



Democracy That Delivers: Ten Years Later. Unlocking the Potential of the Western Balkans

Opening Remarks of Dr. Ognian Shentov, Chairman, Center for the Study of Democracy
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all warmly to Sofia during the days of **the highlight of the Bulgarian presidency** of the Council of the EU – the future of the Western Balkans.

It was exactly ten years ago, in May 2008, that we stood at this same place and welcomed Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, focusing on the ways to make democracy deliver in full for our citizens. Just like in the case of the Western Balkans which got a similar promise for membership in the Union in 2003 in Thessaloniki, with hindsight it seems that we were all too optimistic then and saw membership as the end of history, rather than as a testing new beginning.

Yet, with all the continuing challenges and deficiencies in the rule of law and media freedom, **Bulgaria is a demonstration of the positive force of EU and NATO membership**. Bulgarians today remain the most pro-European nation in the European Union, but they are also among the citizens most dissatisfied with the pace of reform and rule of law in their country.

As members of the civil society we need to acknowledge progress, yet stay ever more vigilant and demand higher standards from the governments in the region. At the same time, Bulgaria has learnt important lessons, which it should seek to relay to its Western Balkans neighbors.

Probably the most important lesson of all is that **progress is not linear** and **not irreversible**. It has been made possible thanks primarily to a social technology we call **partnership triangulation**, which is the shortest way to describe the formula for the success of reforms in transition. This includes simultaneously:

- the active role and in many cases - the leadership of civil society,

- the efforts of reformist politicians, and
- the help and aid of our international partners.

This conference aims to enhance precisely this partnership triangulation. And I would like to **thank our co-organisers** from the European Fund for the Balkans, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the European Commission as well as to note the support of **our partners** from the Bulgarian – Swiss Cooperation Programme, SELDI.net -- the largest indigenous civil society anticorruption network in the region, and the European Western Balkans information portal. This partnership has allowed us to bring you all together – representatives of the key Euro-Atlantic players for the Western Balkans on the eve of the summit of the EU and the Western Balkans tomorrow. The conference will provide a platform for civil society's perspective and input into the uneven process of re-integration of the Western Balkans in Europe.

Of course, this is a **historic window of opportunity** for the Western Balkans. And the central issue here is how we manage and balance the **development agenda** and the **security agenda** for the region. The key link is the **governance angle**, the quality of governance, or rather **governance gaps and failures** in these countries which need to be urgently addressed by both the national governments and the donor community.

Western Balkan countries face **two critical interrelated risks** to their Euro Atlantic integration. Internally, **entrenched corruption and state capture** have plagued their economic development and prosperity. Externally, **Russia has seen the region as a key battleground** to reassert its renewed drive for a global role, deploying an array of hard and soft power instruments in a bid to derail the region's current path of integration.

That is why we need a **more coherent policy response** from the international community vis-à-vis these critical risks and threats. Western Balkan countries will have to **rely for support and synergy on both the European Union and NATO**, on its development partners and major donors in the region - Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan. And, of course, the **United States are playing an indispensable role** in anchoring the Western Balkan countries in the transatlantic security infrastructure.

I hope that today we are going to come up with and discuss specific policy recommendations for leveraging the international assistance into workable solutions that will help the region build democracy that delivers.