties in with the European Pillar of Social Rights, which foresees a right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning. We recommend common criteria to improve apprenticeship's conditions across the EU.

Do you think there is a duality of young people being less likely to vote, yet very politically involved and informed, participating in widely popular projects like the European Youth Forum, Model European Union, Model European Parliament? Are young people choosing less conventional ways to demonstrate their opinions?

It is hard to say in a general way. The situation may well vary from one country to another. One thing is certain – Europe needs the engagement, energy and talent of the young people. The statistics show us that the youngsters are the most pro-European part of the population. They are more open-minded and this is exactly what the EU needs. However, talking and debating is not enough, of course. Young people must act when it comes to politics. All we do as European politicians, now, is to show how EU policies work and to explain the European project. This project, though, needs democratic legitimacy. Hence, in the 2019 European elections young people's votes will be decisive. I hope each and every young citizen with a voting right will stand for values like freedom, human rights, mobility and solidarity.

In the past several decades a lot of young professionals have left Bulgaria. Is there a plan to counter this trend?

You should ask the Bulgarian authorities. But as the economic growth returns to the country we also see people returning back home and finding better opportunities with the education and skills they acquired abroad. The idea of free movement, however, is not to stop people from leaving the country. Citizens must choose freely where they should study, work and live. If the “brain drain” phenomenon is causing an employment gap in Bulgaria or another EU country, we should work on training the remaining population in order to have better qualifications and skills to fill that gap in the labor market. The EU is also discussing the possibility of legal migration for well-educated and highly skilled foreigners who could also help EU economies.

What key skills do future social science students need? Does the rapid digitalization shift the focus to more technical expertise?

As I mentioned, it is true the IT sector is growing and in more demand worldwide. So, whatever our education specialty is, we must all have at least basic digital skills. On 25 January, Tibor Navracsics, our Commissioner for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport hosted the first-ever European Education Summit in Brussels. This issue, among others, was discussed there. One solution to your question might be the creation of an European Education Area by 2025, which could harness the full potential of education as a driver for job creation, economic growth, and social fairness as well as a means to experience European identity in all its diversity. Key aims of the European Education Area are to make mobility a reality for all, to create a network of European Universities and to promote lifelong learning.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Do not take EU for granted – the freedom and peace of today must be defended continuously. I would also suggest you always check and double-check the facts before drawing conclusions. Multiplying your sources of information is the key to a good analysis and success.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Tanchev. Alex Tanchev is an Associate Features Editor at E-International Relations.