

# North Macedonia

Meglen Andreevski interviewed **Dimitar Belchev**.

Interview date: August 2019

**Andreevski:** Good day to you, Mr. Belchev. I would like to start by thanking you for agreeing to participate in this project. Please introduce yourself.

**Belchev:** Thank you for the invitation. I am glad that this will be recorded for posterity. It is good that people who live in Europe today address the genesis of the European project, from its conception until today. It is a noble idea; I salute it and was very pleased when I received the invitation.

I have gathered something in my 70 years of life, and, as any older person, I remember some details, however, I won't be able to precisely convey the continuity of events. I was born in Skopje, the capitol of Macedonia, where I completed my elementary and secondary education, and graduated from the Electro-Technical Faculty. I had a 40-year career, 10 years as a Railway Engineer, 10 years as a representative to Macedonia and some other ex-Yugoslav republics on behalf of a large commercial enterprise, and the last 20 years in Macedonian diplomacy. I retired, but I'm still in good health and engaged in various quests for historical documents, books – I am a collector. We are trying to create a nucleus of a future Railway Museum of Macedonia. We are also trying to introduce the Macedonian philately to the world. I have four grandchildren, so I have enough engagements, and I am trying to find time for everything, to fill my days.

**Andreevski:** It's very important to be in good health. I am Meglen Andreevski, I was also born in Skopje, in 1992. It is where I grew up and completed my elementary and secondary education. I graduated from Georgi Dimitrov High School. After high school, I decided to continue my education abroad, and, thanks to my father's contacts – he is an artist who frequently exhibits in Germany – I managed to enter the University of Erlangen-Nurnberg in Bavaria, where I graduated from the Department of Political Sciences and History, and where in February of this year, I also attained my master's degree in political science. After that I received a stipend to spend five months in the German parliament, the *Bundestag*. I think this covers the general issues, now we can start with the questions. First, I think, this is a good introductory question: How would you describe your childhood?

**Belchev:** It was primarily a childhood without automobiles on the streets, a childhood of wondering around freely, morning 'til dusk – a limitless freedom. My grandchildren often ask me how we went to school, since today their parents drive them to school, and I tell them that we walked. 'Grandpa, you were walking from here, down four big streets, to your school?' 'Yes', I say, and we would hardly encounter five automobiles during the entire walk.

The school was in the city centre and I lived at the city's periphery, near the football stadium, so it was common for us kids who lived in that part of the city to get together and go to school. There we had a meal together, and when returning, we would all stop at the House of People's Technology, which offered each of us an opportunity to develop our skills. There were specialisations in photography, machinery, radio technology, electronics, and technology, and it was our main spot – we spent more time there than at home. It was there that our parents would look for us when they came back from work, since we weren't at our homes. It is interesting that all of us kids, who were frequent visitors there, either graduated in engineering, or became qualified technicians, exactly within the areas of our childhood interest. I was interested in radio technology and went on to enter the Electro-Technical Faculty, where I attained a bachelor's degree in energetics. My friend, who was interested in designing building models, later became one of the leading architects in Macedonia. Another, who was interested in photography, became a master photographer, with photos presented not only at exhibitions organized by Macedonian authors, but also on the calendars of some companies that had a significant presence internationally. What I am trying to say is that we had an opportunity to learn, not only at school, but also through extracurricular activities, which were completely free.

With lots of energy, our educators, that is, our teachers of the related subjects, enabled us to gain knowledge and skills that served as a solid basis for when we entered university, or later in life, when we got jobs. I remember that the most successful among us were selected to attend various gatherings in ex-Yugoslav republics – I went to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to Croatia. We also welcomed children from there to our homes. We always stayed with families, that is, we were accepted there, we would stay two or three days with some family and then there would be a reciprocal. We would welcome them to our homes. I keep in touch with some of them even today – it is nice for us to hear each other on the phone. We ask after each other's health and how our grandchildren are doing.

**Andreevski:** Interesting. And what were your visions for the future, when you were children, what did you dream about at that time, do you remember?

**Belchev:** Well, now, I will address some turning points, how our views changed. I was born in 1946. So, the war in the Middle East in 1956 and the Cuban [missile] crisis made a strong impression on us 15-year-olds. I can still see in my mind the images of the war in the Middle East and the ones of ships with rockets around Cuba. I wouldn't say that we changed our worldviews at the time - it wasn't until the great flood of 1962 in Skopje that we understood how grown-up we were and were expected to help in the reconstruction of the city after the flood. I was about 16-years-old and a Red Cross activist at the time, so I was engaged in clearing the Red Cross warehouses that were threatened by the flood. It was an issue of who would be faster – will the water reach the warehouses, or will we manage to lift everything from the lower shelves to the higher ones so that nothing would be damaged? Several months later, in 1963, the Skopje earthquake struck and then we were far more involved. We went to school for three days a week, and the other four we were organized in labour brigades, working alongside the foreign experts who came to Skopje to help with various types of objects. To be specific, my high school was tasked with erecting large hangars to be used as elementary schools, and already by November – December, we managed to complete several hangars where lessons could begin. During the autumn and the winter months, we worked in a suburb of Skopje where the aid from the World Church Council was delivered. The instructors who arrived with the aid trained us to complete prefabricated houses that would accommodate families, and I remember them being surprised that we managed to complete the houses in ten days, instead of the expected 21 days. It was probably due to our youthful energy. It was, in practice, a race against time for the people to come and settle in before the freezing winter arrived. To us, it was a sign that we were grown-ups - and we could be counted on.

**Andreevski:** Yes, Yes. What was your perception of our neighbouring countries? In particular, within the context of the earthquake. I mean, we were part of Yugoslavia back then, but I know that after the earthquake, the aid from neighbouring countries and from around the world helped us – that is, helped people at the time to get Skopje up and running. What was your perception of our neighbouring countries then? Was it the same as it is now with regard to the Balkans, did the more westernized countries consider themselves as 'Europe', or did you use some other terms at that time?

**Belchev:** No, there was no such division in our minds – there is none today, too. We can recall what kind of aid each neighbouring country sent. I wasn't immediately involved with the aid that arrived from those countries; however, I know precisely that, let's say, Bulgaria dispatched a complete concert hall, which was erected at the city centre and is still in service today. Regretfully, time has done its part and it needs a thorough reconstruction. Nevertheless, it still stands. I don't remember what kind of materials arrived from Greece, but I know that there was an architecture and urbanism bureau from Athens, and if my memory doesn't deceive me, it was called Doksiadis. They took part in creating urban

solutions for post-earthquake Skopje, along with the Polish and the Japanese teams. As for Albania, I don't recall any data on what kind of aid they sent, however, I don't doubt that aid arrived from there, too. The images of the endless columns of the Soviet and U.S. armies' military vehicles driving around the streets of Skopje were incredibly impressive to us. There were specific positions for each army, depending on what kind of debris they should clear. It was usually the largest destroyed objects, as this was where the need for mechanization was greatest. They came with powerful machines and it was all very appealing to us. When we weren't otherwise engaged, we enjoyed going there and observing how organized they were in removing the debris. For instance, we mentioned the clearing of the Central Bank building. The bank was built with very solid materials, and it took a lot of mechanization, a lot of expertise to clear the mountain of debris. The Catholic Church was also in the city centre, a sturdy object which also needed clearing.

And the performances... It is interesting that the cultural events in the City Park continued in the wake of the earthquake. There was a stage at the entrance to the park, an open stage, where shows were performed even before the autumn rains came. As I remember, artists from many countries performed there, and we sat side-by-side with the soldiers from both armies and watched the performances. Later on we had the good fortune – at the time of the earthquake, I was hosting a group of French students spending their summer vacation with us – to receive an invitation, for me and the other hosts from my high school, to spend some time in France and tour the country. I remember people asking us on several occasions about our experiences with the earthquake, about what else could be done to help Macedonia. To be honest, I can't remember what the French aid consisted of, but I do know that the library received a large collection of French literature and that later on, French artists donated a collection of French art for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art. At the exhibition – when was it? – on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the earthquake, we learned that many of the documents have been preserved, which refreshed our memory with regard to everything that happened and how it affected us at the time.

Here, I just remembered an episode regarding Germany, and as it happened, the German Red Cross dispatched a batch of aid by train, with the intent to help feeding the population of Skopje. This included several mobile kitchens, which had been traditionally supplied to the German *Bundeswehr* by one German company. We saw the photos at the exhibition and it reminded us that the kitchens were situated at several locations in Skopje. My younger brother was an amateur photographer and I have several photos of those kitchens. I made an offer to the Museum of the City of Skopje: Let's try to locate the company that produced those kitchens from that time and ask for the technical data on the entire operation. It turned out that the company switched to different products in the meantime, but the German Red Cross managed to find and deliver one kitchen. Today it

is exhibited at the Museum of the City of Skopje, at the department where the earthquake memorabilia is stored. It is a very impressive showpiece.

**Andreevski:** What is the most impressive memory of your high school days? That is to say, what do you remember most vividly from the time you spent in high school?

**Belchev:** Yes, high school, that was the period that marked our break with childhood. It lasted until the flood and the earthquake. After that, as a mature man, let's say, up until graduation, the most impressive thing for me was the travel opportunities. From the time of the earthquake until my graduation in 1965, I managed to travel to most of the European countries. And not just me, but my entire generation, be it through cultural exchanges with youth in other countries or through the inclination towards technical sciences via trips organized by the House of People's Technology. It didn't matter, we had other options as well, such as the scouts' organizations or the youth travel organization. I managed to visit Belgium and Luxemburg for the European scouts assembly. I took part in several marches through the Alps, I went to France – I already told you this – immediately after the earthquake, I visited Germany for the first time at a mountain climbers' gathering, I attended the 1 May – or was it 9 May, I don't remember – anyway, the large parade in Moscow. We went to Moscow as high school students, and then we went to Italy. For certain reasons, I couldn't travel to Greece – we could address this later – but I had relatives on my father's side in Bulgaria, so I stayed with them in Bulgaria. By my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, by my graduation, I had already visited a large part of Europe and it remained with me as a hobby, so to say. When I joined the faculty, I also joined those youth and student organizations. We even published a newspaper and organized exchanges with students from other countries. Briefly, during my university days, I travelled with much greater frequency.

Characteristic of that period was that the travels were not related to the financial situation of one's parents. It was merely an issue of finding a partner to carry out the exchange and to organize a program. What we would do if we went somewhere and what we would do for our guests when they came here. There were always funds to cover our activities. It wasn't easy, but we travelled a lot at that time, at least the students of the high school that I attended, which was probably the most famous high school in Skopje. It produced several academics from my generation. There are also ministers for various Macedonian governments as well as renowned artists and actors.

**Andreevski:** Which high school is that?

**Belchev:** Josip Broz Tito.

**Andreevski:** Ah, Josip Broz Tito!

**Belchev:** We really travelled intensively. I recall that we would fill an entire bus and find partners somewhere in Europe where we could stay for couple of days. We would arrive there, and later on welcome our hosts here and give them a tour around Macedonia. I mentioned that funding was never a big problem, and that is a huge difference with what I see today. When my daughters and grandchildren want to travel, [their ability to do so] is directly tied to their parents' financial situation.

**Andreevski:** Yes. Did your parents have a say, did they make the decision as to what you will study or was it your decision what to study?

**Belchev:** It was my decision. I mean, I've been involved in various aspects of electrotechnology since an early age. We constructed our first airplanes and detectors. There was a skill called 'searching for the fox': A transmitter would be hidden in a small forest and we had to locate the antenna broadcasting the signal as fast as possible. The skill was to build a more sensitive receiver ourselves that would be able to locate a much weaker signal. Then those superheterodyne radio receivers appeared, with five or six different electronic lamps, and it was very interesting for us when the specialist would let us open the receiver's box and locate the defect. They wouldn't let us fix it, but they gave us the opportunity to learn, and it was interesting to us because the grown-ups suddenly trusted us to open it without breaking it as well. It was the best part for me, perhaps because I was more fascinated by technology than the other kids from my group at the time. I know two or three fellow engineers who later went to work abroad. They got the opportunity to gain some experience abroad and they didn't come back, instead becoming very good engineers in various industries throughout the world.

I recall learning later on that the enterprise, the service where they would let us fix the radio receivers, switched to producing satellite dishes. I had an urge to leave the Railway and go back to where my interest in technology started. I decided to join the Railway early in my life. My grandfather was a railway worker and he was killed on duty. As early as high school I spent some time gaining experience at the Railway, so I simply got 'infected' by that technology. My final (high school) project was related to the Railway. I planned the same for my project required to join the faculty, but my professor directed my interest elsewhere. Nevertheless, immediately upon graduating I went straight back to the Railway. Regarding satellite dishes, I was, by God, facing a huge dilemma as to whether I should leave.

**Andreevski:** Was there a lecture, seminar, or professor, which played an important role in your life, throughout your entire life?

**Belchev:** Well, there were several professors. At high school I had a Macedonian language teacher, a renaissance person, I would say, who was full of knowledge and masterful in delivering this knowledge to us. She knew how to inspire us to write and

express ourselves correctly, so it is not only her lectures on the Macedonian language, but also her lectures in general that have somehow stayed in my mind.

At the university, I was fortunate to become close with the professor who taught about the utilisation of electrical energy, which included that used in railway towing. That professor was the reason I delayed my graduation, so that I could stay on working with the team on a new machine, which was being designed at that moment in his office. I remained with the team for another year and a half, and I have to say that I was very well paid, despite not yet being an engineer with a degree. In the meantime, my future spouse graduated, we got married, our daughter was on the way, and I told the professor: 'Professor, I [laughs] have to deal with my situation', and he says, 'All right, you can graduate whenever you want, let us finish the project first'. As it happened, we completed the project and my daughter was born on the same day and I immediately managed to get a job with the Railway. So it was a nice period in my life. I remember those two teachers with a great deal of pleasure.

**Andreevski:** Yes. So far you've told us what you've learned at school and at the university, but what did you learn from your parents? What life lesson from your parents has remained with you?

**Belchev:** Regarding that, I may not be the best example of a typical child from Macedonia. My father was born in a city which today is in Greek territory. In 1922, when he was still a child, his family was expelled from their home, and, after a long plight, they found refuge in central Bulgaria. He grew up with children whose families were also expelled from the same city, in a neighbourhood traditionally called 'the Macedonian district'. He became a communist very early in his life, which got him arrested in Bulgaria. In 1941, Bulgaria occupied Macedonia and the communists sentenced in that trial were transferred to a prison in Skopje. My father remained there until the Macedonian partisans attacked it and liberated the prisoners. He joined the brigade that liberated them and fought until the end of the war. After the war, he remained in Skopje. I don't have any relatives in Macedonia on my father's side. I can't recall any.

My mother was also a pre-war communist. She was a renowned partisan fighter, for which she was highly decorated [*partizanska spomenica* – partisan acknowledgement]. She comes from a town in southern Macedonia; they met in Skopje in 1944 and got married. All their relatives lived far from Skopje, so communicating with them was a bit hard during those initial years.

So, what I remember is that a lot of people gathered in our home, all of them former partisans, some famous partisan commanders, and the discussions were primarily focused on that grievous period of Macedonian history, the pre-war period and the war times, the occupation, the partisans' life. What would be interesting to point out? There

was a certain unease – my father had no nearby relatives and my mother lost her family – all younger than her – during the war. Those are probably the scars that made the biggest impression on us; we understood that a very perplexing period had ended, that it was altogether different from the period we lived in, which was free from any threats. Their insistence that we devote ourselves to school, to study, probably distanced us from what was a decisive plight for them. Thus, I suppose that my younger brother, who dedicated his life to photography very early on, and who took a different direction in his development as a human being, was even more distanced from all of that.

**Andreevski:** I understand.

**Belchev:** I also recall that they talked about books a lot, all of them did. Many years later, I encountered a very interesting fact about them. In the prison in Skopje, where the communists from Bulgaria were transferred, the prison authorities packed 30 to 40 prisoners in one cell, some of them Macedonians [The territory of Macedonia was under Bulgarian occupation during the Second World War].

A few of those people were crucial actors in Macedonian history. One of them is among the Macedonia's most important writers, another is one of its best historians, and a third person later became chairman of the Jewish community in Skopje. So, they were always talking about books, about literature, and very interesting books could be found in our home – hence my interest in bibliophilism. There I saw for the first time a book printed in Arabic, discovered during the reconstruction of the house where my mother was born, when suddenly books started falling from the attic. We gathered all of them and it was very interesting for me to try to find out who [...] wrote those books. The first time my father and I went to a library, we donated all of those books and yes, it is probably where my interest in searching for old books originated.

There were many military operations in Macedonia and it is well known that the most valuable medieval scripts are, fortunately, preserved in places like the Vatican, St. Petersburg, Bologna, Zagreb and Sofia. More recently, with the development of printing, the authorities that periodically occupied Macedonia would remove parts of the library inventory during their turn in occupying our country, while replacing it with their own library inventory, so there is a way to go in terms of upgrading the libraries around Macedonia. Fortunately, I am still working on that.

**Andreevski:** Interesting. You already told us how you got your first job and so on. I am curious if you remember what you bought with your first salary?

**Belchev:** To be honest, I don't remember. But I do remember what would catch my interest at the time. Technology was my primary interest at that time. It was crucial for me to have a good gramophone and a good tape recorder, to have good antennas set on the



roof of our house so we could receive the popular radio stations of that time. My friends and I set up a huge antenna and we could listen to Radio Luxemburg very well. It was our main amusement. When Top Twenty was playing on the radio, we would connect my dual tape recorder – I had a four channel one – and record the hits proposed by Top Twenty that specific evening. In this way we could translate the first, the second, the third one, and already the next day we would announce next week's hits in the Macedonian language on our youth show on Macedonian Radio.

I probably bought some technology with my first salary, but I know that when I received the first salary, my daughter was very little. After she had grown up a little bit, my wife and I spent a lot of money on traveling. At that time, we did several larger tours. I managed somehow to get a Greek visa and we went on a tour around Greece. We took long tours around Yugoslavia, too – we went everywhere: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Albania was an isolated country then – we couldn't enter it – Bulgaria had a specific regime in power and it wasn't attractive for us. A bit later, in 1972, 1973, when I began to travel much more as a Railway employee, I was offered the opportunity to attend training courses for railway engineers in France, in Germany, and my wife would come with me. We would try to take advantage of the week-long stay. I would attend the courses and then during the weekend we would 'steal' a couple of days to travel the area. We probably spent a lot of money on traveling.

**Andreevski:** What did the borders mean to you at that time? Was it like today? Was it hard to obtain a visa? That is to say, was it hard to enter certain countries? Especially Western Europe?

**Belchev:** Not at the time. There were no visas to begin with. The Yugoslav passport was a real passport. It was highly valued. We travelled Europe with ease. I don't recall any problems apart from obtaining a Greek visa. We kept our passports at home. It was one of the big differences at a time when a large part of Europe had to apply for a passport at the relevant institutions every time they needed to travel, while we had our passports at home. If you had the money, you put gasoline in your car and drove wherever you wanted to. We had no limitations in that aspect, the only being our family budget, how much money we could put aside for travel. That was when our long tours of Turkey began.

No, traveling was not an issue for us, as we never had a problem with it and we were never denied entry by a country. The Yugoslav passport gave us real freedom of movement.

**Andreevski:** I suppose that many things changed with the invention of computers, that is to say, with the introduction of computers in the workplace, particularly in fields related to all kinds of technology. Do you remember when you started using a computer for the

first time? How did it change your work experience? The type of work that was being done?

**Belchev:** Yes, I had the opportunity, thanks to my work projects, to be in touch with the latest in the technology at any given moment. Privately, I bought the first Sinclair, followed by the first Commodore. After that I bought an Atari, and, as the new generations of computers emerged, I bought the first IBM laptop for a lot of money. At that time my wife was also working on scientific research and we needed an appliance that could somehow systemize the huge amount of data. We still keep that IBM laptop as a relic [laughs]. Now I have a Siemens Nixdorf laptop. I bought it during one of my trips to Germany. As for my workplace, I think that the moment the personal computers were invented, we had one in our office. I was a designer for the Railway and I went through all the *stadia* necessary to become an engineer: design, oversight, and completion of objects. I obtained all the necessary licenses, and, probably because of the profile of people I worked with, it was logical for our department to be the first to receive computers, to be the first to use them. It was a natural transition to us – from a regular typing machine, to an IBM with a ball, then an IBM with a fan, and eventually the computers arrived. We had some Hewlett-Packard computers with two to twelve lines on the monitor. I remember that we took them back to storage the moment they arrived, since the next generation was much more powerful and we never really used them. It was 1972 or 1973, I don't remember exactly, but it was completely natural to me to have the latest generation of computers on my desk.

**Andreevski:** You already mentioned that you had a somewhat unusual career – from being a technician to later becoming a diplomat. When did you become politically aware and when and why did you decide to become a diplomat?

**Belchev:** Well now [laughs], political awareness [laughs] developed when I grew up, as the saying goes. We were involved with all those organizations that existed at the time. There was the youth travel organization, the scouts, the mountain climbers – and I always had this ambition to contribute to those organizations as much as I could, so it probably helped my selection as a leader of the scouts, as the manager of all the traveling we did in Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Probably all that traveling around, observing how things are in other places, causes a person to mature. Let me recall two episodes.

The large European gathering of scouts was organized by the '*Falcons Rouges*' (Red Falcons) and later we found out that there are several scouts' organizations in France, each with a different political affiliation. We also found out that even the youth traveling organizations differ according to their political orientation. Then, we got the opportunity as students to visit the fraternal city of Bradford, which is among the first cities to offer help for Skopje. There we were hosted by local students. By some good fortune, the then

Prime Minister graduated from the University of Bradford and we had a long conversation with him. He was very curious to find out where we came from (it was Yugoslavia then, not Macedonia), and we had a long conversation as to who we are, how we came to be in Bradford. At the same time, our friends, the local students, organized protests against some local nationalist, an English chauvinist who ran for local office. The students decided to stage a protest against him. We were young and naturally, we joined them, marching along with our friends. Later on, when we returned to Macedonia, some people from the organizations we were members of summoned us to inquire about why we took part in this demonstration, and in England, of all places. It has remained in my memory ever since: They asked us why we took part in a political demonstration, while no one asked us what we talked about with the Prime Minister.

**Andreevski:** [laughs]

**Belchev:** It was an interesting event, it meant that there were people amidst us, there was someone in our group who had to record what each of us was doing. I recall there were future journalists in our group, foreign policy commentators, a minister for foreign affairs, a minister for defence. It was interesting to be part of that group that went to Bradford, to see the political background of these people when they were young.

It came to me very naturally; I can't say exactly at what moment – probably in the scouts. This was because I was a company commander, which meant that I had to organize a large group of scouts. I was in charge of organizing various trips and festivities related to our lives as scouts.

Later on, when we entered the university, there were students' organizations. An interesting moment occurred in 1968, during the wave of student discontent, when we realized that there were obvious deviations in the political system and they bothered us. The first signs of people getting rich through dishonest means appeared, probably as young people, we were bothered by that. As it turned out, we had to come up with a clear position as to what are our demands were, so it wouldn't just seem that we are against that situation, but we don't really know what we wanted. There was [...] a phrase, 'Ask for the impossible' and the impossible is not defined until we define it. Thus the term 'democratic centralism' entered our political slang. Basically, the idea was that, although we all thought differently, we could still sit down and debate as to what would be our common option, and what we would agree upon would remain a joint position thereafter. Now, how much that term really covered all political options that appeared at the moment is a question of time – and time demonstrated that people stick to various political opinions throughout their lives. When the multiparty system arrived, they articulated their positions as political parties. I was in the Union of Communists at that time and I was very active. When I became a state official in 1992, I told myself that the political affiliation should not

be crucial for the state officials, especially the ones high in the administration hierarchy. I informed my organization that I had ceased all my activities because of my office and that I would work for the state thereafter. It is clear that the political leadership of the state administration will always be in the hands of the party, which at that moment, had won the people's trust.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** It is interesting that I still meet with the people who were my friends and with whom I worked at that time, and some of them are distinguished members of some of the political parties in Macedonia, some of them – same as me – are not politically affiliated [laughs] and now, as retirees, when we sit down for a beer, we remember our youthful debates from times long past, but we avoid discussions about the present.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** If we debate the present, it turns into a fight.

**Andreevski:** I can imagine. So, from what you said, I can guess that you view yourself as a political person in Aristotelian sense – *zoon politicon*. What do you think turns a person into a political person?

**Belchev:** The circumstances. The life a person lives. We had the fortune to live in an open society, without limitations, with lots of opportunities and contacts, with many acquaintances that enabled us to easily understand that there are different types of political systems around the world, and not only with regard to political organizations, but the social organizations, too. The experiences that derived from what we saw probably pushed us to try to do something, to offer a different solution when we came back. Sometimes it was accepted, sometimes not, it all depends on the readiness of a society to go in new directions, to make new changes.

It is probably very interesting to follow the genesis of how the large, pivotal global events reflected on our society. I can say that one of those events, when I realized that a person must hold a strong position and know what he or she wants, was 1968, when the student demonstrations broke up de facto. We remember Tito's speech, when he said that the students were right, but there are always wolves in sheep's clothing, people trying to direct the social protest towards something else and after that, the situation calmed. In August the great intervention in the Eastern Bloc, took place in Czechoslovakia, and at that moment we realized that matters were much more serious, that sometimes power can impose a different political system, a political system linked to human destinies. At that moment it became completely clear to us that we have to pick a side, to hold a clear position, to know what we want, and to know how to defend it. It was interesting, we were

all – what was the word – assigned with responsibilities when we received the information about the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the subtext was that tomorrow Yugoslavia and Macedonia could be a target of this type of incursion. And then what? And suddenly we found ourselves facing a task, wondering if everything that we saw on TV about Prague was going to happen to us? Serious preparations would be necessary so that such an event wouldn't catch us by surprise or unprepared. We were old enough to know that the situation was very serious. I was at the time very impressed by one of the student leaders' statements in September that year, during our discussions on how to prepare and organize. He said: 'Let's remember who organized the resistance in Macedonia against fascism!' He listed all organizers and said that they were, practically our age. So he reminded us how serious the moment was and that it was no time for games. Altogether, a nice turning point, an auspicious time to grow up.

**Andreevski:** Yes. Were there moments when you felt more as a European, than a Macedonian? That is, more of a citizen of Europe, not just a citizen of Macedonia?

**Belchev:** Well, probably because I travelled a lot, I realized very soon that there is a difference between Europe as a notion and the European Economic Community as an institution representing a common European interest, a common European project. That is how I saw the difference. Because I travelled a lot around Europe, I pretty soon realized that there is a Greek Europe, an Iberian Europe, and a Europe in the Scandinavian fashion. I saw that these were very different Europes and that Europe is, practically, an everyday adjustment of these different – I wouldn't say interests - but different starting positions for joining Project Europe. We weren't particularly fenced off from that Europe, because we lived as Europe did. Later, as a political person, initially as an engineer, I had the good fortune to be a part of the team of railway employees who prepared the platform for the Yugoslavia on the subject of traffic, to be used in its cooperation agreement with the European Community in 1978. So, I have already to some degree helped prepare a political platform for the former state with respect to the European Community.

I retired in 2010, so I couldn't participate in the negotiations to join the European Community, so, to me, Europe remains an absolutely familiar concept, both as a general notion and as a political organization. Later on, I followed in-detail the internal political development of the European Community, when the European Economic Community became – through the Maastricht Agreement – the European Union, the discussions over the establishment of a European Constitution, the referenda in Ireland and in France, and it became clear to me that the project will continue to be lashed out against, and, occasionally, face deep crises – Brexit being just one. So did we feel any difference between Europe and Macedonia? No, we did not. Somehow it doesn't seem that.

**Andreevski:** Yes. So, from what you said, I can see that you too believe that Europe is not yet a cultural project, but more of a political and economic project?

**Belchev:** That is undoubtedly so. Europe started as a political project, based upon the identification of the reasons that led it into conflict before. When that moment was defined and when the major European leaders said, 'let's create a mechanism that will keep us from clashing again', that idea then naturally attracts new components that complement each other. Most likely, the issues of education, culture and some other aspects of their shared existence will have their turn later on, but at this moment their time has yet to come. There is another task, that is part of internal political system building, and it is that of strengthening the institutions for European internal democracy to such a degree that their officials can be viewed as trustworthy.

The cultural project is still in its infancy. I would say that there are always some interesting endeavours. This attempt here is one of them, right? To draw simultaneous distinctions regarding how Europe is viewed at a given moment.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** Well, I don't know. While preparing I thought about Europe, that grandiose Europe contrived by the original six founding countries – it still knows too little about the culture of Europe as a whole. And it is clear that the 'big' languages tend to impose upon the 'small' languages; the small languages struggle to be translated so that they can reach a wider audience of readers. There is this interesting book that I would recommend by Dubravka Ugrešić. It is about a typical meeting of writers from different countries, their minds filled with stereotypes about Europe, which suddenly bursts into a confrontation within a very small and confined area. And yet, they need to somehow find what is common, a common denominator. Some European officials decided that they should make a 'Literature Express 2000', with the idea of putting writers from all these different countries in one train and have them travel from Lisbon to Saint Petersburg. The goal was to get them to mingle and communicate with each other. Based on this, she wrote this short novella, where in some 20-30 pages this woman manages to tell us that all of these people have their own mental images of Europe, from start to the finish, and that a month-long train trip can't make any dramatic changes. But it will later on inspire some changes in the minds of those who experienced those 30 days together.

So what it means is that the process will take time, the visa regime was a big hindrance, the visa regime was a retrograde process that pushed back several, ... probably an entire generation was cut off from Europe because of that visa regime. I can't speak to how it was with other countries, but I know for certain that it was a problem for Macedonia. Even today we have problems – we know very little about Greek cultural life.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** Regardless of the fact that we are immediate neighbours, the language barriers are too large, but today there is the English language which allows us to communicate. But it is a fact that neither Greece, nor Macedonia have any significant knowledge about each other's culture. There are challenges - that is what makes the European project so wonderful.

**Andreevski:** Yes. What has made you laugh the most in life? Do you know of any, do you remember any anecdotes from your childhood? What were the jokes about in Yugoslavia?

**Belchev:** This is a very hard question for me right now. I can't remember any at the moment. Let's leave it for some other conversation? I can't think of any right at this moment.

**Andreevski:** No problem. So you were talking a lot about borders, about visas and about how difficult travel can be at certain times, and this is also related to the topic of freedom. I am curious – do you think that freedom, in the end, is a relative concept. I mean, is it possible to plainly define freedom or do you think that a person needs to be incarcerated in order to truly understand what freedom means?

**Belchev:** Well now, if we consider how my generation fared. My generation lived in a free country that won the right to use its own language in official communication for the first time; the right to choose its own official name for the first time, and it is only natural for us to continue operating in that manner. We have now arrived at a situation in which we are deprived of our personal freedoms and are hindered by external factors and influences. Apparently, collective freedom within these European constellations has its limits, has real limits. It is a fact that, as a state, as a subject, we have not been able to enjoy that freedom since the referendum for independence. We are forced to try and realize that freedom on a daily basis, within the boundaries of what is known as 'real politics'. And to try to somehow reach the point where the notion of freedom - so self-explanatory in some other countries - won't be so problematic for us. We can see that real politics does have constraints - sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, but real nevertheless. For this reason, a lot of naivety and grand expectations won't overcome them. What it takes is a lot of prudent caution, we what we refer to in Macedonian as 'stepping on eggs'. How do we cross that road and get to the same level as the other countries? Without bringing up again the same political topics, let's just say that a demand to change one's own official name is certainly not a notion of freedom in Europe.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** It is a fact that, at this moment, Europe considers this as the only solution for the European project to continue. There are no dissident voices, as yet, in relation to that. Probably some intellectual elite will raise the question again so that it can be re-evaluated, but at the moment, it is what it is. Let us not forget that France - the engine of Europe, the initiator of the European movement - voted against a referendum. So, twists like that are also possible.

The European Constitution designed a concept that laid the groundwork for the next 50 years, just to have the current political elite to decide on that it is not a real solution. Great leaders, such as the founders of the Union, are needed to create a new drive forwards, a breakthrough. And good administrators, as well, such as Jacques Delors, Prodi (Romano) and Santer (Jacques). Recent years have offered a poor choice in terms of unique individuals who are able to establish a mechanism for a continued progress that is conducive to administering the European infrastructure.

Today, when we see, no, we accept it as normal, that the European euro was created and put into circulation, that it is a prevalent currency, and we don't even ask anymore why this is so. Few are those who remember the political effort required to say that the mark and the frank will be consigned to history – a new currency is on its way. Therefore, it is exactly this kind of people who that are missing in Europe of today.

**Andreevski:** In your twenties, did you have an optimistic outlook for the future, or were you more of a pessimist?

**Belchev:** I entered the university in my twenties. So, I entered the university with the aim of definitely finishing my studies within those five years – it was guaranteed, as the saying goes. I didn't intend to delay my studies, since I chose a curriculum that suited my interests.

What I miss from those years is being the organizer of the technical students' exchange during my studies, which involved sending many of my colleagues to complete short or long studies abroad that were related to various industries throughout Europe. I myself never went anywhere as a student, not even once. I focused on establishing connections with Macedonian firms that would accept foreigners who were willing to work with them as part of that technical exchange. Upon graduating and with barely two months of work experience, I got the opportunity to attend a course in France. 'Aha' - I said to myself – now I shall make up for all the opportunities I missed to study abroad. Access to literature, to next generation technology, free communication with important people in the technology-related professional networks that matched my interest. That probably created the basis for our energy, our enthusiasm.



We put together a good team at the Railway. We were working on the project for electrifying the main lines, what today is called Corridor Ten. It goes from Pannonia via Belgrade, the Morava valley, the Vardar valley, and Skopje all the way to Thessaloniki and Athens. It was a European corridor even then, regardless of the fact that it wasn't called Corridor Ten at that time. It was clear that it was the main communication line between the Mediterranean ports and Europe. We assembled a good team, established a good organization and mastered the technology for electrification thanks to the courses we attended in France and in Germany. It ended up that we were the first to have an electrified junction, at a time when neither Greece, nor Serbia had an electrified railway network. And we were a territory of 25,000 square kilometres, 250 km north to south, and out of nowhere, our little electrified network stood alone, like an island, since our neighbours were still far from extending their communication network to our border. So, that enthusiasm probably motivated us to not wait and see how far our neighbours had progressed so that we could follow them. Instead we were pushing ourselves forward.

The second element arrived thanks to our cooperation with one of the United Nations' programmes in post-earthquake Skopje. It all began with the integrated regulation of the Vardar. Initially the flow of the Vardar riverbed through the city was regulated, followed by a strengthening of the Vardar's basin by building concrete walls at certain points and a study of the Vardar which examined the watercourses for the entire region and future opportunities for exploiting water. And then we were introduced to a French project on the Rona valley. We attended several courses, were trained on long-term planning that was decades in the making, so that one day the potential could be harnessed. The effort resulted in a great study of the river with regard to the best spots for dams and future potential with respect to the production of electricity or irrigation. Why did this project leave a strong impression on me? Because covering the Vardar valley with dams meant dislocating the existing railway route. That existing railway would be cast aside, it would be inundated anyway, and additionally there is data that the Skopje – Thessaloniki railway route was laid by the Turks in 1873 using parameters that were valid at that time. It remains the same to-date, with few improvements, while the features of modern railways are completely different. Among the first things we managed to achieve was to promote among our peers any plans regarding the new route would be located as well as what parameters would be used. That was precisely what we have learned from the French, to plan decades in advance, and I shall right now make a small digression to point out our ability to make mistakes. The political situation [The dissolution of Yugoslavia] in '92 and '93 imposed an urgent need to build a railway connection between our neighbours to the East and West, since to the north, Serbia was under sanctions imposed by the United Nations, while all traffic to the south was halted due to a one-sided embargo by [...]

**Andreevski:** Greece.

**Belchev:** Greece. With a large part of the economy situated within our basic industries, we required a lot of material to enter and exit the country via the railways. As a result, it cut off our access to the nearest port, which dangerously threatened Macedonian industry. So, a political decision was made to immediately build connections with our eastern and western neighbours. It is easy to say it, but if we look at it from a technical standpoint, the Albanian railways were the closest to the border, but had a capacity far below what was needed, or was incomparable to Corridor Ten. The decision was made to link the nearest point of Corridor Ten to the Bulgarian railway system. Absent long-term planning, errors were of course made, by designing projects which omitted the long-term water accumulation plan and the terrain prohibited fixed infrastructure, such as the railway. There is also an urban agglomeration that requires a developing of the railway so that it can merge with the Bulgarian network, which would require further demolition, urban agglomerations, new bends and an extension of the route. Going back to the planning, we knew that something long-term was needed. While we initially managed to instil that idea in some projects – the large Vardar project is still using this approach - the project regarding a railway connection to Bulgaria features some basic errors, to the extent that a review of the entire project is needed, regardless of the fact that it is in an advanced phase of financing and construction. Perhaps some cost-benefit analysis will prove that better solutions exist. We were informed about global trends in this specific area and we knew how to express it, to elaborate on it. The issue was with the political decision-makers, whether they will acknowledge our engineering expertise or not, and whether they will delay the decision for later stages. However, it is a fact that these are the two largest projects in Macedonia, probably the largest in terms of investment value, and can hardly be repeated in scale. We should not forget that when the large European water canals were constructed 150 years ago, the idea was conceived to link the Danube with the Aegean Sea via a waterway. The idea of including Morava and Vardar, that the waterway will one day be a reality, still remains on paper only. Now it is up to the analysis to show when, if ever, the general economic and the political situation will allow for a review of whether the project is sustainable or not. The fact that we should have addressed this issue much sooner remains: Plans should have been made to preserve the project for times when there will be no unnecessary additional expenses. The point is, my generation can boast about its prudence to plan for the future.

**Andreevski:** Did you ever have the feeling that you have created enemies, in other words, were there people who observed you as an enemy and did that ever put you in danger?

**Belchev:** Well, enemies probably not, but opponents – probably yes. This is because when you meet opinionated people who have never travelled abroad, never faced a different truth, who never even consider that there is another way to do something somewhere else, one that is much smarter. There were such instances and it is only

normal in political life – diverse opinions are essential. The political system witnessed several such episodes where the entire ruling elite was forced to back down, to reposition itself in order to make room for the emerging political elite. We were friends with the children of both, those leaving power and the emerging political elite, and we remained friends. However, we were trying, as children and as mature people, not to allow those huge political commotions – inherent to any political process – to affect our lives. We didn't enter high politics - at least my generation didn't. That we made enemies or that we became someone's enemies? I wouldn't say so. It is undisputable that we did face unpleasant situations, even physical confrontations, but, probably, such tumultuous times always produce hotheads who are capable of making an incident happen. That was, in general, the reason why we changed our lifestyles, however, I don't believe that there were serious incidents. Those who were established as powerful political commentators and journalists persevered and kept writing regardless of any pressure.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** There was a generation of people who had to watch as their cars burned in front of their doors, because someone considered it a strong political message. But, to state that we were someone's enemy, or someone was our enemy – we couldn't say that. Incidents happen, what can you do?

**Andreevski:** What role did the religion play in your life? Is it important, in other words, were there any events in your life that shifted your position on religion?

**Belchev:** I can say on my behalf that I am an atheist or, let's be more precise, an agnostic. No member of my family has ever been religious. Anyway, I was curious to understand the philosophy of religion, of the Macedonian, Orthodox version - as you probably know, Orthodox Christianity also features several different versions. Wherever I travelled, I tried to discern the characteristics of the Catholic religion and early, probably even in my student days, I realized that the Catholic religion, too, is not unified, that there are Protestants, Catholics and Lutherans. My visit to the Czech Republic revealed their specific views on religion. I learned that the Orthodox faith attempted to reach the Czechs, but political circumstances prevented its survival, so it retreated. But, to in the collective memory of the Czechs, it is a Bulgarian Orthodox religion. Those were interesting episodes that I witnessed and collected like pebbles when traveling throughout Europe, but they didn't leave any lasting religious impression on me.

My family was never religious. There were mixed marriages amongst my friends, so to say. One of my friends, who considers himself to be Orthodox, married a Protestant woman. The wedding took place during one of his visits to Europe, so he invited us all and we searched for an Orthodox temple to carry out the ceremony, so we could repeat it in a Protestant temple - those were, so to say, some happy episodes. Otherwise, my

bibliophilism allowed me to learn much about religion. I have some special interests, since religious affiliation in the Balkans throughout the centuries has been closely related to education. There was no other education, apart from a religious one. Religion was responsible for the establishment of schools, as well as various forms of political propaganda, and, finally, as an instrument of state. Three or four forms of religion coexisted and rivalled each other, against the backdrop of a totally different religion having more political sway, and it all occurred in this little arena of Macedonia. The Turkish empire only allowed the Bulgarian Exarchate, the Serbian Orthodox church, and the Greek Patriarch to establish school systems in Macedonia, and often there would be three schools of different religious affiliation in one town. This is probably the reason why diversity affected the generations born during that period so strongly, particularly during the violent periods, as the Balkan Wars, the First and Second World Wars, when the consequences of such religious education became apparent. To us, who lived through the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, religion is a type of a mass consciousness, holding no special meaning for us.

I analyse the process of recognition from a political perspective, because there is a lot of politics involved. But as a bibliophile, I keep in mind the fact that the neighbouring churches also waited for 67 years for someone to acknowledge their existence. That is, probably, a logical process within religious logic. I find it interesting to analyse it as a phenomenon, but I have no special interest in these relations.

I am glad that my activities as a bibliophile provided me with a significant collection of religious literature. I recently visited the Theological Faculty and asked their library if it accepts literature donations. They asked me what kind of religious books I have in my collection, so I made a catalogue of the literature I had. They welcomed me with a great deal of care and respect for the collection I donated. I had a separate meeting with the Dean of the Faculty, who gave me in return a book from their library. I announced that there will be other donations following some future clean-up of our libraries, because my wife's family also boasts an abundant library, and, since I am in the process of cleaning that library up, I would certainly bring something again. We also learned an interesting fact: One of my wife's grandfathers assisted with the translation of the Bible into Macedonian.

**Andreevski:** Interesting.

**Belchev:** Which was an interesting bit of information for us. We hadn't known, as my wife's family remembered him for some of the other activities he did, not literature translation. Nevertheless, the translation of the Bible into Macedonian was a pioneering endeavour at that time.

**Andreevski:** Which recent political events have greatly influenced your life, regardless of whether they occurred in Europe, in the world or domestically?

**Belchev:** Probably the period from 1992 until today, that turbulent period through which our acquaintances, friends, and peers were killed. I worked for a long time as a representative for several European companies in the region of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, I had a very large circle of friends. There were practically no cities with an important industry that I didn't visit in an official capacity. I met beautiful people and made good connections. The news began to arrive that one of them had died and that another managed to flee, but had left his family in Sarajevo and was stuck somewhere else. He couldn't come see them. Later their children managed to somehow reach Skopje and we had to make their documents official so that they could go somewhere else. So, we began to worry, because there is a saying that every generation in the Balkans must experience a war. This really came to pass, while large-scale propaganda at that time promoted the stereotype that 'starting a war is the only thing the Balkan tribes are good at'.

In 1995 the war ended. At that moment, I was tasked with organizing aid for Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions, but with the idea of reinstating Bosnia and Herzegovina as a traditional market for the Macedonian economy as fast as possible. To re-establish the severed connections, because we should remember that the federation had these chains of production for achieving a finished product, where a production would start with basic materials from somewhere in, let's say, Montenegro, then be polished in Serbia, then quality-checked in Macedonia, all while using product parts that had to be bought in from Bosnia and Herzegovina. A concrete example were the buses produced in Skopje, which involved components from all over Yugoslavia, but at least 30 percent of the parts came from industry in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then, suddenly, Bosnia ceased its production, which meant no buses would go to Skopje. We began with the idea of promptly re-establishing those contacts only to find out that a contact was gone – he was killed, his wife was killed, and his children were killed.

Then the crisis of 1999 came, when not only that the shooting took place barely 20 kilometres from Skopje, but there was this enormous mass of people, some 200- 300,000 people. We don't even know how many people were expelled over the border into the main city of Skopje, to live in tents on the periphery for several months. And military planes were circling over Skopje as well, but we said, 'this will end, too', because a peace accord had been signed in Kumanovo, meaning that the military operations against the regime had ended. The next thing we thought was, 'that it is now over means that this crisis has passed too.' According to important European Union documents, the Balkans were finally entering a period of reconciliation. And suddenly we in Europe were honoured to welcome the new millennium, the 21st century, with a war. Fortunately, it wasn't just us – Armenia

and Azerbaijan started first with their conflicts, and we followed after them. So our generation had to sacrifice, to count casualties, and the consequences are that for 20 years now we have a system that is changing with radical speed, as opposed to the natural process that took centuries in European countries. We are doing it in a few decades, so we face the chaos even today. It is extremely hard to create a stable political system via military action. A system that will allow for its interests to be expressed via military action cannot enable a new kind of society to develop where peaceful dissent plays a key role. We are exactly at that stage at this moment. How many decades it will take - I don't know – but it would be nice for it to end soon, for my grandchildren's sake.

**Andreevski:** Since we are talking about your grandchildren, what do you hope for, what are your expectations for future generations of Europeans?

**Belchev:** Ah, as I said, there are probably no real reasons, no genuine reasons for violent activities. But, one can never be certain that it is over. France has a stable democratic system, right, but there will always be some hotheads that will cause a ruckus, provoke some other incident. Europe without borders allowed people of that kind to move around freely. We came to the point where extremists who carried those kinds of passports are able to swiftly enter Macedonia. At the same time, people from Macedonia, while exporting no offensive actions whatsoever [laughs], are prevented from entering the European Union.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** So I wish for the political system to be constructed in such a way that it will allow for rational political thought to somehow be articulated to the broader public and that it will enable democratic methods to be used to drive extremism into a corner. We will certainly deal with extremism here - there is a lot of fertile ground for extremism to grow in Macedonia. There is linguistic diversity, religious diversity, ethnic diversity, political diversity and some extremism will emerge, serving as a trigger to a bigger problem. The younger generations grew up perplexed by the two-decades long ban from Europe, with a political environment that made them much less free than we once were. Yet after a very long time, they can now at least experience the freedom of movement.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** Hopefully the awareness that the turbulent times are over will prevail. It is only human to hope. What can I say?

**Andreevski:** Do you think that extremism, meaning extremism as a phenomenon, is one of the greatest challenges to both Europe and our country going forward, or there are other problems that need to be confronted?

**Belchev:** Europe's problem is internal democratic awareness. It is witnessing a percentage of its population in favour of supporting radical political action, and its founding countries are no exception. Europe learned to exist in a frozen conflict not with Cyprus case, but previously, with Gibraltar. It had to accept a situation where, although being allies, one part of the country carried a special status because of an agreement made 300 years ago. Cyprus is a special case, because in the process of building the European project, a situation was created where Europe accepted a status quo, or *fait accompli*, according to the terms of the previous political system. Yes, part of it is beyond the state's control, but let's find some *modus vivendi* so that it could also exist as if it were in Europe, despite not being administrated by the European Union member country in question. Now, the EU has expanded to countries established within this political culture for decades, countries that became independent barely a century ago. They were previously part of a mighty empire, stretching from the Baltic to Herceg Novi. This is probably the third or fourth political generation to develop these countries as they go through a radical transition from one social system to another. Transitioning to a social framework designed for traditional democracies, to which they need to adapt quickly, while accepting its values. Suddenly we realize that it won't be a smooth process. These countries' internal conflicts will surface, creating problems for the entire European project.

Will we succeed in finding our place in this environment, will there be a will for this peaceful Macedonian spirit to join, to have the right to speak up and be heard? That I cannot say. But it is a fact, I will say again, that change occurs in a very short interval of time. Will my grandchildren live to experience peace as we did? Probably yes, because the security structure called NATO, which, along with Europe, established new frameworks that drew the lines of conflict a bit further from Macedonia. Macedonia today is de facto inside Europe, so Europe won't expand if it decides someday to integrate this region too. It will just complete itself, because Europe is already all around us.

**Andreevski:** We are the island.

**Belchev:** Yes. But there will always be some statement, a line of fire and immediately everything becomes questionable: Are you a potential enemy, regardless of the resources you have, and can I consider you as a potential enemy? Various activities support regionalism or incite acts that are perhaps not aggressive, but selfish. Let's not name countries. It is not nice, but it is a fact that in some countries selfishness prevails. 'We should mind our interests now. We'll think about the others later'.

It will have repercussions for freedom of communication over the next generations, meaning that the freedom of movement will exist, but the quality of interactions will deteriorate. Countries will have to come up with plans for people to be able to network as broadly as possible, to address more and more topics that will serve as joint means of

communication among many people, particularly in the Balkans. It is so apparent that we lack that. I have already said that even the cultures of Macedonia and Greece know very little about each other. We have better knowledge of Bulgaria because of the similarity in language. The TV stations in Skopje offer good insight into what is happening in Serbia, in Croatia, and until recently, Slovenia as well, but now we no longer have Slovenia on the channels. So, we have good coverage of this Serbo-Croatian region.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** The Albanian population here in Macedonia can easily follow the cultural development of Albania, however, we are all aware that we and Albania and Greece are peripheral cultures, as opposed to the European 'mainstream', so we have to come up with an approach, similar to what the trader negotiators did. We should start by establishing a kind of a clone of CEFTA - a trade agreement within the region. Revoke all customs duties between all countries and despite all of the events that are happening, the freedom of movement of goods would be created. Freedom of movement for people is already established, so let's deal with the freedom of ideas now. That will probably be the next generation's first challenge.

**Andreevski:** How do you envision the future of this country? For instance, how do you envision Skopje or this country in fifty years?

**Belchev:** All our misfortunes will probably be history by then. The 'Fathers of Europe' type of European democratic spirit will prevail, as it did at the beginning. There is this wonderful Franco-German project enabling millions of young people from France and Germany to get acquainted. I hope, and aspired through the last years of my career – even now as a pensioner – to make such a project possible in Macedonia, between Macedonia and whichever neighbouring country or group of neighbouring countries. Even at my age I am still working with young people heading various NGOs – where exactly this kind of communication about life topics could be created – to contribute towards developing this European togetherness. It is an openness that we will eventually achieve. The rivalries that reign today should be forgotten in 50 years, just as the rivalries of 50 years ago have been forgotten. If countries which for 200 years waged wars almost every 30 years could manage to become the engine of Europe today, we can do it too. There are a lot of opportunities, primarily via the new technologies, that have enabled us to communicate on a daily basis.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** In the past, the time needed for a letter to be sent and for an answer to be received was a problem, and physical communication was practically impossible. Nowadays we can open a computer and see the interlocutor. This kind of communication



will probably level the differences. It is logical to expect different positions, different worldviews, between people's positions. Technology already allows us to communicate on daily basis, something that took a lot of preparation in the past. Today we can watch live an event that occurred a couple of minutes ago somewhere in Europe.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** And, God help us, good news will arrive from Macedonia. None of our neighbours, at least not that I'm aware of, reported the good news about this year's Ohrid Summer. It ended with a theatre show involving actors from five ex-Yugoslav countries. A theatre act that they specifically came to perform. It just wasn't attractive news, neither for the news portals focused on Greek culture nor for those focused on Bulgarian culture.

**Andreevski:** Yes.

**Belchev:** These are the events that will contribute to peace and understanding between nations.

**Andreevski:** In the end, what sort of advice would you give me, my generation, about the future?

**Belchev:** [laughs] How did the saying go? Find your own way and persist by following it. Our advice would otherwise be to note where we have fared well, where we have made mistakes, which of our proclaimed goals we didn't achieve and understand why we failed. We should occasionally write a negative review of our deeds, but always look forward.

**Andreevski:** Thank you very much. Excellent. Well, that was it. Once again, thank you very much.

**Belchev:** It was an honour.

**Andreevski:** I think that this is also a project that will contribute to the future about which you talked about, especially the communication opportunities that will enable young people from all around the world to listen to these conversations.

**Belchev:** We missed something. Yes, this is it.

**Andreevski:** Well I think that. I mean, I intentionally skipped some of the things, because they were already mentioned.

**Belchev:** This is interesting, you already asked me about Europe.

**Andreevski:** Which European countries haven't you visited yet? Yes.

**Belchev:** Liechtenstein, Liechtenstein.

**Andreevski:** Liechtenstein. Well, you have been almost everywhere else. But, there's still time, Portugal.

**Belchev:** I don't feel like traveling right now, and it's time for my children and grandchildren to do so.