

Role of CSO-s in Facilitating EU Enlargement in SEE (a personal view, Nenad Sebek, Executive Director, CDRSEE)

What do the countries of Southeast Europe – or to be more specific, those known as the Western Balkans have in common? On purpose, I am leaving Romania and Bulgaria out of this because they are already on the fast track to the EU, while the rest of us are not. So... we could start with the legacy of the series of wars that accompanied the break up of the former Yugoslavia and the legacy of 40 years of Communism and its sudden and chaotic demise:

- Outdated or destroyed infrastructure;
- An economy in shambles, rising rather than decreasing foreign debt, trade deficits, a post-communist economy that - although it is heading in the direction of a market economy - is probably better defined in the same way that analysts described the Russian economy of the nineteen nineties – Bandit Capitalism;
- Privatisation, a key element in reaching the desired Western standards of living is suspect in every single one of these states. A class of robber barons or tycoons has been created mainly from the ranks of the former communist and the nineteen nineties nationalist nomenklatura. State companies are bought off for peanuts if the right “connections” are in place. How many takeovers and privatisation deals do you KNOW of that are clean?
- A crippling brain drain because most of the best and the brightest preferred to wash glasses in a London pub than to shoot at yesterday’s neighbours and friends. A situation where parents shed bittersweet tears if their child makes it “over there” and if their grandchildren grow up using a different language. And it goes from bad to worse – the expectations were for example that once the newly created states were freed from the shackles of the bad old system and country, the youth would return. Well, statistics show otherwise, there is NO reversal of the brain drain, on the contrary. Any poll among students shows that what they want is to get out of the Balkans. The sooner the better;
- Then there are those who haven’t left. But have become war junkies. Those who prefer the addiction and power of the gun to the tedious process of building one’s future with a plough or a pen. There are far too many young people infected with the belief that a shortcut to prosperity goes through a gun barrel;
- Nationalism: Optimists, and I am one of them, believe that the worst is over. That the disease has run its course, done its worst and is on the down curve. Pessimists, and I am one of them, point out to the fact that in Bosnia, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and here in Kosovo, we have an absence of war, not genuine peace. And that is scary;
- Organised crime. It IS comforting in a way to know that ethnocentricity and ethno exclusivity can be defeated. Just look at any of the criminal gangs. Most of them are multiethnic, multicultural, multinational... and doing just fine, thank you very much. But apart from this one comfort, all other aspects of organised crime are pulling the region away from the EU, not closer to it. The recent successes in fighting organised crime in Serbia after the assassination of Zoran Djindjic will only mean something if they are seen through to the end, and emulated in the rest of the region.

- Corruption: Together with organised crime, corruption is fighting neck to neck with nationalism as the biggest source of instability of the Western Balkans. Before you go to see a doctor... or a car mechanic... do you just look up the yellow pages or do you seek a "connection"? I do. Do you do the same before applying for a planning permission for a house or a takeover bid for a to-be-privatised factory? I don't... I am not building a house or buying a factory... but if I were, I probably would. Seek a connection.
- Educational system – impoverished and in a constant state of reform. Not reformed yet... just in the process of being reformed.
- Poverty. I don't need to explain this, we all know it only too well.

The list could go on, but I guess this is enough to paint a picture we – we know only too well.

What else do we share? Well, if that was a list of the negatives, of the things that keep us out of the prestigious EU club, here is one positive we share. The key proclaimed strategic goal of every single government is to join the European Union. Becoming a yellow star on the blue flag is seen as the passport to success, the passport that needs no visas, the ticket to the land of milk and honey, the end of all our troubles. So far so good. But how do we get there? Do we buy one collective ticket? Do we go it alone? One thing is certain, there are no shortcuts, there will be NO free rides, no tickets unpaid. To be fair to the region, the EU has not been all that fair and forthcoming. The Copenhagen criteria are clear and vague just enough at the same time. The Stabilisation and Association Process is a good one, but it is far less than what the region needs in order to make it. Frankly, however good it might have been a few years ago, it looks a bit stale in 2003. The Thessaloniki/Porto Carras summit has re-affirmed the desire to see the Western Balkans incorporated, but are we any closer to hearing a date? A precise set of preconditions? A significant increase in funds to help the region make the necessary reforms and structural economic changes? No, and no and no yet again.

To be fair to the EU now, can one really blame this exclusive club for not wanting us on their premises? I am not sure I can. OK, we have been much better since the turn of the century, but have we been THAT much better that it makes a difference? Have we really all agreed that we will behave better in the future and put on a tie when we enter the club? What have WE done to persuade the Board members in this club that our quarrels are a thing of the past and will not be repeated? Has anyone here apologised to the neighbour? How many GENUINE efforts have our governments made to demonstrate that they are ready to make peace with the neighbour and work together and build the road to the EU. Serbia and Montenegro and Croatia finally got rid of visas after YEARS of VERY heavy pressure by the EU. Serbia and Montenegro signed the deal keeping their state together after being dragged kicking and screaming to the negotiating table... and Mr Solana had to hold the hands that held the pens in order to get the signatures... Wasn't that the way the Ohrid Agreement also came about? And how about implementing all these agreements? Things going nice and smooth? Not the last time I checked. And here in Kosovo? These days, we are supposed to be greatly encouraged by the fact that direct talks will begin between Belgrade and Pristina. Well, in Bruxelles, maybe this is a reason for optimism. It will be a reason for optimism for me when I see the two sides agreeing upon anything... even the breakfast menu.

So, does all this add up to trades and practices which deserve to be rewarded with EU membership? Would the EU really be better off with us, or is it better off without

us? Bluntly... the way things stand right now, I would say the latter. And, by the way, just in case you are wondering what has all this got to do with the topic I am supposed to be speaking about... we're getting there.

I was often amazed at the naivety of the International Community and its negotiators and their trust in Balkan ceasefires, Balkan agreements or - what they like to call "The restoration of Democracy", although I do not know of any examples of genuine democracies in the past here... The belief that a multi-party election under reasonably free and fair circumstances equals democracy. Democracy is a state of mind, not to be confused with having two or more parties fighting for office. And the battle for real democracy first has to be won in the minds, and then implemented in real life. Similarly, all of the elements I began with, all the reasons why Europe should keep us out for the time being - crime, corruption, nationalism... they first have to be dealt with in our minds, if we are to resolve them in our lives. And this, this is where the civil sector kicks in... or should kick in. Obviously, many of these problems can be resolved only through serious efforts by the state apparatus - NGOs cannot fight organised crime, this is a job for the security services. But all of these fields are battlegrounds for us as well.

Throughout the nineteen nineties, NGOs achieved two things in the Western Balkans. They preserved the links between the newly formed states and warring factions and they played the role of the opposition much better than the opposition parties played it. And, there was reconstruction, food and medical assistance and so on. But these are not the nineteen nineties any more... what are the main tasks nowadays? Well, I would suggest - helping to build the road to Bruxelles and EU accession. By their very nature - funding, contacts, board membership ... NGOs are as closely linked to the West as they are to the territory they operate in. They're a natural bridge. They are a good highway for a flow of information, expertise and above all values that are being upheld in this club that we all aspire to.

So far so good, but how? Well, let's start with ourselves, the NGO sector needs to clean up its act and get rid of its own dark legacy... If we want to be honest with ourselves, we have to admit its largely our own fault that the enthusiasm for the civil sector has dampened. NGOs are latecomers to the region, the first ones arriving only as Communism started to crumble in the late nineteen eighties. Initially, they were tolerated by the governments but welcomed with open arms by the liberal minded reformists for whom they were a breath of fresh air, the smell of freedom, the clinking of moneys to come and the prosperity that was just around the corner - to be gained as soon as the shackles of communism fell off. NGOs offered a new concept, a new way of organising the society. Instead of everything being dictated from above, there suddenly arose the possibility of taking initiatives, organising and acting without permission or at the very least oversight by the state. This was a historic event, and the NGOs which started to blossom all over the region DID play a historic role in developing a different attitude, a different perception of the role of the individual in the society. Showing people that they DO matter and that they CAN make a difference.

But unfortunately, the nineties brought a lot of disillusionment with the Civil Society and NGOs. There was a distinct feel of self-greatness, self-adoration and a lack of real understanding of the environment they were operating in and the people they were "trying to help". A neo-colonialist attitude almost. And, for quite a few people in these NGO's, what they were doing was more about well paid, cushy jobs than about REALLY facilitating change. There is no need to point out that all this was only too obvious to the "natives" especially since those of them who were linked to these NGOs were working for just a fraction of the salary the foreigners were getting. The

same – by the way, even though it's not a part of the topic I am addressing – goes for a number of other international organizations like various UN agencies and so on.

So, cleaning up is a *conditio sine qua non* if the civil society is to continue to be relevant and effective. Just as important is a new vision, the times they are a changing and we cannot operate the way we did ten years ago. Facilitating meetings between intellectuals of different ethnic groups for the sake of having that meeting was quite an achievement in 1993, it is irrelevant in 2003. Those meetings are important today only if they have a real purpose, a focus. Food aid, refugee and reconstruction programmes are all going to die out in the years to come. What and how we replace this with, and what are the best ways for the civil society to become an important part in integrating the Balkans into Europe – well, that I guess is what we're here to discuss in the next two days and I wish us all well. Here are some suggestions:

The civil society could have an important role to play in each of the areas I mentioned at the beginning – outdated infrastructure, economy in shambles, privatization, brain drain, nationalism, organized crime, corruption, education, poverty... but not in a vacuum. Always with an eye toward the larger picture, the vision of SEE / Western Balkans as part of the EU. Civil society also has an important role as the watchdog to make sure that government (and other) officials and privatization processes are not corrupt, that the proper laws are in place to persecute organized crime figures, and that the best education system is in place to stem the brain drain and to reverse nationalistic trends and provide all individuals (not just youth) with the necessary training to earn a decent living for themselves.... Civil society has an important role to play in training government and other officials in areas related to all of the above. Civil society has an important role to play in educating the general population as well as government officials on all of the above. Civil society has an important role to play in advertising what has been done and what needs to be done to address all of the concerns mentioned earlier. In sum, the Civil society has an important role to play in facilitating a fundamental mind shift in what people expect of themselves, their societies, and of their governments. It's a daunting task and I doubt that any one of us has all the right answers. Maybe together, here in Pristina, we can start the search for them.