

Olli Rehn

EU Commissioner for Enlargement

Civil Society at the Heart of the EU's Enlargement Agenda

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Conference on Civil Society Development in Southeast Europe
Building Europe Together

Brussels, 17 April 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

I am very pleased to meet such an impressive spectrum of civil society representatives from all over Europe here in Brussels. Much has been said about bringing the European Union closer to its citizens. There is hardly any better way of doing it than a conference like the one today – to meet face to face and to have, I trust, a productive exchange of ideas.

As I have worked in and with civil society organisations all my youth and adult life, I take it as a special honour to be here with you today. In fact, it was citizen activity in development and human rights that inspired me to become active in democratic politics, too.

I recall being particularly involved in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. Freeing Nelson Mandela is still the single most impressive moment of my hitherto civic and political activity. Maybe I cannot and certainly will not try to claim all the glory for myself, but I take pride of having been part of a wider citizens' movement. The slogan "Free Nelson Mandela!" still resonates with special force for me.

The initiative to this conference was born out of the recognition that the civil society plays a key role in the EU accession process of Southeast Europe. The European future of the Western Balkans and Turkey lies primarily in the hands of their people and their democratically elected leaders. Moving closer to EU membership requires both political will and citizens' support. Civil society organisations can help achieving this.

Before dwelling into the role of civil society, let me to give you an update where we stand with the countries on the EU enlargement agenda.

Turkey has been negotiating accession since October 2005. In this process, the journey is as important as the destination. That is, the EU accession perspective should drive forward such reforms that help Turkey to transform itself into a more open and democratic society, with a strong commitment to the values shared by all Europeans.

Turkey is a case in point how a strong civil society is both a prerequisite and a consequence of a successful EU accession process. Today, the civil society can play an invaluable role by calling for better dialogue and the spirit of compromise. It was evident to both President Barroso and me as we visited Turkey last week that the country is again at the crossroads. It needs our support – and a vocal civil society – to ensure the respect for democracy, rule of law and democratic secularism.

All Western Balkan countries have come closer to the EU over the last couple of years. They have a chance to accelerate their integration with the EU this year. This depends on concrete progress in reforms. The EU supports their progress and is committed to their European future.

2008 can be a decisive year for Croatia's accession negotiations, if the country can meet crucial benchmarks, especially as regards judicial and economic reforms and fighting corruption.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia could demonstrate its readiness to undertake accession negotiations by making determined efforts to meet key priorities. It is important that the elections to be held on 1 June do not derail the country's reform agenda.

The task for both Albania and Montenegro is to build a convincing track record of implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and likewise pursue reforms with determination.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, yesterday's adoption of the police reform laws paves the way to the signature of its SAA in the next few weeks. Thus, BiH is passing a necessary gateway towards eventual candidacy.

Serbia is central for regional stability and good neighbourly relations in the Balkans. It faces a crucial choice in the parliamentary elections on 11 May, turning either to the European future or risking self-isolation.

Kosovo's commitment to a democratic and multi-ethnic society is enshrined in the recent Constitution. The EU supports Kosovo to stand on its own feet and wants to help Kosovo to help itself.

Overall, the Western Balkans is making steady progress towards the EU. If the current challenges, such as Kosovo's status conclusion and Serbia's democratic stability, can be successfully overcome, then the region has a bright future – and that future is in the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd like to now focus on the role of civil society in EU enlargement.

In the enlargement countries, people sometimes ask why they should go through substantial, even painful reforms to join the EU. Posing this question sends the message that they do not necessarily perceive these reforms as something that is, first and foremost, in their own interest.

I would prefer that people of the region could see themselves not as "takers" of externally-imposed conditions, but rather "makers" of their own future. Reforms are not done only for the EU, but primarily for the people of the region. Enhancing democracy and the rule of law, promoting fundamental freedoms and developing a rules-based market economy do indeed improve everyday lives of the citizens.

In the EU, many citizens are sceptical about further enlargements. However, much of the so-called enlargement fatigue arises from social and economic problems at home. We have not been able to communicate enlargement well enough. Its benefits need to be better explained, while the concerns of citizens need to be addressed.

Let me practice what I preach and argue the case of enlargement: First of all, it is indeed thanks to the simultaneous deepening of integration and gradual widening of the EU that Europe of today is safer and more prosperous than when the whole thing started. The EU of 27 member states and 500 million citizens is certainly much stronger and more influential than the original EEC of 6 Member States.

Economically, enlargement has brought new dynamism to the EU. Old and new Member States trade between themselves today four times as much as they did 10 years ago. More new jobs have been created in the old member states than have been lost due to relocations.

Communicating the success story of enlargement is a common challenge for us all. As civil society representatives, you are the bridge between the EU institutions, national authorities and citizens. You can raise awareness of the successes and challenges of EU enlargement. You can strengthen confidence between citizens in the EU and the aspirant members. You can support the reforms in Southeast Europe.

Civil society organisations are essential for building what social scientists call "social capital". Moreover, non-governmental organisations help transform societies in the candidate and potential candidate countries.

Balkan and Turkish civil society organisations have spread the European spirit by promoting the basic values of democracy, human rights, good governance and the rule of law. Together with independent media, they have relentlessly resisted

resurgent nationalism and fundamentalisms, and helped build bridges of inter-ethnic confidence.

Obviously, civil society in Southeast Europe still has its challenges. Further efforts are required to deepen freedom of association and facilitate the development of civil society organisations. Local NGOs require training and need to strengthen their capacities in order to play an effective role in the process of European integration.

The EU has provided assistance for a broad range of civil society organisations, such as those working in inter-ethnic relations, protection of minority rights, including Roma, poverty reduction, environmental protection and social development. Often, we worked closely with other donors. For instance, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Open Society Institute – whose founder George Soros will speak right after me – opened 12 centres around the country to support NGOs in their networking and communication activities. EU financed 8 of those centres, in socially and economically deprived areas of the country.

In Turkey, the “Bridges of Knowledge” programme has been launched under the Civil Society Dialogue initiative. It has supported 27 projects, which aim at, inter alia, improving the quality of life for disabled people, supporting local democracy and assisting forest conservation.

The EU established a training programme to advance NGOs in the less developed eastern and western regions of Serbia. Also, we supported the work of the Kosovo Civil Society Foundation to promote over 50 NGOs active in the fields of minority and women’s rights, cultural exchange and better governance. As a result, more women in Kosovo run their own enterprises, children understand more about European culture, and language lessons are on offer to the Roma community.

The EU continues to support the reforms in and development of Southeast Europe through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). On average, the annual allocation for the Western Balkans in 2007–2011 will be 800 million Euros. This is by far the highest per capita amount provided by the Commission to any region in the world.

Currently, a new facility to support civil society development and dialogue is being established. Financial support to civil society will increase significantly in the period 2008–2010, amounting approximately to 130 million Euros for the Western Balkans and Turkey. The new facility will support three types of civil society development projects:

local civil society initiatives and capacity-building, especially reinforcing the role of civil society;

partnerships and networks between civil society organisations in the EU and the enlargement countries; and

programmes to bring journalists, young politicians, trade union leaders and teachers into contact with EU institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your participation in this conference is important as the Commission seeks to give a new impulse to civil society development in Southeast Europe. This conference is not a one-off event, but the first in a series of what we intend to make an annually recurrent meeting with civil society representatives from the EU and the enlargement countries.

We continue to support the countries of Southeast Europe on their road to EU membership. We continue to support civil society development. But we cannot succeed without the determination and ownership of the civil society itself. Therefore, we need you and your input.

I wish you all a productive, fruitful conference.