

Foreword

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When Gottfried Wagner invited me to join a 'Balkan Reflection Group' examining the role of arts and culture in the conflicts of former Yugoslavia and also exploring their potential contribution to regional and European integration – I immediately agreed.

Now, given that this may at first seem a rather academic pursuit, let me explain why I was so eager to accept the invitation.

Firstly, I am more convinced than ever that any effort to build a new Europe will fail unless serious consideration is given to the profound importance of the cultural dimension. We can help to overcome the present malaise in the European Union, airily characterised as 'enlargement fatigue', by tapping into the continent's vast wealth of artistic creativity – past and present. If this is true for the European Union, how much more urgently so must it be for those countries in the Balkans that are emerging from war, destruction and division.

Secondly, I've committed a good deal of my professional life to understanding the Balkans, and this experience tells me that, in striving for inclusiveness, we must add culture to our necessary focus on political and economic rehabilitation and reform if we are to achieve the desired results.

Hence, for this very pragmatic reason, I feel that Europe has so far failed by not seeing the clear necessity for a holistic approach. The Stability Pact for South East Europe, for example, though meant to facilitate and strengthen regional cooperation, has fallen short by its de facto exclusion of cultural issues. Clearly, this was not a good policy decision, given the destructive role that some writers, journalists and artists played, first in spreading ethnic hatred and then in assuming political positions in the Yugoslav conflict.

Likewise, the comprehensive report by the International Commission on the Balkans also fails to address the pertinence of culture. I therefore enthusiastically welcomed the ECF initiative to add a chapter on arts and culture to this excellent and timely study and to invite artists and arts managers from the region to be its authors. This I consider 'ownership' at its best.

For me, as the only diplomat among a fascinating gathering of artists, this was simultaneously an intellectual feast and an emotional experience. The overall intensity of the exchanges, the grief, sorrow and consternation that was expressed concerning the past, the unabated energy coupled with a healthy dose of scepticism about a possible common future in the new Union – this was all topped by the stunning realisation of how much common ground there was between the participants.

The 'political space' that Yugoslavia represented is a thing of the past. Yet the way this reflection group interacted made it obvious to me that something I would call a 'cultural space' – firmly anchored in the region yet truly 'European' – does indeed exist in the Balkans...and is undeniable. It is up to the European Union to swiftly overcome its self-inflicted inertia and take the Balkans on board for our long journey towards a truly whole and united Europe.

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