

## DEMOCRACY & RECONCILIATION

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Similar to answering the question of the half-full or half-empty glass, the judgement on the status of the “health” of democracy and reconciliation in SEE depends on the perspectives of the viewer. Missing the target for democracy and reconciliation represents the biggest possible loss for the peoples of the region, donors, politicians and investors alike: a **loss of time**, the single most precious commodity for humans. The European Union must build on the already accumulated capital, by setting concrete priorities for NGOs and civil society, so as not to throw away all that has been achieved in the past 15 years. **The alternative is a prolonged period of political instability, poverty and economic stagnation, which is much worse as a prospect for the future than a real past of violent conflict.**

### OVERVIEW

Providing an overview of the process for democracy and reconciliation in Southeast Europe is similar to answering the questions of a half empty or half full glass. If the question is there in the first place, the answer can only depend on the perspective; in other words, on the optimism or pessimism of the viewer. **The status or “health” of Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe actually depends on what we compare it with.**

Compared to the monolith one-party states of the Communist era, or the multi-party autocracy of Milosevic or Tudjman, it could be said that democracy is flourishing in Southeast Europe. Compared to the bloodshed of the 1990s, one could even say that reconciliation is in full swing. But such a diagnosis would not be a sign of optimism, but rather of foolishness. We are nowhere near having any reasons for complacency, not even for being satisfied.

We have three countries in the region (Cyprus, Greece and Slovenia) within the European Union. We have two in the waiting room (Bulgaria and Romania). And we have one knocking on the waiting room door (Croatia). The rest are out in the courtyard, some of them unhappy, some acting miserable and feeling left out. It is also important to keep in mind that there may be two more countries a year from now, if Kosovo and Montenegro go their separate ways, away from Serbia.

Are they all countries with a stable, secure democratic system, a feasible market economy and reconciled with each other? The answer is – however regrettably - obviously “no”.

### WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

In all honesty, it is more than fair to continue asking: “Have we not already poured billions of Euro into the region, building bridges, power plants and schools? Have we not given technical and expert aid on how to transform, restructure and democratise? Have we not sent peacekeepers to Bosnia and Kosovo to safeguard borders, protect minority rights and help the community rebuild itself? Have we not created tens of thousands of jobs, propped up shaky governments and shown them the way towards the EU? What more do you ask of us? What more can we do?”

For a businessman, the question of continuing an entrepreneurial undertaking is simple enough: is this investment worth holding on to, or should we cut our losses and leave? Of course, EU political institutions have their own decision and policy making mechanisms for determining the future of the financial and political investments they have made in Southeast Europe. But given the growing role of the private sector as a development partner, and even more in re-invigorating economic mobility and growth, we have an interest as much as an obligation to share our opinion.

**Democracy and Reconciliation do not fall within the “hard core” of business. They are a process, and if we wish to envision a European future for the whole region, then democracy and reconciliation are a destiny that needs to be fulfilled, no matter how long it takes.**

### **TIME AND TIMING**

In late January, Albanians in Kosovo refused permission to Serbian President Boris Tadic who wanted to attend the funeral of the late Kosovar President, Ibrahim Rugova. Even if we accept that in this particular occasion the timing was not ripe, it should not be forgotten that whatever happens with the status talks on Kosovo, whether Kosovo becomes independent tomorrow, or whether it remains a part of Serbia forever, one thing will not change: **Albanians and Serbs were, are and will remain neighbours.**

**Therefore, reconcile they must, the only question remaining being that of when.** It is in the best interest of the EU, and of all partners involved in the regional development process, to do all it can to speed up this process: each year the process takes is a year lost – for the peoples of the region, for economic welfare, for regional stability, for European prospects of the region. **This loss is surely measurable to Euros, but primarily it is a question of the most precious commodity a human being can have – time.** Far too much time has already been wasted.

### **EMPHASIS ON CIVIL SOCIETY**

Infrastructure rehabilitation and reconstruction are perhaps the most visible signs of regional development – the proof of our engagement and commitment for bringing the region out of a post-war situation. **Infrastructure is the means of this process; the end is the people.** As we clearly saw during the March 17<sup>th</sup> 2004 riots in Kosovo, everything that has taken months to rebuild, can disappear overnight. If we do not strengthen the delicate beginnings of democracy and reconciliation in Southeast Europe, all the moneys poured into infrastructure are at risk.

### **THE RISK**

The risk is not a fully blown war – even if conflict in that sense is over, today’s risks lie with a **prolonged period of political instability, poverty and economic stagnation.** This is an **equally bad prospect, or even worse: it refers to the future and not the past.** Countries in such a state are prolific ground for organised crime, drugs and human trafficking, terrorism, and this picture is far away from the picture of countries at the threshold of Europe.

## **THE COST OF NOT ACTING**

In the dark years of Milosevic's rule in Serbia, it was the civil society, the NGOs that played a crucial part of the battle against tyranny. They carried the huge burden which in countries with a developed democracy is shouldered by opposition parties. It was similar in Croatia during the Tadjman years, it was similar in the Ukraine ahead of the "Orange Revolution". This part of the society in budding democracies, the civic sector, is at risk now, and this is where all of us can do more to help. It would not be an understatement that **we currently ran the risk of losing so much that has been achieved field in the past 15 years** since the break-up of Communism.

## **TAKING ACTION**

It is unfortunate that we are in the process of losing a strategic ally in this field – the United States. Through USAID and a plethora of other organisations, huge sums of money have been invested and an enormous effort to build up the civil society, to strengthen the weak and fragile roots of democracy in Southeast Europe. It is not a question of "mission accomplished", but an **issue of priorities** and as we all know, the priorities for the American administration at the moment lie elsewhere, not in Southeast Europe. There is a downsizing of missions, some offices are closing down and funds are becoming extremely scarce. And, things will not change in the foreseeable future.

## **SUPPORTING NGOs**

Rather than moan and groan about this unfortunate development, the **European Union should be grateful for the assistance so far provided and the work already done, and jump in and fill the rising gap**. The CARDS programme which has done a lot in the past for fostering civil society and has practically disappeared. The new Instruments for Accession have very few funds for the civil society and the procedures for applying can be even more complex than the much-discussed public-private partnership projects for financing infrastructure projects. NGOs are being asked more and more to perform as if they can live on air and water alone, and grants for organisational support are almost non-existent, at a time when their initiatives and vigor are most needed.