

**Conference on Intercultural Dialogue for the Greater Europe - The European Union and the Balkans, 23-24 June 2008, Zagreb, Croatia**

**Speech by the First Vice-President of the European Parliament,  
Ms Rodi Kratsa, MEP**

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

1540 words

Prime Minister,  
Commissioner,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address this Jean Monnet conference today on the theme of intercultural dialogue for the Greater Europe, and in particular the European Union and the Balkans. In my capacity as Parliament's Vice-President responsible for the Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation, I am aware of the important contribution of the Jean Monnet Programme to the dialogue between the EU and our partners. In today's globalized European landscape, intercultural dialogue *in* the Balkans and *with* the Balkans is of great importance for the Greater Europe as long as it is carried out on all levels and with respect and attention to the particularities of the region.

When we discuss the coexistence and dialogue between different cultures, there is a noteworthy difference between Western Europe and the Balkans: a significant number of North-western European societies were until recently fairly homogeneous. In their case, intercultural dialogue

primarily serves as a response to constant demographic changes, brought about by successive immigration waves, the free movement of persons in the EU and globalization. However, the amalgamation of ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures is not a recent trait of the Balkans, but rather the essence of their very own unique identity. Different cultural identities in the region are not a result of the emergence of Balkan states but rather their founding elements. Given the inherent multicultural composition of their population, a direct grassroots dialogue *within* the Balkan states is therefore vital.

However, taking into account the recent history of the region, it is evident that stability and prosperity in South-eastern Europe only greatly relies on a *transfrontier* intercultural dialogue with the full support of local politicians, stakeholders and the civil society. It would obviously be unrealistic to pretend that ten years of war have not severely damaged the relations between the different nations and communities. Nevertheless, the Balkan states rest upon a *vast* depository of cultural coexistence; intercultural dialogue *between* the states in the region should therefore draw inspiration from their *own* history of respect, tolerance and understanding.

On another level, only a constant sincere dialogue between the EU and its Balkan neighbours can guarantee a mutually beneficial and smooth accession process. As Edgar Morin noted already in 1989, "*tous les espoirs de confédération balkanique sont actuellement morts, mais c'est au sein d'une Europe élargie que pourront se constituer des relations particulières interbalkaniques*". Aujourd'hui, la perspective européenne garantit et ouvre une nouvelle voie promettant aux Balkans de trouver leur juste place dans une Europe unie et dans le monde compétitif

moderne. Une raison pour laquelle cette perspective leur est indispensable est que le paradigme européen permettra une *cohabitation harmonieuse* et *honnête* de cette pléthore de cultures et nations différentes. Le système yougoslave a essayé de forcer une telle coexistence, cependant d'une manière totalitaire ayant comme résultat une cohabitation artificielle et fondée sur la peur du pouvoir, et non pas sur la liberté. Aujourd'hui, l'Union européenne peut enfin transformer cet idéal en réalité: les garanties juridiques de l'Etat de droit européen assurent le plein respect des droits des individus indépendamment de leurs identités linguistique, ethnique ou religieuse. En outre, la double légitimité démocratique des institutions européennes, à savoir des états et des peuples européens, leurs politiques de l'emploi, de la cohésion régionale, du développement et de l'éducation, ainsi que la promotion constante des droits des femmes, forment ensemble un cadre politique qui peut accueillir un dialogue structuré, productif et lié aux problèmes de l'actualité.

Mais l'accomplissement le plus précieux de l'intégration européenne est la création d'un réel espace d'épanouissement et d'équité sans frontières pour tous les états et tous les peuples européens. Il incombe tant aux personnes politiques qu'à la société civile des Balkans de faire suivre le message selon lequel, en vue des ambitions européennes de tous les pays de la région, le seul ennemi à combattre est le *nationalisme*. Le succès de l'Europe ne repose pas sur la victoire d'un peuple sur l'autre mais sur la collaboration constante entre ses états et leurs peuples afin de donner des solutions pratiques aux problèmes urgents de nos jours, tels le réchauffement climatique, le chômage ou la crise alimentaire.

C'est dans ce cadre que nous apercevons l'importance du processus de stabilisation et d'association avec les Balkans occidentaux initié en 1999.

Le lancement de cette nouvelle approche européenne renforcée marque pour ces pays la transition d'un état de reconstruction d'après-guerre à leur préparation pour une adhésion à l'Union. Cette nouvelle politique vise au développement des relations économiques et commerciales de l'UE avec la région et à *l'intérieur de celle-ci*, à l'aide à la démocratisation, à la société civile, à l'éducation et au développement institutionnel, à la coopération dans le domaine de la justice et des affaires intérieures, et au développement du dialogue politique. A ce propos, nous saluons tous la signature, le 16 juin à Luxembourg, de l'Accord de stabilisation et d'association entre la Bosnie-Herzégovine et l'Union européenne, qui a marqué l'intégration complète de tous les pays de la région dans ce processus. De même, nous tenons à féliciter la Croatie de l'ouverture des négociations sur deux nouveaux chapitres le 17 juin, preuve claire de ses efforts intensifs. Nonobstant les implications récentes à la ratification du Traité de Lisbonne, la Croatie doit continuer ce parcours réussi, en vue du rapport de la Commission à l'automne.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the EU has been constantly supporting these efforts, both financially and politically. In this regard, I would like to draw your attention to the new Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). The IPA offers streamlined assistance to countries aspiring to join the European Union on the basis of the lessons learnt from previous external assistance and pre-accession instruments, such as Phare, Sapard and Cards. As a Member of Parliament's Committee on Budget Control, I can assure you that we will soon carefully monitor the first year of implementation of this mechanism, and in fact scrutinize whether it is on target.

At the same time, the EU and the European Parliament in particular, are keeping a close look at the political reforms under way in the Western Balkans through the annual progress reports. Attention should be paid to activities aiming at enhancing institutional capacity and consolidating the rule of law in the region, especially through the exchange of best practices. An example is the recent Joint Parliamentary Meeting which took place last May in Brussels and brought together MEPs and parliamentarians from EU Member States and the countries of the Western Balkans to share experiences on EU integration and debate economic, security, and justice issues. The President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering noted at the opening of the event that *"knowledge comes through contacts, contacts build trust, and trust is indispensable for common action. Parliamentary work on EU integration, which affects millions of citizens, is crucial to its legitimacy"*.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, Mrs Asma Jahangir, pointed out in last week's plenary session that *"intercultural dialogue must not be seen as an elite concern; it should include dialogue at grassroots level rather than being conducted purely by leaders"*. Intercultural dialogue in the Balkans is the responsibility of the leaderships, secular and religious, organised civil society and the local economic stakeholders. Each in their own field of competences and without prejudice to their distinct roles, they should all highlight not what separates the citizens of the Balkans but what draws them together: a common past in a land of a rich heritage. Only *they* can choose to see this common past not as the cause of past problems, but of future solutions. Advancing intercommunity reconciliation will not only pave the way for the successful accession of the Balkans to the EU, but also forge the cohesion of the region and provide the Balkan states with

the added value of belonging to a vast, prosperous and investment-friendly common market.

During this year which has been devoted to intercultural dialogue, a wide range of activities throughout Europe have successfully proven that the motto "*United in diversity*" of the defunct European Constitution may not have become the law of the Union but nevertheless remains its spirit and vision for the future. Intercultural dialogue is about exploring this diversity while at the same time safeguarding unity; it is not about eradicating differences, but rather about clarifying positions and exploring common ground. If I'm allowed to give an example from parliamentary life, intercultural dialogue is not so much about forming a majority, but rather about providing an explanation of vote. Dialogue in the Balkans under the above conditions will not only pave the way for their successful accession to the EU, but also forge the cohesion and assure the stability of the region of Greater Europe. Coming from Greece, with its specific position and historical links to the other countries in the region, I am fully aware of the importance an honest intercultural dialogue has in developing good neighbouring relations, with a view to welcoming our Balkan neighbours in the European Union. Fifty years of experience of European unification teach us that only if we strike a balance between diversity and unity, mutual respect and efficiency, enlargement and political deepening, can Europe become a zone of prosperity and peace.

Thank you!