

„A European Visa-Ghetto“

The Balkans are a central, not a peripheral region of Europe, argues Gerald Knaus. The president and founder of the European Stability Initiative (ESI) says, that what is still lacking for sustainable growth in the Western Balkans, is the confidence of investors in abiding stability.

Why is the Symposium called „Return to Europe“ and what is the documentary series that will air on 3sat starting in April, about? Haven't the people in the Balkans always considered themselves European?

Knaus: Our television series, describes a voyage of discovery, in ten episodes, through the whole of the Balkans, from the bay of Kotor in Montenegro all the way to Istanbul. When Martin Traxl and I sat on the banks of the Bosphorus, and planned our route in the summer of 2006, we agreed that we would also describe how rapidly this region has been changing in recent years. The Balkans is not a peripheral, but a central region, for Europe. There is still a lot that can be learnt here, both good and bad. The series also focuses on the people who struggle to establish democratic values, and on the question of what must happen for those values to prevail.

Is this not an optimistic view of a region that is still unstable? There is shooting in Kosovo, cars are burning, in Serbia the Radical Party is confident it can win the next elections, Bosnia is at a standstill. So what has really changed?

Knaus: This is a dangerous point in time, particularly in Serbia. But let's not forget all the things that have changed already. In the Bosnian Republika Srpska, mosques are being rebuilt in regions which saw horrific ethnic cleansing. At the same time, there is a debate in Austria about whether mosques should be allowed to have minarets. In Macedonia the protection of minorities is almost without parallel in the entire EU. Istanbul is experiencing an economic boom and a blossoming of culture, unheard of since the time of Suleiman the Magnificent. Montenegro now has more foreign tourists per capita than France. In short: alongside the familiar setbacks there are many positive developments. But setbacks are possible, in Serbia, in Kosovo, in Turkey. These also feature in our series.

Is there the political will in the countries of the Western Balkans, to push EU accession forward?

Knaus: It is a struggle. Often the political will is absent. Throughout the region there are forces who oppose every progressive step: the film on Serbia describes how a few are fighting against the poisoned legacy of the Milosevic-era. Even in the EU-member state Bulgaria there is not only growth, but also the question: Why have the Roma, for example, not yet benefited from it? And what are the former Securitate-cadres getting up to in the Rumanian city of Timisoara, today? But it is precisely Bulgaria and Rumania who show, how much can change for the better when a country makes EU accession its goal. In Timisoara the former secret service agents are now selling insurance, the city is packed with Italian investors, unemployment is at one percent.

Serbia is increasingly isolating itself. What happens when a county consciously turns its back on the rest of Europe?

Knaus: Europeanization is not a train which you jump on to, and which takes you to the final station of its own accord. It concerns values and power struggles. It needs people who fight for change: artists, environmental activists, politicians. In Serbia there are many who advocate a European future, the Exit-Music festival in Novi Sad, being one visible sign thereof. So far however, Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has always put big national questions on the agenda. The problem is also the lack of reform in the security institutions. The revolution has got stuck. The Serbs, who would like to see Serbia in the EU, are worn out. They had to watch Milosevic assert his will, were bombed in 1999, and eight years after the revolution, live in a country that has no association agreement with the EU and from which one can no longer travel to Hungary without a visa. They have also experienced a draining social and economic decline. The EU's mistake was to maintain the visa requirement, thereby creating a ghetto, in which most of the Balkan's Muslims and Serbs are trapped today. This helps Europe's enemies.

The Balkans is one of the poorest regions in Europe.

Knaus: Today, there is growth almost everywhere in the region, but what is holding the Western Balkans back, is the enormous unemployment, in Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, especially among young people and women. It is the highest in Europe. Investors' lack of confidence in abiding stability continues to be an obstacle for sustainable development in the Western Balkans. The only real guarantee for this stability is the accession process. A boom, as seen in Bulgaria with investments in the environment and infrastructure, is tied to the EU-perspective. This signal is missing in the Western Balkans. If Serbia experienced a different economic growth, Serbian society's attitude would also change. Development as seen in Rumania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia is not taking place there. The textile sector is booming across the Balkans; in Serbia it has collapsed. In Leskovac ten of the seventeen former textile enterprises have not been privatized or allowed to go bankrupt. The warehouses are empty; the director sits there with thirty or forty workers who have not been paid for years, and waits. Serbia has one of the highest rates of unemployment in Europe. And in neighboring Rumania, in Timisoara, there is demand for more labour.

Why does the journey end in Thessaloniki and Istanbul?

Knaus: The Balkans have always been part of Europe, and Europe has long been in the Balkans. This can be seen in Thessaloniki, a real city of the Balkans, with a very complex history. It has been in the EU since 1981. And one sees this especially in Istanbul, for centuries the biggest city in South Eastern Europe, and today, once more a magnet for the whole region. Our journey, which begins on the Balkans, will end on the Bosphorus, just like the Via Egnatia that connected the western and eastern capitals of the Roman Empire in classical times. In that time there were no borders in the Balkans; the whole region was part of what was then Europe. This is still a vision for the Balkans today.