

(Provisional Translation: Original in Bulgarian)

## **Interview with Mr. KAWAZU Kunihiro, Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkans**

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Interview by Georgi Milkov

*If the region is left in instability, the influence of countries and forces that don't share our common values may penetrate, says Tokyo's special envoy for the Western Balkans.*

**Mr. Kawazu, as a special envoy for the Western Balkans of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, you are carefully following the Berlin Process. How do the events in the region look like from your perspective?**

My impression is that in the past six years after the launch of the Berlin Process in 2014, the interest of the international community in the Western Balkans, which is situated in the geopolitically vulnerable region, as well as the realization about the importance of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, has certainly been growing stronger.

In this aspect, I highly appreciate Bulgaria's role during its EU Presidency in the first half of 2018, placing the promotion of the European integration of the Western Balkans as a main priority and stressed its importance.

Moreover, I would like to congratulate Bulgaria for the successful conduct of the Berlin Process Summit and the achieved results during the meeting in Sofia last November. Together with North Macedonia, Bulgaria co-chaired the Western Balkans Summit, at which declarations on a Common Regional Market and Green Agenda were signed. I commend the efforts of the hosts and the member states of the process for this achievement.

**How would you comment on the problems between Sofia and Skopje?**

The tension that has appeared in the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia reminded us of the complex historical background in the Balkan region. I understand well that the historical issues have some complicated aspects that are difficult to be comprehended by countries other than the concerned parties and that these issues are not easy to resolve. I strongly hope that Sofia and Skopje will continue their constructive efforts toward regional stability and development under the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation signed between the two countries in 2017.

## **What is Japan's vision for the development of the so-called Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative announced during the visit of Prime Minister ABE Shinzo to Sofia in 2018?**

In January 2018, when Bulgaria undertook its first EU Presidency, Mr. ABE Shinzo visited the country for the first time as Prime Minister of Japan. It is no coincidence that it was during this first of its kind visit of a Japanese prime minister to Sofia when Japan announced the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative and expressed the commitment to support their integration to Europe. After this visit, as a natural consequence the partnership between Japan and Bulgaria developed, expanding into the new sphere of cooperation in support for the Western Balkans.

After the announcement of the Initiative, Japan strengthened dialogue with the respective countries, opening new embassies in the region and appointing an Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkans, the post that I currently assume. Moreover, with the purpose of complementing the Berlin Process, Japan supports the development of the region as well as the socio-economic reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans in close cooperation with EU countries such as Bulgaria and related organizations that are actively involved in the effort. Concrete efforts of our initiative are made through the Japanese official development assistance (ODA) for the Western Balkan countries; sharing Japan's experience and knowledge in certain areas, considered as common problems for the region, such as disaster management and promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); facilitating reconciliation and cooperation among the different ethnic groups and others. Japan also participates in joint projects with other countries on these topics. For example, in February 2020, in cooperation with the Western Balkans Fund, we held a Western Balkans Civil Society Summit in Tirana, Albania.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of some bilateral projects has been suspended, but the Japanese government is determined to continue promoting the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative. As Ambassador in charge of the Western Balkans, I also remain committed to working for the further strengthening and development of Japan's efforts in this initiative.

## **Why for Japan, which is geographically quite far away from this region, is it so important to promote mutual understanding in the Western Balkans, as well as united and strong Europe?**

In July 2018, two epochal agreements of great importance were signed between Japan and the EU: Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA). This confirms the determination of Japan and the EU who share common values such as freedom, democracy, rule

of law and human rights, to promote the free and open, rules-based international order and to contribute to peace and prosperity of the international community. Despite the growing protectionism worldwide, Japan and the EU should stay united, as promoters of free trade as well as protectors of universal values and principles. Japan believes that Europe's strong unity is significant for its own sake as well.

In this aspect, achieving stability and development of the Western Balkan countries as part of Europe, as well as the European unity under the common values, is crucial for the stability and prosperity not only for the region, but also for the entire international community. In the past years, in light of the geopolitical importance of the region, some third countries have tried to increase their influence on the Western Balkans and this raised cause for concern about possible division and destabilization on the European continent. The Western Balkan region, situated on the border between Asia and Europe, as once called 'Europe's powder keg', has a history of complicated conflicts and ethnic problems, which contain an element of instability. If it were to be left neglected, there would be a possibility of rising influence of countries and forces that do not share the common basic values, penetrating the region.

Japan supports a united Europe and believes that the future of the Western Balkans lies with that of the EU. In this sense, the aim of the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative is not merely to work on bilateral cooperation between Japan and the Western Balkan countries, but also to support their integration into the EU. Based on the two agreements with the EU, Japan undertakes the role and responsibility, together with the EU countries, to contribute to achieving stability and prosperity of the international community, by supporting the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, which we believe is the key to peace and stability in Europe. For Japan, which is geographically distant from the region, building cooperation with countries such as Bulgaria that aspire to support the Western Balkans countries, while having close connections with each of them as well as ample knowledge about the region, is of crucial importance in order to effectively and sustainably promote the Western Balkans Cooperation Initiative.

### **What is the cooperation between Bulgaria and Japan specifically?**

The realization of concrete cooperation between Japan and Bulgaria in the areas of disaster management as well as SMEs development skilfully combines the financial aid allotted by the Bulgarian government for its development assistance programme with Japan's human resources, experience and knowledge.

As a specific example, in February 2019, in collaboration with the Bulgarian government, we jointly organized a workshop on disaster prevention in Sofia, focused on flood control and management as a common problem for both the Western Balkans and Bulgaria. The seminar was attended by around 60 participants from Japan, Bulgaria, representatives of the six Western Balkan

countries, as well as of relevant international organizations. Active discussions were held on political frameworks and legal systems for disaster management, development of the infrastructure for water protection, related training and others, which led to the creation of a network of people and specialists engaged in this sphere. The second workshop on disaster management whose topic will be related to earthquakes is planned to be held in the autumn of 2021.

In the area of providing assistance for the SMEs development, we have started a joint trilateral project with the participation of universities in Japan, Bulgaria and North Macedonia. In the years before Bulgaria joined the EU, with technical assistance of JICA, at University of National and World Economy (UNWE) was introduced a business training course for the development of human resources. In the autumn of 2019, utilizing the knowledge and human resources acquired and developed then, in cooperation with the Bulgarian government and JICA, UNWE realized a project for starting a similar training course on SMEs management at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia. The course was conducted for the second time in December 2020 with the participation of Japanese instructors from Nagasaki University. Furthermore, a Western Balkans SME forum is also planned to happen in Sofia, for which UNWE along with the concerned parties have already started the preparation.

As another project in an attempt to share Japan's knowledge under the difficult conditions of COVID-19 pandemic, in October 2020, Japanese Studies Department of Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski', with the assistance of JICA, started an intensive online course which introduces Japanese practice on development assistance.

The fact that Bulgaria, which once was a recipient of Japan's ODA, now as a donor country provides development assistance to the Western Balkans in partnership with Japan makes us happy, as this is an ideal example of cooperation and mutual assistance.

We are truly grateful that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria demonstrated a very positive attitude toward cooperation with Japan and made a huge contribution by providing financial assistance and realizing the aforementioned projects. We were also very fortunate to have come across such strong partners at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, UNWE, JICA Alumni Association in Bulgaria, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' and others, who with great eagerness and capabilities have promoted cooperation with Japan. I would like to take the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all of our Bulgarian partners. This wonderful partnership with Bulgaria is based on the traditional friendship and trust between the two countries. I would like to assure that Japan continues to attach great importance to the cooperation and mutual assistance with Bulgaria.

**Is effective multilateral diplomacy possible in the time of pandemic, when almost all countries are occupied with the fight against COVID-19 crisis?**

This pandemic brought the world to a crisis that it has never experienced before. People all over the world are talking about the same topic, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, while experiencing the same fear of it. One cannot face this global challenge of historic impact alone. In a situation where free movement of people is restricted, all countries, making use of various online media, are making efforts to maintain and promote dialogue, through which to exchange knowledge and experience. I think that this is the moment when the true value of multilateral diplomacy is being put to the test and Japan will tackle this global crisis in close cooperation with Bulgaria as well as with the other EU member states.