

Building friendship behind divisions. Cultural, ethnic, and religious diversities, added values of future Balkan

A geographic area in which I see still a great deal of conflict is the Balkans. With such a diverse mix of cultures and peoples, we can see it is certainly a matrix of different values and beliefs; all of which need recognition and mutual respect. We must also mention that many of these communities have lived in harmony in the past but with the ever growing complexity of the political and geographic landscape, it is easy to see how new issues between populations have arisen. The region experienced horrific events throughout the 1990s that had significant effects on the population as well as how individuals remember their neighbors. If we step outside our Balkan point of view just for a moment and look at the region and the external issues that are facing it, we perhaps can gain a new perspective for building friendships despite historical divisions.

With the enormity of serious issues facing the Balkan nations today, from climate change to economic downturns to the scarcity of resources such as water and oil, it would be an understatement to say that building friendships and strengthening relationships between these countries was paramount. The geographic interconnectedness of these nations would underscore how essential regional cooperation is. Moreover, with all of this external pressure from nature as well as unpredictable markets, it would only make sense for nations to bind together to overcome these seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Individual national solutions to these problems are valuable but comprehensive action by a cohesive group of countries in this region is invaluable.

There are some long existing divisions between the nations of this region based on cultural, ethnic or perhaps religious differences. These issues still seem to plague certain regions today. These biases or prejudices which most certainly are based on past events have the tendency to prevent nations for moving forward and acting together on larger more threatening issues. This speech does not seek to minimize the importance or gravity of past events. In fact one of the primary ways to build political relationships as well as friendly relations between the peoples of countries is in fact to address these past wrongs so as to allow the individuals of all nations involved to move forward.

Many ask the question why should Europe “care” about the Balkans or why should the Balkan countries themselves take an interest? I would argue that as a region that borders “traditional” Europe, the Balkans, or South East Europe are a very important part of Europe. With a population of roughly 55 million, it can be said to represent 1/9 or more than 10% of the EU population. While it is true that not all Balkan states are EU members, many have special trade agreements or on track for membership. Europe could choose to ignore the issues on its border but it seems that there is potential for some of the problems that so plagued in the 1990s to return. Furthermore, we can point to significant turning points for the region such as the 1999 Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe or the opening of

EU talks with certain Balkan countries have had a vital role in the region's development.

As we can see, the Balkans is a region that Europe should embrace and cooperate with. Because both sides have a great deal to offer one another, it is essential that all parties involved work together in order to deal with and move beyond past differences in order to celebrate their collective diversity as well as address larger problems.