



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:**  
**Bulgarian Prime Minister took part in “This Is Europe” debates in**  
**the European Parliament**  
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# **Bulgarian Prime Minister took part in “This Is Europe” debates in the European Parliament**

## **Summary**

*On November 22, 2023 Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov participated in the 12th plenary debate themed "This is Europe" hosted by the European Parliament in Strasbourg. "This is Europe" is a series of plenary debates in which the leaders of the EU member states discuss solutions to the challenges facing the Union. Nikolay Denkov addressed the members of the European parliament, emphasizing Bulgaria's commitment to contribute significantly to the development of the European Union. Denkov also highlighted Bulgaria's rich history as one of Europe's oldest nations and pointed out ongoing attempts by Russia to exert influence through targeted hybrid attacks. He criticized Russia's exploitation of economic ties and cultural connections to divide Bulgarian society between pro-Russia and Euro-Atlantic groups. Finally Denkov stressed that Bulgaria's complete EU and NATO membership is pivotal for the nation's democratic growth and In this regard he advocated for Bulgaria's integration into Schengen and the Eurozone to solidify its European ties further.*

## **“This is Europe“ debates in the European Parliament**

„This is Europe“ is an initiative proposed by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola which consists of a series of debates with EU leaders with the aim to discuss their visions for the future of the European Union. Roberta Metsola launched ‘This is Europe’ initiative soon after her election as president of the European Parliament in January 2022.

According to The European Parliamentary Research Service<sup>1</sup> ‘This is Europe’ initiative is particularly relevant in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), a bottom-up exercise that allowed EU citizens to express their opinions on the EU’s future policies and functioning. On 30 April 2022, the CoFoE plenary adopted 49 proposals, including more than 300 measures by which they might be achieved. As a follow-up, Parliament adopted a resolution, by a large majority, calling for a convention in accordance with Article 48 of the

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<sup>1</sup> The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) provides comprehensive research and analytical support to the Members of the European Parliament, its parliamentary committees and the European Parliament as a whole. (<https://epthinktank.eu/about/>)

Treaty on European Union.<sup>2</sup> This call was backed by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech on 14 September 2022.<sup>3</sup>

The European Parliament has launched this new series of invitations to EU heads of state and governments under the theme, “This is Europe” in order to stimulate exchanges and discussions focused on various current challenges facing the European Union.

The main long standing goal of these debates has been put on the discussion about further possible actions of the EU in response to all recognized challenges for the Union. The various topics are being adapted primarily to current events and in close cooperation with the individual leaders. Soon after its start the Conference of Presidents<sup>4</sup> endorsed “This is Europe” initiative on 28 April 2022.

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas was the first EU leader to address the European Parliament in “This is Europe” series of debates, on 9 March 2022.

Opening the debate, Parliament President Roberta Metsola said: "We need to re-assess the European Union's role in this new world. We need to boost our investment in defense and innovative technologies. This is the time for us to take decisive steps to ensure the security of all Europeans. This is the time to build a real security and defense union and to reduce our dependencies on the Kremlin.”<sup>5</sup>

Since this first debate of the "This is Europe" initiative, twelve similar discussions have been held in the European Parliament until now, and the last of them was with the the Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov.

This was the fifth debate in 2023, following Cyprus' President Christodoulides (13 June), Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz (9 May), Luxembourg's Prime Minister Xavier Bettel (19 April) and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda (14 March).

The EU leaders who participated in this debate series in 2022 were Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Ireland's Taoiseach Micheál

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union: The Treaties may be amended in accordance with an ordinary revision procedure. They may also be amended in accordance with simplified revision procedures. - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A12008M048>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_22\\_5493](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493)

<sup>4</sup> The Conference of Presidents is the political body in Parliament responsible for: the organisation of Parliament's business and legislative planning; deciding the responsibilities and membership of committees and delegations; relations with other EU institutions, the national parliaments and non-EU countries. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/political-bodies#:~:text=The%20Conference%20of%20Presidents%20is,parliaments%20and%20non%2DEU%20countries.>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/this-is-europe-debates/20220804STO37002/estonian-pm-it-s-in-our-interest-for-ukraine-to-become-more-stable>

Martin, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, and Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov in the "This is Europe" debate**

The participation of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov in "This is Europe" debate in the European Parliament took place on November 22, 2023. For the Bulgarian Prime Minister this debate was obviously of a high priority importance, since Nikolay Denkov preferred to be in Strasbourg, while at the same time in the Bulgarian Parliament there was another important discussion going on related to the submitted, by the opposition, "Vote of No Confidence" to the Denkov's cabinet.

The leading topic of the Prime Minister's visit to the European Parliament during the plenary session in Strasbourg was **the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area**. Denkov also raised this question in his speech before the debate in the plenary hall - at a short press conference given by him and the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Mezzola.

Before giving the floor to Nikolay Denkov, in her introduction speech Mezzola stated that *"reiterating the European parliament's disappointment with the decision to delay Bulgaria's and Romania's accession to the Schengen area last year we stand fully on your side on this, since there is no justifiable reason not to admit Bulgaria as you have now fulfilled all the conditions"*. President of the European Parliament also pointed out that she *"sincerely hope that the Spanish presidency will make every possible effort to reach agreement between all member states this winter"*.<sup>7</sup>

Another pressing issue for Bulgaria that was mentioned by Mezzola was the entry of the country into the Euro Zone and the adoption of the Euro as state currency. Regarding this topic Mezzola stated that she sees and encourages the efforts that Denkov's government is making in meeting all of the conditions since for her it is clear that joining the Euro zone is the best possible decision for Bulgarian businesses, industries and all Bulgarians in terms of financial stability and also in terms of opportunities.

Finally Mezzola thanked Bulgaria for its support to Ukraine. From this press conference it became clear that during their meeting Mezzola and Denkov also discussed the situation in the Middle East and together with the rest of the European union leaders shared the same views

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<sup>6</sup> [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/package/this-is-europe-debates\\_22603](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/package/this-is-europe-debates_22603)

<sup>7</sup> Press point by Roberta METSOLA, EP President and Nikolai DENKOV, Bulgarian Prime Minister - [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/press-point-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president-and-nikolai-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister\\_I249532](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/press-point-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president-and-nikolai-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister_I249532)

regarding the two-state solution and although it seems not an easy target today it is what the International Community should and must aim at.<sup>8</sup>

In his statement on this press conference before the debate in the EU Parliament Bulgarian Prime minister expressed gratitude for the invitation to present the positions of Bulgaria on various hot topics and to contribute to the debate “This is Europe” expressing again the full commitment of the cabinet Bulgaria to be fully integrated in the European structures. From this viewpoint Denkov also wanted to thank very much for Mezzola’s continuous very strong support for Schengen, for the Euro Zone and for the Bulgarian participation in the other structures of Europe. Denkov stressed that “we need this support and will continue to work hard because it is important for Bulgaria, because this is part of our full development as a modern country with high technology economy with well-developed institutions, rule of law and all the other fine adjustments, of the structure of a country that makes it successful”<sup>9</sup>

Denkov underlined that Bulgaria wants to contribute more to the development of Europe so its full integration doesn't mean that it only wants to take from Europe but on the opposite, *“it wants to be as useful as possible to support the development of Europe as a union and family of countries that work together for their own success”*<sup>10</sup>

In response to the journalists' questions, the Bulgarian Prime Minister admitted that for him today there is no „plan B“ if Bulgaria again receive negative decision on the accession in Schengen area issue. Denkov stated that today Bulgaria works very hard to get this accession decided in December (this year) and there have been many efforts by all the members of the cabinet to shows very clearly what are the arguments not only for the benefit of Bulgaria but also for the benefit of the entire European Union, if Bulgaria and Romania are in Schengen area. This is why the entire focus of the Bulgarian government has been put on this issue and Bulgarian Prime Minister promised that at the European Council he will do his best to explain very clearly what will be the negative impact if it doesn't happen.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the same issue, speaking to Euronews, Nikolay Denkov pointed out that Bulgaria has already fulfilled all the EU's criteria to join the border-free travel zone, but is still blocked from entering the Schengen Area by some member states, such as Austria. At the same time Austrian Chancellor Nehammer was very clear that he has no problems with Bulgaria and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

Romania but his problem is how the Schengen Area is working in general. So this is more like a discussion between Austria and the European Union and not between Austria and Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup>

In front of the same media Denkov also rejected any criticism from Hungary and Serbia after Bulgaria announced plans to tax the transfer of Russian gas through Bulgarian territory. Both importers of natural gas from Moscow, Budapest and Belgrade fear that the measure will lead to higher fuel prices. But the Bulgarian prime minister explained that the law is not directed at them. The exact words of Nikolay Denkov were that: *"It is defined in such a way that it should be paid by Gazprom and I had discussions with the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, with the Serbian Prime Minister (Aleksandar Vučić), and I told them, this is not against your citizens. We don't want to hurt them in any way. What we want is to take some of the profit of the Russian war machine because it's fuelled by Gazprom literally in some way."*<sup>13</sup>

### **Main highlights of the speech of the Bulgarian Prime Minister during the "This is Europe" debate**

According to the analyses of the European Parliamentary Research Service, time devoted by Nikolai Denkov to various issues in his speech within the debate in the European Parliament shows clearly what occupies the most attention.

In terms of words, he devoted most attention to the following four main topics. On the first place it was the issue about **the war in Ukraine**. Second place in Denkov's speech occupies **the European history**. On the third place stays the issue regarding **the geopolitical challenges** facing the EU and on the fourth place stays **the issue regarding the future EU enlargement**. The other topics that Bulgarian Prime Minister has touched upon are: the issue of overcoming the **political polarization, Bulgarian History, Migration, Schengen membership, Changing attitudes on the EU, Future of Europe, Bulgaria EU membership, EU values and Russian attacks on Bulgarian society**.<sup>14</sup>

Prime Minister Denkov's opening speech in the plenary hall of the European Parliament began with a brief account of the history of Strasbourg and ended with the historical significance of the date November 22. Denkov pointed out that it is very symbolic that *"On that date, 133 years ago, the hero of the French resistance movement against the Nazi occupation, the first Prime Minister of free postwar France, the first President of the Fifth*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/11/23/bulgaria-hostage-to-schengen-area-debate-says-prime-minister>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/11/23/bulgaria-hostage-to-schengen-area-debate-says-prime-minister>

<sup>14</sup> <https://epthinktank.eu/2023/11/24/this-is-europe-debate-in-the-european-parliament-speech-by-nikolai-denkov-prime-minister-of-bulgaria-22-november-2023/>

*Republic General Charles de Gaulle was born. On 23 November 1959, President de Gaulle delivered his famous speech “From the Atlantic to the Urals” where he expressed his confidence that one day all of Europe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains would be united. Sixty-four years ago, at the height of the Cold War, when the Iron Curtain divided Europe “from Szczecin on the Baltic Sea to Trieste on the Adriatic Sea,” that statement sounded absurd. It sounds even more absurd today, in the midst of the hot war in Ukraine when hundreds of European men, women and children die every day.”*<sup>15</sup>

Saying that, Bulgarian Prime minister also added that *“One day, when today will be yesterday, and tomorrow will be today, when Putins and Lukashenkos will be just a shameful episode in the history of their countries, and our children will not be forced to flee alone away from the war, with a passport, tied round their necks and a phone number scribbled on their palms, then this dream will come true. It is our responsibility that a free, democratic and united Europe may live forever!”*<sup>16</sup>

By making **this historical retrospective**, Denkov directed the attention of the European Parliament to the current problems that the European Union is facing and that must be solved in the near future, emphasizing the place, role and importance of Bulgaria in solving all European challenges and in building the future of Europe.

As one of the biggest challenges facing Europe, Nikolay Denkov pointed **the war in Ukraine**. In his speech, he warned that one of the most dangerous trends that is being observed regarding this issue is that *“Today Europe is often showing some signs of fatigue of the war in Ukraine and voices are being raised against the support to the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian refugees. More and more Europeans are asking themselves why we should bear the burden and hardship of a war that is far away and between two countries that are not part of the European Union. Wouldn't it be better to make some concessions to Putin and let the war end?”*<sup>17</sup>

Here, however, the position of the Bulgarian Prime Minister was extremely clear, as through a historical analogy, he made a direct connection between Hitler's actions on the eve of World War II and Putin's actions today. Denkov reminded how attempts to placate Hitler with continuous concessions ended, recalling a *„thought of the American philosopher George Santayana quoted by Winston Churchill in reference to the Munich Agreement of 1938: “Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it.”* So according to Bulgarian Prime Minister

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.bg/special/en/Press-center/News/Prime-Minister-Acad-Nikolai-Denkov-addresses-European-Parliament-It-is-our-responsibility-that-a-free-democratic-and-united-Europe-may-live-forever>

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem; [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-address-by-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister\\_I249381](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-address-by-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister_I249381)

*”the same holds true today. Putin’s war against Ukraine is actually Putin’s war against Europe. When we help Ukraine, we help Europe. When we defend Ukraine, we defend Europe. Otherwise, Moldova could find itself in the situation of Ukraine tomorrow, the Baltic republics could experience it the day after tomorrow and Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and other European countries come next.”*<sup>18</sup>

Placing this main challenge in the context of the history of Europe, Nikolay Denkov drew attention to the fact that *“Today, for the first time in its centuries-long history Europe is united peacefully in an equal union of independent states, where the main values are solidarity, freedom, democracy, equality before the law, rule of law, respect for human dignity and for the fundamental rights of all citizens. Strasbourg, where you sit in session, is the seat of the European Parliament of united Europe, the guarantor and guardian of these values.”*<sup>19</sup>

From the point of view of the current **Geopolitical situation**, the Bulgarian Prime Minister also warned that the prospects for the expansion of the conflict in the Middle East, caused by the brutal terrorist attack of Hamas and the large-scale military response of Israel, are not to be underestimated and *“the EU cannot turn a blind eye to these geopolitical challenges”* in the Far East and instability in Central and West Africa. According to Denkov, in order to deal with them, Europe must be strong and to be strong, it must be united.<sup>20</sup>

That is why, in order to regain the confidence of the EU citizens, Denkov called on Europe's conservative and liberal political families to work together in the fight against hatred and polarization in politics. According to him *“we need to eliminate the extremes and unite around the best conservative and liberal values for the sake of Europe’s future.”*<sup>21</sup>

Calling for Europe to play a more active role in international relations, as an influential and strong mediator and guarantor of peace, Denkov added that *“the EU should strengthen its strategic ties with NATO allies and its defense capabilities, including giving careful consideration to the idea of creating a single European Army”*.<sup>22</sup>

On issues related to **migration and EU enlargement** Bulgarian Prime Minister said that in the current international context, EU enlargement is becoming extremely important. Denkov recalled that Bulgaria had always supported the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU but he also underlined that enlargement nevertheless had to be based on real achievements by the candidates – and not on political calculations. He also welcomed the Commission’s recommendation to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and also expressed

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.



hope that Georgia would soon join them. For Bulgarian Prime Minister, the internal reform process to strengthen the EU's enlargement capacity and the accession negotiations must be parallel processes.<sup>23</sup>

On the issue of the growing wave of **immigrants in the EU**, Denkov called for a new approach from the side of the Union and insisted that the EU should do everything possible to facilitate the reception of refugees fleeing war, while adopting measures to stop and discourage purely economic migration.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these main highlights related to the geopolitical challenges facing the EU and the ways to deal with them, the Bulgarian Prime Minister emphasized the role and place of **Bulgaria in the EU** underlying its importance in dealing with all other common challenges for the Union.

Denkov highlighted **Bulgaria's rich history** as one of Europe's oldest nations and pointed out its contribution to the formation of the European cultural identity and diversity.

At the same time Denkov pointed out that *“In its recent history Bulgaria has been a target of continuous attempts to be put under domination, some of which were successful, by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.”*<sup>25</sup>

Continuing this line of thought, Bulgarian Prime Minister warned that *„these Great Russian aspirations continue even today and our country is a target of calculated hybrid attacks.”*<sup>26</sup> He also strongly criticized the ongoing attempts by Russia to divide Bulgarian society into Russophiles and Euro-Atlantic who oppose each other, through *“Putin's secret services and propaganda”* which are *“taking advantage of the country's economic and resource supply dependence on Russia and of the historical and cultural ties between our nations”*.<sup>27</sup>

Finally Denkov reached the most important issue from the point of view of two main foreign policy goals of his government's program - **the accession of Bulgaria to Schengen and to the Eurozone**.

Regarding this issues Bulgarian Prime Minister stressed that EU and NATO membership are the greatest guarantee to continue the path to democratic and European development for Bulgaria. *“We must therefore complete our European integration by our accession to Schengen and the Eurozone”* he added.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

The Prime Minister reiterated Bulgaria's fulfilment of all necessary Schengen requirements and that *"any further postponement is unacceptable and demotivating"* for the country and its people. The argument of Denkov regarding this matter was that with the entry of Bulgaria and Romania in Schengen, *"Europe's borders will be better protected, and Europe will be stronger"*.<sup>29</sup>

During the "This is Europe" debate Prime Minister Denkov used the opportunity to present his views on how the European Union should advance in all the specific areas he touched upon.

After Denkov's address in the European Parliament, in the ensuing debate, MEPs from the political families of parties supporting Denkov's government welcomed its pro-European orientation and a return to stability. In reaction to Denkov's address, a majority of MEPs called for the end, once and for all, of the discrimination of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens and demanded Council vote on the Schengen accession of both countries before the end of 2023.

MEPs also welcomed the pro-European government in Bulgaria and recently adopted reforms, but urged quick action on the use of EU funds. Some asked Bulgaria to close loopholes around the circumvention of sanctions on Russian gas and to do more to protect the environment, the rights of minorities, and to support EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.<sup>30</sup>

Leftist MEPs criticized Denkov for not mentioning social justice issues in his speech. Ultra-right MEPs voiced opposition to Bulgaria's Schengen accession, while other MEPs said that Bulgaria continued to not do enough regarding high-level corruption cases in the past.

Bulgarian MEPs participating in the debate tended to focus on some domestic political issues for Bulgaria and also criticized hard Denkov about various actions of his government.<sup>31</sup>

Replying to the 90-minute debate, Denkov pointed that the formation of the government he heads – which took office in June 2023 – had been the only possible pro-European option for Bulgaria.

Responding to allegations made in the debate that Bulgaria's temporary exemption from EU sanctions on oil of Russian oil was being exploited for sanctions-busting, Denkov said that never had Bulgaria violated these EU regulations nor broken the bloc's law.

On criticisms of Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia's path towards EU accession, Denkov reiterated that Bulgaria had been the first country to recognize that country as an

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/priorities/this-is-europe-debates/20231116STO11626/pm-denkov-bulgarian-and-romanian-schengen-accession-will-make-europe-stronger>;  
[https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-with-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister-one-round-of-political-group-speakers\\_I249382](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-with-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister-one-round-of-political-group-speakers_I249382)

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

independent state in the 1990s, but later, relations had deteriorated. Bulgaria had no claims and no demands towards North Macedonia beyond fulfilment of the provisions in the bilateral treaty on good-neighborly relations, Denkov said.<sup>32</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The participation of the Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov in the 12th plenary debate of the European Parliament titled "This is Europe" can be seen as an opportunity that the government successfully took advantage of to once again defend its main foreign policy priorities and the geopolitical strategy and vision of Bulgaria within the framework of the European Union and NATO.

Taking this opportunity Bulgarian Prime Minister emphasized Bulgaria's commitment to contribute significantly to the development of the European Union. Together with this Denkov highlighted once again Bulgaria's strong commitment to resist and oppose the ongoing attempts of Russia to exert influence through targeted hybrid attacks exploiting the economic ties and cultural connections to divide Bulgarian society between pro-Russia and Euro-Atlantic groups.

It was of a great importance for Denkov to once again stress that Bulgaria's complete EU and NATO membership is pivotal for the nation's democratic growth and thus Bulgaria's integration into Schengen and the Eurozone will solidify country's European ties further.

Regarding the global conflicts, Denkov referenced the Ukraine conflict, the Gaza situation, and other geopolitical tensions worldwide with the intention to urge a united and robust Europe to play a more active role globally, strengthen ties with NATO allies, and enhance defense capabilities, including contemplating the idea of a unified European military force.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://sofiaglobe.com/2023/11/22/in-european-parliament-bulgarian-pm-makes-case-for-schengen-euro-zone-accession/>