

BEYOND THE WALL

20 Years of Europeanisation as seen from the former-Yugoslavia

Belgrade Conference, 14-15 décembre 2009

Opening address

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First of all a warm welcome to this conference on behalf of Jacques Delors, our founder and honorary President, unfortunately prevented from being here, and on behalf of the whole team of *Notre Europe*.

In the first months of 2009, *Notre Europe* decided to open a research field on the Western Balkans – a region which constitutes the new “Frontier” of the European project. Indeed the concretization of the European vocation of this region is one of the main challenges lying ahead of the EU in the years to come. This new field of research for *Notre Europe* carries on from an initial exploration conducted in Serbia by research fellow Aziliz Gouez within the scope of her “European Works” project.

Now, why did we choose to organise today’s conference in Belgrade?

A few short weeks ago, Europe was celebrating its unification. Twenty years after, it doesn’t require much effort of memory to call up those captivating images of men and women tearing down pieces of the wall. For a few days, the Fall of the Berlin Wall triggered a rupture in the normal course of things. The euphoria with which the Western Germans welcomed their Eastern brothers, the tears, embraces and outpourings of joy – all this escapes the register of the daily.

Beyond its meaning for Germany, the extraordinary character of the event makes of it a symbol for Europe as a whole. What occurred in Berlin on the 9th of November 1989 embodies a great shift – the passage from the world of blocs to a new order (which we still have difficulty in qualifying), and the passage from a truncated Europe to an enlarged Europe.

The European Union needed three years to digest this completely new situation. Only in 1993 were we able to define the basic cornerstones of an enlargement towards the East. And we needed another four years to launch the concrete accession negotiations.

Nevertheless, when the moment came to realize it, in May 2004, this European enlargement went largely unnoticed in Western Europe. It passed without manifestations of enthusiasm, and to the indifference of Western public opinion.

We should therefore rejoice in the current celebrations: by summoning up the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the new Europe may have found again its founding myth.

A symbol of union, the Fall of the Wall does not however hold the same meaning for all Europeans. The rupture of the Cold War order took Yugoslavia in its wake; and the images from Berlin inversely invoke those of the conflict in Yugoslavia. Contra to the great tide of aggregation begun in 1989 between the East and West of Europe, the decade of the 90s was for the Yugoslav populations a time of dislocation in iron and blood.

The trajectory of these countries singularly remains the blind spot of the reflections, prospective and retrospective, which accompany today's commemorations of the Fall of the Wall. Why so? Is it ignorance? Or indifference? Or is it something else?

And what gaze do the men and women from the former-Yugoslavia cast over the last two decades? What are their conceptions of the great challenges lying ahead of Europe?

In order to draw, together, the lessons of the last twenty years, and to reflect upon the political, economic and social models which we wish for the Europe of tomorrow, *Notre Europe* invited writers, academics, political leaders and journalists from all across the European Union and the former-Yugoslavia to gather, today, in Belgrade.

Indeed, we believe that the technocratic rationale which presides over the accession negotiations with the West Balkan countries constitutes the indispensable motor of the European machinery. But it can by no means stand in the stead of a real debate on our ethical and political choices and visions for the future.

This debate we hope will carry on into the years to come, so that the next enlargements do not occur under the same air of disinterested silence as those of 2004 and 2007.

Neither the blockages the European institutions have been facing during several years, nor all the efforts required to overcome the economic recession must prevent us from remembering that there exists an "outside" to the European Union.

An outside which could furthermore allow a Union with a deficit of self narrations to pick up once more the thread of its history: on the other side, in the Balkans, a face-to-face is unavoidable with all these others Europe is turning aside. The question of the relations to Russia, to Islam, to the 'Byzantine other' are as many salutary breaches given to the cloistered reflection the EU is conducting on its identity, its goals, its foreign policy.

If the Yugoslav wars constitute Europe's other, this other is only the previous self which Europeans decided to leave behind them, fifty years ago – and not the expression of some irrepressible tendency in the Balkanic character.

The "Balkanic" stories, these narratives of nationalist hubris, are intrinsically European stories. These narratives of emigration speak of a hope which Europe must take care not to suffocate.

It would be tempting to pull the curtain across this bothersome clamour. Rather, let us endeavour to engage in the debate on the future of our continent with all those whom it concerns.

Today the Western Balkans seem to be on track towards European integration. The agenda remains heavily burdened by the consequences of the wars, by unresolved issues of border disputes, minority rights, refugees' return.

It is a matter of fact: Serbia matters. The EU cannot be indifferent to the fate of 7,5 million people living right on its South-Eastern border, at the heart of the fragile Balkans region. Serbia is the linch-pin of stability, or instability, for the whole region.

Overcoming the legacies of nationalist hatred, of tragic wars and of lagging economic development is the EU's vocation – what it was created for and what it does best.

Western Europe owes to the European integration process the longest period of peace and stability, democracy and the rule of law, prosperity and social welfare regime in its history. And it is our political and moral responsibility to integrate Europe as a whole in this success story!

In the course of my political career in the 1990s I had to deal with this region, including Serbia. I had to go through Franco-German debates about Yugoslavia, through the peace negotiations, through futile efforts to avoid the war in Kosovo.

I remember in particular nine months of discreet and finally unsuccessful attempts at offering Serbia out of the dangerous and vicious circle of conflict.

We have lost many years and I am glad to be in Belgrade today, for the first time in my life. I hope that the time is ripe for welcoming soon – and not at the end of a “slow march” as predicted last week by *The Economist* – Serbia and its neighbours back in the heart of Europe.

My sincere hope is that this conference may be considered as a step towards this goal.