

Youth and the Future of the Western Balkans: Towards Democracy and Integration

Remarks by Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy

at the Belgrade Summit 2009

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I'm proud to be here and to have the privilege of speaking to more than 350 young activists from throughout the region of the Western Balkans. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights, which has brought together this conference, is a first-rate organization. It was founded more than six years ago by young democracy activists in Serbia, a new generation committed to building a new Serbia, at peace with all its neighbors in the Western Balkans, governed by the rule of law, and integrated into the community of democratic nations in Europe and around the world. And it has now spread throughout the region.

The Youth Initiative is an organization, to be sure, a so-called NGO. But it also represents a real movement, one that has come together around fundamental democratic values and is dedicated to shaping a future for this region that is different from the past, a future built upon an honest accounting of the violence and the last decade as the basis for a new era of peace and reconciliation.

What I want to speak with you about this morning is how to end the isolation of the Western Balkans through a comprehensive process of what we call cross-border democracy work.

Just a few weeks ago I was in Lviv to attend a conference called to commemorate the meeting held twenty years earlier in Wroclaw that initiated the whole phenomenon of cross-border democracy work in Central Europe. The 1989 meeting was organized by Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity, and its purpose was to encourage democratic change in neighboring Czechoslovakia. Havel later called the Wroclaw meeting the "prologue" to the Velvet Revolution.

Over the last two decades cross-border work started in Wroclaw has been carried out by groups in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Ukraine, among other countries. The NED has supported 54 NGOs in 15 countries conducting cross-border work in Belarus, Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and even in countries farther afield such as Cuba and Afghanistan.

The Lviv meeting brought together 260 activists from Central and Eastern Europe for the purpose of advancing the Eastern Partnership Initiative, which looks toward the eventual accession of Ukraine and five other countries into the European Union. The recommendations developed in Lviv were submitted to the Eastern Partnership's Civil Society Forum, which met

last month in Brussels. American Vice President Joseph Biden picked up the theme of the Lviv meeting in his recent address in Bucharest when he said that the Eastern Partnership is an example of how the Central European democracies can “energize” a new effort “to fulfill the promise of 1989.”

This Belgrade Summit has a lot in common with the Lviv conference in the sense that it brings together activists from across this region for the purpose of advancing a common democratic agenda. But there is one important difference. While the Lviv conference was charting a new direction for cross-border work after twenty years of regional cooperation and democratic progress, the purpose of the Belgrade Summit is to start a process of cross-border aid after almost two decades of war and isolation. Our goal here is to end this isolation, to heal the divisions that produced the horrors of the last decade, and to integrate all of the countries of the Western Balkans into the European community. It is also to engage civil society in the accession process, which is much more likely to succeed if the interaction between states to harmonize governing institutions is supported by bottom-up pressure from society for real democratic reform.

There need to be four distinct kinds of cross-borders democracy assistance in the Western Balkans. The first is assistance from NGOs in Western Europe. I’ve just arrived here from Paris, where I went to try to strengthen our cooperation with French NGOs. From what I can gather, only one group from France has been active in the Balkans, the CCFD. I met with many good French NGOs, and I hope that others will become active in this region, along with groups from Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, Scandinavia, and Germany.

It’s also important that the Central Europeans direct more of their efforts to the Western Balkans. Until now, only groups in Slovakia have been active here. It’s important that the kind of groups that gathered in Lviv to promote democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries also become active here – groups like People in Need in the Czech Republic, the Foundation for Education for Democracy in Poland, and the Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity Foundation.

There is also a global dimension of cross-border democracy assistance. It’s important that activists in this region develop links of solidarity with activists in the World Youth Movement for Democracy which is represented here by Ryota Jonen of the World Movement for Democracy, Tapera Kapuya who used to lead the Zimbabwe National Students Union, and others. There will be a special session at this conference with these activists, and I hope it will lead to stronger ties between Balkans activists and those in other regions.

And finally there is cooperation among groups within the Western Balkans. Strengthening that cooperation is of course the main purpose of this conference. It is also the purpose of important initiatives like Recom, the process that the Humanitarian Law Center of Natasa Kandic started several years ago with human rights organizations in Croatia and Bosnia

to develop a regional and inter-governmental approach to facing the truth about the crimes of the past.

I want to call your attention to the title of the Lviv conference, which has a special meaning for this Belgrade Summit. It was “For Our Freedom and Yours! For Our Common Future.” The slogan “For Our Freedom and Yours” is connected with a long history of democratic solidarity. It was first used by Polish activists during the 1830 rebellion, when it was also printed in Russian to express solidarity with the Decembrist uprising in Russia and to convey the notion that the fate of liberal activists in Poland and Russia were linked. It was later the slogan of the Spring of Nations uprisings on 1848 and the Commonwealth uprising in 1864. The Russian version was used in 1968 when seven Soviet dissidents unfurled a banner in Red Square in solidarity with the Prague Spring, marking the start of the Soviet human rights movement; and it was the slogan of Ukrainian activists in 1989 when they engaged in a hunger strike in solidarity with Chinese students killed in Tiananmen Square.

The significance of the slogan at the Lviv conference was that it underlined the critical role played by Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation in the struggle of each country for independence and democracy. It is sometimes forgotten that the history of Poland and Ukraine has been marked by deep enmity, especially during World War II and its immediate aftermath when the violence between Poles and Ukrainians and the ensuing forced population transfers was as great as what occurred in the Balkans during the last decade. Lviv used to be the Polish city of Lwow, and what is now the Polish city of Wroclaw was the German city of Breslau before World War II.

The cross-border work that emanated first from Poland grew out of an understanding that Poland could not achieve freedom and independence unless its neighbors did as well. This was the fundamental insight of the “eastern policy” that was developed during the Cold War by Jerzy Giedroyc and others in the pages of exile journal *Kultura* and eventually by the Solidarity movement and the intellectuals associated with it. They understood that if Poland was to become a free and independent country, it had to relinquish its territorial claims against Ukraine, renounce the enmity of the past, and build an association of sovereign democracies out of the nations that historically had been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which Poland had dominated.

This understanding, which became the basis of the democratic struggles in Poland and Ukraine and the subsequent spread of cross-border democracy assistance, has an obvious relevance to the goals of this Summit and to the future of democracy in the Western Balkans. It tells us that the freedom, independence, and sovereignty of all the countries that were part of the former Yugoslavia are inter-linked, and that the peace and well-being of all the countries in this region must be built upon a modern concept of democratic sovereignty and regional cooperation.

What is needed is not just the renunciation of enmity. What is also needed, more positively, is real solidarity with which the remaining walls of division can be torn down --

solidarity within the region of the Western Balkans, with the other post-communist countries of Central Europe, with the established democracies in Western Europe and the United States, and with all those around the world who are struggling for freedom. “For Our Freedom and Yours!” Let that be your slogan, and let us proceed together for our common future.