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Our Balkans: The fragile heart of our Europe

Janez Potocnik, head of the Slovenian negotiating team during the country's EU accession and as from February 2010 European Commissioner for the Environment, explains why a European perspective for the Balkan countries is essential for Europe as a whole, and the role of *Sarajevo Notebook* in cultivating dialogue in the region.

No so many decades ago, Europe was demolished and its people were desperate. It needed reconstruction, and it needed reconciliation. The European Union brought lasting peace, stability, security and the promise of prosperity and a better life. Back then, the *raison d'être* for European cooperation and integration was more than obvious. That original reason is just as valid today, even if we now sometimes rather foolishly take those achievements for granted.

The fact is that Europe has changed since then. It is a good place to live — peaceful, secure and rich — and many wonder why we should continue increasing our cooperation and integration. The rest of world has also changed, one could say dramatically, especially in the last two decades. We are more interconnected and more interdependent. Developing countries like China and India are catching up fast; the world is becoming increasingly multi-polar. Many of the challenges we face, such as climate change, future energy supply, potential pandemics and other health issues, shortage of food and drinking water, security are becoming more and more global. And competition is getting even fiercer. In a way one could say that the world in which we live is more fragile and precarious than ever.

Two concepts will determine our common future. The first is sustainability — not only environmental sustainability, but sustainability in its widest sense. We have learned from the financial and economic crisis that economies and profits should also be sustainable. The second concept is global governance. This has become so obviously necessary, now that the world has turned into a mutually interdependent global village and our individual and collective responsibilities have substantially increased.

The world needs a responsible Europe, a Europe that is able to speak with one voice, a Europe that can take the leading role globally when needed, for example in the case of climate change. But it is not only the world that needs a stronger Europe, we Europeans also need a stronger Europe, a Europe capable of dealing with the changed reality in which we live.

While original *raison d'être* for our cooperation is still there and valid, new global developments are an additional reason for strengthening Europe's role,

an additional *raison d'être* for strengthened cooperation.

The Balkans are part of Europe, geographically, culturally, historically, economically, in fact in every way you care to think. The fact is that all Balkan countries would today be members of the European Union had the recent terrible war in the region been avoided. But it was not. It happened, and it is a reminder to all of us of how fragile Europe, and especially this region, still is. The time horizon for the countries in the region has changed. Membership has been pushed back, for some more than others. Slovenia was wise enough, and lucky enough, to escape.

The European Union's behaviour in those critical times was far from appropriate and desirable. The reaction to the emerging conflict lacked the clear voice and determination that was needed. We should not forget that. Hence, we have a kind of moral duty to help the region and to correct some of those unfortunate facts.

All the Western Balkan countries clearly have a European Union perspective. This perspective is as important for them individually as it is also for their region and the whole of Europe. It is about their peace, their stability and their prosperity, but it is also about European peace, stability and prosperity. Even if Europe's many other problems are often more visible, many of us are highly aware that enlargement was — and still is — the most successful European policy. The countries in Balkan region should therefore "keep alive" a belief in the European Union and in Europe, while at the same time the European Union should "keep alive" the enlargement policy and process, including the European perspective of all Western Balkan countries (and Turkey, of course). What I learned as head of Slovenia's negotiation team during its accession is that the European Union keeps its promises, and that there are many friends in the European institutions ready to help. Don't forget, there are even more of us here today.

There is no doubt that the Balkan people have great potential. Just think of their unforgettable movies, literature and music, or in the area of science, the genius of Nikola Tesla. And who could forget the unpredictable talents of so many of their sportsmen and women? All these people bring their unlimited talents to various areas of our lives.

As I mentioned, I am currently responsible in the European Commission for Science and research (in the 2010–2014 commission, Janez Patocnik serves as Commissioner for the Environment — ed.). This is a vital area for any country's future and prosperity. Cooperation in research is as vital as blood for our organs. On the European Union level, we manage around five percent of European public spending on R&D through the so-called Research Framework Programme (currently the seventh). We are also trying to build a strong European Research Area, enabling an open marketplace for talent and ideas to circulate. Of course, all member states are part of that approach, but we are trying to enlarge it beyond the Union borders by associating countries to the European Framework and Research Area. Associated members have practically the same rights and obligations as all member states. In a way, they are already effectively members of the Union in the area of science and research. When I joined the European Commission, none of the Western Balkan countries were associated; now all of them are. All are equal partners in science and research cooperation in Europe. The participation fee they pay is

adapted to their relative abilities. The philosophy behind this is simple: it is based on the logic of integrating them as soon as possible, and as much as possible, in the European Union. It is based on the logic to help them! I am convinced that this approach is the correct one, for the Balkan region and for Europe as a whole.

The project of *Sarajevo Notebooks* is unique. It emerged from the initiative of a group of prominent writers and intellectuals from all the Balkan countries. The importance of this project is in its ability to promote cooperation and build bridges, thus embracing the idea of cultural identity, whilst at the same time recognizing our differences as a source of richness. This project not only plays an important part in strengthening regional cooperation, it reveals to the rest of Europe the high philosophical and literary standards coming from this — in many respects — stigmatised region. A region whose culture includes all the fundamental characteristics of the spiritual dimensions that are genuinely European. It reminds us that Europe is also in the Balkans, rich and diverse — something that is of course so easily understandable for all of us who used to live together in the former Yugoslavia.

For many years, this project has gathered intellectuals from the region. On the one hand, the contributing authors promote intellectual and artistic excellence, and on the other hand, they give voice to the urgent need to adopt a democratic European spirit in reciprocal contacts and links. *Sarajevo Notebooks* provide proof, by clear example, that lively dialogue is indeed possible. And more than this, proof that such dialogue — although fragile and in need of outside assistance — can and should be developed in the region itself.

Dear friends, your mission is truly noble. For years you have been sharing the hope of understanding and cooperation, tolerance and readiness for listening and understanding others. You are building dialogue bridges between young generations of writers in the region and replacing hate with hope. Hope that we are able to live together in harmony. *Sarajevo Notebooks* are the lighthouse for the region and for Europe. They are bringing back the same Olympic spirit that died on blood stained Sarajevo streets some years ago.

Rest reassured that in Brussels we admire your work, your sincere fight for a better world out there, in your region, in my region. One should believe in one's own abilities, in one's own strengths, in one's own future. One should believe that borders, be they on the ground, in the air or sea, or, even more importantly, in our heads, can fall. The process of European integration is exactly the process in which the borders are falling, slowly but steadily, especially those in our heads.

Let me finish by saying that I am proud of the role my country is playing in supporting *Sarajevo Notebooks*. For being open to promote this initiative for a better future in our region. *Sarajevo Notebooks* are strengthening the beating of our fragile Balkan European heart. It echoes loud and far.

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