

Els De Groen: Trakia highway threatens Bulgaria's EU membership

Bulgaria risks a red card because of the scandalous deal



Els De Groen is a Dutch Member of the European Parliament from the European Green Party. She was born as Elly Kouwenhoven in 1949 on December 23 in The Hague. She has worked as a journalist and a writer and has received many literature awards. She has been working on various projects in Eastern Europe for twenty years now. Els De Groen knows Bulgaria very well and is also a member of the joint Bulgaria-EU Parliamentary Committee

in the European Parliament.

by Georgi Gotev

- Mrs. De Groen, we all are waiting for the decision of the Supreme Cassation Court of the Republic of Bulgaria on the legality of the Trakia highway concession agreement. You have many times said before the European Commission that this deal is not only unprofitable, but also it is unacceptable under the European legislation, because it was concluded without a tender or bidding and lacks transparency. Do you intend to launch any new initiatives prior to the court's decision?

- I hope I will manage to do something. The court and legal procedures can only slow down the whole process so that the final decision may be taken even after January 1, 2007, when Bulgaria is scheduled to join the European Union. To my mind, the disgraceful concession, contracted without a tender, has no place in the EU. This is the reason why I decided to appeal to the European Commission again. In his letter, Commissioner Olli Rehn politely showed a yellow card to Bulgaria and its government, if I may use football terminology. He warned them not to breach EU rules. Yes, Bulgaria can keep the concession contract but this is hardly a well-mannered behavior, nor is it intelligent. Because this deal harms the Bulgarian citizens' interests and has nothing to do with European policies. I understand that you have a coalition government in which one of the partners would not like to harm the other's interests but nevertheless I have addressed a new question to the European Commission.

- What was it?

- It is obvious that the new government is not doing anything to stop the motorway concession contract. It is also obvious that the Bulgarian authorities have not heeded Commissioner Olli Rehn's opinion. Dogs bark but the caravan rolls on, as the saying goes. So, my question to the European Commission is actually a request: to show Bulgaria a red card instead of a yellow one.

- How would you explain that two European MPs are so concerned about the Trakia motorway concession while 18 Bulgarian observers at the European Parliament remain completely indifferent to this issue?

- You should ask them. The thing I know is that there are forces in the EU aspiring countries opposing their countries' EU membership and that this membership is of great importance not only to these countries' economic progress, but to their political

development as a buffer against political extremism, too. That's why it's of major importance that the process of accession isn't delayed. Let me add that Bulgarian judiciary has a lot of work to accomplish the necessary reforms.

- What is the attitude of Brussels, of the European Parliament, towards Bulgaria's and Romania's EU entry?

- You have chances, but there is skepticism, too. If you take my country, the Netherlands, as an example, the biggest party in the ruling coalition demonstrates a skeptical attitude. Their greatest concern is the slow pace of the legislation reforms as well as the deeply rooted corruption and the strengthening of the Ataka nationalist movement. The hot news is that the decision on the date of your EU accession will be taken at the end of the year instead of in June as was originally scheduled. This will enable the EU to exert some additional pressure. The problem is serious and the Bulgarians must be well aware of it.