



Danube: Europe is meeting

Vienna - Belgrade 12-21 September 2003

Statement for a Europe without borders

We European citizens, representatives of civic associations, nongovernmental organisations, social movements and local authorities, travelled and met together in *Danube: Europe is meeting. From Vienna to Belgrade for a Europe without borders*, a long journey and a series of conferences along the Danube. We are pleased to welcome the forthcoming inclusion of ten new members into the European Union. The inclusion of former "Eastern Bloc" countries shows that the Iron Curtain has partly been pulled down.

Nevertheless, through this appeal, written at the conclusion of the project "*Danube: Europe is meeting*", we call for the concrete fulfilment of the promises made at the European Summit of Thessaloniki. We emphasise that European unification will not be complete until the countries in the South East Europe will also be part of the European Union. The modalities and the timing of this accession are fundamental aspects for the construction of the new Europe, of which the forthcoming Constitution will be a decisive step.

By travelling together down Danube River, all the project participants - from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Hungary, Italy and many other countries - intended to demonstrate how geography, history, cultures and traditions already constitute a common heritage for the whole Europe. Yet, specific territorial diversities make Europe an amazing union of minorities. Now, the men and women working in national and international institutions must carry out this unity on a political level, advancing the unification of the continent through the accession of South-East European countries. This unification cannot be considered a mere technical problem of setting parameters, creating models, and standardising institutions. First, there must be political choices.

Thirteen years ago, the European institutions were late; they did not prevent wars from breaking out in the former Yugoslavia. Today, they need greater wisdom. Some territorial issues have still not been resolved. A clear political commitment is necessary to change nationalistic policies and the idea of micro-states. The South-East European countries must engage in internal reforms and honestly reflect on their recent past. Only Europe can have such a strong perspective. However, infinite time is not available. If there are not specific incentives and precise deadlines, South-East European citizens may suffer more disillusionment and weaken their will to join the EU.

As citizens and members of European civil society, we appeal to European institutions, to national governments, to international organisations and to civil society in the European Union and South East Europe to consider a few concrete suggestions for advancing European unification. Fundamentally, this unification should be "from below", through the wide participation of individual citizens and local communities, rather than only depend on national governments.

1. For a Europe without barriers

Europe bases itself on freedom and rights. But, at the present time, the right of free movement is denied to South-East European citizens by a restrictive and often humiliating visa system, as well as by security policies that preserve restrictions and barriers. We also point out that, among themselves, South-East Europe countries maintain barriers that seriously restrict opportunities for citizens to meet and communicate freely.

In order to overcome nationalism and illegal trafficking and to guarantee regional stability, we believe that developing open cultural exchange policies is a basic, fundamental step.

Hence, we ask for:

- a guarantee by the EU and the SEE countries of regional visa policies, in order to avoid the creation of new divisions caused by the fact that Balkan countries are at different stages of accession into EU institutions;
- a revision of the current visa system that limits travel to the EU by citizens from Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro;
- an experimentation with special free circulation areas between bordering countries within and without the EU, similar to those between some Schengen and non-Schengen countries;

- the final abolition of all visas among South-East European countries, such as between Croatia and Serbia;
- and a rejection of anti-human-rights policies, such as forcing asylum seekers into temporary detention camps in bordering countries outside the EU.

2. For a Europe that cares for the environment and public goods

Europe is a big continent with a single, intertwined environment. The Rhine and Danube rivers, as its back-bone, provide a magnificent example of how nature cannot be contained by political borders. Unfortunately, these rivers also suffer from critical environmental problems: pollution, water shortage, blocking of watercourses, and privatisation of springs.

In 2003, designated by the United Nations as International Year of Water, after travelling down the Danube and appreciating the river as a metaphor for our vision of Europe, we ask for:

- joint management of large environmental resources, like the Danube;
- guarantee of widespread, local-community participation in the management of these resources, creating, in the case of the Danube basin, true "democracies of large rivers";
- proclamation of water as a fundamental human right of citizens and communities;
- and declaration, in the forthcoming European Constitution, that water and its management are indivisible public goods that cannot be privatised.

3. For a Europe of local development

Europe's main characteristic is that of a social model based on inclusion and on guaranteeing fundamental human rights to all. We believe that the integration of South East Europe into the EU should be founded on the will to extend a civil system and a socio-economic identity. This identity should take into account the specific features of a territory: its environment, culture, history, and traditions. Unfortunately, now, the opposite is happening. International policy "recipes" are leading to local economic deterioration, increasing dependence on global economic forces, demolition of social and welfare structures; and reckless deregulation of existing socio-economic safeguards.

It is necessary to rethink the approach of the international community, but also to help local and national communities build sustainable development models structured on adding maximum value to local human and environmental resources.

Hence, we ask for:

- creation of a European fund to support local processing of SEE resources, in order to sustain high-quality, local production, to protect and enhance historical and cultural goods, and, finally, to support states, regions and municipalities in expanding the use of local products among schools, hospitals and public canteens;
- organisation of local databanks on water, forest and natural resources; a registry office of cultural and environmental monuments; and a list of indigenous "quality productions", etc.;
- EU structural support to different types of local economic alliances, such as alliances among municipalities for regional development strategies and creation of tourist "quality" circuits (cultural, historical, environmental, wine and food, etc.);
- agreements on certifications which guarantee the protection of workers' rights, of the environment and of local cultures;
- requirement to carry out locally first (and second) processing in certain sectors, i.e. wood; and limits towards the shopping-malls proliferation;
- and developing social enterprises in South-East European countries, by national legislation and through specific, direct support of social enterprises.

4. For a Europe of cities and citizens

Europe is not only made up of national governments; but, more fundamentally, cities and local communities. These local governments are where the common good actually develops. Cities and local communities are already anticipating the forthcoming complete European unification, through exchanges, twinning of cities, and networks of partnership. This still happens, even now when provincial and federal governments are not aware of these local dynamics and lag behind as they did during the difficult years of the recent wars.

In the South-East European countries, after decades of centralisation, a process of decentralisation and local civic empowerment is now developing. This process - a fundamental, necessary step that allows citizens and communities to participate in and be directly responsible for public policies - is often hindered by the central governments, especially if decentralisation raises taxation and budget issues. On the other hand, both local and central governments find it difficult to acknowledge and support actions from civil society. Thus, civic associations almost exclusively depend on international donors and cannot work constructively with their own governments.

As citizens and members of local institutions of the EU and SEE, we therefore ask:

- the European Union and other international institutions to support exchanges and contacts between cities in the EU and SEE, allowing them to directly access funds that are now available only for cities in the EU;
- the EU institutions to support the networks of cities and local communities (as in the programmes of the Local Democracy Agencies, of Eurocities, etc.), and also through a continuous consultation on their areas of expertise;
- the EU and other international institutions to support for decentralisation and development of the South-East European local governments;
- the South-East European governments (both local and federal) to recognise civil society associations as fundamental referents, providing spaces and help for civic activities, and involving civic associations in public-policy development and implementation.

5. For a united Europe

Europe is a single continent. It should not have fractures or peripheral areas. That's why we like to call the process which will bring entire Europe into common institutions "unification" instead of "integration". This underlines that two or more worlds of equal importance are joining: the process is mutual rather than from only one side.

Likewise, this process cannot rely on decisions from above. This process must necessarily start from below, with the involvement and the participation of citizens, NGOs, civil society and local authorities. For the unification process to have a "lively and equitable dynamic" rather than merely bureaucratic procedures there must be expanded opportunities for participation by ordinary citizens. Otherwise, there's a double risk. On one hand, the EU citizens may hinder the unification-integration process and may not give their support to further accessions. On the other hand, the countries presently not in the EU will experience the unification process as yet another sacrifice for an abstract benefit they don't expect to enjoy in the near future.

For a Europe built truly from below, we therefore ask:

- the EU to support economically the South-East European countries, to increase the resources now available and to reallocate them from reconstruction to structural funds (as, for example, Turkey which is a pre-accession country);
- the EU to permanently include the South-East European countries, in its sector policies such as university (European inter-university cooperation), research, culture, and youth;

- to clearly and explicitly guarantee that, if they respect all the conditions set by the EU, the various countries in South East Europe will certainly enter the EU;
- to invite a delegation of observers from the SEE countries to the next inter-governmental conference for the elaboration of the European Constitution, at least as guests within a national delegation, so they can participate in elaborating, in what we hope, will soon also be their constitution.

A Europe without borders, which respects the environment, which promotes local development based on cities and citizens, and that seeks unity with its South-Eastern part: this is the Europe we would like to have and the Europe we ask for.

And for this Europe we step forward - common citizens and civic associations: towards a Europe which can put peace and human rights at the centre of its Constitution and at the centre of its daily policy; and towards a Europe of peace.

Rovereto - Vienna - Bratislava - Budapest - Vukovar - Novi Sad - Belgrade

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