

(Provisional Translation: Original in Japanese)

## **Bulgaria and the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative**



WATATABE Masato

Former Ambassador of Japan to Bulgaria

My term of office in Bulgaria lasted for two years and eight months, from September 2017 to May 2020. In January 2018, I was involved in the historic first visit of the Japanese Prime Minister to Bulgaria. Furthermore, during my tenure, mutual visits by the Japanese and Bulgarian Ministers of Foreign Affairs were realized in 2019, which was the special year of the “Triple Anniversary”: the 110th anniversary of the beginning of bilateral contacts, the 80th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, and the 60th anniversary of the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In this paper, I would like to focus on collaboration between Japan and Bulgaria under the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative which was announced by Japan during Prime Minister Abe’s visits to Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania in January 2018. Bulgaria, which maintains good and close relationships with all of the Western Balkan countries, is one of the friendliest countries towards Japan in Europe, which has been able to successfully move beyond Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA). I would be happy if this case becomes useful as an example of how, by working together with Bulgaria, Japan has been able to effectively participate in regional cooperation in the geographically distant area of the Western Balkans.

## Prime Minister Abe's visit to Bulgaria

The Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative announced by Prime Minister Abe at the Japan-Bulgaria summit meeting in January 2018 was highly appreciated by Prime Minister Borissov. Prime Minister Abe visited three countries in Southeast Europe, and it was Prime Minister Borissov who was



Joint press announcement by PM Abe and PM Borissov  
(Photograph: Cabinet Public Relations Office)

the most welcoming towards this initiative among the leaders of those three states. When Bulgaria, which held the Presidency of the Council of the EU during the first six months of 2018, made the Western Balkans' integration into the EU a priority of its presidency, part of the EU was lukewarm about focusing attention on the Western Balkans—a region which still had numerous issues to deal with. I believe that it was because of this context that Prime Minister Abe's proposal resonated well with Bulgaria. From the perspective of Bulgaria—a neighbor of the Western Balkans—the present situation in this region after the breakup of Yugoslavia is something akin to a geopolitical black hole; there were many people who feared that if it was to be neglected by the EU, that would lead to the rise of forces which would not share the values of freedom or democracy.

## The Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative

Before I touch on examples of collaboration with Bulgaria under the Initiative, I would like to offer a simple introduction to the Initiative itself.

This Initiative aims to support economic and social reforms for the countries of the Western Balkans (the six countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), which aspire to join the EU, as well as to promote cooperation within the Western Balkans region. More specifically, the effort included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) establishing a new post of Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkans and strengthening dialogues with each of the countries, as well as sharing Japan's knowledge and expertise in tackling common

issues for the region, such as disaster management, and promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by holding seminars and sending Japanese experts.

In terms of Japan's relationship with Bulgaria and Romania—neighbors to the Western Balkans that are already EU members—this Initiative saw Japan promising to share its knowledge as a donor country, as well as encouraging coordination and cooperation to address challenges such as disaster prevention and SMEs promotion—issues shared across the region, including the Western Balkans.

At the time, the Embassy of Japan in Bulgaria had a powerful lineup, with outstanding Bulgarian experts as well as an expert in the former Yugoslavia serving as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). Prior to Prime Minister Abe's visit, the embassy discussed several ideas internally and communicated these to MOFA, and I would be pleased if these were useful to the formation of the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative.

### **Sharing Japan's ODA knowledge with Bulgaria**

After joining the EU, having progressed beyond ODA, Bulgaria itself became a fledgling donor country, and as it was willing to learn from Japan's ODA experience, Bulgaria welcomed Japan's offer to share its knowledge as a donor. Tokyo moved swiftly. In May 2018, the director of the relevant division within MOFA's International Cooperation Bureau and the chief representative of the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) Balkan Office visited Sofia and shared Japan's ODA knowledge through discussions with officials in the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). In January 2019, TANAKA Akihiko, President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (and former JICA President) visited Bulgaria, and delivered a lecture focusing on the history and impact of Japanese ODA to top MFA officials, NGO representatives and other organizations related to international aid, as well as the diplomatic corps. When Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaharieva visited Japan in March the same year, discussions took place between her and JICA President KITAOKA Shinichi. In January 2019, the director in charge of ODA in the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Japan. In addition to talks with MOFA and JICA officials, training for Bulgarian MFA staff run by JICA officials also took place.

### **Japanese-Bulgarian collaboration in the area of disaster management**

Bulgaria was motivated to develop and realize a joint project with Japan that focused on the Western Balkans. This eagerness emerged against the backdrop of the rapid

increase of the Western Balkans' share in the ODA which the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for. Furthermore, Bulgaria had an example of success before its eyes, as it had completed a joint food sector project with the US in Georgia. With regard to the Georgia project, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) each paid half the aid fund, and made use of Bulgarian specialists with a thorough knowledge of the local conditions; it was a classic aid cooperation.

With reference to this example, we explained that we were not envisaging a project based on Bulgaria and Japan providing an equal share of the funding, as had occurred in the case of Georgia, and suggested an alternative: that we focus on disaster management—a wide-ranging issue shared by the Western Balkans and Bulgaria; and that Japan organizes seminars in Sofia bringing together Japanese experts and stakeholders, involved in practical disaster management, from the six West Balkan countries and Bulgaria. This was because disaster prevention was a topic that was included in the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative from the start, as it was an issue that affected the whole region. MOFA made successful preliminary arrangements along with the Cabinet Office and other relevant organizations, and this resulted in the Western Balkans Workshop on Flood Risk Management which took place in Sofia in February 2019. The theme of the workshop was focused on flood damage and flood countermeasures based on requests from Bulgaria and the Western Balkans.

This event brought together both public and private experts from the Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, JICA, and other organizations who participated as lecturers and shared Japan's knowledge. Furthermore, stakeholders involved in practical disaster management from all six Western Balkan countries also participated, together with experts from ministries and governmental offices concerned with the subject, including representatives of the host organization, the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior (participants from the Western Balkan countries were invited by the Bulgarian government). For two days in a row, the participants engaged in focused debate. The World Bank also showed interest in the seminar and sent experts from their headquarters in Washington to contribute to the discussions.

In terms of diplomatic significance, it can be noted that the participants from Serbia and Kosovo, countries having a tense relationship with each other, sat together at the same table and participated in the discussions. Bulgaria, which has close, amicable relationships with all the countries from the Western Balkans, hosted an EU-Western Balkans Summit while it was holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2018, and the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo also joined the event. Perhaps it was

partially due to this experience that the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was confident that there would be no tension or confrontation between Serbia and Kosovo during the seminar. Serbia, which had invariably been sensitive towards Kosovo's moves, gave the impression of putting its faith in the Bulgarian government.

Japan has continued efforts to share its knowledge and experience in the field of disaster management. Emulating the format of the February 2019 Western Balkans Workshop on Flood Risk Management, in February 2020, MOFA welcomed to Japan a training observation team made up of Western Balkans and Bulgarian stakeholders involved in practical disaster prevention. Due to the spread of COVID-19, the future prospects are unclear, but in 2021, another edition of the Western Balkans Workshop on Disaster Management is expected to be held once again in Bulgaria, with the assumed participation of Japan.



Attendees of “Western Balkans Workshop on Flood Risk Management” (including Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Interior Berner) (Photograph: Bulgarian Ministry of Interior)

### **Collaboration between universities on SMEs management training (trilateral university cooperation)**

In terms of movements inspired by the collaboration between Japan and Bulgaria in the field of disaster prevention, an initiative began in earnest around October 2018 to set up an SMEs management professional training course involving the transfer of Japanese management know-how in Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje in North Macedonia, one of the Western Balkan countries. The institution that took the lead on this initiative was a core Bulgarian social sciences university—the University of National and World Economy, an institution which, for its part, had also been a beneficiary of a JICA

management human resources training project during the period when Bulgaria was a recipient of Japan's ODA.

Within the University of National and World Economy, a group of Bulgarian lecturers involved in JICA's past activities played a central role, promptly drawing up a project plan in collaboration with the JICA Alumni Association in Bulgaria and approaching the Bulgarian government for an ODA budget. From January 2019, when the budget for 2019 was secured, coordination and cooperation with the Faculty of Economics at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje accelerated, and between September and December that year, a short-term special course was set up for working adults, including local young businesspeople, at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. In addition to groups of lecturers from the Bulgarian University of National and World Economy and Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, this short-term special course received cooperation from Nagasaki University with regard to the transfer of knowledge about Japanese-style management, which was achieved through the mediation and support of the JICA Balkan Office and the Embassy of Japan in North Macedonia. The contributions of Nagasaki University, especially the lectures by Professor SUSAI Masayuki of the Faculty of Economics, had a positive impact on relations with both Bulgaria and North Macedonia as an initiative with a visible Japanese presence.

Due to the spread of COVID-19, future prospects remain unclear, but Bulgaria has secured a budget to continue and expand this project from 2020 onwards, and future developments will be something to look forward to.



Professor Susai of Nagasaki University giving a lecture at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje (September 2019) (Photograph: Nagasaki University)

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been a quick review of collaboration between Japan and Bulgaria under the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative. In conclusion, I would like to add a few personal impressions, along with an outlook for the future.

First, at present, the overriding issue for EU countries, Bulgaria included, which needs to be addressed is COVID-19, and it is assumed that there will be unavoidable delays in a variety of processes regarding the Western Balkans. In 2020, Bulgaria and North Macedonia assumed the joint presidency of the Berlin Process, which serves as a forum for discussions about the Western Balkans' EU integration, but as of now (August 2020), no remarkable developments have been visible. As far as the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU is concerned, it appears that within the EU, Germany and the UK were driving forward the discussions based on the geopolitical importance of the Western Balkan region, and now, the UK's absence due to Brexit may have implications for discussions within the EU. On the other hand, in September 2019, the US appointed a special representative for the Western Balkans; as far as I have observed in Sofia, the US is strengthening its diplomatic efforts towards stability in the Western Balkans. This could be a movement inspired by Japan's Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative, which, as stated above, included the establishment of Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkans. It is worthwhile for Japan to keep paying serious attention to the Western Balkans, and I believe that there are benefits in continuing to collaborate with Bulgaria.

Second, I expect that the above-mentioned examples of collaboration between Japan and Bulgaria will become a model for cooperation between Japan and former recipient countries of Japan's ODA. It is notable that the University of National and World Economy, which was once a beneficiary of the JICA activities itself, is now actively contributing to the transfer of Japanese knowledge and experience to a university in North Macedonia. Together with us, the JICA Balkan Office in Belgrade has also supported this university's activity (and the place where this happened has sometimes been the Residence of the Ambassador of Japan in Bulgaria). If universities or other organizations and institutions that have received Japanese aid in the past express a desire to support developing countries, and if we manage to offer more attractive options for cooperation, there is a possibility that a second or third University of National and World Economy



will appear. This may also play a part in expanding Japan's ODA network within Europe and in increasing the aid's effectiveness.

Japan has occasionally been approached by Bulgaria with queries about whether we could cover part of the cost of holding seminars or similar events, also referring to the example of the aforementioned Bulgarian aid coordination with the US. Each time this has happened, we have described examples of what cooperation would be possible in the context of our relationship with Bulgaria within Japan's ODA framework, and we have explained the importance of advancing our collaboration from a long-term perspective. The Bulgarians have a strong sense of duty, and when they meet top officials from Japan, they never forget to express their gratitude for the grant assistance provided by Japan in support of democratization and market-oriented economic reforms, for the financial assistance exceeding 90 billion yen, loans projects included, for the dispatch of JICA experts and the trainees accepted from Bulgaria, as well as for the volunteers sent by JICA. The reason why everyone was ultimately satisfied with our explanations may be because of the existence of these friendly feelings towards Japan.

From the outset, collaboration between Japan and Bulgaria in the context of the Initiative has been a process of feeling our way around with no prior precedent to rely on. I would like to point out that without the ingenuity and dedication of the excellent staff of the Embassy of Japan in Bulgaria and without JICA officials, especially the chief representative of the JICA Balkan Office, who extended his cooperation and advice from the start, the progress outlined above would never have happened.

(Comment) The above is based on a (Japanese) text published on the website of the Kasumigaseki Foreign Service Association in August 2020. Some new developments up to December 2020 are available below.

1. In November 2020, Bulgaria, as a co-chair of the Berlin Process, organized a summit (jointly with North Macedonia) of the Western Balkan leaders in Sofia. This resulted in the signing of declarations for a Common Regional Market and a Green Agenda.

2. In October 2020, Sofia University, with active participation and cooperation of its Japanese Studies Department and JICA, opened an intensive short-term Japanese research course that started off with a special lecture on Japan's public health and healthcare system. It was part of the initiative to share Japan's knowledge with Bulgaria and the



course was organized online, in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, to promote better understanding of Japan mainly in areas such as the history of Japan's development and ODA experience.