

Bulgarian Foreign Minister discusses the Balkans at CSIS Forum

On 19 December, CSIS hosted the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Bulgaria, His Excellency Ivailo Kalfin. Kalfin spoke on the future of the Balkans and asserted that at the beginning of the 21st century there is finally an alliance of values and visions in the region, centered around Euro Atlantic integration. He stressed the need to achieve common goals and to complete the political and economic transformations initiated after communism collapsed.

According to FM Kalfin, the biggest regional challenge that severely impedes development in the Balkans is Kosovo. The lack of status negatively impact on the wider region and postponing the solution only worsens the situation. Although it is extremely difficult to align the Serbian and Kosovar positions, FM Kalfin called for a “balanced solution” that creates incentives for both sides. As far as Serbia is concerned, the international community should make strong commitments in terms of financial assistance and other incentives. For Kosovo, financial aid is also crucial. However, Pristina must realize that the international community cannot run the territory’s economy and domestic institutions should be more active.

The Serbian general elections on January 21 will be a turning point in the final status process. Regardless of the outcome, FM Kalfin reiterated that it is vitally important that the solution for Kosovo is multiethnic. Belgrade, and Pristina should make a major commitment to ensure a multiethnic community, protect minorities, and discourage migration and irredentism. Religion and ethnic tolerance is both the weak point and the solution because in the Balkans they are often exploited and used as political tools. The Serbian community in Kosovo is eager to participate in the future political life of the territory. However, the mixed signals coming from Belgrade confuse them. The responsibility rests on Belgrade to support a multiethnic Kosovo rather than promoting division.

Touching upon the role of Russia, FM Kalfin indicated that Russia has shifted its attention from the Balkans and Kosovo is not an interest for Moscow *per se*. Instead, the Kremlin is observing the process and calculating whether independence for Kosovo might be used as a precedent for Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. However, in FM Kalfin’s view this is a risky calculation as it will naturally raise a counter argument on behalf of Chechnya.

According to FM Kalfin, Bulgaria has a strategic vision for South Eastern Europe and certain goals to promote. The government in Sofia strongly encourages regional cooperation parallel to a Euro-Atlantic partnership because local problems cannot be solved from the outside. During the Bulgarian chairmanship of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in 2007, the government is planning several initiatives on regional political cooperation that would benefit the region and improve the efficiency of SEECP. On the economic level, Bulgaria is a strong supporter of the expansion and modification of CEFTA, as well as the creation of a South East European energy pact.

Regional cooperation and liberalization are key to economic development in the Balkans. Bulgaria and the EU have also been very active in securing the new external borders of the Union and specific measures have been taken to tackle smuggling and illegal immigration. International cooperation in border controls is also vital for fighting organized crime.

FM Kalfin agreed that Bulgaria is strongly dependent on Russia for energy. As a result, Sofia is very interested in securing alternative sources and routes, such as the Bourgas–Alexandropoulos pipeline and the AMBO pipeline project. Energy efficiency in Bulgaria is very low compared to other EU members because of the old infrastructure. The country's electricity exports have provided energy to meet shortages throughout S.E. Europe. However, in January 2007, Bulgaria will close two of its four nuclear units and will not be able to provide such exports anymore. This will create energy difficulties in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, which rely on electricity imports from Bulgaria. The building of a new nuclear plant unit is in progress. There is also a commitment to increase the share of renewable sources of energy as the country is currently lagging behind other EU members.

As the conclusion FM Kalfin stated that if all the positive regional efforts are endorsed, progress in the short term for South Eastern Europe is feasible. Bulgaria's priorities within the EU will focus on the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, as well as energy, infrastructure, and education.