



British Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce (BBCC) Comes Back to London

Thirty Members and Friends of the British Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce (BBCC) assembled for a unique Lunch Meeting at the Royal Garden Hotel, Kensington High Street, in London on Wednesday 25th April to mark the UK re-launch of the Chamber following its high-profile series of events in Sofia over the past winter. Distinguished guests included the British Ambassador to Bulgaria, HE Jonathan Allen, the Bulgarian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, HE Konstantin Dimitrov, and Prince Kyril Saxe-Coburg. Hosted by BBCC Chairman Bill Drysdale, a wide cross section of leading figures from London and Sofia business, banking and private equity circles shared their vision of achieving strong growth in trade and investment between our two countries. The Bulgarian City Club in London and Sofia was represented by Svetlozar ('Zarko') Iankov and Iliya Lingorski, who pledged the support of their members to the BBCC's commendable goals and initiatives.

Both Ambassadors were warmly supportive of the initiative to bring this energetic and enterprising group of opinion leaders together, and assured the meeting of the backing of their governments and state investment agencies in developing all possible channels for mutual cross-border business. A valuable opening stage of the event was a short introduction by each person present of their biography and current activities, demonstrating a strong interest from many different business sectors. Banking, private equity, fund management, financial PR, the legal profession, construction, oil and gas, manufacturing industry, media, architecture and design, education services and the high-tech engineering sector were all represented. Prince Kyril spoke appreciatively of the highly regarded Bulgarian professionals working in London, and mentioned also his voluntary work in assisting NGOs which have committed to humanitarian projects to help under-privileged Bulgarians as well as to enhance the brand image of Bulgaria in Western markets.

Bill Drysdale highlighted the goals of the BBCC to raise the visibility, profile and presence of Britain in Bulgaria, to attract UK investment as well as exports, concessions, infrastructure projects and technical agreements, and to facilitate the establishment also of Bulgarian enterprises or expert professionals in appropriate industries in the UK. Mr Drysdale also sought the support and involvement of all present in helping to attract a British bank to set up in Bulgaria, either through acquisition or establishment of a branch: approaches have already been made to the largest UK based multinational banks which were not bailed out by the government in 2008. An alternative model was discussed for a syndicate of UK private equity funds to invest, perhaps in conjunction with the EBRD which is London based. It was agreed that the way forward for Britain is to emulate the model adopted by other investor countries in Bulgaria (e.g. Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece and Turkey) where the presence of one or more of their leading banks makes investors feel more secure about their entry into the market, about coping with the bureaucracy, and effectively managing the continuing process of doing business.

General support was indicated by those present for the success stories of British companies in Bulgaria highlighted in a recent survey by the 'Sofia Echo'. Appreciation was expressed for the quality of events mounted by the BBCC for Members and Friends, the successful attraction of influential guest speakers, and the distinguished accommodation for meetings with leading politicians and other high profile guests generously provided by the British Ambassador at his Residence. Mr Allen was complimented on his rapid integration into his first Head of Mission post in Sofia, his already sound Bulgarian language skills, and his overt support, in harness with the Commercial Attaché Tim Buisseret, for UK investment into Bulgaria – going well beyond the normal policy guidelines of UKTI to focus for Bulgaria as much on FDI as on exports. While in London on the current visit, the Ambassador had meetings with ports and airports authorities to encourage them to apply for upcoming management contract concessions in Bulgaria.

Ambassador Dimitrov remarked that there was a close identity of interest between the goals of the Bulgarian Foreign Minister (who visited London recently) and his Embassy on the one hand, and of the BBCC on the other, to promote trade and attract British investment to Bulgaria. An important priority during his term of office in furthering this goal is to expand Bulgaria's commercial contact network more widely across the UK: the BBCC chairman's suggestion to undertake together an investment road show to business or financial centres such as Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle and Edinburgh was welcomed. Mr Dimitrov will also work to increase internship opportunities for Bulgarian students at UK universities. The Ambassador endorsed the comments of participants at the lunch that Bulgaria deserves to be more widely publicised as an attractive investment location, with special regard to its macro-economic and political stability, low operational costs, skilled labour, proximity to Western export markets and good living conditions.

Many comments, questions and constructive suggestions were made around the hollow square table which provided an excellent discussion forum at the lunch. These included improving the professionalism of the Bulgarian civil service along UK lines, attracting British investors already active in Bulgaria's close neighbour countries (e.g. Orgachim in Rousse, led by a Romanian entrepreneur resident in London), building on the success story of a Bulgarian furniture making company which supplies all branch furnishings and shop-fitting for one of the largest UK banks, support and funding for InvestBulgaria Agency to seriously increase the promotion of Brand Bulgaria (our neighbour Macedonia being a good role model), and working hard to reduce the negative perceptions (also in some cases realities) of Bulgaria, including heavy bureaucracy, an unpredictable legal environment, more overt corruption and organised crime than the less visible varieties also common in fully developed economies, lack of management skills, and insufficient trust of foreign investors by state authorities, municipalities, trade unions and consumers who believe (sometimes correctly) that they are being over-charged.

A common thread evident throughout this pivotal meeting was that all present saw opportunities to influence growth and new business opportunities in the economies of both our countries, at a time when Britain especially is continuing to suffer recessionary conditions, high public indebtedness and a continuing perception from the rest of Europe that there remain some inhibitions in casting aside the island mentality. The BBCC will spare no effort in going forward with confidence and optimism to make Britain an equal if not dominant competitor to the other countries which have contributed more boldly till now to FDI in South-East Europe.