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The Balkans on their way to Europe and to themselves, – an agenda for higher education

A wos wos was e wos se woin? A North German business man would think this is English, when addressed in such way. It is Viennese and means *I do not really know what you really want*¹. In a nutshell, this is one of Europe's problems.

1.

The privilege to being chosen to address you at this meeting is challenged by the double bind, which has not left me since I returned from my UNMIK assignment in Pristina and Belgrade, in 2002. Does anyone in this room need another confirmation of the common view that higher education plays a critical role for the continuation of the region's way to Europe; does anyone need another proof that the Balkans' way towards the new Europe is also a way to themselves; isn't it obvious that higher education is one among the few central hinges that will enable the region really catch up with the more advanced, and with the luckier partners in Europe, inside and outside the European Union? Of course, for most of my professional life I have been a higher education person. I'm still one, but after Kosovo, after Afghanistan, after working for post-conflict policy and diving into the hopeless deadlocks of never-to-be-resolved problems I have learned that higher education is not only a stimulus for the creation of sustainable civil societies, but it is also an instrument and a derivate of politics allocated much higher in priorities and strategic reputation.

It does not make sense to propagate something like reform-oriented *Realpolitik*, when trying to align a region to the mainstream policies in the European Union. Several Directorates General compete for the effects and the features of science, higher education, tertiary institutions². It seems that the ominous names of European metropolitan cities gloom like landing fires in an airport, leading the way: Lisbon, Bologna, Copenhagen, Graz, Thessaloniki, Berlin, Bergen. All right: the follow up of all these programs and agendas will be the focus of the Conference of European Minister of Education in two weeks, which event will be a highlight of Austria's Presidency to the EU, and it will combine what has been prepared since long, namely the enhancement of quality assurance and the preparation for European and national qualification frameworks, and the focus on the Western Balkans. Let me try to draw your attention to this conference, which will certainly also take up the messages which may come from your meeting. But before your deliberations let me try to divert you from this attention for a moment; this will be the key moment of my key note, leaving the path of complacent expectations in self-referential reforms, which will change higher education against all odds.

¹ A paraphrase, taken from Karl Kraus: *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*.

² The Communication COM(2006) 27 final: *The Western Balkans on the road to the EU*, is one of the first promising attempts to cope with this problem.

2.

As many of you feel, *Balkanism* has survived, it is resurfacing after 1989, as if it were never really gone. *Balkanism*, that is part of the rumours about the region, which are internalised by some of the people there, if not the majority. Since Maria Todorova's important study on *Imagining the Balkans*, we know that *Balkanism* isn't far away from (Said's) *Orientalism*. One significant of this phenomenon is that you cannot escape it by just pretending to ignore it. As Georg Winckler has said: a lack of understanding has accompanied the Balkans approaches towards the new Europe.

What *are* the Western Balkans? A once powerful federal state has dissociated into a number of independent, sovereign nation states and territories of unsolved political status. Including or excluding a state with a non-Slavonic majority language; including or excluding states which are either already members of the EU or on the verge to become members. The Western Balkans are part of the Balkans, which are a part of South East Europe, which are a huge region of countries under transition, a transition into what is meant to be the reality in the Western, the luckier part of Europe, market-driven democratic societies. The promise is that all countries will be members states in calculable periods of time, that they will gain in prosperity and stability like, say, Portugal and Ireland. The expectations are high, and so are the stakes.

I am the last one to reduce the hopes or belittle the visions. I will not diminish the goals and targets, but I will discuss some conditions which are less popular in the current discussion on how to attain these noble aims. Of course, I will not go into a general debate on Europe and why its glamour and radiance are seemingly looking the worse for wear. I will just address you, the heads and peers in a world of higher learning, who are concerned about their role in this process of transition. And in concentrating on this higher education sector I will address the segment which is most likely to allow both predictions of the future and analyses of the present. Since I will report back to the Ministry of Education, which is in charge of the aforementioned conference of ministers, I will not let myself being trapped by a twin-track argumentation, being critical with the intellectuals and affirmative with the politicians. However, for a moment I consider myself as an analytical mind rather than as a negotiator of medium-range goals on the long and well established ways of European accession policies.

3.

One leitmotif from my work in post-conflict areas is that these regions are likely to be forgotten as soon as a more urgent agenda appears on the horizon, Kosovo was replaced by Afghanistan, Afghanistan yielded to Iraq, Tsunami was toppled by the bird-flu. This is, what no country and no people deserve. But on the other hand, if attention returns, it is more often than not an event which is unpleasant, like the extraditing of an alleged war criminal, or the fusion of business giants, or the question whether illegal foreign detention occurs in a country. Without these headlines, obliviousness would speed up even more. In other words: higher education will one make headlines, if one of your institutions gets into the charts of the top twenty, if another Nobel Prize is awarded, if long-term agreements will be signed with notable institutions outside the region. That is not satisfactory. But by simple compliance with what may be the standards of reform and changes, nothing is gained: because higher education is a very slow system and takes a lot of time between the adoption of an agenda and the implementation of good practice into its structures. This time is often used for quite a few interventions which follow Lampedusa's guideline that you have change things in order to

keep them as they are. This is not typical for the Balkans, but it is certainly a strategy much more dangerous than in other parts of Europe.

EU has some experience with the integration of countries with a poor economical background, and to include societies with little democratic background. EU has less experience with a group of members which have overcome their past in the Socialist camp and immediately have begun to play an active and often non-conformist role in the larger community. EU has no real experience with the Balkans. I cannot go into a comparative discourse, but any comparison between SEE and the Baltics and Poland or the Czech Republic must find their limitations rather early in the exercise. The first and not trivial experience is that the EU deals with a region of which it hardly knows enough, while the countries of the regions, at least its elites, know all about the rest of Europe, and have known for the last decades.

Secondly, SEE and the Western Balkans are a region which does not fit into the normal pattern of European history, with ups and downs following a certain scheme of feudalism, enlightenment, nation state building and emancipation. Enlightenment had had its difficulties to penetrate the former Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian territories, no proper nation state tradition and not clear divide between *nation states* and *ethnic people states* had ever occurred; but the distortions by authoritarian or failed governance were not only endured, they had found their opposition and even resistance, however, most of it in exile or within a framework of bypasses and compromises. One of these was higher education. The university played a role, has never ceased to play one in strengthening society, where there was no real state worthwhile to being supported. This explains the locally very high level of academic performance even before 1989, notwithstanding an unfavourable environment. And it partially explains the reputation, which academics and graduates enjoy irrespective of their disciplinary affiliation.

I hope that by now it is clear that I am not approaching my topic from a parochial or typical Western point of view. But I have learned how bitter the present discourse of anti-neo-colonial resentments can be in the region that I have to learned how important a broad access towards higher education matters is when dealing with the structure of society.

My first two assumptions are well supported by several examples: if there was no Andrei Marga and Andrei Plesu in Romania at the right time, if there were no activities by AAEN in Serbia, the universities in their countries had not had the chance to keep up with European development. *Navreme* is a nice word for that right moments in history. What does that ominous play on words with Europe mean? This is my third thesis: the Balkans have always been part of the European notion, since the middle ages and older than many of their Western counterparts; but they have distanced themselves in the course of history from what has become Europe in a post-enlightened, post-national, post-imperial sense, and now it is difficult to call them back into an area which, by hereditary rights, is theirs, and yet has to become theirs again by a new sense of ownership, of responsibility, of responsiveness, and of respect for differences, which are not ideological, but hard reality. And if it is true that universities are the places, where societies do reflect themselves, then it is the duty of higher education not only to explain the society and the world to their citizens, but also to *explain their countries to the rest of Europe*, to make the West as knowledgeable about the Balkans, as the intellectuals in the Balkans have ever been about the West. Which means make the Commission, the associations of higher education, the intellectuals and the scholars shall be aware that, before any integration can take place, the regional distinctions and differences must be taken note of. Otherwise, many good counsel will fail. (If I only take a glimpse at the difficulties to deconstruct the system of faculties within a university, or to re-integrate academies of science, or to translate the term autonomy as used in the Magna Charta to many

of the politicians in SEE, then you will understand why I am cautious with any master plan or model-function of the established EU 25 policies).

Hard-Talk of BBC is my favourite Anglo-Saxon feature. And *Dubravka Ugresic's* saying that the vocabularies have changed, while the grammar remains the same, is my favourite provocation. Now, the consequence from these rationales is rather easy and challenging. Higher education by now is not even a *continental*, but a *global* agenda, far ahead of any economic or diplomatic alignment. If that is true, it does not help much if Western Europe is patronising the Balkans and SEE. Both must give the united Europe one strong continental voice in the global arrangements (not everything is just *competition*, there are many networks and interactions, which are on less conflicting turfs, such as higher education as examples for protecting human rights or spreading literacy among educated persons). Hard talk on universities in the Balkans means that the European Union must help them to become proactive again, *in order to let them represent their countries* even before policy and the market can get there. My negative scenario is that the gap between Western development and SEE will widen and not narrow, and that the economic reforms will not succeed because they starve the changes in higher education and thus devoid their most important soft sector support. We must avoid this scenario and we can avoid it.

4.

Western Balkans is one priority of the Austrian Presidency. This can help to keep the region in the focus of European policy. (Without the dealing with the legacies from the past, without Srebrenica, Mladic and the ICTY, the attention would be less, without the Kosovo problem, it would be less, without any autonomy problems for Vojvodina it would be even lesser, without certain problems in the trans-Atlantic orientation of some policies of the region it would be almost invisible: the attention has no chance to become resurfaced, given the problems of some countries, like France and the Netherlands with the constitution, or of some other countries with their global engagement, like the United Kingdom, or an irrational anti-EU mood in other countries, which profit most from their membership, such as Austria; but one incident on the cartoon-field, and the region gets enough spotlight for a moment). But this is, what Rectors and Minister of Higher Education should see, when they discuss reforms of higher education: that the supra-national dimension of the changes in mindset and policies are as important as the alignment with Bologna, ECTS and the quality assurance instruments and standards. In other words: the themes which shall occupy the intellectual forces of academia are given not only by disciplinary tradition, which is a little bit behind in many institutions of the region, and are not given by the supposed imperatives of market supply but they are almost forced into the universities by a demand of good counsel for politics and public mindsets.

5.

This can be shared on a general level, but when it comes to implementation, it certainly will develop its national, ethnic and economic idiosyncrasies. Labour markets do not exist in many of the countries of the region, and nevertheless trendy demand goes towards Business Administration and Tele-Communication...well, they will be needed one day, but for the moment we need the academic education of a *new democratic and cosmopolitan elite*, cosmopolitan meaning truly European. This elite will be able to attract exchange with other parts of Europe and, at the same time, explain to the people at home why they must trust into a *deferred gratification pattern*, since there are no real returns to be expected from a growing market in higher education without a sustainable labour market. And that is just the whole

point of our convention today: to discuss the area building in a region where all this has to be done, and not with too much delay. Time is not working for higher education.

6.

What is needed is an *area of higher education*, which is European – as Bologna prescribes the framework – and local, and regional at the same time. The big aim is the *European Area of Education*, which will be built step by step and is a composite: the *area of higher education* is a forerunner, an *area of research* will come with the new R&D policy, and an *area of information* is on the horizon. What does an *area* need, apart from a territorial definition?

1) First of all higher education shall know its potentialities to participate in the processes of transition.

2) It will be also important that the tertiary sector in the region will speak with one strong voice, if necessary crossing the borders of national interests.

3) A third necessity is the sober weighing of existing strengths and weaknesses at present as contrast to the wishful thinking and projections into an uncertain future.

4) Another priority is the positioning of higher education within a European context which is in itself prone to diversify its structures.

Let me restrict the rest of my considerations to these four aspects.

7.

What are the potentialities of higher education with regard to the regional process of transition? Universities and the entire tertiary sector are the most important, and probably the most stable, institution of creating new democratic elites and a highly qualified population. The first is needed for a sustainable society building, which must precede the alignment with the high-flying demands from the business community. The second is a condition for the creation of labour markets, where there is only a rather volatile revulsion of workforce. The change of mindset is more important than to comply with rules, which will be applicable in the future, but are not rooted in the present societies. There is too much legacy from the past, too much unresolved potential for new and old conflicts, too much ethnical tension in some parts of the region as to cross into routines. This gives the universities the important role of preparing for larger areas than the aforementioned ones: the new Europe will be one of educated peoples. The educational role of higher education goes beyond training and qualification: it is a political role that is expected from universities; a role which must, at the same time, depoliticize the institutions, otherwise their credibility would be at risk.

8.

Speaking with one voice will be difficult: as long as higher education understands itself as a servant to *national aims* (only), it will not meet the paramount mission of universities. Academia must challenge the narrow interpretations of newly attained national sovereignty and independence in societies, which have emancipated themselves from authoritarian rules, but have also allowed the process of state building to precede society and nation building. In other words, the university provides the litmus tests for the status in which societies can interact both regionally and continent-wide. Rectors conferences and higher education forums are as important as the joint commitment to the Magna Charta and Bologna agendas. Only one voice can establish the interest of higher education to become national and regional priority, also with regard to budgets and public appreciation. One danger comes from the increasing engagement of national governments to military actions out of area: precious

money which should be invested into soft sectors such as education, social protection and public health will be lost at a time, when the new economy is already stressing the national resources.

9.

What are the strengths of regional higher education then? Certainly, there is strong loyalty towards the institutions, and a certain willingness to keep up the social cohesion which the institutions provides other than many loosening social ties in times of transition (the university still being a stable and dynamic civic institution, perhaps as important as family or public administration, and certainly more future oriented than church, army and other traditional authorities). The basis of higher learning is still provided, students have the capacity and obviously the will to use tertiary education as a platform for private advancement. Universities in South East Europe will be the decisive force to build social and cultural capital beside qualifications and employability. But these two capitals need a self-conscious integration into the processes of political and social transformation, other than the tradition complacent and self-assured local autonomy. The strengths are certainly also well placed in a capacity to admit and enrol more students, in order to increase the participation in the tertiary sector.

The weaknesses are well known, and in many cases not typical for the region. But some of them are innate evils to the old systems, and a certain nostalgia sometimes hinders a fast removal of the legacies of the past and present weaknesses. One deficit is certainly the underfinanced infrastructure and equipment and the low rate of upgrading the quality of human resources and curricula. But money is not everything, because outdated ideas of hierarchy, status and the schemes of promotion slow down all processes of transition. Of course, some misconduct and corruption have also another place and weight in systems which are less stable than those in more advanced countries. One weakness is the escape into *window dressing*, such as advertising compliance with the Bologna Process by just cutting and pasting old curricula into the new modes, or by topping old studies with post-graduate programs without sound basics in the graduate programs.

For both, strengths and weaknesses, there are quite a few programs available, mainly from the EU and the Stability Pact; ERI SEE and other approaches have shown their first effects. The support from the Council of Europe and Associations like the EUA is also designed to assist in the transition. But nothing can provide a sustainable cure to the problems without much stronger self-reliance and responsibility, which also means that the tertiary sector must seek the support from the people. The creation of *public space* for higher education is a condition for Europeanisation, - and, at the same time, an appeal to Western partners in Europe to not fall into a certain fatigue of higher education. This is not just another round in the communication among governments and political leaders. The demanding appeal is not feasible without the inclusion of the civil society. The reform of higher education has gained much from NGOs and joint ventures between state agencies and other organisations, local and foreign, have been critical to any success in the field.

10.

The European context is often evoked, but in many cases the euro-sceptical mentality is growing. There are many reasons for this, and we must address them openly in order to not betray each other. The new Europe is more than a free market and administrative unit, but will also not become the United States of Europe in our lifetimes. It is above all a peace project and a social project in the age of globalisation and supra-national readjustment of the world.

Europe is also a small, privileged haven for millions of people on the move, adding to the ethnical diversity which we already have another multitude of cultural and social input. That is neither easy to cope with nor is it without backlashes and failures, as we can learn from the well-intended but ill-prepared constitutional debate. So, what? There are no real alternatives, as the populists in all camps make us believe, not only in the countries of accession and association, but also among the member states of the EU. The problem is that even theoretically one cannot combine win-win situations, as the EU is one, with raising picking and national advantages. This has a lot to do with higher education, because the active participation in the design and implementation of all programs, especially concerning mobility quality and recognition, must always affect all partners and cannot only serve the own constituencies at home. And it means that higher education shall be subject of research and investigation, and that it becomes an instrument of political counselling not only with the ministers of finance.

Europe is demanding. The rapidly shifting allocations of qualification will need more and better qualified workforce everywhere on the continent. But this does not mean that only the services and high-tech industries must gain new qualifications. What we need in the region is much more social science and humanities, not only for the sake of an improved teacher education, but for the noble aim of forming the new elites. Together with these requirements of a new division of labour, the most urgent segment of Europeanization is the stepping up of lifelong learning in the region. There is much well-trained workforce which cannot be employed because the old markets have gone. For these people it is absolutely crucial to upgrade their existing qualification and to being able to participate in the mobility which will be cross border in the region and throughout Europe, whether we like that aspect or not.

From the imperative of lifelong learning we derive another aspect, which will create some trouble in the region: *diversification and differentiation* must speed up. The university shall not remain the one and only focus of recognition and reputation, with a certain unfair downgrading of all other tertiary institutions. We find only a very poor to non-existing research basis, and for the next decades, the segment of basic research and applied big investigations will remain small. But we need highly qualified teaching on all levels and for all groups in society: *community colleges* shall serve this aim as other institutions, which should be free from too narrow affiliations with certain sectors in economy: in many cases, the graduates' choice will stimulate the market better than a demand from existing industries and businesses. New partnerships, public-private and public-corporate, will be competing on a relatively small turf, which does not allow an unlimited growth of private enterprises; only the fittest will survive, and they shall not only concentrate on the cheap subjects of mass demand, law or business administration: the costly sectors, such as medicine or engineering, also need their modernisation at shared expense by public and private funds. Investment by local and foreign investors shall be accompanied by higher education input from the beginning.

11.

This all sums up to a strong quest for reform and change. You, the leaders of regional higher education, are certainly the group to understand this better than anyone in your societies. In a way, the EUA is preparing the road towards transition with the universities as soft diplomacy and preventive policy, where professional administration and traditional hierarchies have their difficulties. Let me close with a somewhat sombre reflection.

Often, whenever I refer to the specific problems in the region, this is either qualified as parochial or even condescending, paying little attention to comparable problems in the West;

or it is accused of being not respectful towards the difficulties and problems which the region has and therefore is not really able to solve them and to regulate the conflicts stemming from these problems. These two critiques want me to admit that what I am saying is philosophical and paying little respect to the progress which has been made during the past 15 years. A third reaction is the smiling face telling me that I am just saying what everybody knows.

May I, with due respect, argue that all three reactions are not untypical for a mentality, which is a product from times past rather than from difficulties with providing a good future? The attitude of betraying one's own awareness of reality has helped to survive difficult times, and, in many cases, to cope with the effects from wars and political conflicts. But there is one thing which I have learned, not least in the Balkans: if there is a place where societies can restart to think themselves, it is in the universities. Many of those who are now on the progressive side, which means on the European side of transition, have been active in student movements, in academic resistance against authoritarian rule, and could learn their future roles within the protective walls of academic freedom. This is one of the strengths of Balkan academia, which some less lucky countries do not share. I have just referred to some of the reform projects which may be even strengthened by universities and other institutions of the tertiary sector. But my main concern is that the universities will be the anticipation of an major part of Europe, which is including itself into a structure, which it had desired for such a long time, and which is now the natural area of belonging. In the universities the terms are being forged under which societies can understand themselves and their policies towards even bigger associations and networks. It is also there where the shallow vocabulary of the retrospective mentalities is being criticised. Academic freedom as a privilege is not enough, it shall be the power, which allows your countries to belong to, where participation and formal alignment with standards and frameworks will never suffice.

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